

Local news

Smuggling suspect freed

Crime & Criminals - 1990-1999
Soquel restaurateur posts \$1 million bail

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SOQUEL — Richard Chen, a Soquel restaurateur charged with helping to arrange the largest known load of automatic weapons ever smuggled into the United States, returned to his business Thursday after a federal judge agreed to release him from jail on a \$1 million bond.

Chen, 65, and his wife, Ching Hua "Jean" Chen, 68, were among seven Northern California residents arrested by federal agents last week in connection with the smuggling of 2,000 AK-47 machine guns from China. They live in an upscale Aptos Seascapes neighborhood and own the Golden Buddha, a popular Szechwan restaurant in downtown Soquel.

Chen, considered one of the key figures in the illegal arms deal, was released from jail Wednesday after he agreed to post a bail bond secured by his home and business. His wife was released on \$100,000 bail last week.

Both had lunch Thursday at the Golden Buddha, where business has noticeably declined since news of the Chinese gun smuggling ring broke a week ago. The couple declined to comment on the charges against them and referred questions to their attorneys.

"They're very happy to be out of custody," said Tom Nolan, a Palo Alto defense lawyer. "They're up-



Richard and Jean Chen are among those suspected of smuggling automatic weapons from China.

standing members of the community and the judge showed no reluctance in releasing them at all. They're not going anywhere, because they're not guilty."

The Chens' arrests followed an 18-month sting operation in which the automatic weapons were sold to two undercover agents for \$700,000. The guns were shipped into the country in crates labeled "hand tools."

According to prosecutors, Chen was a sales representative for Norinco, one of two state-controlled companies of the Peoples Republic of China that made the guns. He is accused of negotiating at various times with Hammond Ku, a 49-year-old San Jose resident charged with orchestrating the illegal arms deal.

Prosecutors allege Chen had been negotiating another sale of AK-47s earlier last year through his contacts in Cambodia and China.

Ching Hua Chen is accused of receiving faxes from her husband while he was abroad negotiating a gun deal, and relaying that information to Ku.

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The charges have stunned those who know the Chens.

Friends, neighbors and business associates described the couple as quiet, friendly and hard-working people.

But many say their disbelief and support for the couple would disappear if the charges are found to be true.

"As far as I know, Richard's a fine man. But I don't condone guns or drugs, so if he did it, he deserves to be punished," said Jim Danna, a friend of the Chens. "I'm just hoping he didn't do it."

Danna met the Chens about two decades ago, not long after the Chinese-born couple immigrated from Taiwan. Danna watched the Chens build two successful businesses and raise two daughters.

Prior to opening the Golden Buddha at 4610 Soquel Drive about 12 years ago, the Chens owned and operated a restaurant by the same name in Carmel. They sold that restaurant after buying the Soquel property.

Chen converted what used to be a yogurt store into a restaurant fashioned after a Chinese peasant village. Red lanterns hang outside; low ceilings, bamboo screens and round wooden pillars decorate the inside.

According to the restaurant's menu and other accounts, Chen designed the place and built most of it on his own. He wanted to create an atmosphere similar to his birthplace in Tianjing, China, the menu says.

Chen, who served as a fighter pilot for the Chinese nationalist air force, came to America to pursue his creative and artistic passions, one of them being cooking, the menu says.