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Toronto businessman allegedly focus of Chinese interference probes: sources



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Toronto businessman focus of 2019 Canadian election meddling investigation

WATCH: Jeff Semple delves deeper into the details about the Toronto businessman alleged to be at the centre of that operation – Nov 16, 2022.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Wei Chengyi and the Confederation of Toronto Chinese Canadian Organizations did not respond to a series of inquiries for this story, but two days after its publication, a website called ccmedia posted a series of denials and statements from Wei and CTCCO president Weng Guoning in Simplified Chinese, given to an unidentified reporter. Global News has translated the text into English.

A prominent businessman in Toronto's Chinese community is the subject of two separate investigations involving foreign interference, sources tell Global News. both

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related to a series of briefings and memos that Canadian security officials allegedly gave to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau beginning in January.

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The Canadian Security Intelligence Service has investigated Wei Chengyi for his alleged role in a covert scheme that facilitated large-fund transfers meant to advance Beijing's interests in Canada's 2019 federal election, sources said.

According to RCMP sources, national security investigators are also probing Wei for possible links to several properties in Toronto and Vancouver allegedly used as so-called Chinese government "police stations," which are believed to secretly host agents from China's Ministry of Public Security (MPS.)

The owner of the Ontario and British Columbia supermarket chain Foody Mart, Wei is also "permanent honorary chairman" of the Confederation of Toronto Chinese Canadian Organizations (CTCCO), a local umbrella group for dozens of associations that promotes ties to Beijing and consular officials.

Wei has not yet responded to repeated phone calls from Global News, emails or two, hand-delivered letters with detailed questions about the two alleged probes or his relationship with the Chinese government.

But in a brief phone response from CTCCO, a man who identified himself to a Global News reporter as a CTCCO official said that allegations that Wei and CTCCO are involved in a Chinese foreign-interference campaign are "nonsense."

"No, we are never involved in those allegations," the unidentified CTCCO official said. "I don't want to give my name. But don't use those allegations without evidence."

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No criminal charges have been laid against Wei.

Officials from the Chinese embassy in Ottawa and the Toronto Consulate did not respond to questions about Wei and the CTCCO.

People's Republic of China has allegedly been targeting Canada with a vast campaign of foreign interference, including attempts to influence the 2019 federal election.

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One of the specific allegations detailed the funding of a clandestine network that involved at least 11 federal candidates running in the contest, according to Global News sources.

The briefing did not identify the politicians in the running, but Global News independently confirmed through separate sources that members of the alleged network — which sources say include federal campaign staffers — represented both Liberal and Conservative parties.

Responding to questions about the briefings last week, Prime Minister Trudeau did not acknowledge receiving the intelligence but did accuse China and other countries of playing “aggressive games” with democracies and insisted his government has taken significant measures to strengthen the integrity of the elections process.

At the G20 summit Tuesday, a government source disclosed to media that Trudeau privately discussed interference among other issues with China's President Xi Jinping. But on Wednesday, Xi chided the Canadian PM for publicly disclosing the conversations, and disputed the content of their previous discussions.

“That's not appropriate,” Xi said.

On Tuesday, foreign minister Melanie Joly told reporters she raised the issue with her Chinese counterpart and warned that Canada would not accept “any form of meddling in our governments, in our elections, and we won't tolerate any form of foreign interferences.”

The Cash Flow

As part of the 2022 briefings, intelligence sources say that CSIS also warned Trudeau and several cabinet members that the Chinese government uses local proxies to transfer significant sums of money aimed at helping the PRC advance its age LIGHT

Even if allegations regarding Wei's role as an actor for the Chinese Communist Party are proven to be true, there is no foreign interference law prohibiting him from doing so.

The allegations highlight escalating tension between a government that seems reluctant to rankle Canada's second-largest trading partner, China, and a security establishment seeking tighter rules against foreign interference.

"Unlike its partners in Australia and the United States, Canada lacks a method by which to effectively register and track the activities of those who are acting on the behalf of the interests of foreign states, as well as an effective means by which to punish interference," said Akshay Singh, a security scholar with the Council on International Policy. "Absent these guidelines, proxies or 'co-optees' can work on behalf of the interests of a foreign government, with little scrutiny."

A bipartisan panel of parliamentarians in Ottawa has repeatedly recommended the Trudeau government table such laws. Police and intelligence officers have been warning senior Canadian officials since at least 2010 about China's aggressive incursions, sources said, including secret Ministry of Public Security repatriation operations.

Sources aware of investigations into the alleged covert funding methods that CSIS believes the Toronto consulate uses allege that Wei and the organization he's tied to, the CTCCO, acted as intermediaries in the covert funding activity in 2019.

The sources alleged Wei and CTCCO transferred about \$250,000 from the consulate to an Ontario MPP and a federal candidate staffer, who in turn distributed the funds to the 11 or more candidates and other campaign staffers.

Warrants cleared by federal judges allow CSIS to intercept communications of Chinese consulate officials; by extension, these intercepts might capture politicians and staffers who might be in contact with the diplomats.

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Responding to questions from Global News, a lawyer for the MPP in question said the allegations are untrue, and stated: “Be advised that the allegations that a sitting member of the Provincial Legislature and loyal Canadian is treasonous and an operative of a foreign power is clearly defamatory.”

