



How Much of a Threat is Espionage from Chinese Immigrants?

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Native-born Americans who are ethnically Chinese are less likely to be spies than their proportion of the population would suggest.

Most Americans, former President Donald Trump, and now the Joe Biden administration, all view China as the greatest geopolitical threat to the United States. Avril D. Haines, Biden's new director of national intelligence, recently said last month "When it comes to espionage, [the Chinese] are an adversary." And the recent sentencing for conspiracy to steal trade secrets and wire fraud of Chinese-born husband and wife team Li Chen and Yu Zhou seems to, at least on the surface, justify this fear.

Their conviction also seems to vindicate President Trump for creating the Department of Justice's (DOJ) China Initiative in 2018 to counter a Chinese "economic blitzkrieg" to steal intellectual property, trade secrets, and technology to undermine the U.S. economy and national security. Espionage, it was said, is the primary tool the Chinese were using to attack the United States.

But how serious is this threat? Countries spy on each other daily; does Chinese espionage justify immigration restrictions placed by the Trump administration on all Chinese students and travelers? Does it justify going further by permanently limiting the number of Chinese students and Chinese immigrants, all while specifically keeping them out of STEM fields as Senators Cotton (R-AR) and Blackburn (R-TN) proposed? How about more radical changes in America's foreign policy?

Despite its tough rhetoric, the federal government has released no systematic data on espionage or provided estimates about how serious of a threat it is.

A new paper published by the Cato Institute fills this gap. My research identifies 1,485 people convicted of espionage and espionage-related offenses on American soil between 1990 and 2019. This doesn't count people who hacked computers from abroad, just those who were caught engaged in any espionage or espionage related activity in the United States.

During that thirty-year period, about 1 in 6.5 million people per year in the United States committed espionage or an espionage related crime. A total of 583 of these spies were native-

born Americans while the rest were foreign-born or had unknown origins. Only 184 of them were from China.

The annual chance that somebody born in China would commit espionage was about 1 in 404,000 per year during that time. But Chinese-born spies aren't the only threat. Of the 1,485 identified, 276 spied for China. Of those, 171 or 62 percent, were born in China. Twenty-four percent were American born, 7 percent were born in Taiwan, and the rest come from many different countries. And in only a third of the cases against Chinese-born spies was the U.S. government the target of the espionage.

This means that, ultimately, native-born Americans who are ethnically Chinese are *less* likely to be spies than their proportion of the population would suggest.

While rare, the most memorable recent instance of a Chinese national attempting to target American officials, which became known after my paper was finished, was of Christine Fang. She tried to “influence” many minor American politicians like Reps. Eric Swalwell (D-CA) and Mike Honda (D-CA) in unspecified ways and to no apparent effect, other than possibly embarrassing her targets. Despite her apparent efforts, however, she wasn't charged with espionage.

When it comes to those actually prosecuted, in two-thirds of instances Chinese-born spies stole economic secrets or intellectual property that were rarely related to national security. Xiaorong You, a Chinese immigrant, was indicted for stealing a formula for a new coating on the inside of Coca-Cola cans. Chinese-born Xudong “William” Yao was convicted of stealing secrets related to operating train locomotives. James Patrick Lewis, a native-born American professor at West Virginia University, was convicted of fraud because he lied about his involvement with a Chinese program that *may* be tied to economic espionage. Li Chen and Yu Zhou, the husband and wife team mentioned above, conspired to steal trade secrets related to breakthroughs in pediatric cancer research—not national security secrets.

Those cases of economic espionage and theft of trade secrets simply do not rise to the level of an “economic blitzkrieg,” in the words of former attorney general Bill Barr. It is true that some instances are very serious, such as the case of American-born John Reece Roth, who exported data on specialized plasma technology for use in drones that he had developed under a U.S. Air Force contract while a professor at the University of Tennessee. But Roth's crime is the exception as most have no connection to national security.

Ultimately, the government should try to reduce espionage where practicable, but the national security establishment needs to justify its worry with systematic evidence. My research supplies such evidence and makes it clear that circumstances don't justify Secretary of State Tony Blinken's recent statement that China “poses the most significant challenge of any nation-state to the United States.” I've shown my work. It's time for those worried about Chinese espionage to show theirs.

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