

# The US witch-hunt against Chinese scientists and the death of Danhao Wang

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*We are publishing here the report given by World Socialist Web Site writer Stephen St. Clair to a public meeting of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at the University of Michigan held April 21.*

We gather today in the shadow of a profound tragedy: the death of Danhao Wang, a brilliant 30-year-old postdoctoral researcher at the University of Michigan. On March 19, Dr. Wang took his own life after being subjected to hostile questioning by federal agents.

His death is the direct consequence of a systematic government- and university-sponsored political operation targeting young Chinese researchers. This xenophobic purge, deeply intertwined with the capitalist military-industrial complex, is part of the broader attack on the democratic rights of all immigrants, students and working people. Today we will examine the profound complicity of academic institutions in this state repression and outline the urgent need to mobilize the working class and young people in a unified political struggle against the anti-Chinese pogrom, which is bound up with the criminal war against Iran and preparations for war against China, the drive to dictatorship, and the capitalist system which is the root cause of these evils.

We must begin today by speaking of the death of Danhao Wang. Dr. Wang took his own life, falling from an upper story of the G.G. Brown Laboratory building on North Campus. According to statements released by the Chinese Consulate in Chicago, Wang had been subjected to hostile questioning by federal agents the day before his death. Within days, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned the encounter as unprovoked investigation and harassment, denouncing the US government for terrorizing lawful international residents in the name of national security.

While the College of Engineering acknowledged that a death had occurred in an internal email, the U-M administration withheld the fact of the suicide for two weeks. It was only after independent reporting by the *World Socialist Web Site* on April 2 revealed the name of Danhao Wang that the broader public was informed of the tragedy.

The university issued a statement the following morning naming Wang and local, national, and international news media covered the story over the next week. Posts referring to articles from the *World Socialist Web Site* calling for an independent investigation led by researchers, students, staff and faculty were subjected to political censorship on the U-M subreddit.

Wang stood at the vanguard of semiconductor physics. Working within the laboratory of Professor Zetian Mi, Wang focused his research on a new class of materials known as wurtzite ferroelectric nitrides. Wang had authored over a hundred articles, including a landmark April 2025 paper published in the journal *Nature* under the title “Electric-Field-Induced Domain Walls in Wurtzite Ferroelectrics.” Wang’s findings essentially mapped the theoretical and physical blueprint for a new generation of transistors capable of vastly outperforming the existing radar technologies currently used by the military.

Additionally, because wurtzite ferroelectric nitride-based semiconductors can integrate both memory storage and logic processing within the same physical material, Wang’s research provides the potential physical substrate for “edge AI” computing. This would enable AI processing to occur directly on local, physically disconnected devices, such as autonomous combat drones, missile interceptors, or isolated battlefield sensors, without ever requiring connectivity to cloud networks.

While Wang’s research has military applications under the control of the Pentagon, the technology itself has vast potential to benefit society. Like artificial intelligence, its impact on humanity depends entirely on which social class is wielding it. Under capitalism, this genius is hijacked to build the machinery of death. Under the democratic control of the working class, these breakthroughs in efficiency and computing power could be used to improve the conditions of society as a whole, optimizing global logistics, revolutionizing medical technology, and laying the infrastructural groundwork for the elimination of scarcity.

As the capitalist ruling class accelerates its preparations for war against China, the bipartisan political establishment is creating a climate of security paranoia to justify the militarization of academic institutions. Danhao Wang’s death is the direct consequence of a government- and university-sponsored political operation that has systematically targeted young Chinese researchers. What follows is an accounting of the federal prosecutions, the prolonged detentions, the coerced plea deals, and the ultimate deportations of six Chinese scientists over the past 10 months: Yunqing Jian, Chengxuan Han, Xu Bai, Fengfan Zhang and Zhiyong Zhang, all affiliated with the University of Michigan, alongside Youhuang Xiang of Indiana University.

All six had their careers ruined by the criminalization of routine, harmless biological research. The Department of Justice (DOJ) used labels like “agroterrorism,” espionage and smuggling to terrorize these scientists. Under ordinary circumstances, minor technical lapses regarding biological material transfers are treated strictly as administrative matters by the US Department of Agriculture’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (USDA APHIS). They are typically resolved by destroying the material and issuing a warning or fine. The DOJ escalated these cases into felony conspiracy and smuggling charges carrying a potential twenty five-year prison sentence.