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The alleged 2022 briefing also references an alleged \$1-million transfer in 2014 from the Toronto Consulate to unidentified local proxy groups to finance rallies in favour of the Toronto District School Board’s doomed deal with the Confucius Institute, a cultural education program which the U.S. State Department contends is run by the United Front Work Department.

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The United Front Work Department is a primary organ of President Xi's vast, global-interference campaigns, according to the 2022 briefs. However, Beijing has denied that it uses the United Front to support Chinese Communist Party policy abroad, and last week Chinese officials said the nation doesn't interfere in Canadian affairs.

Sources with awareness of CSIS probes allege that Wei and CTCCO are among the unidentified, local proxies who received part of the \$1 million disbursed by the Toronto Consulate.

In an interview, former Asia-Pacific desk CSIS officer Michel Juneau-Katsuya said he voluntarily provided testimony to a TDSB committee arguing against the deal in 2014, which ultimately fell through after much grassroots protest from parents and pro-democracy members of the Chinese community.

"The Confucius Institutes do represent a threat for the Canadian government," Juneau-Katsuya commented at the Oct. 1, 2014, hearing.

Juneau-Katsuya, who was not with CSIS but working privately as a security consultant in 2014, said he cited open-source records to allege that Wei and the CTCCO are linked to the United Front Work Department.

However, at these hearings in 2014, some community leaders reportedly countered that Confucius Institutes would benefit Canada and enrich language and cultural programs outside of school hours.

Juneau-Katsuya said he is not surprised by the allegations reported by Global News from the 2022 briefs. He said CSIS and the RCMP have been monitoring “very aggressive operational initiatives coming from the Toronto Chinese Consulate several decades.” LIGHT

When approached for comment for this story, however, Public Safety Minister Marco Mendicino’s office appeared to downplay the severity of CSIS’s alleged 2022 briefs.

“We established a non-partisan panel to evaluate influence and interference in 2019,” wrote spokesman Alexander Cohen. “The panel announced their findings after both the 2019 and 2021 federal elections, stating clearly that they did not detect foreign interference threatening Canada’s ability to have a free and fair election.”

Stations linked to Fujian police bureaus

A report issued by the Spanish human-rights group SafeGuard Defenders identified more than 50 police stations worldwide allegedly used for Operation Fox Hunt. The group cited Chinese state records to link the locations to police bureaus in Fujian, a Mainland province.

The SafeGuard findings say that three secret stations are in the Greater Toronto Area, and RCMP sources have alleged to Global News that Wei Chengyi has ties to two of them.

Launched by President Xi Jinping in 2014, Fox Hunt is billed by the CCP as a worldwide program to repatriate fugitive tycoons and corrupt officials who’ve absconded with ill-gotten gains.

Enforcement officials such as FBI director Christopher Wray, however, take a different view. “Fox Hunt is a sweeping bid by General Secretary Xi to target Chinese nationals whom he sees as threats and who live outside China, across the world,” he said two

years ago. “We’re talking about political rivals, dissidents, and critics seeking to expose China’s extensive human rights violations.”

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In the 2022 briefs, CSIS echoed the allegation, explaining that Chinese police have been running “forced repatriation” operations as part of Fox Hunt but did not identify any locations or suspects, intelligence sources familiar with the information say.

According to SafeGuard, the three stations are located in Markham and Scarborough – Toronto suburbs with large, politically diverse communities of Chinese expatriates – and are related to Fox Hunt activities.

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Canada as an easy operating environment for Chinese state actors.

However, in a response sent to the Guardian last week about the stations identified by SafeGuard, the Chinese embassy in Ottawa confirmed the addresses but rejected the notion these locations are nesting areas for secret police agents. LIGHT

Instead, the embassy insisted the stations provided community outreach for expatriates: "For services such as driver's license renewal, it is necessary to have eyesight, hearing and physical examination.

National security investigators are also looking into Wei's connection to a suspected location in Vancouver, which investigators did not identify. Global News could not independently verify its existence.

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Also in an effort to independently verify the allegations regarding the Toronto locations, Global News searched for land-title records for one property in Scarborough and one in Markham that RCMP sources allege Wei has ties to.

One of the title searches did not turn up any overt connection to Wei. But the second, a low-rise office at 220 Royal Crest Court, a Markham industrial plaza, listed Canada Toronto Fuqing Business Association as its owner. The office building was empty when a Global News reporter visited the location to seek comment on Monday.

That association has ties to the CTCCO: Wei and another CTCCO leader are named on its website as their permanent honorary chairmen. An employee told Global News on Monday that Wei also could not be reached at a Toronto business address listed on the Fuqing website. LIGHT

The Fuqing group was started in June 2019, its website said, under the guidance of the United Front Work Department and various Fujian government agencies.

The RCMP did not respond directly to questions about Wei's alleged connection to the secret Chinese police stations.

"The RCMP is actively investigating reports of criminal activity in relation to the so-called 'police' stations," a statement said. "As the RCMP is currently investigating the incident, there will be no further comment on the matter at this time."

CSIS also did not respond to questions about Wei, saying that in order to preserve the integrity of its operations, it was unable to comment on the specifics of its investigations.

But, responding to general questions about Fox Hunt operations and CSIS investigations into China's foreign interference, CSIS told Global News that Fox Hunt is a "covert global" tool of Xi's repression abroad, and the United Front Work Department facilitates these state-backed operations.

"These activities constitute a threat to Canada's sovereignty and to the safety of Canadians," a November 2022 CSIS statement said.

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