

Sleuths Using Sleuths

Chilling Realities of PI's Deployed for China's Hidden Purposes

BY **CHRISTOPHER SALGADO**,
CEO OF ALL POINTS INVESTIGATIONS, LLC

The surveillance was going well! A fantastically sunny day offering a welcomed temperature (for hiding in an SUV), a cool breeze and zero humidity. While the surveillance environment on your case started out a bit rough due to limited visibility (thanks to several winding roads), a layout offering permit-only parking and nosy neighbors, your day has opened like a rose in the desert. You're now able to stretch your legs in the front seat as you pursue your subject. The windows of your SUV are open and the cool breeze arrives like the star of the party.

Your subject, a middle-aged male in the tech industry, is enjoying a late afternoon walk on the boardwalk with his female acquaintance. No, this isn't a domestic case but the field leg of a rather in-depth diligence background into your subject. Alas! Your subject enters a popular mall. Fun times lie ahead with your covert cameras. You abandon your vehicle and initiate some rare foot surveillance.

You continue to tail your subject and his female friend. While you possess a significant amount of information about the male, you know nothing about the female subject. She appears to be in her 30s, physically fit and dressed fairly professionally. She seems fairly attentive. Your male subject, on the other hand, is pretty aloof. He's sporting his stapled look of a polo and khaki pants with sneakers.

Your subject is led into the employee section of the mall by his female companion. The door closes behind them. You stall... You think to yourself, "Should I go through the door?"

Both curiosity – and your client's judgy voice in your head – get the best of you. You enter through the employee section and immediately get knocked on the ground. You're hogtied with zip ties on your ankles and wrists by numerous federal agents. An undercover federal agent offloads a barrage of questions: "Who are you?" "What are you doing here?" "Are you working with the Chinese?"

Confused, you say nothing; you're in shock. You attempt to appeal to the agents but before you can, one recovers your concealed pistol from



your beltline. A commotion instantly erupts and you are handled much more aggressively by the agents, as they fear your intent against the male and female subjects was violent.

You falteringly demand to know if you are under arrest. An agent confirms and several undercover agents lead you into the back of an unmarked van just outside the employee-only section of the mall. After being thrown into the dark and empty van, the door is slammed loudly. Seconds pass as you blankly stare into the darkness of the van's windowless cargo section. Your thoughts betray you as they cruelly remind you of the wife and two young kids that you'll likely never hold again.

While the above scenario is a fabrication, the basis is not. More disturbing is the fact that real-life stories like the above are true. For quite a while, China has tried to penetrate U.S. intelligence resources for their own illegal purposes. Due to the same reasons, the PI industry has been infiltrated as well. In response, we – as an industry – must adopt adequate vetting processes for our clients that pass the muster of the reasonable person test. Two specific cases below showcase the results of PI's being engaged through China's intelligence efforts and the results of some of those.

Important caveat. While I am citing real issues, charges and cases below, I want to safeguard the names in the matter. Feel free to conduct research into the below matter to expose additional information, should you wish. I want to avoid being aggressive against the entities who claim to not be willing participants in what they are being alleged/charged of doing.

June 2023 (NY) - A grand jury convicted a PI and others for stalking and harassing a New Jersey couple who were Chinese nationals. It was discovered that the true motives of the PI's client were not of a civil mat-

ter, as presented by the client, but to gain intelligence, stalk and harass the couple and their daughter. The client was identified to act on behalf of the People's Republic of China known through Operation Fox Hunt. The PI was charged with multiple crimes and sentenced to federal prison.

September 2021 (NY) - An agent with China's Ministry of State Security (MSS) onboarded a NY PI to dismantle the campaign of a 2022 U.S. congressional candidate. The specific objective was reportedly to gather and even manufacture damaging information on the candidate. It was further reported that the agent (client of the PI) stated "Whatever price is fine" and "Right now we don't want him to be elected." The statements reported also claim the MSS agent even approved and recommended the PI to physically assault the subject. The DOJ reported a voicemail left for the PI by the client (MSS agent) stated "You can start thinking now, aside from violence, what other plans are there? Huh? But in the end, violence would be fine too. Huh? Beat him [chuckles], beat him until he cannot run for election. Heh, that's the—the last resort. You—you think about it. Car accident, [he] will be completely wrecked [chuckles], right? Don't know, eh, whatever ways from all different angles. Or, on the day of the election, he cannot make it there himself, right?"

