

# THREAT ASSESSMENT

From China's Transnational Repression to Foreign  
Interference in Canada: A National Security Threat

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### **About the Author**

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Her research utilizes political ethnography to examine the strategies of digital resistance employed by activists against state mechanisms in authoritarian contexts. She received her Master's degree in Political Science from the University of Toronto and completed a Bachelor of Philosophy in International and Area Studies with Honours from the University of Pittsburgh.

Before she joined the University of Toronto, she was a Toronto-based journalist working with different community members in the Greater Toronto Area. In addition, she worked with Toronto & York Region Labor Council as a digital campaigner, advocating for labor right in Canada.

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## Introduction: Rethinking Transnational Repression

China's transnational repression has increasingly become a focal point of concern for democratic countries hosting significant Chinese diaspora communities, including Canada. Traditionally understood as the efforts of the Chinese government to monitor, coerce, and suppress dissent among its citizens living abroad, transnational repression is now recognized as having far-reaching implications. Beyond targeting individuals, it challenges the sovereignty of host countries, disrupts political and social landscapes, and undermines democratic institutions. As China's global influence has grown through its economic and political power, so too has its ability to extend domestic authoritarian practices across borders, employing a mix of state-led initiatives, such as the notorious "Fox Hunt" operations, and more covert tools like digital surveillance, disinformation campaigns, and coercion through diaspora networks.

While much attention has been paid to high-profile forms of interference, such as election meddling and forced repatriation, this paper argues for a paradigm shift: the need to examine *everyday forms of transnational repression*. These mechanisms, though less visible, are deeply embedded in the lives of diaspora communities and have profound implications for the democratic fabric of host nations like Canada. Through digital platforms such as WeChat, TikTok and Weibo, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) employs advanced algorithms and subtle disinformation campaigns to influence diaspora identities, regulate discourse, and suppress dissent. Unlike overt forms of coercion, these strategies exploit the invisibility and pervasiveness of digital tools, fostering self-censorship and reshaping community dynamics.

A critical yet underexplored dimension of this repression lies in the role of non-state actors. Diaspora media outlets, cultural organizations, and community leaders, often operating under the guise of independence, play a dual role in these dynamics. Co-opted

or coerced by the CCP, these actors amplify state narratives, enforce informal censorship, and monitor dissent within diaspora networks. Such actions not only blur the lines between state and non-state repression but also obscure accountability, enabling authoritarian influence to permeate democratic societies with minimal resistance.

This paper introduces a new lens for understanding transnational repression, emphasizing the covert and embedded nature of everyday practices that extend authoritarian control. By shifting the focus to non-state actors and the pervasive influence of informational and psychological repression, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship on authoritarian adaptation in transnational contexts. It highlights how these strategies not only target individuals but also erode trust within diaspora communities, manipulate public narratives, and challenge the foundational values of democratic societies.

In analyzing these dynamics, this paper examines the mechanisms through which China exerts control over its diaspora in Canada, identifying critical gaps in Canada's current security framework. While policies often prioritize high-profile incidents, the covert nature of everyday repression demands more comprehensive approaches that address disinformation, digital surveillance, and the role of non-state actors in facilitating authoritarian influence. By proposing an inclusive framework that prioritizes collaboration with diaspora communities, this paper underscores the importance of safeguarding both individual rights and Canada's democratic institutions against the evolving threat of transnational repression.

