MEDIA MENTIONS

Ryan Levitt Interviewed on Bloomberg Documentary | “How China’s ‘Perfect’ Spy Got Caught”

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Featured Practices: White Collar, Government Investigations & Regulatory Compliance, Litigation

Benesch’s Ryan Levitt, of counsel in the firm’s White Collar, Government Investigations & Regulatory Compliance Group, was interviewed for Bloomberg’s documentary on the high-profile case of Chinese college student Ji Chaoqun, who was accused of acting as an unregistered foreign agent in the United States. Ryan was one of the criminal defense attorneys who represented Ji at trial and visited him in prison during the four years he was held at the Metropolitan Correctional Center (MCC) in Chicago pending sentencing, widely known as one of the city’s most violent detention facilities.

Ji Chaoqun was a bright college student in China studying aerospace engineering. During his final semester, he was “spotted” at a job fair by the Ministry of State Security (MSS). He was subject to what in the espionage world is known as the “recruitment cycle,” where, over time, he met with intelligence officers who slowly began to assess and develop Ji as a potential asset. Ji presented the “perfect” cover for a spy: a mild and unassuming nature, technical knowledge that would allow him to identify valuable information and, most importantly, a U.S. visa and clean record.

Ji came to the United States in 2013 to study at the Illinois Institute of Technology. At one point, in 2015, Xu Yanjun, a deputy division director in the MSS, asked Ji to obtain commercially accessible public background reports from companies like Spokeo and Intelius containing information on Chinese scientists working for U.S. defense contractors. It’s common for the MSS to recruit these scientists under the guise of academic cooperation in order to obtain jet engine technology and return it to China.

In 2018, Xu Yanjun was arrested and charged with economic espionage and trade secret theft in connection with the recruitment of an engineer that worked for General Electric. Shortly after, Ji was approached by an undercover FBI agent posing as an MSS agent and was subsequently arrested. He was charged with conspiring to act as a foreign agent of the United States, acting as a foreign agent, wire fraud and making false statements to the U.S. government.

"Ji always maintained his innocence and was clear that he wanted to proceed to trial, and we were going to proceed to trial,” Ryan said.

The case presented significant challenges for the defense given the scope of the government’s evidence. At the conclusion of trial, while the jury convicted Ji of one count of acting in the United States as an unregistered foreign agent, one count of conspiring to do the same, and one false statement count, it acquitted him of two counts of wire fraud, which carried the most serious maximum possible penalty. By that time, he had already spent four years at MCC Chicago.

“I saw him as a kid who just grew up on the other side of the world,” Ryan said. “If he had been born here, he’d be my neighbor-just like anyone else. A great American and probably a patriot.”

On November 27, 2024, Ji and Xu were returned to China as part of a prisoner swap that secured the release of three American citizens detained in China.

Watch the full documentary. Ryan’s segment begins around 18:45.