

With F.B.I. Search, U.S. Escalates Global Fight Over Chinese Police Outposts

Beijing says the outposts aren't doing police work, but Chinese state media reports say they "collect intelligence" and solve crimes far outside their jurisdiction.

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F.B.I. agents searched a suspected Chinese police outpost located at this glass building on East Broadway in New York's Chinatown.
Credit...Hilary Swift for The New York Times

The nondescript, six-story office building on a busy street in New York's Chinatown lists several mundane businesses on its lobby directory, including an engineering company, an acupuncturist and an accounting firm.

A more remarkable enterprise, on the third floor, is unlisted: a Chinese outpost suspected of conducting police operations without jurisdiction or diplomatic approval — one of more than 100 such outfits around the world that are unnerving diplomats and intelligence agents.

F.B.I. counterintelligence agents searched the building last fall as part of a criminal investigation being conducted with the U.S. attorney's office in Brooklyn, according to people with knowledge of the inquiry. The search represents an escalation in a global dispute over China's efforts to police its diaspora far beyond its borders. Irish, Canadian and Dutch officials have called for China to shut down police operations in their countries. The F.B.I. raid is the first known example of the authorities seizing materials from one of the outposts.

Those who discussed the F.B.I. search did so on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the matter. The Chinese Embassy in Washington on Wednesday played down the role of the outposts, saying they are staffed by volunteers who help Chinese nationals perform routine tasks like renewing their driver's licenses back home.

But Chinese state news media reports reviewed by The New York Times cite police and local Chinese officials by name describing the operations very differently. They tout the effectiveness of the offices, which are frequently called overseas police service centers. Some reports describe the Chinese outposts "collecting intelligence" and solving crimes abroad without collaborating with local officials. The public statements leave it murky who exactly is running the offices. Sometimes they are referred to as volunteers; other times as staff members or, in at least one case, the director.



The Chinese Embassy in Washington, D.C., in 2019.
Credit...Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times

Some of those online articles have been deleted recently as Western officials and human rights groups have called attention to the police offices.

Western officials see the outposts as part of Beijing's larger drive to keep tabs on Chinese nationals abroad, including dissidents. The most notorious such effort is known as Operation Fox Hunt, in which Chinese officials hunt down fugitives abroad and pressure them to return home.

At least four Chinese localities — Fuzhou, Qingtian, Nantong and Wenzhou — have set up dozens of police outposts, according to state media accounts and public statements published in China. They identify sites in Japan, Italy, France, Britain, Germany, Hungary, the Czech Republic and other nations.

“It's extremely worrying from the human rights perspective. We're essentially allowing the Chinese diaspora to be controlled by the P.R.C. rather than subject to our national laws,” said Igor Merheim-Eyre, an adviser to a Slovakian member of the European Parliament, using the acronym for the People's Republic of China. “That obviously has a huge impact — not only for our relations with the Chinese diaspora across Europe, but also has huge implications for national sovereignty.”

The New York outpost, which was set up by the city of Fuzhou, is based in the offices of a Chinese community organization, the America Changle Association NY, according to the state-run China Youth Daily, which last year published a document listing various police outposts. Changle is a district in the city of Fuzhou. The article has since been deleted. Other addresses of Chinese police outposts match locations of private businesses, including Chinese restaurants and commercial associations. The Chinese embassy in Washington described the spaces as “provided by local overseas Chinese communities who would like to be helpful.”



The suspected Chinese outpost in New York's Chinatown is one of more than 100 such locations around the world that are unnerving diplomats and intelligence agents.
Credit...Hilary Swift for The New York Times

America Changle is headed by Lu Jianshun, known as Jimmy Lu, a donor to Mayor Eric Adams of New York. It is unclear whether he is a focus of the F.B.I.'s investigation. A spokesman for Mr. Adams said the mayor does not know him.

Mr. Lu, asked during a brief phone conversation about the F.B.I. search, said he would call back but did not. He did not respond to telephone and text messages seeking comment. Spokesmen for the F.B.I. and the U.S. attorney's office in Brooklyn declined to comment, but the F.B.I. director, Christopher Wray, told lawmakers in November that he was aware of and concerned by the outposts, which he called police stations.

The Chinese Embassy in Washington said the sites are not police stations. “They are not police personnel from China,” said the embassy spokesperson, Liu Pengyu. “There is no need to make people nervous about this.”