The objective of these federal prosecutions was not to secure convictions in fair, open trials, as the scientific evidence overwhelmingly undermined the government’s claims. Instead, the national security apparatus used the threat of indefinite detention to extract coerced plea deals.

When these researchers were targeted by federal probes, U-M and Indiana University swiftly terminated their employment and revoked their visa sponsorships, exposing them to detention by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). If a targeted scholar were granted bail by a federal magistrate, they would be instantly transferred from criminal custody to administrative ICE detention. Because time spent in

administrative immigration custody does not count toward a federal criminal sentence, these researchers were forced to waive their right to a detention hearing and remain in federal prison indefinitely.

Yunqing Jian, a plant biologist and thirty-three-year-old postdoctoral fellow, was the first to be arrested, in June 2025. The DOJ accused Jian of conspiring with her boyfriend in China to smuggle a strain of *Fusarium graminearum*, branding the incident an act of agroterrorism supposedly intended to sabotage the American food supply.

In July of 2025, Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins linked Jian to terrorism and espionage, declaring:

Last month, the US Department of Justice charged foreign nationals, including a Chinese Communist Party member, with smuggling a noxious fungus into the United States — a potential agroterrorism weapon responsible for billions in global crop losses. The scheme involved a US research lab and highlighted a disturbing trend: America’s enemies are playing the long game—infiltrating our research, buying up our farmland, stealing our technology, and launching cyberattacks on our food systems.

Academic experts testified that the strains involved in the prosecution were ubiquitous in the wild across North America and posed absolutely no threat to United States agriculture. Such materials are routinely studied at research institutions to genetically engineer pathogen resistant crops.

Jian was brought to a Detroit federal courtroom bound in chains in November to finalize a coerced plea after five months of incarceration. A federal prosecutor admitted at the sentencing hearing that the government possessed no evidence that Jian harbored any evil intent, yet the government destroyed her career and forced her permanent exile from the country.

The second Chinese researcher to be arrested was University of Michigan doctoral student Chengxuan Han, a 28-year-old scholar, detained at Detroit Metro Airport in June, 2025 following an international flight from China on her first visit to the US. She was interrogated for six hours as federal agents ignored her requests for an attorney, failed to inform her of her Miranda rights, used an incompetent translator who several times had to ask Han to answer in English, and ultimately misled Han into speaking without a lawyer present.

The government characterized her research shipments as containing dangerous biological materials, ignoring the fact that her samples consisted merely of *Caenorhabditis elegans* and plasmid DNA. *C. elegans* is an entirely harmless, non-parasitic roundworm used as a model organism in biology laboratories. Plasmids are small, circular DNA molecules likewise used daily in thousands of molecular biology laboratories to replicate and study genes. They possess absolutely no pathogenic qualities, are chemically inert, and are entirely incapable of causing sickness or disease in humans, animals or agriculture. Han’s research focused on how organisms detect sensory inputs such as light and temperature, with no conceivable connection to bioweapons, agricultural sabotage or espionage. Chengxuan Han was coerced into a no contest plea in August 2025 before being sentenced to time served and deported back to China, permanently banned from reentry into the United States.

Three other Chinese postdoctoral researchers at the University of Michigan, Xu Bai, Fengfan Zhang and Zhiyong Zhang, were fired by the university in October 2025 for refusing to participate in an internal probe. They were arrested and jailed for over three months on identical baseless conspiracy charges related to shipping Chengxuan Han’s harmless nematodes and plasmids. The entirely fraudulent nature of these charges was exposed on February 4, 2026, when federal prosecutors filed a motion to dismiss all indictments against the three men without offering any

explanation, implicitly admitting before the court that the prosecutions lacked any basis. Following their release, the researchers immediately returned to China, their American careers destroyed.

The case of Youhuang Xiang, a 32-year-old postdoctoral research associate in the Department of Biology at Indiana University, continued this campaign of persecution. Xiang, who resided lawfully in the United States on a J-1 visa, was arrested by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents at Chicago’s O’Hare International Airport in November, 2025 upon his return from an international research trip. The initial criminal complaint, amplified by inflammatory social media posts from FBI Director Kash Patel, accused Xiang of participating in a sinister plot to smuggle pathogenic *E. coli* bacteria into the country.

