


7-28-2009

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Goffman, Sam, "Race and Espionage" (2009). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 430.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/430>

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Race and Espionage

July 28, 2009 in [Uncategorized](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [No comments](#)

By Sam Goffman

The fact that China and the US spy on each other should come as no surprise to anybody. Each country is nervous about the other, and espionage, though it is surely not conducted with the same vigor as during the Cold War, is still an important part of interactions between states.

What's interesting about Chinese espionage operations in the US, however, is that they appear to involve strong racial and nationalist overtones. The Soviet Union tended to appeal to ideology, or simply offer money or other types of benefits to its agents; China, it seems, is mainly going after overseas Chinese communities in its efforts to recruit spies.

In the [latest example](#), Dongfan "Greg" Chung, a Boeing employee who had been with the company for 30 years, was convicted two weeks ago for passing numerous sensitive documents to the Chinese government. The judge in the case proclaimed, "The trust Boeing placed in Mr. Chung to safeguard its proprietary and trade secret information obviously meant very little to Mr. Chung. He cast it aside to serve the PRC, which he proudly proclaimed as his 'motherland.'" Afterwards, a think tank analyst told the *New York Times*, "The Chinese communist government is seeking to divide the loyalties of Chinese-Americans. By defending ourselves in this way, asserting our sovereignty, we are making clear to all those who would be turned by nationalist appeals from China's communist government that there is price to pay."

This kind of language is indicative of a broader fear in the American government and its environs that Chinese-Americans are more likely to serve as spies than Americans of other ethnic backgrounds. Several Chinese-Americans have been convicted of espionage activities in recent years—for example, [Chi Mak](#), [Tai Shen Kuo](#), and [Katrina M. Leung](#)—and quotes such as the one above indicate there is a broad understanding that the PRC targets Chinese-Americans in its recruiting efforts. Ira Winkler, a security consultant, [has said](#), "They [the Chinese government] play upon the ethnic heartstrings of people with Chinese heritage, telling them they must help. They identify in social settings who is here on a Green Card, who has relatives in China and who can be compromised."

Another alleged strategy of the Chinese government, which has gotten some attention from the media, is a phenomenon that could be called "micro-espionage." A former Chinese diplomat named Chen Yonglin, who defected to Australia in 2005, has confirmed that this strategy exists. In a [discussion about Chinese espionage efforts in Canada](#), he said, "China has a huge network of secret agents, and it is working hard to influence governments, including Canada's. It infiltrates the Chinese community and also puts pressure on groups that it considers the enemy, like Falun Gong, democracy activists and others." And Sreeram Chaulia, in an article on Chinese espionage, [writes](#), "US counter-espionage professionals contend that this is a unique style patented by China wherein the agents are relative amateurs such as Chinese students, businesspersons, visiting scientists as well as persons of Chinese heritage living in the US. Each individual may produce only a small iota of data, but a network of such persons could vacuum up an extensive amount of sensitive military and economic information."

Such is the vision: a vast array of overseas Chinese, working in every corner of the economy and government, all funneling small pieces of information back to their "home" country, which, presumably, fashions the pieces together to form a comprehensive view of America's secrets. It is difficult to think of a conspiracy theory grander in scope, more racist in content, and more frightening in its implications. *Every* Chinese-American is a suspect. Not only does the vision assume that a large number of Chinese-Americans would be willing, even eager, to spy for the "motherland"; it also assumes that the Chinese government has the kind of sophisticated information-gathering apparatus in place to collect all these little shards of information, and that it would be capable of forming them into something useful.

It perhaps should not be surprising that Americans would extrapolate the Chinese practice of targeting individual Chinese-Americans into a grand conspiracy—during the Cold War, similar fears of broad

Soviet espionage were all too common. And it should not be surprising that the PRC would attempt to use race to persuade Chinese-Americans to become spies—Chinese nationalist discourse has consistently invoked race as a fundamental part of being Chinese, and such rhetoric has seen a resurgence in recent years. Both countries are merely doing what they have already been doing for a long time.

It may boil down to competing ideas of what a nation-state should look like: in the US, the specter of large numbers of Chinese-American spies could be yet another test for American-style multiculturalism. Caught in the middle, of course, are Chinese-Americans themselves.

Sam Goffman previously published a piece on the [Seoul Olympics](#) at China Beat.

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