

Science magazine investigates FBI's witch-hunt against Chinese researchers

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17 May 2026

Science magazine, one of the most prestigious peer-reviewed publications in the world, has published an investigative report titled “Researching While Chinese,” detailing the Department of Justice (DOJ) persecution of Chinese researchers at the University of Michigan (U-M) and Indiana University (IU). The report names the FBI operative at the center of every prosecution and exposes retaliation against IU Professor Roger Innes, a leading American plant biologist.

This witch-hunt has its roots in the China Initiative, launched by the DOJ during the first Trump administration in 2018, nominally to counter Chinese espionage and theft of trade secrets. The China Initiative targeted primarily senior faculty with established careers and institutional standing.

It produced a string of prosecutions that collapsed under scrutiny. The case against MIT Professor Gang Chen was dismissed in 2022 after the government’s charges proved baseless. Harvard chemistry chair Charles Lieber was convicted not of espionage but of lying to federal investigators about a modest research relationship. University of Kansas Professor Franklin Tao was convicted on concocted evidence.

The *Science* investigation documents the second phase of this campaign. Where the China Initiative targeted senior faculty, making prosecution difficult and politically costly, the current FBI campaign has shifted its focus to junior researchers—postdoctoral fellows and graduate students on temporary visas. These individuals have no tenure, no institutional protection and no citizenship rights that could complicate their removal.

The campaign has been driven from the top by fascist political operatives of the Trump administration. Former Attorney General Pam Bondi and FBI Director Kash Patel have publicly advanced the narrative of widespread Chinese “sabotage” and “espionage” in US universities. Patel, in particular, sought to stoke anti-Chinese hysteria with inflammatory social media posts and statements framing routine scientific exchange as a national security threat.

This is a political operation against immigrants and

Chinese scholars, an assault on democratic rights, an effort to whip up national chauvinism and racism. It is part of the erection of a presidential dictatorship and the preparation for war against China, a nuclear power.

Since June 2025, six young scientists have been prosecuted on felony charges of smuggling and conspiracy, carrying 25 years in prison, for mislabeling shipments of nonhazardous biological material. In ordinary circumstances, this administrative violation would draw a fine or a warning email from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).

The *Science* article names Special Agent Edward Nieh as the lead investigator. He is assigned to the Detroit field office’s counterintelligence division. The article traces the current wave of prosecutions back to July 27, 2024, when Zunyong Liu, the boyfriend of U-M postdoc Yunqing Jian, was stopped at Detroit Metropolitan Airport carrying samples of *Fusarium graminearum*, a fungus that causes head blight in wheat and barley and was the subject of their research. Liu was denied entry and returned to China. The FBI confiscated his phone and found exchanges implicating Jian. On February 5, 2025, Nieh interviewed Jian and seized her phone, finding a conversation in which she had asked a colleague to send her plasmid DNA, material U.S. Customs had already intercepted and destroyed.

Jian was held for five months before being coerced into a guilty plea, sentenced to time served and deported. U-M doctoral student Chengxuan Han was arrested a week after Jian and held for three months before entering a no-contest plea and being deported. Postdocs Xu Bai, Fengfan Zhang and Zhiyong Zhang were fired by U-M, stripped of their visas, arrested and held for over three months until the government abruptly moved to dismiss all charges on February 4, 2026, days before trial. Postdoc Youhuang Xiang at IU was held for almost five months, sentenced to time served and deported.

Neurobiologist X.Z. “Shawn” Xu, a senior faculty member at the University of Michigan whose laboratory employed Han, Bai, F. Zhang and Z. Zhang, has left the United States

and relocated his lab to Huazhong University of Science and Technology in China. Xu was not charged with any crime.

The *Science* investigation documents the retaliation against IU Professor Roger Innes, a distinguished plant biologist recently elected to the National Academy of Sciences, after he wrote an expert letter defending Yunqing Jian. Innes stated in the letter that the *Fusarium graminearum* strain at issue “did not present any appreciable danger of infestation or disease, let alone a ‘significant risk’” and noted that the researchers likely wanted access to a specialized microscope available at the U-M lab.

One week after Jian was sentenced in November 2025, the FBI’s Detroit office notified the Indianapolis office about “shipments from the PRC to individuals at IU whose research focused on pathogen resistance and susceptibility in wheat,” the same field as Jian and Liu. Innes’s postdoc Youhuang Xiang was arrested on November 25. “Why would Innes be on the Michigan FBI’s radar, except for that letter?” Jian’s lawyer David Duncan asked. “There’s no other connection.”

In December 2025, FBI agents searched Innes’s lab and confiscated a notebook containing seeds of *Arabidopsis thaliana* because, Innes told *Science*, “there was some Chinese writing in the notebook.” He had received the seed packet from a Chinese colleague in 2018 and never opened it.

In February 2026, the USDA issued a letter stating his lab was “in compliance” with federal regulations, and then canceled a long-running research collaboration aimed at combating *Fusarium* head blight. In early April, the day after Xiang was sentenced, IU’s public safety office ordered Innes to “cease all importing and exporting activities in connection with your research, effective immediately.” Three weeks later, the USDA informed Innes that the compliance letter had been sent “in error.” On May 7, IU locked him out of his laboratory entirely.

As of May 14, IU had announced a partial measure—temporary barriers around the Innes lab theoretically allowing researchers in adjacent spaces to re-enter—while shared offices, equipment, refrigerators and freezers remained inaccessible. Biology department chair Armin Moczek noted that “If the goal was to restore functionality to these two labs, that goal has yet to be accomplished.”

It must be noted that the *Science* article, for all its detail, does not mention the suicide of Danhao Wang. A 30-year-old postdoctoral researcher in the laboratory of Professor Zetian Mi at U-M, Wang took his own life on March 19, 2026, the day after being interrogated by federal agents, jumping from an upper story within the G.G. Brown Laboratory on North Campus. In almost two months,

President Domenico Grasso and the U-M administration have issued no statement to the campus community about his passing. It was the WSWS that first reported Wang’s name on April 2, informing the broader public of his death. *Science* has documented the machinery of the witch-hunt without confronting its most devastating human consequence.

The readership of *Science* is the scientific establishment: senior faculty, research administrators, funding bodies and academic institutions. That its editors concluded the time had come to document this campaign in such detail reflects the depth of alarm spreading through sections of the scientific establishment. They are watching the state attempt to suppress Chinese scientific advances through police state methods and concluding that the damage to American science may be irreparable.

The World Socialist Web Site and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) have opposed this witch-hunt from the beginning. We renew our demands:

- **A full, independent investigation into the death of Danhao Wang**
- **The exoneration of all convicted researchers**
- **The restoration of their careers and right of return**
- **An end to visa revocation as a political weapon**
- **The immediate restoration of Roger Innes’s laboratory access**
- **An independent investigation into the coordination between the FBI, DOJ, USDA and the university administrations that have served as willing instruments of this purge.**

The defense of these scientists is inseparable from the defense of democratic rights for the entire working class and the fight against the imperialist drive to war with China.



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