

Australian media's "Chinese spy defection" story unravels

By Oscar Grenfell
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It took little over a week for lurid media claims about Wang Liqiang, a supposed defector from Chinese intelligence, to be revealed as a tissue of lies and fabrications aimed at bolstering a three-year anti-China campaign waged by the official press and the political establishment in Australia.

On November 24, 9Now's "60 Minutes" program publicly unveiled Wang in a heavily-promoted episode. Reporters, including Nine Media's Nick McKenzie, claimed that the defection was the most significant by a foreign spy in decades.

Wang was provided a platform to tell tales about "Chinese interference" operations spanning multiple continents, and to warn that Australia must not underestimate Beijing's reach. Nine media marshalled "experts" from US and Australian-government funded think tanks, who stated that Wang's story was consistent and warned darkly that his life may now be in danger.

Politicians from the Coalition government and opposition Labor Party made speeches expressing their "serious concern," and pledging to intensify their campaign against "foreign interference." The director general of the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) issued an unprecedented statement, declaring that the spy agency was "taking seriously" and "actively investigating" Wang's claims.

The story also had global implications. It was used by right-wing, US-aligned forces throughout Asia to ratchet-up tensions with China. In Taiwan, a man whose name appeared on a list of Chinese operatives drawn up by Wang was detained by the security services.

On November 26, however, after a five-day media barrage, the *Australian* reported that the intelligence agencies had concluded that Wang "is not the

high-level operative-turned-defector he claimed to be," and that he "was, at most, a bit player on the fringes of the espionage community."

The finding was not a surprise to anyone who had scrutinised Wang's claims. As the WSWS commented two days after the "60 Minutes" episode was broadcast: "[H]is 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."

Among the many implausibilities was the fact that Wang's only apparent skill—and the primary basis for his progression in the intelligence world—was oil painting. He was, moreover, supposedly involved in some of China's most sensitive intelligence operations, when he was a 23-year-old arts graduate with a year of espionage experience. Despite being a cut-out—i.e., someone not directly employed by an intelligence agency—Wang asserted familiarity with intelligence operations around the world.

That his absurd story was so aggressively promoted was clearly a political decision, involving sections of the intelligence agencies, their mouthpieces in the media and the government. It has since come to light that Wang was introduced to ASIO by federal Coalition MP Andrew Hastie. How Hastie, the head of the joint parliamentary committee on intelligence, began rubbing shoulders with Wang, who the Chinese government claims is a convicted conman, has yet to be explained.

The purpose of the campaign surrounding Wang was to justify Australia's stepped-up involvement in the US plans for war with China. This includes the use of draconian foreign interference legislation enacted last year, which potentially criminalises any

internationally-coordinated political activity and creates the conditions for the banning of anti-war organisations.

In the immediate aftermath of Wang's "unveiling," media articles stated that the security establishment was frustrated that there has not been a prosecution under the laws and that they were searching for a "scalp."

That sections of the media have now cast doubt on Wang's story, and that it has largely been dropped by those who promoted it, is because of fears that his bogus tales could discredit the entire anti-China campaign. The revelation that ASIO did not believe his claims was only made public after damning evidence exposed the gaping holes in Wang's narrative.

Two days after the "60 Minutes" program appeared, it was revealed that a Chinese-language expert and two Korean-language experts had examined documents Wang presented, concluding that they were riddled with inconsistencies.

The *Australian* cited Macquarie University China researcher Adam Ni, who stated that Wang got the name of the Chinese military institution that he was supposedly working under wrong four times in one document. His "claims and credibility should be seen with skepticism," Ni said.

The Korean-language experts noted that the false South Korean passport Wang claimed had been provided to him by the Chinese state was issued in a name commonly given to women, not men. If he had used it to travel, they said he would almost certainly be detained.

Then Chinese state media released a video of what it claimed was a 2016 Chinese court case in which Wang pleaded guilty to fraud. The man they claim is Wang is heard plaintively stating: "Dear judge, the result of my action was due to my lack of awareness of law, so I hope the court could give me a lighter punishment. That's all."

The blows kept coming, with the *South China Morning Post* reporting: "Lieutenant General Wong Yen-ching, former deputy chief of Taiwan's Military Intelligence Bureau, has given a withering assessment of Wang's allegations, dismissing him as 'an outright liar'."

Wang had claimed that he played a leading role in a Chinese plot to subvert Taiwan's 2018 elections, but, according to the *Post*, Wong told Taiwanese media that

Wang "lacked proper knowledge of the spy agency he supposedly worked for, was too young to be involved in any major operation targeting Taiwan, and his background was too weak for him to be recruited by military intelligence."

Even one of Wang's supposed victims branded him a conman. In October 2015, five Hong Kong booksellers disappeared after selling literature critical of the Chinese regime. They emerged in China. It appeared they had been abducted by the authorities in a significant attack on civil liberties.

Wang said he was "responsible for the negotiation and tasks to be implemented." But Lam Wing Kee, one of the kidnapped booksellers, told Hong Kong media that Wang was likely just repeating details of the abduction that he had "heard elsewhere," dismissing his claim to have played any central role in the operation.

All in all, the Chinese government's statement that Wang is a criminal who fled the country last April after facing the prospect of charges over an investment fraud, is a more plausible claim than any of those advanced by Wang's advocates.

Unabashed, Nick McKenzie—who just a few weeks ago was describing Wang as "the first Chinese operative to ever blow his cover"—has continued to churn out articles warning of Chinese interference, based solely on the unsubstantiated assertions of the intelligence agencies.

The collapse of Wang's story, and the revelation that he is most likely "the spy who wasn't," is an object lesson in the fraudulent character of the entire anti-China campaign. Lurid claims are presented as unquestionable facts, without any evidence. Political figures with ties to governments and the intelligence agencies are rolled-out as impartial experts.

When the story falls apart under the slightest scrutiny, those in the press peddling the neo-McCarthyite line simply move on to their next operation.

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