

Beat: News

U.S. Citizen and Four Chinese Intelligence Officers Charged with Spying

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U.S. Citizen and Four Chinese Intelligence Officers Charged with Spying on Prominent Dissidents, Human Rights Leaders and Pro-Democracy Activists.

The Defendants Allegedly Conspired to Silence Critics of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the United States and Abroad.

A U.S. citizen and four officials from China's Ministry of State Security (MSS) were charged in an indictment, unsealed in federal court in Brooklyn yesterday, with conspiracy and other charges related to an espionage and transnational repression scheme.

According to court documents, Wang Shujun, 73, of Queens, New York; Feng He, aka Boss He, of Guangdong; Jie Ji, of Qingdao; Ming Li, aka Elder Tang and Little Li, of Guangdong; and Keqing Lu aka Boss Lu, of Qingdao, allegedly participated in an espionage and transnational repression scheme in the United States and abroad. Wang was arrested on March 16, pursuant to a criminal complaint, and will be arraigned at a later date. He, Ji, Li and Lu remain at large.

"We will not tolerate efforts by the PRC or any authoritarian government to export repressive measures to our country," said Assistant Attorney General Matthew G. Olsen of the Justice Department's National Security Division. "These charges demonstrate the Justice Department's unwavering commitment to hold accountable all those who violate our laws in seeking to suppress dissenting voices within the United States and to prevent our residents from exercising their lawful rights."

"As alleged, Wang acted as a covert intelligence asset in his own community, spying on and reporting sensitive information on prominent pro-democracy activists and organizations to his co-defendants, who are members of the Chinese government's Ministry of State Security," said U.S. Attorney Breon Peace for the Eastern District of New York. "Today's indictment exposes and disrupts an operation by the PRC that threatens the safety and freedom of Chinese nationals residing in the United States on account of their pro-democracy beliefs and speech. Our office and our law enforcement partners will remain vigilant to thwart foreign espionage activities aimed at our citizens and residents."

"If anyone doubts how serious the Chinese government is about silencing its critics, this case should eliminate any uncertainty," said Acting Executive Assistant Director Alan E. Kohler Jr. of the FBI's National Security Branch. "The Chinese government's aggressive tactics were once confined to its borders. Now, the PRC is targeting people in the United States and around the world. The FBI and its partners remain committed to combating transnational repression."

According to court documents, Wang is a well-known academic and author who helped start a pro-democracy organization in Queens that opposes the current communist regime in China. However, as alleged, since at least 2011, Wang has used his position and status within the Chinese diaspora and dissident communities to covertly collect information about prominent activists and human rights leaders on behalf of the MSS and PRC. As alleged in the indictment, He, Ji, Li and Lu acted as Wang's handlers, directing Wang to target specific individuals and groups that the PRC considers subversive, such as Hong Kong pro-democracy activists, advocates for Taiwanese independence, and Uyghur and Tibetan activists, and obtain information on particular topics and matters of importance to the MSS.

As alleged in the indictment, Wang communicated and provided information to the MSS, including to He, Ji, Li and Lu, by using encrypted messaging applications and emails, as well as during face-to-face meetings in the PRC. Wang would often memorialize the information he collected in email "diaries" to be accessed by the MSS. These "diaries" included details about Wang's private conversations with prominent dissidents, as well as the activities of pro-democracy activists and human rights organizations. A search of Wang's residence incident to his arrest revealed approximately 163 "diary" entries Wang wrote to He, Ji, Li and Lu and other MSS officials.

For example, in one series of communications on or about Nov. 22, 2016, Ji instructed Wang to interface with a particular attendee at an upcoming pro-democracy event and to “accomplish the task” assigned by the “Boss,” referring to Lu. Ji noted that the attendee of interest had contacts with “Tibetans, Uyghurs and Mongolians” and wished Wang luck at getting “good results.” In another exchange on or about Nov. 16, 2016, Wang informed Li that he “just finished chatting” with a prominent human rights activist, noting that he asked the “necessary questions” and received “candid” answers. Li responded “great” and with a thumbs-up emoji, instructing Wang to write it in a “diary.” At least one Hong Kong democracy activist and dissident that Wang reported on to the MSS, identified as “Hong Kong Dissident #1” in the indictment, was subsequently arrested by the PRC.

In addition to this conduct, the indictment alleges that Wang transferred and possessed telephone numbers and contact information belonging to Chinese dissidents to the MSS, as well as making materially false statements to federal law enforcement, falsely denying that he had contacts with PRC officials or the MSS.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Artie McConnell of the Eastern District of New York is prosecuting the case with valuable assistance from Trial Attorney Scott A. Claffee of the National Security Division’s Counterintelligence and Export Control Section.

An indictment is merely an allegation, and all defendants are presumed innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.

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