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The arrest of a former aide to NY governors highlights efforts to root out Chinese agents in the US



BY PHILIP MARCELO, ERIC TUCKER AND DIDI TANG

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NEW YORK (AP) — A secret Chinese police station [hiding in plain sight](#) in New York City. Clandestine efforts by Communist Party operatives to [spy on and bully Chinese expatriates](#). And now, charges that a [former aide to two New York governors](#) was secretly acting as an agent of the Chinese government.

The U.S. Department of Justice has initiated a wave of prosecutions in recent years aimed at rooting out covert agents advancing Beijing's interests on American soil.

In Brooklyn alone, federal prosecutors in the last four years have brought at least a dozen such criminal cases against more than 90 people — the latest being Tuesday's arrest of Linda Sun, who once served as deputy chief of staff to Gov. Kathy Hochul and was earlier an aide to former Gov. Andrew Cuomo.

The charges against Sun are the most startling example yet of a threat U.S. officials have warned about for years: China's determination to influence American policy and cultivate relationships with political figures seen as having access to the levers of power, even if only at a local level.

While the public might think of foreign agents as people who eavesdrop on military officials or steal state secrets, China has demonstrated an eagerness to exert influence in less splashy areas, like currying favor with American officials with control over things like local land use regulations or labor issues.

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“There is definitely an effort to develop relationships and friendships and connections in state and local governments,” said Adam Hickey, a former senior Justice Department national security official who led the department’s enforcement of the Foreign Agents Registration Act, which Sun is charged with violating.

Prosecutors say Sun — a midlevel aide in two Democratic administrations — developed a close relationship with officials in the Chinese consulate in New York and did their bidding in ways that were important, albeit unlikely to make the plot of a spy novel.

Among other things, she is accused of quietly spoiling efforts by representatives of Taiwan's government to meet with top New York state officials. The Chinese government considers Taiwan to be part of China. She also allegedly encouraged Cuomo and Hochul to make supportive remarks about China such as thanking Chinese companies for donating medical equipment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

An indictment says she solicited talking points from a Chinese official for a video Hochul recorded as lieutenant governor wishing people a happy Lunar New Year. Prosecutors said Sun took credit for keeping Hochul from mentioning human rights issues in that video. And the indictment said Sun provided unauthorized invitation letters from the governor's office that helped Chinese officials enter the U.S.

In return, prosecutors say Sun got tickets to performances by Chinese arts groups and multiple "Nanjing-style salted ducks" that were sent to her parents' home. More lucratively, the indictment said, Sun's husband got help for his business dealings in China, which brought in millions of dollars for the couple, who had a [\\$4 million mansion](#) on Long Island and a condominium in Hawaii.

Sun and her husband, Chris Hu, pleaded not guilty Tuesday.

Sun's lawyer, Jarrod Schaeffer, said she was "understandably upset that these charges have been brought," but didn't discuss the charges in detail.

Hochul on Wednesday called Sun's alleged actions "an absolute betrayal of the trust of two administrations in state government."

The alleged foreign influence efforts are part of what FBI and Justice Department officials have described as a broader attempt to manipulate public opinion in China's favor.

"The Chinese government understands that politicians in smaller roles today may rise to become more influential over time," FBI Director Christopher Wray said in a January 2022 speech. "So they look to cultivate talent early to ensure that politicians at all levels of government will be ready to take a call and advocate on behalf of Beijing's agenda."

Justice Department officials have charged dozens of Chinese nationals in the last five years, though many have remained out of reach of American law enforcement.

Among those who have faced charges are 40 officers with the Ministry of Public Security accused of harassing and threatening dissidents, as well as a cluster of operatives alleged to have stalked Chinese individuals living in the U.S. as part of an effort to coerce them into returning to China, where they wanted for prosecution.

A Chinese American scholar known as a pro-democracy activist was [convicted](#) in New York earlier this month of gathering information on dissidents and feeding it to his homeland's government.

