

# Chinese Nationals Sentenced for Trafficking Counterfeit Gift Cards Across Country and Even Belleville

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February 14 2024 1:58 PM

EAST ST. LOUIS – U.S. Attorney Rachelle Aud Crowe released information today that a U.S. District judge sentenced two Chinese nationals to more than 12 months imprisonment for their involvement in a gift card scheme directed at Target shoppers across the Midwest, including Belleville.

Hongying Wang, 53, and Guangwei Gao, 38, pleaded guilty to one felony count of using and trafficking in a counterfeit access device. The pair have been incarcerated since Jan. 21, 2023, and so have served their full prison time.

In January 2023, a Target security officer observed Wang and Gao placing gift cards onto the racks in the Belleville store for customers to purchase. Upon further review, the gift cards were altered with the codes scratched off and covered by stickers to appear untouched.



“The defendants placed fake gift cards onto sales racks with the intention of stealing the loaded funds once purchased by patrons,” said U.S. Attorney Rachelle Aud Crowe. “The investigation took a coordinated effort, and I commend the law enforcement officials contributed to this case.”

According to court documents, Wang, Gao, or others working with them retained the access numbers to 6,100 gift cards with the intent to place the altered gift cards on the sales racks at Target. Once a gift card was loaded with funds by an unsuspecting patron, the fraudsters would have the codes needed to steal the funds.

“The gift card scheme concocted by these two defendants had the potential to steal money from anyone,” said ISP Director Brendan F. Kelly. “ISP special agents will thoroughly investigate cases to hold people accountable and protect the public.” In addition to Belleville, the following Target locations were knowingly affected by the scheme: Albuquerque, New Mexico; Norman, Oklahoma; Edmond, Oklahoma; Liberty, Missouri; Independence, Missouri; St. Peters, Missouri; Town and Country, Missouri; and Brentwood, Missouri. Homeland Security Investigations and the Illinois State Police contributed to the investigation, and Assistant U.S. Attorney Peter T. Reed prosecuted the case.