

3 more Chinese researchers at the University of Michigan jailed

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12 November 2025

The US Department of Justice (DOJ) announced on November 5 that three more Chinese postdoctoral researchers at the University of Michigan (U-Mich) have been arrested, charged with federal crimes and imprisoned. The arrests mark an escalation of the bipartisan campaign to whip up anti-Chinese hysteria and an expansion of the Trump administration's fascist attacks on scientific inquiry and democratic rights.

The three researchers—Xu Bai, Fengfan Zhang, and Zhiyong Zhang—were all working at the X.Z. Shawn Xu Lab at U-Mich in the Life Sciences Institute, which focuses on animal sensory biology in roundworms and mice. All three have been charged with “smuggling biological materials into the US,” and Zhiyong Zhang has been additionally charged with making false statements to federal agents. These charges carry penalties of up to 25 years in prison.

The three researchers are victims of a frame-up. The arrests are part of a campaign by the Justice Department and FBI to witch-hunt and de-humanize the more than 270,000 Chinese students in the US and lay the groundwork for war against China.

The arrests came just five weeks after another Chinese researcher from the same U-Mich lab, Chengxuan Han, was released from prison, deported and banned from reentry to the US.

Han was detained by Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) agents on June 8 while trying to enter the US at Detroit Metropolitan Airport to begin a post-doctoral year of research. Han was questioned for six hours without being informed of her Miranda rights. She was denied legal representation despite her repeated requests for a lawyer.

She was charged by the DOJ with “smuggling dangerous materials” to the U-Mich lab from China and imprisoned. In fact, what Han sent was harmless,

common biological material – lab petri dishes containing *C. elegans* nematodes (roundworms) and paper material containing DNA plasmids.

After a coerced plea deal, Han was sentenced only to “time served”—three months in federal prison. US District Judge Matthew Leitman, speaking from the bench, made clear that DOJ and FBI claims of “bioterrorism” had nothing to do with reality. He said, “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.” He made clear that the fabricated case had likely irreparably damaged Han's scientific career. Han was immediately deported to China after her release.

Another U-Mich postdoctoral biologist from China, Yunqing Jian, was arrested on June 2 and faces similar charges to those levied against Han. She has been imprisoned on the basis of the sensationalized claim that she was attempting to commit “agroterrorism” by transporting a common fungal pathogen, *fusarium graminearum*.

Top Trump administration officials such as Attorney General Pam Bondi, FBI Director Kash Patel and Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins have attacked Han and Jian and linked them to “agroterrorism.”

As reported by the WSWS, Jian has endured state coercion while in prison. She has a hearing on November 13, where she will likely be given the choice of pleading guilty or “no contest” or remaining in jail while awaiting a trial where she faces the prospect of decades in prison.

The sentencing and removal of Han set the template for future political persecution, including the cases of Bai, F. Zhang and Z. Zhang.

Key to these attacks is the complicity of the U-Mich administration, which has not issued any public

statement on the latest arrests. According to the DOJ complaint, in the aftermath of Han's removal, U-Mich opened an internal investigation into the Shawn Xu Laboratory. The university has not made public any information about this investigation, including the extent of DOJ and FBI involvement.

At the time of the Jian and Han arrests in June, the U-Mich administration immediately solidarized itself with the actions of the DOJ and FBI, denouncing "any actions that seek to cause harm or threaten national security," and pledging continued cooperation with law enforcement. Not only did the university administration do nothing to defend Han and Jian from an obvious frame-up, it used Han's coerced "no contest" of the charges to open the investigation that led to Bai, F. Zhang and Z. Zhang being pursued and arrested by the same fascistic arms of the state.

All three researchers were scientific collaborators with Han at the Shawn Xu Lab at the University of Michigan and doctoral students at the Huazhong University of Science and Technology in Wuhan, China. Their research at the Shawn Xu Lab focuses on sensory transduction, sensory processing, and sensory regulation in *C. elegans* nematodes, also known as roundworms.

While at U-Mich Bai, F. Zhang and Z. Zhang all received packages of roundworms and plasma from Han at different points over several years. At least one of these packages was seized by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) after Han was detained. The packages contained *C. elegans* petri dishes and plasmid DNA paper samples, without being correctly labeled as such.

The criminal complaint states that the three researchers, on the advice of their lawyer, did not take part in the university investigation.

In response, the university terminated all three on October 8 and removed their Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) records. SEVIS is a tracking system maintained by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) of all nonimmigrant students and exchange visitors. The termination immediately put all three researchers at risk of apprehension. Criminal detention will also potentially compromise their J-1 visas and provide a legal pretext for their deportation.

On October 10, federal agents visited their homes on campus but could not locate the researchers. All three

then attempted to leave the country, with the assistance of their lawyer, purchasing flights back to China. On attempting to leave from JFK airport in New York City on October 16, they were detained and interrogated.

Jerome Gorgon, US Attorney for the Eastern District of Michigan, told the press, "At some point, pattern becomes practice. And, apparently, these three men are part of a long and alarming pattern of criminal activities committed by Chinese Nationals under the cover of the University of Michigan. This is a threat to our collective security."

The frame-up and jailing of Yunqing Jian, Xu Bai, Fengfan Zhang, and Zhiyong Zhang must be opposed by all students and workers. It is an attack on the democratic rights of the entire population. It is, in particular, part of the drive to silence opposition to war, genocide and the rights of immigrants on college campuses.

The only organization at U-Mich that has waged a political struggle in defense of Han, Jian and all Chinese researchers 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 bipartisan US war drive against China and impose Trump's fascistic, war-mongering ideology on college campuses.



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