

Framed-up Chinese scientist at University of Michigan pleads not guilty

Stephen St. Clair
24 September 2025

At a hearing in Detroit on September 18, Yunqing Jian, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Michigan (U-Mich), entered a plea of “not guilty” to politically motivated federal charges. Jian faces a vicious state campaign that has seen the 33-year-old plant biologist incarcerated without bail for over three months and branded an “agroterrorist” and spy for the Chinese Communist Party.

The court, while accepting her not guilty plea, simultaneously scheduled her next appearance on November 13 for both a plea hearing and a sentencing hearing. This seemingly contradictory scheduling is a procedural indication of the immense pressure being brought to bear on Jian to capitulate. The court is evidently proceeding on the assumption that the ordeal of indefinite pre-trial detention will force her to accept a plea deal.

Jian was re-arraigned on a new criminal information after prosecutors dropped a visa fraud charge while proceeding with charges of conspiracy, smuggling, and making false statements, which carry a potential 25-year prison term. Her alleged crime is conspiring to transport samples of a common plant fungus for scientific research.

The scheduling of a plea hearing and sentencing on the same day is a feature of the American plea-bargaining system, which resolves over 90 percent of federal criminal cases without a trial. A defendant’s formal plea is “not guilty” until they change it in open court. The court’s calendar, however, is a weapon in the state’s psychological campaign to secure the change of plea.

Typically, in a felony case, a significant gap of a month or more separates a guilty plea from sentencing. This allows for a Presentence Investigation Report (PSR) to be prepared by probation officers. The defense

must be given this report at least 35 days before sentencing, a right that can only be relinquished if the defendant waives it. By scheduling both events for November 13, the court signals its expectation that Jian will not only plead guilty or no contest but will also waive her right to the standard pre-sentencing review, expediting her own conviction.

The choice presented to Jian is capitulating to a pre-arranged deal versus the prospect of remaining in jail to fight a trial where she faces decades in prison. Whatever her choice, the essential objectives of this witch-hunt have already been accomplished: the destruction of a young scientist’s career, the terrorizing of Chinese students and researchers across the country, and the reinforcement of the anti-China war drive.

The state’s case against Jian is a political fabrication built on xenophobia and war propaganda, not scientific reality. After her arrest in June, the Department of Justice (DOJ) unleashed a propaganda campaign, with US Attorney Jerome F. Gorgon, Jr. declaring her alleged actions to trigger the “gravest national security concerns.” FBI Director Kash Patel claimed the case was a “a sobering reminder that the CCP is working around the clock to deploy operatives and researchers to infiltrate American institutions and target our food supply, which would have grave consequences, putting American lives and our economy at serious risk.”

This narrative is a deliberate lie. The fungus at the center of the case, *Fusarium graminearum*, is a common plant pathogen already widespread throughout the world and the United States. Caitlyn Allen, a plant pathologist and professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin, told the *World Socialist Web Site*:

Fusarium graminearum would not be an

effective agroterrorism agent because this crop pathogen is already widely established across the US... It has been here for over 100 years. It causes diseases called head blight or scab on wheat and barley, but growers have good tools to manage these diseases. These tools include disease-resistant crop varieties developed by research in labs like the one where Dr. Jian... worked at the University of Michigan.

The smuggling charge is a distortion, criminalizing a routine practice of international scientific collaboration. Professor Tom Sharkey, a plant pathologist and professor emeritus at Michigan State University and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, explained:

In science we are expected to make all raw data and all organisms needed to recreate results that are published freely available. Breaking rules about getting permission before transferring materials is a minor infraction... Smuggling is a gross exaggeration of what is alleged.

The “evidence” that Jian is a CCP operative is equally fraudulent, based on a standard “annual self-assessment form” found on her laptop. This is a bureaucratic document required of tens of thousands of Chinese academics who receive state scholarships for study abroad.

The frame-up of Jian is not an isolated incident but follows a well-established playbook for the political persecution of scientists of Chinese descent. The immediate precursor was the case of Chengxuan Han, a 28-year-old Ph.D. candidate arrested just days after Jian for transporting common, non-hazardous biological materials for her research.

Han was subjected to the same template: held without bail for three months at the same jail as Jian and vilified with racist smears, with the DOJ referring to her as an “alien from Wuhan” to associate her with the COVID-19 pandemic and the Wuhan Lab Lie. She pleaded “no contest” on August 19. When her case came to sentencing on September 10, however, the

government’s fear-mongering narrative collapsed. US District Judge Matthew Leitman stated from the bench, “This is not a case of smuggling in some sort of virus or a crop-destroying something or other... From what I can tell, this material was not a threat at all.”

Judge Leitman sentenced Han to time served and released her, whereupon the government immediately deported her back to China.

The government is fully aware that its case against Jian is just as baseless as its case against Han. The state’s strategy is to use the immense punitive power of the pre-trial process—the denial of bail and months of incarceration—to secure a conviction on lesser charges.

The historical archetype for these frame-ups is the 1999 persecution of Dr. Wen Ho Lee. A nuclear physicist at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, Lee was targeted through racial profiling and became the subject of a state-led witch-hunt accusing him of giving China the secrets to the W-88 nuclear warhead. The central tactic was coercive pre-trial punishment. He was held for nine months in solitary confinement without bail, deemed a “clear and present danger.”

Ultimately, Lee was released after pleading guilty to a single felony count of mishandling data, with 58 other counts dropped. The case concluded with an extraordinary apology from the presiding federal judge, James A. Parker, who told Lee: “I sincerely apologize to you, Dr. Lee, for the unfair manner in which you were held in custody by the executive branch.”

The only organization at U-Mich that has waged a principled political struggle in defense of Yunqing Jian and Chengxuan Han from the outset is the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth and student movement of the Socialist Equality Party. The IYSSE has demanded the immediate and unconditional dropping of all charges and denounced the cases as politically motivated frame-ups designed to fuel the US war drive against China and impose Trump’s fascistic, war-mongering ideology on college campuses.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact