

# Knowing claims were unproven, Sanders used Arkansas attorney general's office to link companies to Communist China

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*Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders speaks during a fireside chat with Attorney General Tim Griffin during the Social Media Summit at the Statehouse Convention Center on Tuesday, Oct. 7, 2025. (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/Colin Murphey)*

Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders used the attorney general's office to assail businesses as run by Communist China despite her staff knowing those claims were unproven and the companies might be following the law, internal texts disclosed in [court records](#) show.

[\[READ: Sanders defends tactic of touting unproven claims charging companies owned by Communist China\]](#)

Asked by a deputy under state Attorney General Tim Griffin to delay public pronouncements in one case until allegations of a Chinese connection could be investigated, the administration refused, a text said. A top Sanders staffer said the

administration "would rather have a media hit and have to walk it back later," a deputy attorney general wrote in a text to Griffin and others.

Sanders' office posted to her website a day later a referral letter to Griffin from state Agriculture Secretary Wes Ward tying the company to Communist China. The governor's name appears in the letterhead along with Ward's. The claims proved false.

Urged by the administration to investigate a separate case asserting a company's Chinese ties, the attorney's general's office issued subpoenas that killed a land buy in Sharp County. Deputy Attorney General Alexandra Benton boasted in texts to Griffin that the title firm in that deal "got scared off by the [subpoenas!](#)"

In November 2024, Jones Eagle, which is owned by Qimin "Jimmy" Chen, the prospective purchaser in Sharp County, sued Ward, Griffin and the state in federal court.

"Our client just wants to do business like anybody else," said Alex Jones, an attorney for the company.

An Arkansas Democrat-Gazette review of thousands of pages of records in that case uncovered texts depicting an administration fixated on Communist China and heedless of the merits of claims against those swept up in the narrative.

"China is America's greatest threat," Sanders declared in a July 24, 2024, post to X, referring to 4811 S Zero Street's plans to open a site near the Ebbing Air National Guard Base in Fort Smith. "I won't let them buy up land close to our military installations and spy on our nation's defense assets."

A Walmart supplier, Zero Street is owned by a naturalized U.S. citizen and native of Taiwan, a longtime trade partner with the United States.

Benton texted a day before Sanders' post that she'd urged Chafer Stanley, then the governor's director of policy and legislative affairs, to wait for Griffin's office to check the company to "confirm that it actually was Chinese BEFORE they sent the referral over, and they were not willing to do that. He said they would rather have a media hit and have to walk it back later."

"Good grief," Griffin texted in reply.

"Comms before substance," Ryan Owsley, Griffin's chief deputy, wrote.

Like Sanders, Griffin is a Republican.

Sanders spokesman Sam Dubke refused to directly answer a question from the Democrat-Gazette about the remarks Benton attributed to Stanley, who is now the governor's deputy chief of staff.

"Thankfully, the company was cleared of all wrongdoing, and the Chinese Communist Party does not hold land near Arkansas military bases," Dubke said.

On July 23, 2024, the governor's office posted to her website the referral letter asking the attorney general to determine whether Zero Street was breaking the law "and, if so, commence appropriate legal action." The letter said a "preliminary investigation" into the company revealed "a reasonable suspicion of ownership ties to China and the Chinese Communist Party."

Ward's office provided no information to support that claim, Benton wrote in a text to Griffin.

"The point being," Benton said, "that they don't have one for Ebbing because this was a [comms stunt](#)."

Texts show Griffin's team scrambling to produce an announcement saying he was still investigating. Benton advised that "Ward referred to China as the 'Republic of China.' That is actually Taiwan. I have gently let the Governor's staff know about this mistake, and they have addressed it with Secretary Ward."

Taiwan is a self-governed island known officially as the Republic of China. The People's Republic of China, meanwhile, refers to the global economic and military power ruled by the Chinese Communist Party. The relationship between Taiwan and China long has been contentious.

"It appears," Benton later wrote, referring to Zero Street, "that the investigators at Agri may have known it wasn't Chinese before Wes sent the letter to us."

"Well," Griffin replied, "to be fair the letter/release said Taiwan. (ROC.)"

Three weeks after Sanders' X post, Griffin issued a statement clearing Zero Street of ties to any "foreign-party-controlled business." The governor's website still shows a headline for the referral: "Sec. Wes Ward's Letter to Attorney General Griffin on Chinese Owned Land."

At the time of this writing, [the link](#) was blank, lacking a letter or any other explanation to accompany the headline.

A Dec. 13, 2023, release based on another referral letter from Ward still appears on the governor's site. The headline declares, "Sanders Administration Holds China Accountable." Sanders took aim at Jones Digital, the predecessor to Jones Eagle, and Risever Machinery, charging that the companies "may have significant ties to China."

Recruited from Heifei, China, to Arkansas by former Gov. Asa Hutchinson, Sanders' predecessor, Risever in 2019 opened a 125,000-square-foot machine parts factory in a Jonesboro technology park with help from a \$1 million state grant. Hutchinson, a Republican, led three Arkansas trade delegations to China to court Chinese companies.

Claims against Risever quickly proved false.

The ex-governor's son Asa Hutchinson III, Risever's lawyer, sent a Dec. 15, 2023, letter to Griffin rebutting claims the family-owned company violated Act 636, one of two recent measures targeting "foreign-party controlled businesses." Passed in 2023, the law barred those businesses from owning agricultural land in Arkansas. They also were prohibited from owning digital mining operations in the state under an amendment in 2024 to the Arkansas Data Centers Act.

"It is clear from public records that the land referenced by implication in Secretary Ward's letter is neither agricultural, nor owned by a foreign party," Hutchinson wrote. "Consequently, Risever is not in violation of Act 636 and requests that you make this determination accordingly."

Benton texted Griffin Dec. 21, 2023, saying she'd shared with the Sanders administration doubts about the Risever claims.

"I told Chafer at the Gov's office yesterday that we didn't think they were out of compliance," Benton wrote. "I guess that either did not get communicated to Alexa or they doubled down on their strategy of comms directing legal."

"All comms," Griffin answered.

Benton referred in her email to Alexa Henning, who served as Sanders' press secretary for about 18 months before leaving in August 2024 for a job with a Washington, D.C., public relations firm. Henning later served as chief of staff to Tulsi Gabbard, former director of national intelligence under President Donald Trump.

"Alexa Henning just called me," Griffin spokesman Jeff LeMaster wrote in Dec. 22, 2023, texts, "pushing for us to note that Risever is a Chinese-owned company, even though they're not violating Arkansas law. ... They're wanting to save face."

Griffin issued a statement that day clearing Risever. He noted the company is Chinese-owned.

The attorney general's office took a different tack with Jones Eagle's Chen, a naturalized American citizen who immigrated to the U.S. from China as a small child.

As Chen pursued a land purchase for a planned cryptomining operation in Sharp County, Griffin's office worked against the deal despite uncertainty about whether the company was breaking any laws.

"FYSA," Benton texted Griffin in late February 2024, "the potential sale of land for a crypto mine in Sharp County that was supposed to close today did not close -- they got scared off by subpoenas!"

"Boom," Griffin answered. "Tell me more."

"The title company got skittish and has pushed out the closing, but with no back up date to close," Benton texted.

"The parties are now all looking at avenues to cancel the transaction."

The deal crumbled. Jones Eagle is still battling the state in court.

"We have a strong case and we look forward to presenting that case at trial," Jones said, "but the goal is to be able to do business just like anybody else."