

# Charges dismissed for University of Michigan Chinese researchers—but the political witch-hunt continues

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On February 4, federal prosecutors abruptly filed a motion to dismiss all criminal charges against three Chinese postdoctoral researchers from the University of Michigan (U-Mich)—Xu Bai, Fengfan Zhang and Zhiyong Zhang. After more than three months in federal custody, the three were released on February 5 and returned to China. The dismissal confirms that these prosecutions lacked any genuine public-safety basis and formed part of a politically driven campaign to intimidate migrant researchers and students, coerce universities into policing international cooperation, and provide ideological cover for a US turn toward confrontation with China.

The three U-Mich researchers were accused of participating in a conspiracy to “smuggle” dangerous biological materials. In reality, the alleged contraband was common laboratory research material—*C. elegans* nematodes and plasmids—ubiquitous, harmless tools of basic biology used in labs around the world.

The case of Bai, Zhang and Zhang must be understood as part of a coordinated escalation by the national security apparatus. Since 2024-2025, the Department of Justice, FBI and Customs and Border Protection have pursued a series of prosecutions and detentions of Chinese researchers, promoting the use of sensationalist “agroterrorism” and “smuggling” rhetoric to criminalize routine scientific exchange. Cases at U-Mich—where earlier arrests and coerced plea deals produced deportations and ruined careers—served as a template.

In June 2025, the government accused postdoc Yunqing Jian of smuggling a strain of *Fusarium graminearum* and branded it a potential “agroterrorism” threat. Academic experts, including

Professor Roger Innes of Indiana University (IU), demonstrated that the strain was ubiquitous and posed no risk to US agriculture. Faced with this scientific reality, a government lawyer admitted in court he had “no evidence that she had evil intent,” yet the state leveraged detention to extract a plea and deportation.

Similarly, doctoral student Chengxuan Han was arrested at Detroit Metropolitan Airport in June, interrogated for hours without counsel or Miranda warnings, and ultimately coerced into a plea that destroyed her prospects for research in the United States. These outcomes—indefinite detention, psychological pressure, plea bargains and deportations—are the actual goals of the government, not public safety or scientific integrity.

Shortly after Han’s coerced plea and deportation, Youhuang Xiang, a postdoctoral associate in the Indiana University Department of Biology, was arrested on charges that mirror the Michigan cases. Xiang faces allegations he received shipments of plasmids and other routine laboratory materials without proper customs paperwork—and is being held pending a trial set for April 6. In December, FBI agents executed searches of the laboratories of Professor Xindan Wang and Xiang’s supervisor Professor Roger Innes.

When the DOJ quietly dismissed the Bai, Zhang, and Zhang case, corporate media moved quickly to salvage the government’s credibility. Reporters and official spokespeople emphasized technical rationales or diplomatic explanations to deflect attention from the fraudulent basis of the charges. This spin serves to preserve public trust in the state security apparatus and to maintain the usefulness of xenophobic tropes in priming public opinion for further repression and war

preparations.

Three interrelated material factors explain the drive to criminalize international scientific collaboration.

### 1. **Geopolitics and preparations for confrontation.**

The US ruling class is rearming and reorganizing its political and economic life for strategic competition with China. Universities and scientific research are now being systematically militarized under measures such as the CHIPS and Science Act and other initiatives that tether academic work to defense priorities. In 2025, U-Mich received \$100 million in direct research support from the Department of Defense. The repressive campaign against international researchers prepares the ideological terrain for confrontation by demonizing foreign scientists as potential agents of a foreign state.

2. **Domestic class politics and scapegoating.** As the capitalist crisis deepens—reflected in austerity, precarious employment and attacks on democratic rights—sections of the ruling elite exploit xenophobia to divide the working class and deflect social opposition. Targeting migrant scholars frames a manufactured external threat while legitimizing an expansion of police and administrative powers at home.

3. **Corporate-state control of knowledge.** The tightening of export controls, grant conditions and university compliance regimes places academic labor under the authority of government and corporate interests. Universities, fearing loss of federal funds and political reprisal, collude with investigators—firing staff, revoking visas and handing over records—transforming campuses into instruments of government repression. The U-Mich administration did nothing to defend Jian and Han, and its decision to terminate Bai, Zhang and Zhang stripped them of institutional protections and immediately jeopardized their immigration status, exposing them to detention by federal authorities.

The collapse of the case against Bai, Zhang and Zhang should not be mistaken for an end to the witch-hunting. The national security state retains the legal instruments and administrative mechanisms to target scientists, union activists, anti-war organizers and any section of working people that challenges the policies of the ruling class. The fight against this repression must be fought politically and on a mass basis, linking the defense of scientific freedom and democratic rights to the broader struggle against imperialist war and capitalist austerity.

We must make these demands:

- Drop all charges in the case against Youhuang Xiang at IU, and halt all deportations and visa revocations used for political purposes.
- Reinstate fired researchers and restore their visas and employment without conditions.
- Open independent, democratically supervised public hearings on DOJ and FBI abuses, with subpoena power to reveal coordination between universities, prosecutors and intelligence agencies.
- Repeal administrative rules and funding conditions that force universities to police international collaboration and research.

The Socialist Equality Party, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality and the *World Socialist Web Site* have been at the forefront of exposing and mobilizing against these frame-ups. The defense of the persecuted researchers is inseparable from the defense of democratic rights for all working people and the fight to prevent the slide toward imperialist war. We must build rank-and-file defense committees among students, researchers, faculty and workers, independent of university administrations, corporate trade unions and the bipartisan establishment that sanctions these attacks.

Join us in this fight. Organize locally, form defense committees at your university or workplace, and link these struggles to the global movement against imperialist war and capitalist oppression. The SEP and allied youth and student organizations are organizing to defend democratic rights and to build the political strength of the working class. To take part in building a political movement capable of defending researchers and opposing the war drive, join the Socialist Equality Party.



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