

Criminal Justice

A Diplomat's Visits to Oklahoma Highlight Contacts Between Chinese Officials and Community Leaders Accused of Crimes

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After a mass murder at a marijuana farm, a Chinese diplomat visited an organization that has been the subject of investigations. The meetings reflect an international pattern of contacts between Chinese officials and suspected criminal networks.



Police respond to a shooting at a Chinese cultural association in Oklahoma City in 2020. Oklahoma City Police Department

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The photos look like a routine encounter between a senior Chinese diplomat and immigrants in the American heartland: dutiful smiles, casual clothes, a teapot on a table, Chinese and U.S. flags on the wall.

But behind the images, there is a potentially concerning story. During two trips to Oklahoma, Consul General Zhu Di of the Chinese embassy visited a cultural association that has been a target of investigations into Chinese mafias that dominate the state's billion-dollar marijuana industry. And the community leaders posing with him in the photos? A number of them have pleaded guilty or been prosecuted or investigated for drug-related crimes, according to court documents, public records, photos and social media posts.

"He's meeting with known criminals," said Donnie Anderson, the director of the Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs Control, in an interview.

There is no indication of wrongdoing by the consul general, who is one of China's top diplomats in the United States. Still, the encounters in Oklahoma reflect a pattern of contacts around the world between China's authoritarian government and diaspora leaders linked to criminal activity — a subject of

increasing concern among Western national security officials, human rights groups and Chinese dissidents.

U.S. and foreign national security officials have alleged that the Chinese state maintains a tacit alliance with Chinese organized crime in the U.S. and across the world. Mobsters overtly support pro-Beijing causes and covertly provide services overseas: engaging in political influence work, moving illicit funds offshore for the Chinese elite and helping persecute dissidents, according to Western officials, court cases and human rights groups. Chinese officials reciprocate by tolerating and sometimes supporting their illicit activities, according to those sources.

And this alleged state-mafia partnership has used influential Chinese cultural organizations in foreign countries to project power, according to Western officials. As ProPublica has reported, the leaders of diaspora associations who interact with Chinese and local governments in Europe and elsewhere include accused organized crime figures.

In the United States, Chinese criminal networks have expanded their wealth and influence by taking over much of the nation's illicit marijuana trade, ProPublica reported last week.

It was in that context that the consul general traveled to Oklahoma.

In November 2022, a Chinese gunman killed four fellow immigrants and wounded another at an illegal marijuana farm in Oklahoma. The consul general hurried to Oklahoma City to discuss the murders with representatives of the community and offer help to relatives of the victims, according to Chinese officials, a participant in a meeting and media reports and photos. Zhu returned for another visit in June, photos and media reports show.

During both trips, meetings took place at the local branch of the American Fujian Association on Classen Boulevard, which in 2020 was the scene of a violent clash that left a convicted criminal with a gunshot wound and two others facing trial. Two years after that shooting, one of the accused assailants died and the other was wounded in the quadruple murder at their marijuana farm. Law enforcement agencies have also investigated the association's headquarters, a ground-floor suite in a minimall, as a suspected illegal casino and a hub of other illicit activity, according to court records and senior officials.

During a second visit in June 2023, shown below, the diplomat met with some of the same people, as well as Chuan Min Zhang (circled), who had pleaded guilty to drug-related offenses.



Li Zhaoyin via SinoVision, annotation by ProPublica

Although the consul general did not respond to questions addressed to him for this article, officials at the Chinese embassy in Washington, D.C., said he simply did his duty by going to Oklahoma in response to the deaths of Chinese nationals. While declining to discuss the visits, a consular official said in an interview that the embassy was not aware of the crimes linked to the association and the people who met with Zhu.

In a written statement sent by email, the embassy's spokesperson, Liu Pengyu, said Chinese officials travel to different states "to understand the living conditions and development of overseas Chinese in the United States, help them better observe the laws and regulations of their country of residence, and encourage them to actively serve and integrate into local communities so as to play a positive role in promoting friendship between the peoples of China and the U.S."

But U.S. law enforcement experts see a troubling global pattern in ongoing relationships between Chinese government officials and community leaders with criminal ties. Because Chinese officials closely monitor the diaspora, it's very likely they know about such ties, the experts said.

