

Freed from prison by federal judge, scientist at University of Michigan deported back to China

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On September 10, in a federal courtroom in Detroit, Chengxuan Han was sentenced to “time served” and remanded to the custody of the US Marshal, whereupon she was immediately deported back to China and banned from reentry. The 28-year-old Ph.D. student had been unjustly imprisoned for three months. She pleaded “no contest” on August 19 to inflated and politically motivated charges.

While the state sought three additional months of incarceration, the judge ordered Han to be released from jail, rebuking the government’s narrative. “This is not a case of smuggling in some sort of virus or a crop-destroying something or other,” US District Judge Matthew Leitman stated from the bench. “From what I can tell, this material was not a threat at all.”

The ruling exposes the fabricated and baseless character of the state’s case, but the outcome is no victory for Han. Her scientific career has been irreparably damaged by a vicious state-media campaign. According to her defense lawyer’s sentencing memorandum, “Even if she returns to China and is able to finish her Ph.D. on time, she has in all likelihood eliminated the option to become a professor in China, which requires international research experience. This has been her long-held professional dream.”

The government, even though its case was determined to be fraudulent, achieved its primary objective. Through the public vilification of a young scientist, it has sent an intimidating message to the academic community, created a precedent for the further persecution of Chinese scholars, and whipped up anti-Chinese sentiment to advance its agenda of economic confrontation and war. The senior officials who orchestrated this frame-up face no consequences for ruining a career and trampling on constitutional rights.

The persecution of Han began on June 8, 2025, the moment she arrived at Detroit Metropolitan Airport to begin a year of research at a University of Michigan (U-Mich) laboratory. Han was intercepted by Customs and Border Protection officers and subjected to a six-hour interrogation immediately following a long international flight. She was not informed of her Miranda rights until after she was handed over to Homeland Security Investigations, two hours into the interrogation. Federal agents deliberately and repeatedly violated her Fifth Amendment rights by ignoring her requests for an attorney.

The government provided a deficient translator who not only mistranslated critical portions of the interview but, at times, gave up on translating Han’s responses and asked her to answer in English. This was a calculated denial of due process, designed to coerce incriminating statements from an exhausted and isolated individual unfamiliar with the American legal system. Following this unconstitutional interrogation, Han was arrested and held without bond in federal detention.

Han’s case is part of a drive to terrorize and deport many of the 270,000 Chinese students living in the US. In a parallel case at U-Mich, postdoctoral fellow Yunqing Jian faces similar charges to those faced by Han, sensationalized as “agroterrorism,” over the transport of the common fungal pathogen *fusarium graminearum*. Jian is reportedly negotiating a plea deal, with a preliminary hearing set for September 18. She has been held in federal custody without bail since her arrest on June 2.

The arrests of Han and Jian followed closely on Secretary of State Marco Rubio’s May 28 announcement that the State Department would “aggressively revoke visas” of Chinese international students.

In the days following the arrests of Han and Jian, the

Department of Justice launched a propaganda campaign. The charges—carrying a potential 25-year prison sentence for smuggling and making false statements—were announced alongside inflammatory press releases designed to paint a picture of a dangerous foreign agent.

This narrative was driven from the top. FBI Director Kash Patel linked Han’s case to a supposed plot of Chinese disease warfare. He wrote, “This case is part of a broader effort from the FBI and our federal partners to heavily crack down on similar pathogeon (sic) smuggling operations, as the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] works relentlessly to undermine America’s research institutions.”

Attorney General Pam Bondi told the press, “Both of them have ties to the CCP,” adding, “Just days later we arrested another Chinese citizen for sending packages of concealed biological materials into the United States.” Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins stated, “We’re tracking and are very well aware of the Michigan case, but there are others as well.”

This campaign of xenophobic fear-mongering was amplified by the corporate media, which uncritically repeated the government’s line. The US Attorney’s Office’s pointed reference to Han as an “alien from Wuhan” was a deliberate and racist dog whistle, transparently seeking to connect her to the Wuhan lab lie and portray her as a biological threat.

The reality of the case was farcical. The “dangerous biological materials” that triggered the national security witch-hunt were nothing more than laboratory petri dishes containing the nematode worm *caenorhabditis elegans* and paper containing small DNA molecules known as plasmids. *C. elegans* is a harmless, non-parasitic roundworm, one of the most fundamental and widely used model organisms in biology labs across the globe. An Oakland University biologist told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “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?”

Han’s research—focused on how organisms detect sensory inputs like light, touch, and temperature—has no connection to espionage, terrorism or bio-weapons. The state’s entire case rested on inflating minor procedural violations in the labeling and shipping of these harmless research samples into grave federal crimes.

The government’s frame-up was facilitated by the isolation imposed upon Chengxuan Han, bound up with the cowardice and complicity of institutions that should

have defended her.

The University of Michigan administration issued statements “strongly” condemning “any actions that seek to cause harm or threaten national security,” and pledged cooperation with the federal frame-up. The positions for Han and Jian were immediately terminated upon their arrests. U-Mich made no effort to defend its own students from a political witch-hunt, a betrayal of its proclaimed commitment to international students and academic freedom.

Student and faculty campus organizations have been shamefully silent for more than three months. The Graduate Employees’ Organization (GEO), the union representing thousands of graduate student workers, issued no statements and organized no protests. Student organizations such as the pro-Palestinian Tahrir Coalition also remained silent.

The only organization at the university to call for the defense of Han and Jian was the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), which called for the immediate release of Han and Jian and the dropping of all charges, a halt to federal harassment of international scientists and students, the restoration of research partnerships with Chinese institutions and the defense of scientific collaboration, and the withdrawal of campus disciplinary and legal actions against all student protesters.

The IYSSE continues to call for the mobilization of campus unions, student organizations, faculty and staff, and the broader working class to stop the witch-hunt of Chinese scientists and the assault on free speech and democratic rights.



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