

# Republican congressmen escalate witch-hunt against Chinese researchers at the University of Michigan

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On June 18, three US House of Representatives committee chairmen wrote to the University of Michigan (U-M), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and the National Science Foundation (NSF), demanding an inquiry into research security. The letters mark a significant escalation of the persecution of U-M postdoctoral researchers and Chinese citizens Yunqing Jian and Chengxuan Han, directly integrating the federal legislative branch into the anti-China witch-hunt.

Jian was arrested June 2 and, together with her boyfriend Zunyong Liu, faces charges related to the alleged smuggling of *Fusarium graminearum*, a common agricultural fungus. Han, arrested June 8, is accused of smuggling *C. elegans* roundworms and plasmids.

Jian and Han remain in federal custody without bond, facing potential sentences of up to 20 years in prison, while Liu was returned to China and has been banned from entering the US. Both Jian and Han are reportedly in plea negotiations with prosecutors.

These severe penalties are wildly disproportionate to actions that would under ordinary circumstances result in a fine for failing to follow protocol. The congressional inquiry underscores the unscientific and witch-hunting character of the prosecution of Jian and Han.

The targeting of Jian, Liu and Han is part of a campaign to poison US public opinion against China in preparation for war against the nuclear power and economic rival of US imperialism. They are being depicted as “agro-terrorist” agents of the Chinese Communist Party.

Representative John Moolenaar (Republican of

Michigan), who chairs the House Select Committee on Strategic Competition between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party, has been at the forefront of this campaign. Joining Moolenaar are Representative Brian Babin (Republican of Texas), chairman of the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, and Representative Tim Walberg (Republican of Michigan), chairman of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce.

In March, 2024, Walberg suggested the use of nuclear weapons in Gaza: “It should be like Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Get it over quick,” he said.

The congressional letters demand that the NIH and NSF investigate whether any of their grants violated security protocols, whether intellectual property was compromised, and what steps the agencies are taking to screen foreign nationals. They single out the \$9.6 million in federal grants received since 2010 by Professors Ping He and Libo Shan, who supervised or collaborated with the charged individuals.

The University of Michigan (U-M) was given a deadline of July 2 to provide responses on its internal compliance processes, lab access controls, and oversight of foreign research personnel.

Rather than defending its researchers and the principles of academic freedom, U-M has capitulated to political pressure. In response to the congressional inquiry, U-M issued a statement on July 2 affirming its “cooperation” with federal authorities. The university declared:

We condemn any actions that violate federal law, threaten national security, or otherwise

undermine the university's critical public mission. We will continue to cooperate with federal law enforcement in its ongoing investigation and prosecution.

This statement is a craven rubber stamp of the frame-up of Jian and Han. Interim president Domenico Grasso accepts the “national security” premise and language of the Trump Department of Justice, effectively endorsing the persecution of the U-M postdocs.

Grasso continues the policy of the Board of Regents and former president Santa Ono to align the university with right-wing political demands. In January 2024, following a previous inquiry from Chairman Moolenaar, U-M severed its joint research partnership with Shanghai Jiao Tong University.

U-M accepts the “agroterrorism” narrative despite clear scientific counter-evidence. Plant pathology experts state that the fungus allegedly brought into the US by Jian and Liu is not a terrorism agent and is very common and widespread, found in at least 32 American states. In an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*, an Oakland University scientist described the agroterrorism motive as “completely absurd” and “asinine,” emphasizing that the pathogen is “ubiquitous across lots of different countries.”

Chengxuan Han's case, involving *C. elegans* roundworms and plasmids, is particularly egregious, as these are common non-hazardous biological materials. The OU scientist explained: “It's a completely innocuous thing to be shipping. I could dig up some soil in my backyard and mail it to my mother and it would probably have some *C. elegans* in there. Am I going to be jailed for that?”

The WSWS plans to publish more interviews with scientists on the persecution of Jian and Han.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) is the only organization at U-M that has called for the defense of Jian and Han.

The inaction of U-M faculty and student organizations and unions in the face of this witch-hunt is shameful. Despite the clear threat to academic freedom and the rights of their students and colleagues, unions at U-M, including the postdoctoral fellows union (UM-PRO), have not denounced these attacks. Not a single Democratic Party official has uttered a

word on the cases of Jian and Han from the start.

The current prosecutions represent a de facto revival of the “China Initiative” from the first Trump administration. This initiative was notorious for prosecuting Chinese scientists, often on paperwork issues, and was widely criticized as racist. The Department of Justice's inflammatory press release headline for Han's case, “Alien from Wuhan, China charged with making false statements and smuggling biological materials,” links her to the discredited “Wuhan lab leak” conspiracy theory.

The “agroterrorism” allegations against Jian and Han were referenced during the Trump administration's July 8 announcement of a ban on purchases of US farmland by Chinese nationals and other “adversaries,” integrating the agricultural sector into the anti-China warmongering campaign. Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins stated:

Last month, the US Department of Justice charged foreign nationals, including a Chinese Communist Party member, with smuggling a noxious fungus into the United States—a potential agroterrorism weapon responsible for billions in global crop losses.



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