

Education Department probe of University of Michigan cites bogus “agroterrorism” claims against Chinese scholars

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The US Department of Education initiated a federal investigation into the University of Michigan (U-Mich) on July 15, citing “inaccurate” and “incomplete” foreign funding disclosures. The Education Department demanded that the university deliver within 30 days all financial records, contracts and other documents related to foreign funding for the past five years.

The investigation is based on Section 117 of the Higher Education Act of 1965, largely unenforced for decades but aggressively revived during the first Trump administration. Section 117 mandates semi-annual disclosure of foreign gifts and contracts exceeding \$250,000.

Between 2019 and 2021, the Department of Education initiated 19 compliance investigations of major universities, including Harvard, Yale and MIT. Upon retaking office, President Trump revived this campaign, reopening its Harvard inquiry and launching new investigations into the University of Pennsylvania, the University of California, Berkeley, and now U-Mich.

An April 23, 2025 executive order signed by Trump links Section 117 compliance to the False Claims Act, a federal law that penalizes false claims to the government, creating unprecedented civil liability for universities and potentially individual faculty members. The DETERRENT Act, which passed the House with bipartisan support in March, aims to introduce mandatory fines for Section 117 violations, potentially amounting to millions of dollars, a stark increase from previous penalties.

This investigation, like the June 18 congressional inquiry into “research security” at U-Mich, promotes witch-hunting claims against Chinese scientists associated with the university. In the Education Department press release, Chief Investigative Counsel Paul Moore tied the investigation to the cases of Yunqing Jian and Chengxuan Han. It stated:

Despite the University of Michigan’s history of downplaying its vulnerabilities to malign foreign influence, recent reports reveal that UM’s research

laboratories remain vulnerable to sabotage, including what the US Department of Justice recently described in criminal charges as “potential agroterrorism” by Chinese nationals affiliated with UM. As the recipient of federal research funding, UM has both a moral and legal obligation to be completely transparent about its foreign partnerships.

Yunqing Jian faces charges stemming from allegations that she attempted to smuggle the fungus *fusarium graminearum* through Detroit Metro Airport. The Department of Justice (DOJ) labeled this fungus a “potential agroterrorism weapon.”

Separately, Chengxuan Han was charged with smuggling and making false statements after allegedly mailing four packages containing non-hazardous biological material—*C. elegans* roundworms and plasmids—from China to U-Mich laboratories without proper authorization. Jian and Han have been in federal custody since early June, held without bond, and face 20 years in prison.

This witch-hunt against Chinese scholars is part of Washington’s preparations for war against China. By whipping up anti-Chinese sentiment through alarmist, unscientific claims about “agroterrorism” and “sabotage,” the US government seeks to put the American population on a war footing and subordinate the entire university and college system to militarist and hyper-nationalist ideology. By means of punitive investigations, threats to federal funding, and strict compliance requirements universities are being coerced into severing international ties and suppressing any internationalist or anti-war sentiment.

Adding to the federal pressure, the Education Department launched a separate investigation July 23 into U-Mich and four other universities. This probe targets potential violations of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, scrutinizing U-Mich’s “Dreamer scholarship,” reserved for undocumented non-citizens. Acting Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights Craig Trainor wrote in a press release:

On January 21, 2025, President Trump promised that “every single day of the Trump Administration, will, very simply, put America first.” Neither the Trump Administration’s America first policies nor the Civil Right (sic) Act of 1964’s prohibition on national origin discrimination permit universities to deny our fellow citizens the opportunity to compete for scholarships because they were born in the United States.

The government’s alarmist narrative, particularly regarding the “agroterrorism” potential of *fusarium graminearum*, is not based on science. Caitilyn Allen, plant pathologist and professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that “it’s irresponsible and unethical to say these scientists were planning to commit agroterrorism.” The issue is a customs violation. Allen said, “They certainly should have obtained a permit to move the fungal strains, but importing without a permit has been punished with a fine, not a 20-year jail sentence.”

In an interview with the WWS, an Oakland University scientist dismissed the “agroterrorism” designation as “completely absurd” and “asinine.” Jian and Han were likely bypassing onerous materials transfer protocols. The Oakland University expert said, “I’m 100 percent confident that these people were not doing this for a nefarious purpose.”

Despite the severe charges—up to 20 years in prison—and the rejection by scientists of the “agroterrorism” claims, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) is the only organization at U-Mich defending Jian and Han.

The case of Zaosong Zheng, a Chinese national and cancer cell researcher, is a precedent for understanding the government’s strategy in the Jian and Han cases. Zheng was arrested in December 2019 for attempting to smuggle 19 vials of his own biological research from Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center to China. Zheng pleaded guilty to “making false statements to federal agents,” not to charges of espionage or terrorism. He was sentenced to time served (87 days in jail) and ordered removed from the United States.

The Education Department investigation is part of an assault on academic freedom at U-M, enabled by the Regents and university administration. As with the June congressional investigation, University spokesperson Colleen Mastony affirmed that the university “will fully cooperate” and “strongly condemn[s] any actions that threaten national security or undermine our mission.”

The letter from the Education Department’s Office of General Counsel singled out Professor Ann Chih Lin, director of U-Mich’s Lieberthal-Rogel Center for Chinese Studies, again citing the unscientific charges against Jian and Han:

against UM-affiliated researchers, Lin’s assertions appear to be ill-conceived. Lin’s apparent indifference to the national security concerns of the largest single source of funding for UM’s annual research expenditures—the American taxpayer—is particularly unsettling.

Professor Lin’s “unsettling” position stems from her public statements that the risk of technology theft by China is often overstated, challenging the official narrative of pervasive Chinese espionage.

In a May 2022 interview, Professor Lin argued that the FBI’s persecution of Chinese scientists undermined science. She said:

A significant part of our national security establishment believes that China deliberately sends Chinese students here to act as “nontraditional collectors” of information. They believe that Chinese will always do anything they can to help China at the expense of the US. If that’s your fear, then goodbye international education, open science, trade—any and every encounter is a potential threat.

I want to point out that this is crazy! American universities encouraged collaborations between their faculty—not only their Chinese American faculty—and universities in China because the US benefits from working with the best and the brightest all over the world. Science doesn’t win by hiding secrets; it wins by making discoveries public so others can build on them.



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Considering DOJ’s recent criminal charges brought