## Background and Importance of Understanding Transnational Repression

China's transnational repression is part of a broader strategy aimed at maintaining control over its citizens, regardless of their geographical location. This approach is deeply rooted in the CCP's authoritarian

ideology, which prioritizes the suppression of dissent and the preservation of its power. While repression has traditionally been confined within national borders, globalization and technological advancements have enabled authoritarian regimes like China to extend their authoritarian practices globally (Xu 2021; Dukalskis 2024). This has significant implications for countries like Canada, which host large and politically active Chinese diaspora communities. Transnational repression represents a complex challenge for democratic nations (Anstis & Barnett 2022). It is not limited to physical coercion, such as harassment or intimidation, but includes more covert tactics, such as digital surveillance, disinformation, and manipulation of diaspora networks. These mechanisms create an environment of fear that stifles dissent and discourages political engagement (Wong 2024; Oztig 2023; Lemon, Bradley & Hall 2022). By targeting diaspora communities, authoritarian regimes like China undermine sovereignty, the integrity of democratic institutions, and the principles of democracy and freedom that host countries uphold.

The repression of Chinese diaspora communities is not a new phenomenon, but its scale and intensity have increased in recent years. Significant mass political mobilization such as the 2019 anti-government protests in Hong Kong<sup>1</sup> and the 2022 “A4 White Paper Revolution”<sup>2</sup> against China’s strict COVID-19 policies have spurred a new wave of political dissidents seeking refuge in countries like Canada. In response, the Chinese state has intensified its efforts to monitor and repress these communities, employing a range of tactics that blend traditional forms of coercion with advanced digital surveillance. In addition, disinformation campaigns targeting pro-democracy activists have proliferated on platforms like WeChat, while Confucius Institutes and student organizations have been implicated in monitoring dissenting voices within Canadian academic institutions (Special Committee on Canada-China Relations 2023).<sup>3</sup> This repression has far-reaching implications, not only for the individuals directly targeted but also for the integrity of Canada’s national security and its democratic institutions.

Recent studies have highlighted the expanding scope of China’s transnational repression. For example, Xu (2021) and Feldstein (2021) have documented the use of digital surveillance and disinformation campaigns as tools for suppressing dissent within diaspora communities. Additionally, Kendall-Taylor et al. (2020) and Gohdes (2020) have explored the role of emerging technologies in facilitating state control over citizens abroad. These works underscore the growing sophistication of China’s repression strategies, which now extend beyond traditional methods of intimidation to include cyber attacks, social media manipulation, and the exploitation of diaspora networks.

In Canada, the implications of China’s transnational repression are particularly pronounced. The country has become a refuge for Chinese political dissidents, including those from Hong Kong and mainland China, who seek to continue their activism in a democratic environment (Yang 2023; Young 2022; Gorokhovskaia & Linzer 2022). However, as Leung (2024) and Specia (2024) have noted, this activism is increasingly met with resistance from the Chinese state, which uses both formal and informal channels to suppress dissent. This has created a challenging environment for the Canadian government, which must balance its commitment to protecting the rights of its residents with the need to safeguard national security. To fully understand the threat posed by China’s transnational repression, it is essential to consider the broader geopolitical context. The Chinese government’s actions are part of a larger strategy aimed at reinforcing its authoritarian rule both domestically and internationally. By targeting diaspora communities, the CCP seeks to neutralize potential sources of opposition and prevent the spread of dissenting ideas. This repression not only affects the targeted individuals but also sends a message to other members of the diaspora, discouraging political engagement and reinforcing the state’s control. Therefore, understanding China’s transnational repression is critical for protecting both the rights of diaspora communities and the national security of host countries like Canada.

## *Expanding the Scope: The Role of Non-State Actors and Everyday Repression*

Traditional frameworks for understanding transnational repression often focus on state-led initiatives like “Fox Hunt” operations or diplomatic coercion. However, this paper brings new attention to the role of non-state actors and the everyday forms of repression that operate beneath the surface. Diaspora media outlets, cultural organizations, and diaspora community leaders often act as intermediaries in facilitating repression. While ostensibly independent, these actors are frequently co-opted by the CCP, whether through financial incentives, coercion, or indirect pressure. Their role in amplifying state narratives, enforcing informal censorship, and surveilling dissenting voices blurs the line between state and non-state repression, making accountability increasingly difficult (Adamson 2020; Ong 2022).

