



Ji Chaoqun

- Age 31 at time of sentencing
- Chinese citizen
- Came to the U.S. from Beijing, China in August 2013
- Admitted to the U.S. on an F1 Visa, to study in the U.S.
- Master's Degree in Electrical Engineering from the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago (December 2015)



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CASE STUDY

Acting as an Agent of a Foreign Government

WHAT HAPPENED

In 2016, Ji enlisted in the U.S. Army Reserves under the Military Accession Vital to the National Interest (MAVNI) program. During his time in the Reserves, high-level intelligence officers from the Jiangsu Province Ministry of State Security (JSSD) recruited Ji as part of an effort to obtain access to advanced aerospace and satellite technologies under development by companies within the U.S.

The Chinese operatives tasked Ji with providing biographical information on potential recruits for spying for China, including Chinese nationals working as engineers and scientists in the United States, some of whom worked for U.S. defense contractors. In late August 2015, Ji purchased background checks on eight individuals from Intelius, Instant Checkmate, and Spokeo. All eight individuals were naturalized U.S. citizens born in either Taiwan or China now living in the United States. Additionally, these individuals currently worked in or were recently retired from careers in the science and technology industry.

On August 30, 2015, Ji sent an email to his handlers in China. The subject line was "Midterm test questions." Ji attached the eight background reports to the email. Ji also met with Chinese Intelligence officers at least six times, both in hotels in Chicago and three times in Beijing, China.

In his application to participate in the MAVNI program, Ji falsely stated that he had not had contact with a foreign government within the past seven years. In a subsequent interview with a U.S. Army officer, Ji again failed to disclose his relationship and contacts with a foreign intelligence officer.

Ji had several meetings with an undercover law enforcement agent posing as a representative of the JSSD. During these meetings, Ji explained that with his military identification, he could visit and take photos of "Roosevelt-class" aircraft carriers. Ji also explained that once he obtained his U.S. citizenship and security clearance through the MAVNI program, he would seek a job at the CIA, FBI or NASA where he would have access to all their databases, including databases that contained scientific research.

Ji Chaoqun was convicted of acting illegally within the United States as an agent of the People's Republic of China and was sentenced to eight years in prison.

INDICATORS

Access Attribute – As a member of the military, Ji had physical access to military installations and equipment. He also had information about troop strength, capabilities and plans.

Foreign Influence and Preference – Although in the U.S. on a valid visa, Ji is still a citizen of China. Ji falsified statements on several government forms stating that he had no contact with foreign nationals nor any unreported foreign travel. Ji told undercover agents of the FBI that he planned to obtain U.S. citizenship and a security clearance through the MAVNI program. He told the agent that he would seek a job at the CIA, FBI or NASA where he would have access to all their databases, including databases that contained scientific research.

IMPACT

- Chinese intelligence services typically recruit and employ agents to collect a wide range of information, including U.S. national security secrets. Chinese intelligence typically focus their efforts on recruiting ethnic Chinese, primarily because of cultural and language affinity.
- According to Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director Christopher Wray in July 2020, China-related economic espionage cases have increased 1,300 percent over the past decade, though the size of this increase in absolute terms is unclear.
- The FBI opens a new China-related counterintelligence case about every ten hours, and almost half of the nearly 5,000 open counterintelligence cases nationwide are China-related.

ADDITIONAL INFO

- The Military Accession Vital to the National Interest (MAVNI) program allows the U.S. Armed Forces to recruit foreign workers with skills considered vital to the national interest. This program was suspended in 2016 and has not been resumed pending review.
- The Jiangsu Province Ministry of State Security (JSSD) is a provincial department of the Ministry of State Security for the People's Republic of China. Xu Yanjun was the Deputy Division Director within the Chinese Ministry of State Security.
- According to their websites, Intelius, Instant Checkmate, and Spokeo are each U.S.-based companies that offer, among other services, online services for consumers to purchase background reports about any individual. Intelius provides its services only to U.S.-based consumers, and it utilizes a tool that restricts access to the Intelius website from China, among other locations outside the U.S. Instant Checkmate strictly prohibits purchases from outside the U.S. According to a representative from Spokeo, it provides services only for U.S.-based consumers and only accepts payment from U.S.-based credit cards with valid U.S. billing zip codes.
- On November 22, 2024, President Joseph Biden signed an Executive Order of Clemency commuting Chaoqun's sentence to time served. Chaoqun and two others were returned to China as part of a White House prisoner swap that returned three wrongfully detained Americans from Chinese custody.

Questions to consider:

- What safeguards can an organization use to protect against recruitment by foreign intelligence entities?
- What training does your organization conduct to help employees recognize signs of recruitment?

Resources for further exploration:

- Foreign Intelligence Entity (FIE) Targeting And Recruitment (<https://www.cdse.edu/Portals/124/Documents/jobaid/foreign-intelligence-entity-targeting-recruitment-methodology.pdf>)
- Understanding Espionage And National Security Crimes (<https://www.cdse.edu/Portals/124/Documents/jobaid/ci/ci-jobaidseries-understandingespionage.pdf>)
- Counterintelligence Awareness for Defense Critical Infrastructure (https://www.cdse.edu/Portals/124/Documents/jobaid/ci/CDSE_CIP_Job_Aid.pdf)

Supporting Through Reporting!

Contact the appropriate POC to report any observed potential risk indicators:

Name: _____ Agency/Department: _____
Title: Supervisor/Security Officer/ITP Senior Official/ITP Manager