"These diaspora associations are tools of the Chinese state," said Donald Im, a former senior official at the Drug Enforcement Administration. "The presence of criminal elements in the leadership suggests an alliance, directly or indirectly, between the Chinese state and organized crime."

Freedom House, a human rights organization, summed up China's global reach in a report in 2021, describing a "framework of influence that encompasses cultural associations, diaspora groups, and in some cases, organized crime networks."

The activities of the 14K triad, one of the Chinese criminal groups that are the dominant money launderers for Latin American drug lords and the Chinese Communist Party elite, highlight another suspected connection to the Chinese state, current and former law enforcement officials say.

The 14K has expanded its portfolio to play a command role over marijuana trafficking networks in Oklahoma and other states, according to Anderson, Im and other current and former officials. The Treasury Department has accused a Macao boss of the 14K of being prominent in the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference of the Chinese Communist Party and advancing China's foreign influence through business ventures and Chinese cultural groups in Asia and the Pacific.

And U.S. federal agents are investigating cases in which Chinese provincial officials allegedly work with criminal groups to get drug money that they then use to finance infrastructure projects in China or abroad in the Belt and Road Initiative, the international public works program that has expanded China's global might, according to current and former U.S. officials.

"All these provinces are competing with each other and using criminal networks and triads to find revenue for government projects," Im said. "The marijuana industry in the U.S. is benefiting regional governors and provinces in China. Drug money is like an ad hoc bank for Chinese economic projects and policies."

Oklahoma authorities admit that it is hard for them to get a grip on the influx of criminal groups, let alone trace a trail back to the Chinese state. Monitoring the activities of foreign diplomats, officials and spies is the jurisdiction of federal agencies working in the secretive realm of counterintelligence.

Nevertheless, state and federal agents have detected interactions between their suspects and Chinese government officials using surveillance, open sources, and photos and communications found in electronic devices, Anderson and other officials said. And the brazen movement of large amounts of money between China and the players in the illicit marijuana trade shows that Chinese officials are either aware or involved, the officials said.

"Our investigations indicate that there are Chinese officials pulling the strings, making money off of and involved in the illegal marijuana industry in Oklahoma," Anderson said. "Money is invested here and it's from China, to set up organizations. These are transnational organizations. And money is going back to China."

Sen. James Lankford of Oklahoma, a member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, said during a committee hearing last year that the Chinese government seems "fully aware" of marijuana-related organized crime activity in the United States, but it is "looking away ... to increase a negative influence on Americans."

The Chinese embassy spokesperson called such accusations “groundless,” “irresponsible speculation” and “slander.”

“We urge relevant sides to respect facts, stop fabricating lies, stop discrediting and smearing the Chinese government and diplomatic officials, and stop fomenting and spreading anti-China narratives,” Liu said.

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Many owners and workers at Oklahoma marijuana farms are Fujianese immigrants who arrived in recent years from other U.S. states, particularly New York, according to law enforcement officials and Chinese American leaders.

Some are law-abiding. Others are gunslinging gangsters. And still others operate in a gray area created by the national trend toward decriminalization, which has reduced risks and increased rewards associated with black-market marijuana.

ProPublica and The Frontier have identified over a dozen national leaders of Fujianese associations from the East Coast involved in Oklahoma’s marijuana boom. A number of these leaders, who include U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents, have suspected or confirmed links to illegal activity. Yet they interact with Chinese diplomats, Communist Party leaders and even Chinese security officials, according to photos, media reports and interviews. Some also mix with U.S. politicians.

A case in point: an accused drug trafficker named Yunda Chen, known as “Big Boss Yunda,” who traveled regularly between his home in Atlanta and his marijuana farms in Oklahoma, according to court records.

Using vehicle surveillance and a drone, state anti-drug agents followed couriers working for Chen as they transported bales of marijuana and cash shipments, some in Oklahoma and others that were destined for New York, Tennessee and other states in the national black market, court records say. The agents recruited an undercover informant — a local resident whom Chen paid \$2,500 and a pound of dope a month to appear on registration documents and medical marijuana licenses as majority owner of his farms, court records say. FBI translators helped translate intercepted phone calls in which Chen used code words to set up deals, talked to suspects linked to alleged trafficking and money laundering in other states, and discussed a fight among more than 20 combatants over a debt in New York, court records say.