A defining feature of modern transnational repression is its integration into the everyday lives of diaspora communities through both traditional and digital tools. Canadian Chinese-language media, though regulated under Canadian law, has been constrained by the CCP's influence, avoiding coverage of sensitive topics such as the June 4th Tiananmen vigils, Uyghur human rights, and the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement (Bronskill 2024; Thompson 2024). Beyond traditional media, digital platforms like WeChat and TikTok have emerged as critical instruments of covert repression, enabling the CCP to monitor, manipulate, and influence diaspora communities outside of its borders. For example, private subscription accounts on WeChat, often registered in China and beyond Canadian regulatory oversight, disseminate disinformation, shape diaspora identities, and surveil dissenters (Xu 2021; Göbel & Li 2021). These platforms use advanced surveillance algorithms to flag politically sensitive discussions, preempt dissent, and facilitate indirect intimidation.

One documented case involved a Canadian WeChat user whose politically sensitive messages led to Chinese police intimidating their family members

back in China (Desson & Murray 2024). Such tactics create a pervasive climate of fear, normalizing self-censorship as individuals weigh the risks of political expression against the potential harm to loved ones (Tai & Fu 2020; Ding 2024). This repression extends beyond Chinese platforms to Western social media such as X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram. High-profile activists critical of China's human rights abuses have reported instances where their followers were targeted by Chinese authorities, warned to unfollow dissidents, or faced harassment (Lee & Gu 2024). These incidents illustrate how the CCP adapts its repressive strategies to operate on platforms where it has limited direct control, thereby extending its influence globally (Dukalskis et al. 2023; Moss 2021). These digital tactics, though subtle, are deeply embedded in the everyday practices of diaspora communities, shaping perceptions, interactions, and political engagement.

## *Beyond Dissidents to the Broader Diaspora Communities*

China's influence operations extend beyond outspoken dissidents to ordinary community members, students, and business owners, many of whom experience coercion through threats to family members in China, social pressure within diaspora communities, and manipulation of Chinese-language media outlets (Amnesty International 2020). These tactics create an environment of fear and self-censorship, discouraging political engagement and silencing dissenting voices.

A 2020 report from Amnesty International Canada and the Canadian Coalition on Human Rights in China provides concrete evidence of an organized and sustained campaign of harassment and intimidation against individuals advocating for China-related human rights concerns in Canada. Activists engaged in pro-democracy movements, Hong Kong protests, Uyghur rights advocacy, Tibetan causes, and Falun Gong practices face persistent threats, including cyber surveillance, online harassment, in-person intimidation, and pressure exerted on family members in China (Amnesty International 2020). These findings

align with the 2019 National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (NSICOP) report, which identifies China as one of the most active foreign states engaging in interference operations targeting diaspora groups. The report details tactics such as psychological pressure, misinformation campaigns, and infiltration of community organizations (NSICOP 2019).

Beyond direct threats, China leverages economic and social pressure to maintain influence within the diaspora. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) utilizes Chinese-language media, often influenced or controlled by Beijing, to shape narratives that delegitimize criticism and reinforce state propaganda (NSICOP 2019). Similarly, United Front Work Department (UFWD)-linked organizations actively monitor community activities, report on political expression, and discourage dissent through social coercion. This strategy marginalizes opposition voices while fostering internal divisions within diaspora communities.

China's strategy also involves co-opting community organizations and business networks to exert influence through social and economic pressure. In addition to direct threats and intimidation, individuals face online harassment, cyber surveillance, and indirect economic consequences for expressing dissent. The Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) have identified these tactics as part of a broader pattern of foreign interference aimed at suppressing critical voices in Canada (CSIS, 2020). Overall, China's transnational repression blends traditional and digital tactics to maintain control over diaspora populations. The impact of these activities extends beyond individual victims to broader civic engagement, as fear of reprisal discourages public criticism and political participation. Addressing this challenge requires a multi-faceted policy approach that balances national security protections with the democratic rights of affected communities.

