

University of Michigan Chinese researcher takes his own life after interrogation by federal agents

Stephen St. Clair
2 April 2026

On March 19, a Chinese postdoctoral assistant research scientist at the University of Michigan (U-M) jumped from an upper story of the G. G. Brown Laboratory on the North Campus and died. Campus sources and the Chinese Consulate in Chicago report that the researcher was questioned by federal agents the previous day.

The name of the research scientist has not been officially released, but according to a source in the University of Michigan Postdoctoral Researchers Organization (UM-PRO), the name of the victim is Danhao Wang. This tragic event is being covered up by the local media and the university, to the point of refusing to release even the name of the deceased.

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement condemning the actions of US law enforcement. A spokesperson declared:

The heartbreaking death of a Chinese postdoctoral scholar, who took his own life after being subjected to hostile questioning by US law enforcement personnel, calls into question once again the impact and legitimacy of unwarranted US interrogation and harassment targeting Chinese researchers and students.

The ministry said that these actions “poison the atmosphere for people-to-people exchanges between the two countries and continue to create a serious chilling effect.” It demanded that the US “carry out a full investigation, give the family of the victim and the Chinese side a responsible explanation, and stop discriminatory enforcement.”

All available evidence points to Wang being a victim of a vicious campaign against Chinese scholars being conducted by the Trump administration and the Republican Party, with the complicity of the Democratic Party and the U-M administration. Wang was only the latest Chinese researcher to be targeted by the US government for prosecution on the basis of fabricated charges of research espionage and the smuggling of toxic materials.

The prior federal prosecutions of Chinese researchers Chengxuan Han, Yunqing Jian, Xu Bai, Fengfan Zhang, and Zhiyong Zhang at U-M, and Youhuang Xiang at Indiana University (IU) were part of a politically driven, xenophobic campaign orchestrated by the Trump administration and the US national security apparatus. The FBI and Department of Justice have criminalized routine scientific collaboration, including by citing Chinese scholars for “smuggling” harmless, universally used laboratory materials. These scientifically illiterate prosecutions, which lack any genuine public safety basis, have been enabled by the collaboration of the U-M and IU administrations. They have involved coerced plea deals, months of federal detention, and deportations.

The events following Wang’s death reveal an effort to manage the fallout and suppress the political implications of the tragedy. On March 20, the U-M Electrical Engineering and Computer Science Department sent an internal email to its faculty and staff, stating, “We are reaching out to share the sad news of the death of an assistant research scientist employed in the lab of Zetian Mi, who fell from an upper story of the GG Brown building last night.” Professor Zetian Mi’s laboratory is known for its research into semiconductors, nanomaterials, and optoelectronics.

On March 30, the Chinese Consulate General in Chicago confirmed the details of the case. A spokesperson for the consulate stated that it had lodged “stern representations to the relevant departments of the US government and relevant universities on this case many times.” The consulate denounced the US for having “generalized the concept of ‘national security’” to carry out “political manipulation, unprovoked investigation and harassment of Chinese students and scholars.”

By March 31, Chinese-language media outlets had named U-M as the site of the tragedy and confirmed the victim’s affiliation with Zetian Mi’s research group. Yet U-M and the US press remain silent.

U-M students, faculty and staff must demand answers from the administration and the federal government. Has there been any official report from the university regarding the death of

this researcher? How have university officials facilitated these interrogations? What other laboratories have been investigated?

The role of U-M acting president Domenico Grasso must be scrutinized. A week after the death of Wang, at a March 26 hearing of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce titled “US Universities Under Siege: Foreign Espionage, Stolen Innovation, & the National Security Threat,” Grasso boasted of the university’s collaboration in the witch-hunting of Chinese researchers and its role in persecuting opponents of American imperialism and Trump’s drive to dictatorship. Grasso’s testimony exposed the university administration as a willing enforcer for the national-security apparatus, helping to frame up Chinese scientists and attack democratic rights to protect institutional funding and status.

Grasso said:

As an engineer and an army veteran, who currently holds a top secret security clearance, I’m deeply committed to protecting our nation’s security and ensuring that the university continues to support the research talent and partnerships that help make Michigan special. ... Housing some of the world’s greatest minds makes the University of Michigan a potential target of threats, such as research espionage, unauthorized technology transfer, and foreign talent recruitment programs. That is why the university has established a comprehensive program to safeguard our research from America’s adversaries. ... Safety and security is a *team* effort, and at Michigan, we know how important it is to be a *team player*. [Grasso’s emphasis]

We stand committed to protecting the interests and security of the United States. This commitment is illustrated by our decision to end a relationship with a university in China that is seen as a potential threat to America’s interests. We made this decision after discussion with this committee and the House Select Committee on the CCP.

Grasso pointed to the bipartisan character of the anti-Chinese witch-hunt, telling the committee:

We have a special bond with this committee as three of our close Michigan friends and neighbors, chairman [Tim] Walberg (Republican) and congresswomen [Lisa] McLain (Republican) and [Haley] Stevens (Democrat) serve on it. We look forward to continuing our dialogue with this committee to ensure that the interests of Michigan and of the nation are protected from both known threats we face today and those that may occur in the future.

The tragic death of this young scientist must not be swept under the rug by U-M administrators and politicians of both parties. The student and faculty unions and other organizations at U-M and IU were largely silent during the persecutions of Han, Jian, Bai, Zhang, Zhang and Xiang.

The Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) have defended these researchers from the start. We call on students, researchers and campus workers to demand:

- A full, independent investigation: University and federal authorities must release all information regarding the harassment and interrogation of this researcher.

- The outing of the agents involved: The federal agents who conducted the hostile interrogation that apparently precipitated this tragedy must be publicly identified and held accountable.

- An end to the anti-China witch-hunt. All investigations, surveillance and harassment of Chinese scholars based on unscientific, fabricated claims of “national security threats” must cease immediately. All pending charges against targeted researchers, including Youhuang Xiang, who faces sentencing on April 7, must be dropped.

- Halt the drive to war. The persecution of Chinese nationals is the domestic front of the imperialist war drive against China. Workers and students must oppose the militarization of society and the xenophobic campaigns that enable it.

We call for the immediate formation of an independent committee of U-M campus workers, researchers and students to investigate this death. The perpetrators of the campaign against Chinese researchers—from the interrogators to the officials in the Trump administration, the members of Congress and the U-M officials who have incited this hysteria—must be held to account.



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