

# [***China sees foreign threats 'everywhere' as powerful spy agency takes center stage***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BVN-B031-JBSS-S005-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

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**Body**

Hong Kong (CNN) &#8212; In a slick [*video*](http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/spbb_214126/16300870.html) marking the National Security Education Day, [*China's*](https://www.cnn.com/world/china) top spy agency has a stern message for Chinese people: foreign spies are everywhere.

As ominous music plays, a broad-faced, beady-eyed man disguises himself as a street fashion photographer, a lab technician, a businessman and a food delivery driver - he even sets up an online honey trap - to glean sensitive state secrets in various places and industries.

"In the sea of people, you may have never noticed him. His identity is changeable and his whereabouts are hard to find," a narrator says. "They are everywhere, cunning... and sneaky, and they may be right here in our lives."

Eventually, Chinese police catch the spy in a dramatic ambush after state security authorities receive multiple tip-offs from the public.

"They can disguise as anyone. But among the crowds you and I together are protecting national security," the narrator concludes. "We 1.4 billion people are 1.4 billion lines of defense."

The three-minute video is the latest propaganda push by China's powerful civilian spy agency, the Ministry of State Security (MSS), to mentally arm the Chinese public against what it sees as the growing threat of foreign espionage.

Under Xi Jinping, China's most authoritarian leader in decades, the country's notoriously secretive spy agency has drastically raised its public profile and broadened its remit.

From a shadowy organization without any discernable public face, the MSS has been transformed into a highly visible presence in public life.

In Chinese cities, posters and slogans promoting national security are now a common sight on sidewalks, subway trains, campuses and billboards. On social media, the ministry commands a massive following with near-daily commentaries, short videos or even comic strips sounding the alarm about supposedly ubiquitous threats to the country.

According to the MSS, foreign spies are omnipresent and infiltrating everything - from [*mapping apps*](https://m.huanqiu.com/article/4GeyuraFCfm) to [*weather stations.*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/01/china/china-crackdown-weather-stations-spying-intl-hnk/index.html#:~:text=The%20country's%20civilian%20spy%20agency,and%20posing%20national%20security%20risks.) The ministry has also posted details of what it claims are espionage activities carried out by American and British spy agencies, and detailed how Chinese nationals studying or working abroad have allegedly been [*recruited*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/21/china/china-national-security-second-cia-spy-intl-hnk/index.html) by the CIA.

Last week, as part of a [*documentary*](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/FBMMEIP5ZUJOJ4y5HZXRrg) to mark National Security Education Day, the MSS revealed that a Chinese scientist convicted of selling state secrets to a foreign intelligence agency was executed in 2016. The documentary did not explicitly mention which country, but its images show an American flag and the US Capitol building.

The MSS' transformation is part of Xi's sweeping pivot to ramp up national security in the face of heightened geopolitical tensions and mounting domestic challenges.

As US-China relations fray, the MSS has undertaken significant efforts to provide guidance to other government agencies and broader society, said Xuezhi Guo, a professor of political science at Guilford College in the US.

"These endeavors aim to foster anti-espionage awareness and enhance security measures in light of the evolving landscape of espionage threats," he said. "The goal is to empower Chinese citizens and entities with the knowledge and skills required to bolster their vigilance and preempt espionage activities effectively."

The emphasis on external threats also helps Beijing deflect criticism at home over its own policies by shifting blame onto "foreign forces" - a playbook the Chinese government has repeatedly applied during periods of public discontent, most recently over protests in late 2022 against Xi's hardline measures to prevent Covid.

And the spy agency's extending reach is a sign of the increasing securitization of Chinese life and society under Xi, where "an incredibly wide array of issues can be viewed as threats to national security," said Sheena Chestnut Greitens, director of the Asia Policy Program at the University of Texas at Austin.

High profile

The MSS was born out of [*a reassessment*](http://news.cnwest.com/tianxia/a/2021/01/06/19417235.html) of China's national security needs in the early 1980s, as the country emerged from decades of political upheaval and self-imposed isolation under Chairman Mao Zedong to embrace market reforms and open up to the world.

It was founded in 1983 by merging an intelligence department of the ruling Chinese Communist Party and a counterespionage unit in the police force. It oversees intelligence and counterintelligence both within China and overseas, with provincial and municipal branches extending throughout the country.