## *Why Understanding Transnational Repression Matters*

Understanding the mechanisms and implications of China's transnational repression is crucial for several reasons. First, it exposes vulnerabilities in the security frameworks of democratic nations like Canada. While policies often address overt threats such as election interference, the pervasive and covert nature of everyday repression is harder to detect and counter. This highlights the need for more comprehensive approaches that address disinformation, psychological control, and the role of non-state actors in facilitating authoritarian influence (Adamson & Tsourapas 2020; Göbel & Li 2021). Second, it underscores the importance of protecting the rights of diaspora communities, who often face dual pressures from both their home and host states. As recent scholarship emphasizes, repression operates not only through fear and coercion but also by creating divisions within diaspora communities, fostering mistrust, and undermining solidarity (Moss 2016; Wong 2024). These dynamics weaken the ability of diasporas to serve as agents of democratization and social change, roles that are often critical in resisting authoritarianism. Finally, this analysis contributes to a broader understanding of how authoritarian regimes adapt and exploit global dynamics. The CCP's use of non-state actors and digital tools reflects a shift in authoritarian strategies, moving away from overt coercion to more covert, embedded mechanisms of control. By examining these dynamics, this paper advances the study of *everyday transnational repression*, providing new insights into the intersections of digital technology, diaspora politics, and authoritarian adaptation.

## **Informational Autocracy as a Theoretical Framework**

Modern authoritarian regimes, particularly informational autocracies like China, strategically adapt their repression tactics in transnational contexts by leveraging digital tools and non-state actors. The concept of "informational autocracy," as developed by

Guriev and Treisman (2019, 2020), provides a critical framework for understanding how modern authoritarian regimes maintain control through information manipulation rather than overt repression. Informational autocracies are characterized by their reliance on propaganda, censorship, and strategic disinformation to create the perception of competence and benevolence, enabling rulers to sustain legitimacy while avoiding overt repression that could undermine their credibility both domestically and internationally (Guriev & Treisman 2019, 2020). These regimes strategically mimic democratic institutions and rhetoric to bolster their image, often masking their control over media and dissent (Guriev & Treisman 2020). They can also adapt their tactics to transnational contexts, leveraging digital tools and exploiting sociopolitical environments in host countries.

A central paradox of informational autocracy lies in its simultaneous reliance on competence and control. Guriev and Treisman (2020) argue that regimes strive to project an image of competence and benevolence to sustain legitimacy. However, their heavy dependence on propaganda and censorship to suppress dissent often undermines genuine engagement with societal concerns. This paradox becomes particularly acute in transnational contexts, where democratic host countries provide spaces for diaspora resistance and alternative narratives. For instance, Ding (2024) discusses how generational shifts in diaspora communities pose challenges to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as younger generations increasingly resist state narratives despite sustained efforts to influence their identities.

The role of technology is central to the informational autocracy framework, particularly in the context of transnational repression. China exemplifies this approach through state-controlled platforms like WeChat and TikTok, which target overseas Chinese communities, particularly younger generations (Ding 2024; Sun 2021). These platforms serve dual purposes: disseminating state-approved narratives to shape cultural and political identities while simultaneously enabling sophisticated surveillance of diaspora com-

munities (Ding 2024; Tsourapas 2021). This combination demonstrates how digital tools allow regimes to extend their reach across borders. By monitoring conversations, influencing political engagement, and covertly suppressing dissent, these platforms enable authoritarian regimes to maintain influence without direct interference that might provoke international criticism (Tai & Fu 2020; King et al. 2013). Byler (2022) provides a detailed account of how surveillance technologies, developed through collaborations between the Chinese state and private tech firms, are deployed to monitor and manage dissent. While his analysis focuses on Xinjiang, the methods he describes reveal a broader authoritarian playbook, showing how regimes integrate technological advancements to enforce control both domestically and transnationally.