Authorities arrested Chen in Florida in December 2022 and charged him and five others in a trafficking conspiracy. Agents raided five farms in Oklahoma and seized nearly 50,000 marijuana plants and several guns, court documents say. They also found workers living in “poor and unsafe” conditions, said Mark Woodward, spokesperson for the Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics.

Last June, prosecutors hit Chen with an additional charge of witness intimidation after he sent a text message warning an accused accomplice “not to talk about the things that don’t concern you” in upcoming testimony, court records say. (Chen is awaiting trial and has not yet entered pleas because defense lawyers requested delays of arraignments. He and his lawyers did not respond to requests for comment.)

The aid of the FBI and the rare use of wiretaps in a state case reflect its significance. As far as investigators were concerned, Chen was a major trafficker.

“He’s as big a player as any we’ve touched,” Woodward said. “He was running a more organized system than many we have dealt with — large scale, more hierarchy.”

In the simultaneously tightknit and far-flung subculture of Fujianese immigrants, though, Chen is a well-connected leader.

He lives in a large house on several acres bordering a country club in suburban Atlanta and owns a chain of restaurants and a catering business, public records show. (In 2012, court records show, he agreed to pay \$225,000 in back wages to settle a Labor Department lawsuit accusing him of wage theft from employees

who endured conditions that a federal investigator described as “deplorable.” Chen denied wrongdoing and disputed some of the findings in the settlement.)

While serving as executive vice chair of the American Lianjiang Association, which represents people from a coastal district of Fujian, Chen has joined Chinese diplomats and Communist Party officials at U.S. events, according to media reports and photos posted on social media.

Among those events: In 2017, photos and media reports show he spoke at a reception in Atlanta that was attended by a Chinese consul general who was based in Houston. In 2019, he participated with prominent Chinese Communist Party members in a gala and symposium held by his association in New York to “conscientiously study” President Xi Jinping’s campaign for the “reunification” of China and Taiwan — a perennial flashpoint in military tensions with the United States.

Chen is also active in U.S. politics. He went to Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp’s inauguration ceremony in Atlanta in 2019 and donated \$6,600 to the governor’s general election campaign, according to public records, photos and social media posts. He has contributed thousands to other local politicians and socialized with them, according to public records and media reports. He received an award from a minority business association in 2019. (A spokesperson for the Kemp campaign declined to comment.)

As of last year, Yunda Chen remained a “specially appointed policy consultant” of the Lianjiang association, according to a Chinese media report.

Like the Big Boss in Georgia, Virginia-based businessman Bi Chao Chen (no relation to Yunda) has interacted with Chinese diplomats, Fujian provincial officials and even representatives of the Ministry of Public Security — the law enforcement juggernaut that oversees China’s police forces — media reports and photos show.

In 2018, he was among leaders who met with a Ministry of Public Security delegation that visited New York, according to a news report that gave few details about the meeting. Photos and media reports also show him at a 2019 dinner with leaders of a powerful organization that is part of the United Front, the influence and intelligence wing of the Chinese Communist Party.

U.S. prosecutors alleged last year that officials of the United Front worked with the public security ministry to set up an illegal Chinese police station in a Fujianese association in New York to monitor and intimidate U.S. dissidents, according to a federal criminal complaint and statements by federal officials. It was one of dozens of such stations directed by Chinese security forces and operating in diaspora associations around the world. The two Chinese-American defendants in the New York case have pleaded not guilty, and the Chinese government has denied any illegal activity on the part of the overseas police stations.

Bi Chao Chen, who appears in a photo with a defendant in the federal case, has had his own run-ins with the law.

In 2015, he was convicted of assault and battery after he menaced a man with a knife, forced him to the ground and stole \$5,000 from him in Hampton, Virginia, court records show. He also has multiple convictions in connection to a wildlife poaching operation he led and an additional arrest for assault and battery in which he was not charged, court records show.

In Oklahoma, he has had ties to at least two marijuana ventures, public records show. His name appears on a state marijuana license, limited liability corporation documents and the front gate of a vast expanse of greenhouses and indoor cultivation structures west of Tulsa whose registered agent was a lawyer now facing trial for hatching fraudulent ownership schemes, court records show. Another person who has a marijuana license registered at the same location was involved in a violent dispute in 2021 that ended in an assailant shooting at her with a pistol, court documents say.

