

Framed-up University of Michigan researcher Yunqing Jian sentenced and deported

Stephen St. Clair
17 November 2025

On November 12, University of Michigan researcher Yunqing Jian was sentenced to “time served” and immediately deported back to China. Her sentencing and deportation were the result of a government-manufactured “agroterrorism” frame-up. After five months of incarceration, the 33-year-old Chinese scientist was brought into a Detroit federal courtroom in chains to finalize a plea deal that exposed the fraudulent character of the government’s entire case.

Jian, until June a postdoctoral research fellow at a University of Michigan (U-M) lab, pleaded guilty to charges of smuggling and making false statements to investigators. In exchange, the government dropped its conspiracy charge. US District Judge Susan DeClercq, who called the case “very strange,” sentenced Jian to the five months she had already spent in jail and ordered her removal from the US to China.

The government alleged that Jian conspired with her boyfriend, Zunyong Liu, to smuggle *Fusarium graminearum*, a common fungus that can cause wheat disease, and plasmid DNA materials into the country. While Liu was intercepted at the Detroit Metropolitan Airport in July 2024, Jian was not arrested until nearly a year later, following an investigation. Jian initially faced charges carrying a potential 25-year prison term.

Since Jian’s initial incarceration, the government has escalated its crackdown against Chinese academics at the same U-M lab, resulting in charges against four other researchers for smuggling and making false statements to agents. This witch-hunt continued with the case of Chengxuan Han, who was sentenced to time served and deported last September. Following Han’s sentencing, three more Chinese researchers at U-M—Xu Bai, Fengfan Zhang, and Zhiyong Zhang—were arrested and jailed in November.

In the course of Jian’s November 12 sentencing hearing, the prosecution made extraordinary admissions, abandoning its own hysterical narrative. This confirmed what the *World Socialist Web Site* has said from the beginning: the case

against Jian, as well as the prosecution and jailing of the four other Chinese researchers at U-M, is a politically motivated witch-hunt, created to fuel the anti-China war drive and escalate the Trump administration’s fomenting of a climate of fear and repression on college campuses.

At the hearing, Assistant US Attorney Michael Martin demanded a two-year prison sentence. This demand, however, contradicted Martin’s own stunning admission in open court, when he conceded, “I don’t have evidence that she had evil intent.”

This statement shattered the entire premise of the government’s case. For five months, the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the FBI painted Jian as a sinister biosecurity threat who had smuggled an “agroterrorism” weapon into the heartland of America.

The defense provided the simple and obvious motive for Jian’s circumventing of biological materials transport regulations, which was scientific, not criminal. An expert for the defense, Prof. Roger Innes of Indiana University, affirmed in a letter attached to the defense memorandum that the *Fusarium graminearum* strain was “ubiquitous in Michigan.” He concluded the genetic modifications would “not increase the virulence ... but could weaken it” and that the samples “did not present any appreciable danger of infestation or disease, let alone a ‘significant risk.’” Innes noted that the researchers likely wanted to use a specialized microscope available at the U-M lab.

Jian expressed her motivation in a letter filed with the court. “I did not follow the rules because I was under pressure to proceed with research and produce results,” she wrote. “The research was not to harm anyone, but instead to find ways to protect crops from disease.”

The plea deal itself confirms the fraudulent nature of the government’s conspiracy charge. The official Information filed by the government shows that the central “agroterrorism” narrative was contained in Count 1, “Conspiracy to Commit Smuggling.” This count was dismissed.

Jian pleaded guilty only to the specific charge related to

intercepted plasmid DNA (Count 2) and to making false statements to the FBI (Count 3). The legal pretext for the “agroterrorism” scare, centered on the *Fusarium graminearum* fungus, was abandoned by the prosecution as legally indefensible.

The in-court admission of “no evil intent” stands in contrast to the DOJ’s official narrative *after* the hearing. While Martin was forced to concede the facts in the courtroom, the DOJ’s leadership immediately released triumphant, bellicose statements. US Attorney Jerome F. Gorgon Jr. declared the sentence “a small but important measure against secret biological threats from China,” and added, “We must stop Chinese Nationals who are smuggling potentially catastrophic biomaterials.” This was echoed by the FBI’s special agent in charge, Jennifer Runyan, who called Jian’s actions “a threat to the citizens of Michigan and America as a whole.”

The outcome of the case against Yunqing Jian was a direct consequence of the immediate precursor case, the government persecution of 28-year-old Ph.D. student Chengxuan Han.

Han was arrested a week after Jian for smuggling non-hazardous biological materials related to *C. elegans* roundworms. The DOJ immediately linked the cases, claiming they were part of an “alarming pattern of criminal activities committed by Chinese Nationals under the cover of the University of Michigan.”

The government’s narrative was suffused with xenophobic and racist incitement. In his official statement on Han’s arrest, Gorgon referred to her as an “alien from Wuhan, China,” a calculated smear designed to associate the Ph.D. student with the COVID-19 pandemic and the anti-China Wuhan lab lie. The Wuhan lab lie is the unsubstantiated conspiracy theory promoted by right-wing elements alleging that the COVID-19 pandemic originated from a leak at the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

On September 10, 2025, Han was sentenced to time served and swiftly deported. After she had been held for three months in jail, US District Judge Matthew Leitman demolished the government’s narrative. Rebuking the prosecution’s request for more prison time, he 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.”

This judicial rebuke was a refutation of the entire “biosecurity” premise of both prosecutions, and exposed the fraudulent character of the government’s campaign. Jian’s defense memorandum noted that Han received “time served after being held for approximately three months” and argued that Jian’s five-month incarceration already represented an “indefensible disparity.”

Having secured the precedents of the conviction and deportation of Han and Jian, the government continues its campaign of intimidation. On November 5, the Department of Justice announced charges against three more Chinese researchers affiliated with U-M: Xu Bai, Fengfan Zhang, and Zhiyong Zhang.

The three scientists were arrested on October 16 at JFK International Airport in New York as they attempted to board a flight to China. The charges are a direct extension of the Jian and Han cases: all three are accused of conspiring to smuggle non-hazardous biological materials related to *C. elegans* roundworms, and Zhiyong Zhang is additionally charged with lying to federal agents. Like Han and Jian, the three face charges carrying potential sentences of 25 years in prison.

The researchers were attempting to leave the country after U-M fired them in September for refusing to cooperate in an internal investigation following Han’s arrest. This action by the university led to the revocation of their J-1 visas, destroying their careers and rendering them “eligible for removal.” Their “crime” was attempting to leave the country after being summarily fired and stripped of their legal status.

As with Jian and Han, U-M has refused to defend its scholars, acting as a compliant arm of the government. It remained shamefully silent as its researchers were vilified and it actively participated in their persecution.

US Attorney Gorgon seized on the arrests of Bai, Zhang and Zhang to escalate his xenophobic incitement. “At some point, pattern becomes practice,” Gorgon declared in a statement. “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.”

The real “alarming pattern” is a coordinated government-media-university persecution aimed at terrorizing Chinese academics and manufacturing a political climate for war.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact