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Four Chinese nationals arrested in brothel case

They allegedly engaged in various types of immigration fraud to recruit Chinese women into home-based prostitution in the San Gabriel Valley.

By Ching-Ching Ni, Los Angeles Times

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Four Chinese nationals have been arrested on suspicion of recruiting women from China to work in brothels set up in residences in Monterey Park and San Gabriel.

According to Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials, the weekend bust resulted from a nine-month investigation into a far-reaching prostitution enterprise that relied on word of mouth and personal referrals to lure customers into private condominiums for commercial sex.

Court papers allege that the defendants engaged in various types of immigration fraud, including using fake documents and false marriages to recruit Chinese women, many with valid student visas, into a life of prostitution in the San Gabriel Valley.

"We found no evidence of force or coercion. These women were willing participants," said Claude Arnold, special agent in charge of ICE's office of Homeland Security Investigations in Los Angeles. "But regardless of whether these women were actively trafficked, they are still being exploited and these operations degrade the quality of life in our neighborhoods."

The defendants arrested on Saturday evening were Huagui Lotto, a.k.a. "Candy," 53, of Rowland Heights; her husband, Phillip Tingxiang Fu, 47, of Rowland Heights; Yibin Zhang, 45, of Monterey Park; and Jian Guo, a.k.a. "David," 42, of Arcadia.

The charges filed against them include conspiracy to import and harbor aliens for prostitution, conspiracy to commit marriage fraud and pimping and pandering.

Authorities say it is not unusual to see prostitution rings move into residential neighborhoods given recent crackdowns on sex trades such as those found in massage parlors.

As these industries move more underground and into private homes, they also rely more heavily on repeat customers rather than fresh clientele from the street, making these brothels harder to infiltrate, officials say.

The Asian prostitution rings are particularly active in the San Gabriel Valley and are tightly controlled by managers who act as gatekeepers who scrutinize potential customers and shun those they don't trust.

Among the four arrested over the weekend, Lotto allegedly managed the Monterey Park brothel located in one of the three-story multifamily town houses on a residential stretch of North Nicholson Avenue near East Garvey Avenue. Zhang served as her enforcer and part-time manager who also shuttled the sex workers to and from their jobs, according to authorities.

Officials say most of the prostitutes working there are Chinese, speak limited English and appear to be working off debt related to their immigration status.

Lotto's husband, Fu, was the operation's alleged overseas recruiter. Court papers indicate he was stopped at Los Angeles International Airport in May and told officials he was returning from a six-week trip to China to set up his business — a cultural exchange program that recruits underprivileged Chinese students to study in the United States.

Among Fu's belongings, officials found multiple identification documents not belonging to him and money transfer receipts to U.S. citizens who appeared to be participating in marriage fraud to shuttle illegal immigrants into the country.

"There was no school," said Arnold. "They committed fraud."

Sgt. Frank Duke of the Monterey Park Police Department said law enforcement depends on the community to speak up about potential criminal activities. He encourages residents to call his department, which has Mandarin- and Cantonese-speaking officers able to help those uncomfortable with English.

"A major component of us shutting any problem down is because of the community," said Duke. "People should know their neighborhoods. If you see a constant turnover of cars and different people visiting, maybe something is not right and you might want the authorities to know about it."