

Australian media and intelligence agencies reveal “Chinese spy” defection

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In a feature episode of Nine’s “60 Minutes” program on Sunday, Australian journalist Nick McKenzie interviewed Wang Liqiang, a 27-year-old who claims to be a defector from Chinese intelligence.

Wang contacted Australian intelligence agencies when he was holidaying in Australia earlier this year to visit his wife and children. He has been meeting with Australian officials since October, presenting himself as a “Chinese spy” who wishes to blow the lid on Beijing’s espionage and interference operations around the world.

McKenzie introduced the program by stating that it was the outcome of a joint investigation involving “60 Minutes” and Nine newspaper publications, including the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age*.

A more accurate description of the program is that it was a joint operation between Nine and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), the country’s main domestic spy agency.

It was aimed at bolstering a three-year campaign against supposed Chinese interference, which serves to legitimise Australia’s central role in the US confrontation with China and provide a pretext for attacks on democratic rights.

The program was timed to appear just days after former ASIO director Duncan Lewis publicly warned of unprecedented “foreign interference” and declared that Beijing was seeking to “take over” Australian politics. Lewis called for the development of a Stasi-like system of informants within the Chinese diaspora, comparable to that cultivated within the Muslim community under the “war on terror.”

Current ASIO director general of security Mike Burgess released a pre-prepared statement immediately after the program, declaring that his agency was “taking seriously” and “actively investigating” the claims broadcast by “60 Minutes.”

The response had an absurd, circular character. As McKenzie acknowledged, the investigation began when he received a “tip” from a source within the state apparatus. His interviews with Wang were apparently facilitated by the Australian state agencies, with the defector now living as their ward.

Since October, only a handful of journalists and public figures appear to have met Wang. All of them are either journalists who have uncritically promoted ASIO’s claims

about foreign interference before, such as McKenzie, or the representatives of think tanks funded by the US and Australian governments. They were granted exclusive access to Wang, even before his asylum application had been fully reviewed and his claims tested.

In other words, Burgess was issuing an urgent statement in response to a program that his own agency set in motion.

While “60 Minutes” ran with the headline “China’s Spy Secrets,” Nine has been compelled to acknowledge that there is no evidence that Wang was ever employed by a Chinese spy agency. Instead they have claimed that he functioned as a “cut-out,” who engaged in espionage operations as a result of his employment at a private company in Hong Kong with links to the Chinese military.

There is no indication that Nine has seriously investigated the claims of the Chinese government that Wang is a convicted fraudster, who left China for Hong Kong in April on falsified documents, after Shanghai police launched an investigation into a “fake investment” program that had netted \$90,000.

Even some of those promoting Wang’s story have been far less definitive than “60 Minutes” was in presenting all of his assertions as the truth.

An intelligence official, speaking anonymously to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, said that ASIO would need to “separate fact from fiction” in assessing Wang’s asylum claim.

An article by Alex Joske of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, while seeking to bolster Wang’s claims, was headlined “Defections are messy and we may never know the full story.” Joske wrote: “With a case like Wang’s that crosses between several regions, it’s impossible to verify every claim. Past defectors who were nonetheless genuine have been accused of spicing up their stories in misguided attempts to strengthen their asylum claims.”

The reason for the note of caution is likely that many of Wang’s claims appear highly improbable. Taken together, his story reads like a cross between a spy movie and a boys’ own adventure. It seems crafted to bolster virtually every strand of the anti-China narrative that has been promoted by the US and Australian state agencies and the corporate media.

His claims are presented most fully in an article by McKenzie

headlined “The moment a Chinese spy decided to defect to Australia.” It begins by claiming that Wang chose to defect after receiving a fake South Korean passport, supposedly designed to help him meddle in Taiwan’s 2020 election.

Seeing the passport, McKenzie writes, Wang “realised he was at risk of losing himself. As he would later write, he was on the cusp of becoming ‘a person without real identity.’” According to Wang’s own claims, however, he had worked in intelligence operations for five years, including with the aid of false documents. Why this fake passport was a particular turning point is simply not explained.

According to Wang, he was tapped for intelligence work while studying oil painting at Anhui University in 2014. A university official apparently “suggested” that the undergraduate art student “work in Hong Kong at China Innovation Investment Limited (CIIL), a listed diversified investment company with interests in technology, finance and media, he jumped at the chance.”

When he arrived, Wang “realised he was not working for a normal company.” He “overheard company representatives whispering about sensitive dealings with officials.”

For the second time, in his unlikely journey, oil painting would again be decisive in advancing Wang’s career as an intelligence asset.

McKenzie writes: “It was Wang’s skill with a paintbrush that propelled him into the company’s inner sanctum. In early 2015, CIIL’s chief executive officer Xin Xiang asked Wang to teach his wife, Qing Gong, oil painting. ‘Winning her favour was one key point as [to] why I could become a core member,’ he says.”

Within a year, Xin had taken Wang into his confidence. Xin supposedly revealed that he was an intelligence operative, working for the Chinese government under a false name in Hong Kong. He was responsible for “buying weapons” and “stealing US intelligence.”

According to Wang’s claims, almost immediately, he was playing a key role in the operation. In October 2015, five Hong Kong booksellers, who had been distributing literature critical of the Chinese government, disappeared. They later resurfaced in China. It appeared they had been abducted by the Chinese authorities, in a serious attack on democratic rights aimed at chilling dissent.

Wang claims the operation was organised through CIIL and that he was personally “responsible for the negotiation and tasks to be implemented.”

At this point, Wang was a 23-year-old arts graduate, whose primary skill was oil painting. He had been at CIIL for around a year. The claim that he was not only privy to, but centrally involved in some of China’s most sensitive intelligence operations, can only be described as far-fetched.

Wang provided “ideological education” to Chinese students in “patriotism.” He supposedly ran Chinese agents in the Hong Kong dissident movement, before helping to “direct a major

operation” in the 2018 Taiwan elections aimed at installing pro-Beijing candidates. Wang was also familiar with Chinese computer hacking activities.

Wang’s statement to ASIO “names dozens of alleged assets who occupy prominent positions in Taiwanese and Hong Kong society.” He was also intimately aware of attempts to “infiltrate” Australian politics, including a supposed Chinese plot to help elect Bo “Nick” Zhao, a Melbourne car dealer, as a Liberal member of parliament. Bo allegedly reported the approach. He was later found dead in a hotel.

Andrew Hastie, a Coalition MP and head of the joint parliamentary committee on intelligence, was prominently featured on “60 Minutes.” He has close ties to US and Australian intelligence agencies. Hastie described Zhao’s death as “chilling,” even though there has previously been no public indication that his demise was the result of foul play, and called for Wang to be provided asylum.

There is every reason to doubt Wang’s story. He has presented himself as a man who was everywhere and who knew everything. He has thus positioned himself as being able to provide “proof” for the lurid and unsubstantiated claims about “foreign interference,” peddled by the very intelligence agencies and government authorities now assessing his asylum application.

Given the stringency of Australia’s asylum regime, Wang has every reason to tell his interviewers what they want to hear.

Wang’s familiarity with Chinese intelligence activities internationally, including those he was not involved in, would be highly unusual for a so-called cut-out. The entire purpose of such operations is to limit the direct liability of state agencies, and to mitigate against the threat of exposure by restricting their knowledge to immediate tasks.

Wang’s improbable story, whatever his exact identity, is being aggressively promoted because it serves the bogus anti-China campaign, which has been intensified over the past months, amid stepped-up US and Australian aggression against China. His usefulness to ASIO and senior political figures, including Hastie, means it is highly unlikely that his assertions will ever be tested openly.



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