



This picture shows an instructor (right) correcting a trainee's action during a training session at the Genghis Security Academy in Tianjin. — AFP photos



Two trainees playing basketball after a training class at the Genghis Security Academy in Tianjin.



Trainees training at the Genghis Security Academy in Tianjin.

China's rich seek bodyguards schooled in digital dark arts

At the "Genghis Security Academy", which bills itself as China's only dedicated bodyguard school, students learn that the threats to the country's newly-rich in the tech age are more likely to emerge from a hacker than a gunman. Each day students in matching black business suits toil from dawn until midnight at the school in the eastern city of Tianjin, where digital defenses are given equal pegging to the traditional close-protection skillset of combat, weapons training and high-speed driving. Around a thousand graduate each year, hoping to land jobs as guards to China's burgeoning ranks of rich and famous, positions which can be worth up to \$70,000 — several times more than an annual office wage.

But the school says it can't meet demand as China's rapid growth mints millionaires — 4.4 million according to a Credit Suisse 2019 report, more than in the US. The course fees are up to \$3,000 a student; and while they had to cancel training between February and June because of the coronavirus pandemic, it has not dampened demand. Only the best make the cut, says founder Chen Yongqing, insisting his disciplinarian standards are stricter than in the army. "I'm quick-tempered and very demanding," the army veteran from China's northern Inner Mongolia region told AFP. "Only by being strict can we cultivate every good sword. If you don't forge it well, it will break itself."

About half of the students are ex-military, Chen says. They train in rows in a large, shabby sports hall, holding blue plastic guns ahead of them with a steady stare-before practicing hustling their clients safely into a black Audi with smashed windows. Other sessions are held in a classroom or gym, where they box in matching red T-shirts. Mobile phones are confiscated throughout, while meals are taken in silence in a large dining hall presided over by pictures of acclaimed graduates, who have protected everyone from China's second richest man Jack Ma to visiting French presidents.

"We have been defining the standard of Chinese bodyguards," instructor Ji Pengfei told AFP. In one class, students in pairs work through a scenario protecting a "client" from an intruder. "Danger!" shouts Ji, prompting the guard to quickly throw their "boss" behind them and pull out a gun in the same move. Those who fail to do it in two seconds are assigned 50 push-ups. The guns at the Tianjin school are fake-China outlaws possession of firearms. For live firearms training, students are taken to Laos in Southeast Asia.

Wiping data, blocking hacks

But in a highly surveilled country with a low rate of street crime, the modern minder needs an up-to-date skillset, against state monitoring or professional hackers. "Chinese bosses don't need you to fight," Chen tells his students of a client base which includes the country's biggest real estate and tech firms. Repelling hacks on mobile phones, network security, spotting eavesdroppers and wiping data are all



A group of trainees attending a training session at the Genghis Security Academy in Tianjin.



A group of trainees attending class at the Genghis Security Academy in Tianjin.

required tools in the bodyguard's armoury. "What would you do if the boss wants to destroy a video file immediately?" Chen asks a class.

Even so, old-school threats still exist in China—earlier this year billionaire He Xiangjian, founder of Midea and one of the country's richest men, was kidnapped at his home. According to Chinese media, He's son escaped by jumping into a river and was able to call the police, who said they arrested five suspects at the scene. Student Zhu Peipei, a 33-year-old army veteran from northern Shanxi province, hopes becoming a bodyguard could offset his lack of professional skills or academic qualifications. "And of course, it's cool," he added.

But the alumni of the Genghis Academy also provide humdrum services, like accompanying children of the rich and famous to school—for a fee of 180,000

yuan (\$26,000) a year. That in itself is far more than the base salary in private companies of around 53,000 yuan. Students must also navigate the quirks of their wealthy clients, says trainer Ji. Some only trust bodyguards whose Chinese zodiac sign matches theirs, he explains—while one, from a Fortune 500 company, only wanted to hire from his hometown. Another demanded a prospective bodyguard tell him what books he liked to read—he was hired after saying he liked military novels. The best can command as much as 500,000 yuan a year inside China, but some set their sights on a posting overseas, potentially working with foreign clients. "I want to work in the Philippines or Myanmar," one student said, requesting anonymity. "Then I can carry a gun... it will be more challenging and I can earn more." — AFP



A group of trainees attending a training session at the Genghis Security Academy in Tianjin.



A group of trainees attending a training session at the Genghis Security Academy in Tianjin.



A group of trainees attending a training session.



A trainee attending a training session



A trainee training at the Genghis Security Academy.



An instructor (center) demonstrating during a training session.



A trainee training at the Genghis Security Academy in Tianjin.



Trainees attending a training session.



A trainee selecting a model gun during a training session.



A group of trainees attending a training session.