Hebei University of Science and Technology is grappling with the fallout from the retraction of a prominent paper on gene editing.

Discredited gene-editing researcher vows to clear his name

By Yongming Huang Aug. 4, 2017 , 1:45 PM

A Chinese biologist whose team on Wednesday retracted a high-profile paper on a gene-editing technology has vowed to press ahead with experiments that he hopes will vindicate the potential rival to the CRISPR/Cas9 system.

In May 2016, Chunyu Han of Hebei University of Science and Technology in Shijiazhuang, China, and colleagues published a paper in *Nature Biotechnology* describing a gene-editing system using an enzyme, Argonaute nuclease, from the organism *Natronobacterium gregoryi*(NgAgo). The technology was hailed on social media as Nobel Prize–worthy work and Han, the paper's lead author, rose to fame in China. He was elected vice president of Hebei Association for Science and Technology and conferred the title of "most beautiful teacher in Hebei." That August, Hebei government officials approved a plan to establish a $32 million gene-editing research center at the university. The fate of the center is unclear; Chinese journalists who visited Hebei University of Science and Technology reportedly could not locate the center, and staff said they were unaware of it.

Han's star began to fall late last year, when independent labs in China, South Korea, Germany, and the United States began reporting their failures to replicate the paper's key result. In a 3 August statement, Han's team acknowledged that "so far there is no second paper showing NgAgo-gDNA can be used for gene-editing." Last January, a patent on the NgAgo technology that Han and a colleague applied for in 2015 was effectively withdrawn after the duo failed to respond inquiries from China's State Intellectual Property Office, the office's online database shows.

Han's team continues to stand by their findings, stating that "when key requirements are met, the NgAgo-gDNA system can effectively edits genes." They did not reveal what the "key requirements" are. And they are pressing for another attempt to independently verify that the NgAgo system works. "Our next step, in response to social concerns, is to do the relevant work in accordance with the school arrangements, to select a third party laboratory, accompanied by peer experts to carry out experiments to verify the efficiency of NgAgo-gDNA gene-editing technology and publish the results," they stated. Han could not be reached for comment.

"They feel like the NgAgo technology is still possible. But I think the possibility is minimal," says Bo Tang, a molecular biologist at China Agricultural University in Beijing who uses CRISPR/Cas9 technology in his research. "Now [Han] is on thin ice," he says.

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