In 2022, a Chinese government operative was charged with plotting to undermine the candidacy of a little-known congressional candidate in New York by planning to locate, or even manufacture, derogatory information that could prevent him from being elected. The allegation was part of a broader plot resulting in charges against five people, including for spying on a Chinese national living in Los Angeles and plotting to destroy his artwork.

Two U.S. citizens were charged last year with establishing [a secret police station](#) in Manhattan under the direction and control of the Chinese government.

A spokesperson for the Chinese Embassy, Liu Pengyu, dismissed the concerns as overblown, blaming the U.S. government and media for having “frequently hyped up the so-called ‘Chinese agents’ narratives, many of which have later been proven untrue.”

China has long maintained that U.S. authorities are simply discrediting its international crime-fighting work, such as “Operation Fox Hunt,” a [nearly decade-old effort](#) ostensibly focused on pursuing Chinese fugitives, including corrupt officials.

It also claims that police stations, which have been reported across North America and Europe, [aren't law enforcement offices at all](#), but provide routine services for Chinese citizens, including renewing Chinese driver's licenses.

Yaqiu Wang, research director for China, Hong Kong and Taiwan at Freedom House, which tracks transnational repression, applauded efforts to counter Chinese activities that she says undermine human rights and democracy.

Last year, a congressional committee warned that Beijing runs an extensive network of organizations that seeks to influence U.S. universities, think tanks, civic groups, other “prominent individuals and institutions” and public opinion broadly.

But Wang warned that federal efforts must be targeted and proportionate, given civil rights concerns raised by the Chinese American community and others.

In 2018, the Trump-era Justice Department launched a nationwide effort known as the [China Initiative](#) targeting Chinese espionage at American universities.

But the [initiative was rebranded](#) early in the Biden administration following multiple unsuccessful prosecutions of researchers and concerns from some of the nation's top colleges that the program had a [chilling effort on academic research](#) and amounted to racial profiling.

"No Americans should have to live in fear that their entire lives may be turned upside down due to wrongful accusations, unwarranted racial profiling, or ugly xenophobia," U.S. Rep. Judy Chu, a California Democrat, said in July as she stood with Feng "Franklin" Tao, a Chinese-American professor who had an [espionage case thrown out](#) by a Colorado judge earlier this year. "There is no room for this prejudice in our federal government or in our country."

Associated Press reporters Jennifer Peltz and Anthony Izaguirre in New York contributed to this story. Tucker and Tang reported from Washington.

Follow Philip Marcelo at twitter.com/philmarcelo.



PHILIP MARCELO

Marcelo is a general assignment reporter in the NYC bureau. He previously wrote for AP Fact Check and before that was based in Boston, where he focused on race and immigration.

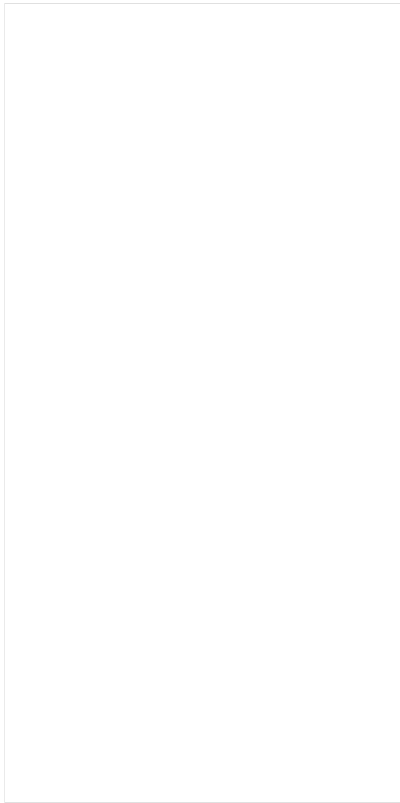


ERIC TUCKER

Tucker covers national security in Washington for The Associated Press, with a focus on the FBI and Justice Department and the special counsel cases against former President Donald Trump.



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