

Neuroscientist fired after dispute over magnetic-protein research

Leading Chinese university dismisses researcher accused of breaking a collaboration agreement.

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A Chinese neuroscientist has been sacked after reporting he had used magnetic fields to control neurons and muscle cells in nematode worms (pictured), using a protein that senses magnetism.

Tsinghua University in Beijing has sacked a neuroscientist embroiled in a dispute over work on a [long-sought protein that can sense magnetic fields](#).

The university has not given a specific reason for its dismissal, however, and the scientist involved, Zhang Sheng-jia, says that he will contest their action.

In September, Zhang reported in the journal *Science Bulletin*¹ that he could manipulate neurons in worms by applying a magnetic field — a process that uses a magnetic-sensing protein.

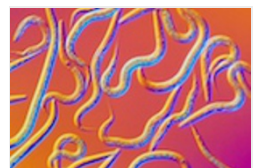
But a biophysicist at neighbouring Peking University, Xie Can, who claims to have discovered the protein's magnetic-sensing capacity and to have a paper detailing his research under review, complained that Zhang should not have published his paper before Xie's own work appeared.

Xie said that by publishing, Zhang violated an agreement that the pair had reached — although the two scientists tell [different versions about the terms of their agreement](#), and have different explanations of how Zhang came to be working with the protein.

Magnetic row

Researchers have long sought to discover a magnetic-sensing protein: not only because it might explain the mystery of how some animals and insects can sense magnetic fields, but also because — as Zhang's paper suggested — researchers could use it in experiments to manipulate and control cells using magnetism.

After Zhang's work appeared, Xie asked *Science Bulletin* to retract the paper. Officials from Tsinghua and Peking universities also made a joint request of retraction, and Tsinghua opened an investigation into Zhang's actions.



Chinese scientists row over long-sought protein that senses magnetism

On 2 November, Tsinghua told *Nature* that it had dismissed Zhang, but not why. In a statement, a university spokesperson said: "Tsinghua University has consistently attached great importance to building a rigorous academic environment and to academic ethics. After the academic dispute between the two researchers escalated, coming to the attention of the responsible officials, the university, in accordance with its rules, organized a special working group to investigate. Based on what we have already grasped about the situation, the school decided to terminate Zhang Sheng-jia's post."



The mystery of the magnetic cows

Zhang told *Nature* in an e-mail that he received notification that he was being dismissed on 15 October. "The document does not explain the reason behind the dismissal, and it does not have signature of any individual but only a stamp from [the] HR department," he wrote. Zhang says that there is nothing wrong with his paper, questions the procedure that led to his dismissal, and says that he will file a rebuttal.



Electronics' noise disorients migratory birds

Publishing ethics

Xie did not want to comment on Tsinghua's decision, and says that his only concern is that Zhang's paper be retracted. "I feel rather disappointed that the editorial office of *Science Bulletin* has not made much positive move towards retraction," he said.

Science Bulletin's editorial director, Rui An, says that editors at the journal did not know anything about the controversy when they decided to publish the paper. The journal is waiting for an official investigation report from Tsinghua University, she says, adding: "Whether to issue a retraction or correction will follow the guidelines of COPE [the [Committee on Publication Ethics](#)] and depend on the evidence provided by the institution."

The online Chinese news outlet Caixin has reported that Xie says his own paper is accepted for publication at *Nature Materials*, although Xie said he could not discuss the matter with *Nature's* news team, and a spokesperson for the journal would not confirm nor deny the report.

(Both *Science Bulletin* and *Nature Materials* are published by *Nature's* publisher, Springer Nature; *Nature's* news and comment team is editorially independent of its research editorial team.)

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Corrections

Corrected: The original version of this article incorrectly referred to Rui An as a man.

References

1. Long, X., Ye, J., Zhao, D. & Zhang, S.-J. *Sci. Bull.* <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11434-015-0902-0> (2015).