### ”One hundred percent political”

The package Xiang received from a trusted colleague in China did not contain infectious, living bacteria of any kind; it contained plasmid DNA. Xiang’s direct supervisor, the distinguished Indiana University plant biologist Professor Roger Innes, denounced the prosecution, calling it “one hundred percent political” and clarifying that the plasmid DNA was a completely harmless substance.

Innes said:

The fact that it grew up in *E. coli* is irrelevant. It has no genes from *E. coli* in it; it can’t infect you. Once you’ve purified DNA, it’s the same DNA that you would purify from your own cells. It was clear the FBI [agent] just didn’t understand what he was talking about.

Chief Judge James R. Sweeney II, a Trump appointee and member of the far-right Federalist Society, repeatedly conflated the inert plasmid DNA with living, dangerous bacteria in his official orders, citing it as a pathogen that could damage US public health and agriculture.

Youhuang Xiang was coerced into accepting a guilty plea for smuggling in March of this year after enduring over four months of incarceration. Even after the prosecutor recommended a sentence of “time served,” Judge Sweeney delayed the final sentencing hearing for an additional five weeks. Xiang was ultimately sentenced to time served and ordered deported on April 7. He remained in custody for almost two weeks after his sentencing at an ICE facility in Kokomo, Indiana. We just received word that he arrived safely in Beijing yesterday afternoon and was met by his family.

The consequences of this xenophobic purge are spilling outward, affecting the broader international community. Following the death of Dr. Wang and the ongoing harassment of scholars, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an extraordinary safety alert to its citizens on April 16. It warned of malicious inspections by US border authorities and advised travelers to entirely avoid Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. This warning was issued after 20 Chinese scholars, traveling with valid visas to attend an academic conference, were subjected to questioning and harassment and ultimately denied entry and deported by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents at Seattle-Tacoma Airport.

The University of Michigan administration, led by President Domenico Grasso, views the lives of its foreign-born researchers as expendable in the pursuit of federal funding and political alignment with the Trump administration. On March 26, one week after Wang’s death, Grasso testified before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce at

a hearing titled “US Universities Under Siege: Foreign Espionage, Stolen Innovation, and the National Security Threat.” Grasso pledged his administration’s total subservience to the state apparatus.

He 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. ... 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 (Chinese Communist Party).

He boasted of terminating the visas of the five Chinese researchers, telling the committee:

In isolated but serious incidents, a small number of university students and researchers from China have been arrested for unlawful activities... Once alerted, we acted swiftly and decisively—working with federal law enforcement, promptly terminating student and work visas, and severing all ties with those individuals.

By doing so, the administration stripped its researchers of all institutional protection and triggered the legal ICE traps that facilitated their prolonged incarcerations and deportations.

The University of Michigan’s institutional complicity is rooted in the financial structure of US academia, which has become heavily dependent on federal research funding from the defense and intelligence sectors. The university is a highly integrated beneficiary of the capitalist military-industrial complex, securing \$100 million in direct research support from the Department of Defense for 2025 alone, an increase from \$85 million the previous year.

This funding supports critical defense projects, including the development of heat-tolerant silicon carbide semiconductors for military aircraft, the engineering of autonomous off-road vehicles designed for combat zones, and the creation of imaging technology for the detection of nuclear materials. To protect this revenue stream and maintain its institutional standing in a national climate dominated by imperialist war-mongering, the university administration facilitated the purge of its own researchers, acting as accomplices to the FBI and CBP.

The militarization of universities is codified by bipartisan legislative efforts designed to build a fortress around American technological research. At the congressional hearing on March 26 where President Grasso testified, Republican Representative Michael Baumgartner promoted the “Defending Education Transparency and Ending Rogue Regimes Engaging in Nefarious Transactions Act,” known as the DETERRENT Act. This legislation is designed to increase reporting requirements for universities, using the threat of massive fines and the loss of funding to force academic institutions to police their own faculty and international students.

At the same hearing, Representative Haley Stevens, a Michigan Democrat, promoted legislation to expand the definition of partnerships with “malign foreign talent programs.” This bill, which was passed in the House, exposes an even broader swath of immigrant researchers to federal scrutiny for engaging in what was previously considered entirely routine academic exchange, shared data analysis, or even co-authorship of scientific papers with foreign nationals.