Informational autocracies exploit the blurred boundaries between state and non-state actors to conceal their direct involvement, enabling them to operate covertly in foreign contexts. Adamson and Tsourapas (2020) highlight how authoritarian regimes engage in coercion-by-proxy, co-opting diaspora media outlets, civil society organizations, and cultural associations to disseminate state narratives and monitor dissent. This strategy enables regimes like the CCP to extend their influence while mitigating direct accountability within democratic host countries. These approaches exemplify broader authoritarian adaptations to transnational challenges, where regimes navigate the legal and normative frameworks of democratic spaces to advance their goals. For instance, Tsourapas (2021) emphasizes how non-state actors facilitate surveillance and control within diaspora communities, amplifying the CCP's ability to suppress dissent without overt state involvement.

Understanding informational autocracy requires examining the interplay between propaganda, censorship, and the strategic use of digital tools. This framework reveals how modern authoritarian regimes like China adapt their repressive strategies to navigate networked, digitalized transnational environments. Scholars such as Tsourapas (2021) and Adamson (2020) have shown how authoritarian regimes ex-



tend their influence beyond borders through a blend of legitimization, co-optation, and repression. In this context, digital platforms amplify state-approved narratives while simultaneously surveilling diaspora communities to detect and suppress dissent. Dukalskis (2023) underscores how digital authoritarianism facilitates repression without resorting to physical violence, thereby minimizing political costs while achieving informational control. By leveraging these mechanisms, informational autocracies like China maintain their influence domestically and abroad, highlighting the dynamic and adaptive nature of modern authoritarian governance in the 21st century.

## **Contextualization: Canada as a Refuge for Chinese Activists and the Diaspora**

### *Historical Context*

Canada has a longstanding history as a refuge for individuals fleeing persecution and authoritarian regimes, rooted in its commitment to protecting human rights and upholding democratic values (Gorokhovskaia & Linzer 2022; Atak 2018; Lippert 2011). This tradition is particularly evident in the Chinese diaspora in Canada, which has grown over the decades due to various waves of migration, many of which were driven by political repression in China. One of the most significant events that shaped the Chinese diaspora in Canada was the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre.<sup>4</sup> The violent suppression of pro-democracy protesters by the Chinese government led to an influx of political dissidents seeking asylum in Canada (Gecelovsky 2001; Liu & Norcliffe 1996). These individuals were drawn to Canada not only by its reputation as a safe haven but also by its robust legal protections and relatively open immigration policies. Over time, Canada's Chinese diaspora has expanded to include not only those fleeing political repression from mainland China but also individuals from Hong Kong.

The 1997 handover of Hong Kong from British

to Chinese rule marked another pivotal moment in the history of the Chinese diaspora in Canada. Under the “One Country, Two Systems” framework, Hong Kong was promised a high degree of autonomy, including the preservation of its legal system, political freedoms, and way of life for 50 years (Scott 2017; So 2011). However, even before the handover, many Hong Kong residents harbored deep concerns about the future under Chinese sovereignty. Fears of the potential erosion of civil liberties and the encroachment of the Communist regime led to a wave of emigration, with Canada being one of the top destinations. Between the mid-1980s and the late 1990s, tens of thousands of Hong Kong residents, many of whom were affluent and well-educated, relocated to Canada, particularly to cities like Vancouver and Toronto (Li 2005; Mitchell 2000). This period saw a significant influx of Hong Kong immigrants who sought stability and safety in Canada's democratic environment.