In 2022, DEA agents searched the second location, located on the grounds of a former horse racing track, in an investigation into money laundering and marijuana trafficking in Oklahoma and Colorado that has

resulted in three guilty pleas, according to court records, which also show that another defendant awaits trial. Chen has had a limited liability corporation registered at the address of the farm.

Authorities have not charged Bi Chao Chen in those cases. He and a lawyer did not respond to email and phone requests for comment.

Chinese officials are likely aware of the questionable backgrounds of these and other leaders because Chinese intelligence agencies systematically gather granular information on overseas communities, according to Western officials, academic reports, human rights groups and Chinese dissidents.

Many immigrants from Fujian, a coastal province with a history of organized crime and official corruption, come from modest backgrounds and entered the U.S. illegally, said Yaqiu Wang, research director for China, Hong Kong and Taiwan at Freedom House. Because they often visit family or do business in China, they feel pressure to develop good relationships with Chinese officials, she said.

“The CCP has leverage over them,” Wang said. “If you want to go back to China, if you need a passport or you want to clean up a criminal record in China, you need to demonstrate loyalty.”

And if leaders show loyalty, Chinese officials are increasingly willing to engage with them — even those who are organized crime figures, experts said.

“As the Chinese government has been expanding its power across the world, the organized crime connections with the state have grown,” a former national security official said. “They have gotten much closer. Chinese government influence has expanded. There is a lot of incentive to work together.”

The Chinese embassy did not respond to questions about specific cases. In an interview, a Chinese consular official acknowledged that Chinese officials have regular contact with U.S. diaspora associations. But the official rejected the idea that the Chinese government has detailed knowledge about community leaders and works with them even if they are involved in criminal activity.

“We have five million Chinese nationals living in the USA,” said the consular official, who requested anonymity because they are not the official spokesperson. “We just have some connection with different organizations, regardless of specific persons. ... We couldn’t be able to know everybody.”

In Oklahoma City, the associations themselves have kept law enforcement busy.

Oklahoma Attorney General Gentner Drummond, Anderson and other officials told ProPublica and The Frontier that members of Fujianese associations are targets of investigations into organized crime. Leaders of associations in Oklahoma City did not respond to requests for comment.

During a raid last year on the Fuzhou Chamber of Commerce, police busted an illegal casino, arrested three suspects and seized drugs and \$79,000 in cash from 18 people, including two who had criminal convictions and several involved in the marijuana industry, according to court documents and public records. Surveillance had detected numerous cars in the parking lot that were connected to narcotics investigations, court records say. (Of the three arrested, one was charged and has pleaded not guilty, another was extradited to Colorado on a warrant in a marijuana cultivation case, and the third has not been charged.)

A block away on Classen Boulevard at the American Fujian Association, city inspectors found card tables, video slot machines and other signs of an illegal casino in 2020, court records show. The police vice squad has investigated alleged gambling in the ground-floor suite, according to court testimony and public records. No charges have been filed in that case. Leaders of the organization did not respond to requests for comment.

Two years after the shooting in 2020 at the association, the two accused assailants became victims in the quadruple murder at the marijuana farm in Kingfisher County. As a result, investigators revisited the 2020 shooting looking for links to organized crime and the farm massacre, and they learned that the killer and some of his victims had spent time at the association.

Despite the troubles of the American Fujian Association, Consul General Zhu chose to meet there with community leaders days after the quadruple murder, according to photos, media reports and a participant in the meeting at the association. During that visit in November 2022, the diplomat talked to relatives of the victims about funeral arrangements and the transport of one of the bodies to New York, according to a media report and a participant at the meeting

Those present included prominent Fujianese figures from New York who have invested in Oklahoma's marijuana boom, media reports and photos show. One of them was Pan Muyong, a veteran national leader of several groups.



Pan Muyong, circled, at the America Changle Association in Manhattan, where U.S. prosecutors allege an illegal Chinese police station was helping monitor and intimidate dissidents. The blue sign on the left says Fuzhou Police Overseas Service Station. Louis Zhao/YouTube

“We are deeply anxious and uneasy,” Pan told the visitors from the embassy, according to a report by SinoVision, a Chinese-language media outlet. “We Chinese operate farms and grow marijuana with the licenses approved by the local government and within the scope of the law, not illegally as reported by the media.”

