

California scholars demand accountability for death of Chinese researcher Danhao Wang

Stephen St. Clair
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The World Socialist Web Site recently spoke with Stephen Roddy, professor of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at the University of San Francisco and member of California Scholars for Academic Freedom (CS4AF). CS4AF is an organization of over 200 scholars across California that has twice written to University of Michigan President Domenico Grasso demanding accountability regarding the political persecution of Chinese scholars at U-M.

On March 19, 2026, Danhao Wang, a 30-year-old Chinese postdoctoral researcher at U-M, took his own life, jumping from an upper story of the G.G. Brown Laboratory on the university's North Campus. Wang had been subjected to interrogation by federal agents the day before his death. U-M has to this day issued no statement to the broader campus community. It took the independent reporting by the World Socialist Web Site to inform the public of what had taken place.

Wang's suicide was the direct and fatal consequence of a systematic, bipartisan campaign of state terror targeting Chinese researchers at American universities. Since mid-2025, six Chinese scientists affiliated with U-M and Indiana University (IU)—Yunqing Jian, Chengxuan Han, Xu Bai, Fengfan Zhang, Zhiyong Zhang and Youhuang Xiang—have been arrested, imprisoned for months, subjected to coerced plea deals and ultimately deported. Their “crimes” consisted of transporting harmless, universally used laboratory materials without the proper paperwork, which would ordinarily draw a fine or a warning email from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). For this they were prosecuted on federal charges of conspiracy and smuggling, carrying a potential sentence of 25 years in prison.

The motivation for this McCarthyite witch-hunt is not “national security” but the accelerating, bipartisan drive to military and technological confrontation with China. The Trump administration has weaponized the FBI, the Department of Justice and ICE against Chinese scholars, graduate students and postdoctoral researchers. University administrators, most shamefully U-M President Grasso, have actively collaborated with this onslaught, terminating visas and severing institutional protections. One week after Wang's death, Grasso testified before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce to boast of the university's role in persecuting its own

researchers.

Danhao Wang's death must not be buried. Those responsible must be held to account, from the federal agents who interrogated him, to the university officials who enabled his persecution, to the politicians of both parties who have incited this hysteria.

Stephen St. Clair: California Scholars for Academic Freedom wrote to University of Michigan President Grasso in July 2025 about the cases of Yunqing Jian and Chengxuan Han, and now you're writing again following the death of Danhao Wang. Can you describe how this campaign has evolved over the past year, and what compelled your organization to escalate its intervention?

Stephen Roddy: We are a bare-bones operation, and our membership is mostly focused on two areas: the suppression of Palestine-related activism and California campus-specific concerns (which are often Palestine-related). So these U-M cases were a new area for us. However, since my own interests are heavily China-focused (and I've been involved in “China Is Not Our Enemy” since 2021), I took the initiative to bring these cases to the attention of our members, who were very supportive and resulted in the two letters we sent to President Grasso.

SSC: One letter accuses the University of Michigan administration of “complicity of silence.” After almost two months, the university still has not issued a statement to the broader U-M community on the death of Wang. What is the nature of the relationship between university administrations and federal law enforcement in these cases, and how should that relationship change?

SR: Obviously, law enforcement's increasingly repressive behavior on university campuses has been a major concern of ours since October 2023, whether it has been federal, state or local forces. The Trump regime's activation of the FBI to pursue Chinese or other academics has only accelerated this trend toward unbridled repression in the academy. Unfortunately, very few campuses have been able to withstand these pressures and, just as with U-M Ann Arbor, have surrendered their autonomy on curricular and other matters to outside forces, such as the Brandeis Center (e.g., UC Berkeley's March 2026 capitulation).

SSC: Your organization is calling for the release of all relevant surveillance video and information in the university's possession. What resistance do you anticipate from the administration and federal authorities to that demand, and what legal or political mechanisms exist to compel transparency?

SR: It's inconceivable that the university does not have plenty of surveillance video that could prove or disprove the presence of FBI or other law enforcement units at the Brown building on the night of Danhao Wang's suicide. It might even show evidence of coercive or threatening actions toward Wang in the hours or moments before he jumped. I don't know what could be done to compel the release of this material, but I hope that the U-M community, including its law school, for example, (members of which have recently spoken out against Grasso's statements about Professor Peterson's commencement speech), might get involved. Our previous attempts to liaise with U-M faculty re: Jian and Wang's cases were met with silence, unfortunately.

SSC: The WSWS has documented that the witch-hunt of Chinese researchers at U-M is part of a broader, bipartisan campaign rooted in the US drive toward military and technological confrontation with China. Do you see the persecution of Chinese scholars as a specifically Trump administration phenomenon, or does it have deeper roots in US policy?

SR: Elbridge Colby seems to be the point person for the Trump regime's belligerent posture toward China in Trump 2.0, but the Biden admin's Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell advocated for a similar posture. There's a lot of continuity, going back to the Pivot to Asia announced by Secretary of State Clinton in 2009. Silicon Valley tycoons like Eric Schmidt are also important forces in driving this trend. These latter seem motivated by a combination of anger that China has limited their expansion into the Chinese market, and the desire to grab a share of so-called defense spending by hyping the China threat.

SSC: California Scholars for Academic Freedom (CS4AF) represents over 200 scholars across California. How have your members responded to these events? Has the atmosphere of surveillance and intimidation spread beyond Michigan?

SR: We are constantly responding to incidents of surveillance, intimidation and persecution here in California, with multiple faculty being targeted for suppression and even termination (our co-chair, Sang Kil, was terminated from San Jose State University and is currently in litigation). Most of this is Palestine-related, but we don't see why it would stop there, and Trump's National Security Presidential Memorandum-7 has provided a blueprint for a future crackdown on anything perceived as threatening to this regime's unhindered exercise of power.

SSC: Your letter connects the persecution of Chinese scholars to the University of Michigan's participation in what you call a "Manhattan Project 2.0" and its plan to install a data

center in Ypsilanti over community opposition. We wrote on this recently. How do you see these issues as interconnected, and what does it tell us about the direction American universities are heading?

SR: Glad to see WSWS reporting on this! The so-called nuclear modernization program initiated by Obama is certainly part and parcel of the weaponization of academia. Unfortunately, academics can be bought off by the mountains of cash being offered to collaborating institutions. Painting China as a threat as part of the campaign to scare the public into supporting increases in military spending, including on nuclear weapons, is patently obvious to anyone with half a brain.

SSC: What concrete steps is California Scholars for Academic Freedom calling on the broader academic community—faculty senates, professional associations and individual scholars—to take in response to the death of Danhao Wang and the ongoing persecution of Chinese researchers? And what can members of the public do to support this effort?

SR: We haven't done enough on this front, but I plan to advocate for more. The California-based Pivot to Peace is working on these issues, I believe.

SSC: University of Michigan President Grasso recently censured the chair of the Faculty Senate for remarks at the commencement in support of students who protested the Israeli war on Gaza.

Please describe CS4AF's efforts to protect scholars from political persecution over opposition to the Gaza genocide.

SR: Please refer to our website, which shows our recent actions on this topic: <https://cascholars4academicfreedom.home.blog/palestinian-rights/>.

We are organizing with other California-based groups to advocate for legislation to amend CA AB-715, a dangerous infringement on freedom of speech in California schools on Palestine.



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