It is not automatically inappropriate for police officers to work overseas. The F.B.I., for example, posts agents abroad. But they typically declare themselves to the foreign government and work out of American embassies. If they perform law enforcement duties, it is with the permission of the local authorities. China has made similar arrangements for joint patrols in places like Italy, a popular destination for Chinese tourists.

That makes the off-the-books operations all the more curious.

China's Foreign Ministry has said little in response to the criticism, but back in China, police departments have trumpeted their reach and information-gathering powers both in official statements and in the state news media.

One article in a newspaper associated with the propaganda department of China's Qingtian County describes a Chinese woman who said she had money stolen in Budapest. Instead of calling the local authorities, she sought help from the Chinese police outpost there. The people in charge of the police center, the article said, used surveillance footage from a convenience store to identify the thief, a Romanian, and recovered the money through "negotiation and education."



Chinese police officers posing for pictures with Chinese tourists in front of the Colosseum in Rome in 2016.

Credit...Nadia Shira Cohen for The New York Times

The state-run China News Service said Qingtian's overseas police centers gathered information on public opinion and the sentiment of Chinese people living abroad.

And an article posted by a Communist Party body in Jiangsu province said that Nantong City Overseas Police Linkage Service Centers had helped capture and persuade more than 80 criminal suspects to return to China since February 2016. The human rights group Safeguard Defenders said in a report late last year that the police stations carried out similar operations in Serbia, Spain and France.

It is not clear what the F.B.I. was investigating during its search, but it comes amid a broader Justice Department effort to rein in Fox Hunt. In October, prosecutors in Brooklyn — the same office that searched the New York office — charged seven Chinese nationals with harassing a U.S. resident and his son, pressuring the man to return to China to face criminal charges.

"It's outrageous that China thinks it can come to our shores, conduct illegal operations and bend people here in the United States to their will," Mr. Wray said in 2020, after the authorities charged eight others with being part of Fox Hunt.



Christopher Wray, the F.B.I.'s director, speaking in 2020 about arrests connected to harassment campaign on behalf of China to pressure political dissidents and fugitives in the United States to return home to face trial.

Credit...Pool photo by Sarah Silbiger

The Chinese government has also surveilled and pressured ethnic minorities abroad, including Uyghurs and Tibetans, as well as their families. Human rights groups and government officials fear that the outposts could be bases for these kinds of operations.

Current and former law enforcement officials in New York say that the Chinatown outpost, like others elsewhere in the United States, dates to the middle of the last decade. Police officials in at least one Chinese province tried then to arrange for their officers to train with the New York Police Department and other departments in cities that are home to large Chinese communities, the law enforcement officials said.

The Chinese officials wanted the N.Y.P.D. to sign a memorandum of understanding to outline the training program and make it official. But senior commanders and New York F.B.I. officials had serious concerns. They feared that the training program could legitimize the presence of Chinese officers and potentially make the N.Y.P.D. an unwitting partner in a campaign of surveillance and harassment, the officials said.

“The Chinese government wants to have more influence and to extend their transnational policing,” said Chen Yen-ting, a Taiwan-based researcher who worked on the Safeguard Defenders report. “It’s a long-arm power to show their own citizens inside China that their government is so strong. We have the power to reach globally, and even if you go out, you’re still under our control.”

The Chinese cities appear to be taking steps to conceal their efforts. Márton Tompos, a Hungarian lawmaker, said he visited a Chinese police center in Budapest last year. “There were three signs saying Qingtian Police Overseas Service Station,” he said in an interview. After he spoke about the visit, he said, the signs were removed.

Not everyone is convinced that the outposts present a major threat. Jeremy Daum, a scholar at the Paul Tsai China Center at Yale Law School, said that though government harassment of Chinese nationals is a serious problem, for the most part these personnel appear focused on arranging administrative tasks by providing video links between Chinese people abroad and police departments back in China.

In theory, a person could carry out the same video chat process, he said, using a smartphone.

“The processing and activity seems to be happening in China,” Mr. Daum said, referring to examples cited in the Safeguard Defenders report.

Chinese dissidents in Europe see things differently. “Those are things you can get done at the embassy,” said Lin Shengliang, a Chinese dissident in the Netherlands. He said people fear the police are keeping tabs on them.

“I am extremely anxious about them,” he said by phone. “There are no channels to report this, and there’s nothing we can do about it.”



[Chinese outposts in Europe, like this one in Budapest connected to China’s Qingtian County, have been cited in Chinese media reports for helping aid Chinese citizens facing problems abroad.](#)
Credit...Anna Szilagyi/Associated Press