Thankfully, the PI rightly alerted authorities, which resulted in a federal investigation into the matter and charges being brought against the MSS agent. The PI was never charged. However, this scenario underlines another example of the PI industry being activated by Chinese influence, entailing illegal activities being requested of PIs. It is imperative that PIs are aware of these real engagements and install a thorough vetting mechanism to remove nefarious would-be clients from their list of prospects. I imagine that we all admire hefty invoices but what good do those serve if you're sitting in prison? Never mind the reputational damage to yourself, mental anguish, ding against the PI industry and the fact that you are doing something wrong against innocent persons and their families. Just as we've all learned, two wrongs do not make a right.

Before I move on, please note that this article is not intended as anti-Chinese. I am simply addressing a current concern in our industry that has been validated across media. Having said that, how do you vet potential clients enough to satisfy yourself and any third-party inquiry without auto-creating two cases for every one received? (One for the subject and one for your client.) Ensure to adopt the below steps.

1. **Verify the client's true identity and corporate ties, if any.**
 - a. Demand government IDs and vet them. As we know, AI can do wondrous things for fraudsters these days.
 - b. Follow-up on the corporations and your client's position within it.
2. **Aggressively analyze any intermediaries, such as middlemen, companies or translation firms! (The latter was used in the June 2023 (NY) case.)**
3. **Demand traceable payments and avoid using cryptocurrency or cash payments. If you must accept the latter, vet the sources.**
4. **Demand specific, documented legal justifications for the case, such as asset tracing or fugitive tracking.**
5. **Consider FARA (Foreign Agents Registration Act). Are there any obvious or potential violations of this?**
6. **Incorporate agreements highlighting:**
 - a. The prohibition of illegal surveillance, harassment, or coercion
 - b. The client's requirement to certify they are not acting on behalf of

a foreign government

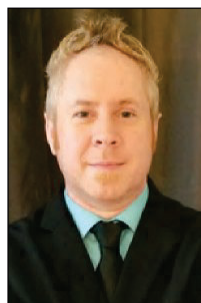
- c. An allowance for you to terminate the case, should new information reveal foreign-state ties or other illegal activities of the client's

While you cannot know everything about your potential clients within a short phone call or a few emails, if you can showcase a reasonable vetting process that was consistently deployed to safeguard yourself, your firm and the subject(s), that may be enough to avoid a lengthy prison term. I'm neither an attorney, nor do I pretend to be one in front of my keyboard, so please use common sense when trying to implant a solid vetting process. Certainly, contact an attorney to weigh out your options. I'd appreciate avoiding me learning of your case in the media and hearing your plea of "But Your Honor, the esteemed Chris Salgado, fantastical writer in *PI Magazine* clearly stated..." I know any news is good news but if we can avoid that, it may be beneficial to both of us.

Stay vigilant, folks! **PI**

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Christopher Salgado is the CEO of All Points Investigations, LLC, a global cyber and physical investigative firm serving Fortune-listed corporations, law firms, and other entities. A former Facebook investigator, he brings over 20 years of expertise in cyber investigations, OSINT, cryptocurrency, social engineering, and threat management. His work spans corporate risk, brand protection, cults, cyberstalkers, SIU matters and others. In 2024, he was named a Top Investigator by PI Magazine.

Christopher is a member of the London Speaker Bureau and a keynote speaker at industry events, including CrimeCon. He has briefed agencies such as the FBI, DEA, HSI, CBP, Interpol, Europol and members of the EU Commission. He is also the Founder of Anti-Hackathon, an online safety initiative, and AGGOSO™ Training, an advanced OSINT education program. He may be reached at csalgado@allpointsinv.com

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