The Democratic Party is completely complicit in this McCarthyite witch-hunt. The war in Iran and the witch-hunt against Chinese researchers are interconnected aspects of a single imperialist strategy, based on the need to control the energy corridors and resources needed by China.

Furthermore, we must understand this assault on international researchers within the context of a general attack by the ruling oligarchy on science itself. The criminalization of basic biological research, treating harmless plasmids and roundworms as threats, is part of the same phenomenon driving the assault on medical science and public health. We see it in the elevation of figures like Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., and the relentless, government-backed promotion of religious obscurantism and anti-vaccine and COVID lab leak conspiracy theories.

Growing sections of the capitalist ruling class are deeply hostile to scientific truth because rational, scientific inquiry exposes the irrationality, profound inequality, and inherent destructiveness of the profit system. They seek to subordinate all scientific endeavor strictly to the needs of militarism, while drowning the broader population in ignorance and backwardness to prevent a unified, scientifically literate challenge to their rule.

The political assault on Chinese scientists is an attack on the core democratic rights of all immigrants, students and working people. It is part of a broader assault on the social gains of the working class, all of which are being systematically dismantled to feed the budgets required for World War III. The legal mechanisms currently deployed to criminalize minor academic infractions and enforce deportations through indefinite administrative detention will be redirected against the working class, anti-war activists and political dissidents. All of this—the drive toward war, the attack on social gains, the destruction of democratic rights—arises organically from the capitalist system in the age of imperialism.

It must be emphasized that appeals to university administrations or to the political establishment, including the Democratic Party, are futile. In every case discussed today, these institutional actors have functioned as willing conduits for state repression. The American state apparatus, fully backed by the corporate press and the institutional defenders of the status quo, has mobilized its legalistic and administrative instruments to bypass democratic constraints. The defense of persecuted researchers, the preservation of academic freedom, and the prevention of a catastrophic global conflict require a fundamental, irrevocable break from these capitalist entities.

The survival of rational, cross-border scientific cooperation depends upon the independent, coordinated political organization of the global working class. The ultra-efficient microelectronics made possible by Danhao Wang’s theoretical breakthroughs must be physically manufactured, etched, and assembled. This process rests entirely on the exploitation of a globally interconnected industrial working class. The workers in the massive semiconductor fabrication plants around the world, at TSMC in Taiwan, at Samsung and SK Hynix in South Korea, at Intel and GlobalFoundries in the United States and at SMIC in China, are the ones who turn theoretical physics into material reality.

This dire situation demands the immediate formation of independent rank-and-file committees across university campuses and within the semiconductor fabrication plants. These committees must operate independently of the pro-imperialist corporate-controlled trade union bureaucracy, university administrations, and the capitalist political parties. We must work to unite the theorists and researchers who design microelectronics with the technicians, logistics workers, and assemblers who physically manufacture them, establishing lines of communication across national borders.

The investigation into the tragic and entirely preventable death of Danhao Wang must not be left in the hands of the institutional apparatus that facilitated his political persecution. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality insists that any internal probe conducted by

the U-M administration, led by a president who has publicly boasted of his subservience to the national security state, will result in nothing but a whitewash. The federal agencies whose hostile interrogations precipitated this tragedy cannot be trusted to investigate their own crimes.

Therefore, the immediate task is the formation of an independent commission of inquiry, organized and led by rank-and-file researchers, students, staff and faculty, operating entirely outside the control of the university administration and the capitalist state. This democratically controlled committee must demand the unredacted public release of all communications between the university and federal intelligence agencies. It must expose the precise nature of the harassment Dr. Wang endured, and hold fully accountable every official who sacrificed the lives and democratic rights of international scholars on the altar of the imperialist war drive. We must remove ICE from campuses, oppose all collaboration between academic administrations and federal security agencies, and fight for the full restoration of visas and academic positions to those persecuted by the state.

This meeting is a direct appeal to all workers and students, especially the international scientists and students targeted by this campaign. It is a call to understand the revolutionary tasks that stand before us. The central issue of our time is to mobilize the working class and young people, both immigrant and native-born, in a unified political struggle against capitalism, and for workers' power and socialism. Through sustained international solidarity, armed with a scientific understanding of political economy, the working class can halt the imperialist war drive. Only the socialist transformation of society can ensure that the genius of researchers like Danhao Wang serves the flourishing of all humanity, rather than its destruction.



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