It is often likened to a combined CIA and FBI, though the MSS long operated under a heavier veil of secrecy, without an official website or any publicly listed contacts or spokesperson.

But China's spy agency has gradually stepped out of the shadows as Xi makes national security a key priority.

In 2015, the MSS established its first public point of contact by setting up a hotline and a [*website*](https://www.12339.gov.cn/) to encourage people to report any suspected threats to state security. In the same year, China designated April 15 as National Security Education Day.

And in 2020, the ministry started to churn out promotional materials - from posters to [*animations*](https://www.xuexi.cn/lgpage/detail/index.html?id=445654826838854&item_id=445654826838854) - under a dedicated office named the National Security Propaganda Studio.

The following year, the MSS gave an unprecedented [*written Q&A*](http://news.cnwest.com/tianxia/a/2021/01/06/19417235.html) to state media, introducing its role and recruitment channels to the public for the first time. Later in the year, an official in charge of the spy agency's educational and propaganda work showed up on the prime-time news program of state broadcaster CCTV - a rare appearance that was [*noted by state media*](https://news.sina.cn/gn/2021-11-18/detail-iktzscyy6198818.d.html).

The most drastic move came last August when the agency made [*its social media debut*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/02/china/china-security-ministry-on-wechat-intl-hnk/index.html): it launched an official account on WeChat, China's most popular social app, with a rallying call for "all members of society" to join its fight against foreign infiltration. Its posts regularly rack up hundreds of thousands of views and are widely shared by state media outlets.

And this year, the ministry dialed up its multimedia activity. In January, it launched a comic strip series called "Shenyin Special Investigation Squad," featuring a team of five secret police officers hunting down foreign spies - plots it said were inspired by real-life counterespionage operations.

In one installment, a group of foreign-looking characters are tracked by the secret police as they try to extract strategic rare earth metals under the guise of survey work for real estate development; in another, an undercover MSS agent gets a job at a consulting firm to investigate its suspicious deeds, including its connections with experts in key sensitive fields.

"MSS' decision to establish a social media presence is an anomaly given its traditionally low profile," said Greitens at the University of Texas, who has studied China's security apparatus.

One reason for the change may be the minister of state security, Chen Yixin, who was appointed in late 2022, according to Greitens.

Chen is widely seen as a trusted aide of Xi, having served under him for years when Xi was a provincial official in Zhejiang province. And he has a track record of using social media to drive home the official message.

"Chen has been saying for years that new media are important to guide public opinion on the party's political-legal and national security work. So, part of this appears to be him putting his personal stamp on the Ministry's work," Greitens said.

In addition, China's National Security Commission - a powerful body headed by Xi - approved a document on enhancing public education around national security work last May, which "seems to provide high-level cover for MSS' course of action here," she added.

Broad remit

The MSS's warnings appear aimed at a wide variety of targets.

In one post from last year, the agency said it had discovered hundreds of [*"illegal" weather stations*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/01/china/china-crackdown-weather-stations-spying-intl-hnk/index.html#:~:text=The%20country's%20civilian%20spy%20agency,and%20posing%20national%20security%20risks.) that were spying for foreign countries, including around sensitive sites such as military bases, defense companies' property and major grain-producing regions.

In another, the agency warned against commentaries that seek to "denigrate" the Chinese economy through "false narratives" that promote China's decline - calling such criticism an attempt to attack its socialist system and "strategically contain and suppress China."

"Things that might have previously been considered purely scientific or purely in the realm of business and economics now have this securitized layer to them," Greitens said. "Whether it's the collection of data, or market research by a foreign consulting firm."

Last May, CCTV reported state security authorities had raided several offices [*of Capvision*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/09/business/china-capvision-consultant-industry-crackdown-intl-hnk/index.html), an international consultancy firm with headquarters in Shanghai and New York. It came after authorities [*raided*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/24/business/china-mintz-staff-detained-closure-intl-hnk/index.html) the Beijing office of US firm Mintz Group, which specializes in corporate due diligence, while detaining five of its local staff, and [*questioned*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/26/business/bain-shanghai-china-questioning-intl-hnk/index.html) employees at the Shanghai branch of American consultancy firm Bain.

