

# FBI frame-up of Indiana University postdoc Youhuang Xiang: Anti-China witch-hunt escalates

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Youhuang Xiang, a 32-year-old postdoctoral research associate at Indiana University (IU), was arrested November 25 at Chicago's O'Hare Airport and is now in federal custody, charged with conspiracy, smuggling goods into the US, and making false statements to federal officials. This arrest and prosecution, announced December 19 by Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director Kash Patel, is the latest episode in an FBI/Department of Justice (DOJ) campaign to criminalize scientific exchange with China.

Xiang's alleged crime—the transportation in 2004 of *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) bacteria containing plasmid DNA, hidden in a package of commercial clothing—has been seized upon by far-right media and federal law enforcement to propagate panic over US food supply safety.

This is part of the same campaign of frame-ups that led to the deportation and destruction of the careers of Yunqing Jian and Chengxuang Han at the University of Michigan (U-M). Three more researchers at U-M, Xu Bai, Fengfan Zhang, and Zhiyong Zhang, have been in federal custody since mid-October.

While no faculty or student organization other than the International Youth and Students for Social Equality has come to the defense of the researchers at U-M, Xiang's supervisor, the distinguished plant biologist Professor Roger Innes, courageously attempted to intervene in the legal process, offering himself as a custodian for Xiang to secure his release on bail.

The government rejected this offer, accusing Innes, elected this year to the National Academy of Sciences, of planning to use the “smuggled” material in his research. The memorandum released by the government rejecting Innes' effort to secure Xiang's release stated:

[T]he government has now learned that defendant also told CBP (Customs and Border Protection) officers that his supervising professor at Indiana University (who the defendant identified as Professor Innes) was aware of the March 2024 shipment of *E. Coli* DNA the defendant had received and that the defendant and Professor Innes

planned to use that material in their research at Indiana University.

This is a threat to all primary investigators and research supervisors in the US. It aims to force primary investigators and research supervisors to police their own students and view their international collaborators as liabilities. It incentivizes the purging of Chinese staff to protect careers and federal grant funding.

## The materials and the real risk

The DOJ and the FBI have focused on the seizure of biological materials containing *E. coli* in a package addressed to Xiang's residence in Bloomington, Indiana. Fox News headlines screaming of “smuggling *E. coli*” evoke images of poisoned lettuce, hospitalized children and a fragile food supply under attack by foreign agents.

However, the filings describe materials consistent with common laboratory *E. coli* strains used as plasmid hosts, which are non-pathogenic and incapable of surviving outside controlled culture conditions.

Such bacteria function only as replication “vessels” for plasmid DNA—small circular molecules used routinely in molecular biology to carry genes of interest. Plasmids and their common laboratory *E. coli* hosts are standard purchase items for life-science labs worldwide and, in their laboratory forms, do not present public health or agricultural threats.

The movement of biological materials across borders requires an APHIS/USDA import permit for many organisms and regulated samples—a process that can take months to approve, creating crippling delays for time-limited postdocs and other researchers and driving some to use informal or mislabeled shipping routes.

On the case of Yunqing Jian, Professor Tom Sharkey, a plant

pathologist and professor emeritus at Michigan State University and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, told the *World Socialist Web Site*:

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 Jian case was the first implementation of the current “smuggling” panic. In June 2025, the DOJ announced the arrest of Jian, charging her with smuggling *Fusarium graminearum* and labeling the fungus a “potential agroterrorism weapon.” US Attorney Jerome Gorgon stated that her actions raised “the gravest national security concerns.”

This fungus causes Fusarium Head Blight (FHB), a disease that is already endemic to the United States, found in soil and crop residue across the Midwest. Jian, like Xiang, was researching how to cure the disease. Professor Innes, who reviewed the evidence in the Jian case before becoming involved in Xiang’s defense, stated unequivocally that there was “no risk to US farmers, or anyone else.”

Despite the “agro-terrorism” rhetoric, the prosecution was forced to admit it had “no evidence of evil intent.” Jian pled guilty to a smuggling charge and was sentenced to five months time served and deported. The government’s motive was never to neutralize a threat, but to generate the headline: “Chinese Researcher Smuggles Biological Weapon.”

## A political campaign, not science

The case of Chengxuan Han expanded this campaign. Arrested in June 2025 at Detroit Metropolitan Airport, Han was subjected to illegal interrogation regarding the shipment of *C. elegans*, a harmless microscopic roundworm essential to neurological research. Han was charged with smuggling, coerced into a “no contest” plea, sentenced to time served, and deported in September.

The DOJ has used Han’s case as the foundational “conspiracy” to entrap her former colleagues at U-M: Xu Bai, Fengfan Zhang, and Zhiyong Zhang, who are also accused of conspiring to smuggle *C. elegans* roundworms and associated plasmids. Bai, Zhang, and Zhang entered pleas of not guilty on December 19 and likely face months of isolation and detention, as the government uses the brutality of imprisonment to coerce a plea deal.

The university administrations have capitulated to the state’s witch hunt. Following Xiang’s arrest, an IU spokesperson issued a statement of “no tolerance,” pledging full cooperation with federal authorities. At U-M, the betrayal of principles of scientific freedom has been even more pronounced. The firing of Bai, Zhang, and Zhang in September was a direct result of their refusal to participate in a university interrogation they correctly perceived as a prelude to criminal charges. The university effectively told its staff: “Incriminate your colleagues or be fired and deported.”

FBI Director Kash Patel has personally amplified this case. In his December 19 announcement, Patel linked Xiang to the Michigan cases, framing them as a coordinated assault on the American heartland. Outlets like Fox News, the *New York Post*, and Breitbart reprinted Patel’s talking points without scrutiny.

The liberal media—the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, CNN—has ignored the Xiang case. This silence follows a “both-sides” whitewashing of the Yunqing Jian case. A November 21 *New York Times* article described Jian’s sentence as a “muted denouement,” minimizing the fact of Jian’s career-ruining imprisonment and ignoring the unscientific character of the government’s claims.

## What must be done

The universities and the media have enabled a political campaign that uses a fabricated “biosecurity” panic to isolate and expel international researchers. This must be answered by a political mobilization of scientists, students and workers demanding the immediate release of the accused researchers, the dropping of all charges against them, their reinstatement, and an end to visa-revocation and deportation as tools of political repression and warmongering. The Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality are organizing to link the defense of democratic rights with the broader struggle of the working class against imperialist war and corporate control of science. Join and act now.



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