

# **Chinese National Admits to Trafficking Counterfeit Gift Cards to Belleville and Across Midwest**

by Dan Brannan, Content Director  
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**EAST ST. LOUIS –** A woman who was originally from China admitted involvement in a counterfeit gift card scheme directed at Target shoppers across the Midwest, including in Belleville in this region. Hongying Wang pled guilty to the federal crime in a U.S. District courtroom in East St. Louis on Thursday. Wang, 53, originally of Hunan Province, China, admitted guilt to using and trafficking in a counterfeit access device.

For the charge, Wang faces a statutory maximum of 10 years imprisonment and a fine of up to \$250,000.

Wang's sentencing is set for 10:30 a.m. on Jan. 22, 2024, at the federal courthouse in East St. Louis.

Wang admitted to possessing 6,100 fake gift cards with the intent to place them on the shelves.

According to court documents, the scheme involved individuals placing altered gift cards on the sales racks at Target while retaining the access numbers. Once a gift card was loaded with money by an unsuspecting patron, the fraudsters would have the codes needed to steal the funds. In January 2023, a Target security officer observed Wang and a co-defendant 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.

"Protecting consumers from fraud is a familiar battle, but individuals deliberately placing fake gift cards onto sales racks with the intention of stealing the funds from patrons is a new low, and I applaud the law enforcement officials who are investigating this case," said U.S. Attorney Rachelle Aud Crowe.

"Fraud is often mistaken for a victimless crime but when individuals like Wang commit these types of crimes, they are most certainly victimizing consumers and businesses," said Special Agent in Charge of the HSI Chicago Area of Operations Sean Fitzgerald. "HSI works daily to protect our community from these individuals by partnering with our local and federal partners to not only keep these counterfeit products out of the hands of unsuspecting consumers, but to also hold accountable those who attempt to profit from scamming the public."

"The Illinois State Police is committed to stopping trafficking, whether it is trafficking in guns, drugs, or in this case - counterfeit goods," said Illinois State Police Director Brendan F. Kelly.

In addition to Belleville, the following Target locations across the Midwest 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.

If you believe you are a victim, contact the U.S. Attorney's Office by emailing: [USAILS.VW\\_ILS@usdoj.gov](mailto:USAILS.VW_ILS@usdoj.gov).

Please provide your full name, mailing address, telephone number, and email address.

Guangwei Gao, also of China, was named and charged in the indictment with one count of using and trafficking in a counterfeit access device. An indictment is a formal charge against a defendant.

*Under the law, a defendant is presumed to be innocent of a charge until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt to the satisfaction of a jury.*

Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) and the Illinois State Police (ISP) are leading the investigation, and Assistant U.S. Attorney Peter T. Reed is prosecuting the case.