The broad scope of threats on the MSS' radar is closely linked to Xi's "comprehensive national security concept," an overarching framework that includes more than 20 components to state security. It covers everything from ***politics***, economy, defense, culture and ecology to cyberspace, big data and artificial intelligence, and extends from the deep sea and the polar regions to space.

China has also broadened its already sweeping counterespionage law, casting a wider net over what the state deems as potential acts of spying.

It now encompasses "a much broader range of activities, including what some in the foreign business community perceive as ordinary, everyday business behaviors," said Guo at Guilford College. "This expansion also extends to the state's authority to investigate and seize electronic devices, computers, and digital assets, raising heightened concerns about cybersecurity."

China's heightened focus on national security stems not only from what it sees as a deteriorating international environment - especially its great-power rivalry with the US, but also concerns about the slowing Chinese economy. The property crisis and unpaid salaries have already sparked sporadic protests, and a worsening economic downturn could risk triggering further domestic unrest.

Through the emphasis on national security, Guo said, Xi strategically redirects part of the criticism and blame for his policy failures onto external forces.

'Conflicted messages'

The MSS' propaganda and education campaigns - as well as its generous [*cash rewards*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/06/08/china/china-foreign-spies-national-security-cash-reward-hotline-intl-hnk/index.html) for national security tip-offs - have spurred enthusiasm online for catching foreign spies.

On Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok, influencers have rushed to produce [*short videos*](https://www.douyin.com/video/7341708733250145588) teaching their followers how to identify spies. In the comment sections, users shared their own experiences of reporting or encountering a suspected spy.

On Xiaohongshu, China's Instagram-like platform, a young woman [*caused a stir*](https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/693423.html) last year after she called the MSS' hotline to report her boyfriend as a suspected spy. The blogger had been encouraged to do so by commentators after she said in an earlier post that her boyfriend could not remember the exact lyrics and tunes of China's national anthem. "Ladies, is it normal if your boyfriend can't sing the national anthem?" she asked in the post.

Greitens noted that past examples from other countries have shown over-encouraging or incentivizing citizens to report on potential security threats can backfire.

"The tendency is to over-report," Greitens said. "What happens then is you can actually get lots of false positives in a system that can end up having a really corrosive long-term effect ... the potential effects for Chinese citizens and foreign businesses could really start to accumulate quickly."

The relentless warnings from the MSS and its expanding powers have already raised alarms in the international business community, at a time when the Chinese government is trying to woo foreign investment to help revitalize a slowing economy.

Last month, a day after [*Xi hosted a group of American executives*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/27/business/china-xi-jinping-us-ceos-meeting-intl-hnk/index.html) in Beijing and less than a week after the annual China Development Forum attended by about 100 global CEOs, the MSS released a [*dramatic video*](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/uqzFyyhTr_whO3RKRUIA7A) warning the public to stay vigilant against foreign consultancy firms working as a cover for foreign intelligence services.

The six-minute "micro movie," which the agency says is based on real events, shows a consultancy working on behalf of an unidentified foreign spy agency to steal commercial secrets from a Chinese company seeking to go public abroad - and gleaning sensitive information about government industrial subsidies and the Chinese air force.

Experts say such videos risk undermining Beijing's central message that China is trying to lower barriers for foreign business and investment.

"This is indicative of the conflicting messages coming from the top, as well as an unreasonable overemphasis on national security issues that is driving foreign investors away," said James Zimmerman, a Beijing-based partner at American law firm Perkins Coie LLP.

"The ambiguity of the laws and lack of judicial oversight to prevent the security agencies from overreaching, creates much uncertainty for foreign companies."

Following China's crackdown on the consulting industry, most foreign consultancies have adjusted to the new environment, with some moving potentially controversial due-diligence or fact-finding work outside of mainland China, Zimmerman said.

"Some that remain in China are getting called in for 'tea,'" he added, referring to a euphemism for police questioning. "Not because they are under investigation, but to have a chilling effect and as a reminder that they, too are being watched by the security agencies."

Since starting his unprecedented third term in power in late 2022, Xi has repeatedly urged officials to balance development and security, calling security "the foundation of development." But the highly visible warnings and raids by the MSS have fueled concerns among foreign businesses that, should the two appear to conflict, security will take precedence.

The MSS is "driven more by ***politics*** than reality or good common sense," Zimmerman said. "But this is China with Xi Jinping characteristics."

CNN's Simone McCarthy contributed reporting.

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