Pan has been an executive of the America Changle Association in New York, according to media reports and photos. Last year, federal prosecutors charged two other leaders of that association with operating the illegal Chinese police station in Manhattan.

Photos and media reports place Pan with the defendants during the period of time when, according to the federal criminal complaint, they allegedly helped Chinese security forces monitor dissidents in the United States. A video shows Pan giving a speech in the association offices that housed the allegedly illegal police station — with a sign about the station visible on a wall.

Pan interacts regularly with Chinese diplomats and other officials, according to photos and media reports. Last year, he and other pro-Beijing leaders held signs as they protested the visit of Taiwan's president to New York, video and media reports show. Pan and other Oklahoma-connected leaders are also active in New York politics, attending campaign events and making donations, according to photos, media reports and campaign records.

Pan has not been charged with a crime. He did not respond to emails and declined a telephone request for comment.

But four people who posed for photos with him and the consul in Oklahoma City have pleaded guilty or been charged or investigated for offenses including drug trafficking, illegal firearms possession and obstructing officers, court records show.

Ling Chen, for example, pleaded guilty last June to maintaining a place for selling drugs in a case in which authorities confiscated \$42,000 from her and two other defendants, court records show. Chuan Min Zhang pleaded guilty in 2021 to possession of cocaine and acquiring drug proceeds, a felony that resulted in the forfeiture of \$32,000, court records show. Ke Xiang Chen has pleaded not guilty and awaits trial after an

arrest last October for alleged possession of ketamine and ecstasy and acquiring drug proceeds, court records show.

None of the three responded to requests for comment in emails, by phone and through lawyers.

The fourth, Qiu He, was arrested last April in the investigation of an alleged network that set up illegal marijuana farms, court records show. She has not been charged with a crime and denied any wrongdoing in an interview with ProPublica and The Frontier. She is fighting to recover almost a million dollars seized by anti-drug agents.

He, who had a grandparent from Fujian, said members of the community asked her to attend the 2022 meeting with the consul general to translate Mandarin for people who only spoke a Fujianese dialect. But she said she knows little about the association and has not returned.

In addition to He, three other people in the photos with the consul general have surfaced in investigations of fraudulent owner schemes for marijuana farms. Although they have not been charged with crimes in relation to those investigations, Ling Chen, Jun Can Zhang and Weixing Feng have jointly owned marijuana farms with people who are being prosecuted or investigated for serving as paid straw owners for dozens of growing operations, court documents and public records show. They did not respond to requests for comment.

Ling Chen, Ke Xiang Chen and Junli Zhang also managed or had an ownership interest in Lucky Zhang's, a restaurant and nightclub near the Fujianese association that was outfitted with high-tech lighting and individual karaoke rooms, court documents and public records show. Detectives zeroed in on the club as a suspected site of human trafficking after they learned that young Asian women living at a house were being transported regularly to Lucky Zhang's and spending the night there, court documents say. Police raided the club on Nov. 5, 2022, and again on Feb. 15, 2023, making arrests and seizing drugs and cash, according to court documents, interviews and social media posts.

The November raid resulted in the prosecution in which the manager, Ling Chen, pleaded guilty, court records show. Another defendant arrested at the club pleaded not guilty and awaits trial on charges of acquiring drug proceeds and possession of ketamine with intent to distribute, according to court records.

Junli Zhang did not respond to email and phone requests for comment. Zhang was also the chair of the association on Classen Boulevard during both of the consul general's visits, according to Chinese media reports.

Last June, the consul general returned to Classen Boulevard for the second visit. Zhu's stated goal was to gain "an in-depth understanding of the production, life and work conditions of the farms run by overseas Chinese in Oklahoma," according to Chinese-language media reports. He listened to "a work report" from the association's chair, one article said.

"Overseas Chinese will always be members of the big family of the Chinese nation," the diplomat said, according to the media report. "No matter where you go, the eyes of the motherland are never far away and are always watching and caring about you."

March 22, 2024: *This story originally misstated what political entity a leader of the 14K triad was said to be an important member of. The Treasury Department alleges that he is prominent in a subentity of the Chinese Communist Party called the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, not in the larger party.*

CORRECTION

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