The concerns of the Hong Kong diaspora were not unfounded. In the years following the handover, particularly after the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the 2019 pro-democracy protests, it became increasingly clear that Beijing was tightening its grip on Hong Kong (Ho 2020; Wong 2020; Yuen 2015). The imposition of the *National Security Law*<sup>5</sup> in 2020 was a turning point, leading to the criminalization of dissent and the suppression of fundamental freedoms in the city (Lo 2021; Vickers & Morris 2022). As a result, a new wave of Hong Kong residents sought refuge in Canada, fearing persecution under the increasingly authoritarian regime. This immigration trend highlights Canada's role as a longstanding sanctuary for those fleeing Chinese government repression, whether from mainland China or Hong Kong. However, as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has increasingly extended its authoritarian practices beyond its borders, even those who sought refuge in Canada are not immune to the reach of China's repressive mechanisms (Xu 2021; Feldstein 2021). While Canada offers legal protections against persecution, the Chinese government has employed a range of tactics—both physical and digital—to exert control over Chinese nationals

abroad, challenging Canada's role as a sanctuary for dissidents.

## **Current Landscape of China's Transnational Repression**

In recent years, Canada has become a critical battleground in China's broader campaign of transnational repression, a strategy aimed at monitoring, intimidating, and controlling Chinese nationals, particularly those involved in political activism against the CCP (Gorokhovskaia Linzer 2022). China's repression tactics in Canada include both direct and indirect methods, leveraging advanced technologies and covert operations to target dissidents (Ai 2024; Uluyol 2024; Leung 2024; Oztig 2023; Lemon, Bradley & Hall 2022). One of the most significant developments in this regard has been the establishment of overseas police stations, often disguised as service centers for Chinese nationals (Dirks & Fu 2024; Hardie 2023; Hawkins 2023). These stations, which ostensibly offer consular services such as passport renewals, have been implicated in covert surveillance and intimidation activities aimed at dissidents. The use of these stations is part of a broader pattern of "soft repression," where the Chinese government applies pressure on dissidents without overt violence, instead opting for subtler forms of control that can include threats against family members in China, economic coercion, or reputational harm (Dirks & Fu 2024).

### *The Role of Non-State Actors in Transnational Repression*

A critical but underexamined dimension of China's transnational repression is its reliance on non-state actors to extend its reach while reducing direct accountability. Ong (2022) introduces the concept of "outsourced repression," where non-state actors enforce state directives while reducing the regime's direct accountability. While originally conceptualized in domestic contexts, this framework is highly appli-

cable to transnational settings. Diaspora organizations, media outlets, and community leaders often become tools of authoritarian influence, either willingly or under coercion. These non-state actors often play dual roles: while acting as intermediaries for the CCP, they may also navigate the democratic norms of their host countries. The 2023 Interim Report<sup>6</sup> on Overseas Police Stations reveals that organizations linked to the CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD) are key facilitators of transnational repression, often operating under the guise of community service or cultural representation.

For example, diaspora media outlets in Canada have reportedly been pressured to avoid covering politically sensitive topics, such as Hong Kong protests or Uyghur human rights abuses (Bronskill 2024; Thompson 2024). These organizations, though seemingly independent, effectively amplify CCP narratives and enforce informal censorship within diaspora communities (Adamson, 2020; Tsourapas, 2021). This model, conceptualized by Ong (2022) as "outsourced repression," demonstrates how authoritarian regimes delegate repression to non-state actors to obscure their involvement while maintaining control.

However, this reliance on non-state actors creates a paradox. While these actors often facilitate repression, they can also become sites of resistance, challenging the regimes they are co-opted to support. Diaspora organizations may serve as intermediaries between the authoritarian state and the host society, balancing their role as extensions of CCP influence with the democratic norms of their host countries. This dual role underscores the complexity of transnational repression, as it is shaped not only by state strategies but also by the agency and resistance of non-state actors. These dynamics highlight the inherent tensions and challenges authoritarian regimes face in extending their influence beyond national borders.

### *Digital Surveillance and Preventive Repression*

In addition to physical presence, digital surveillance has become a cornerstone of China's transna-

tional repression (Al-Jizawi et al. 2020; Wang 2019). The CCP has developed sophisticated cyber capabilities that allow it to monitor the online activities of dissidents abroad, track their communications, and even engage in direct harassment through social media platforms. This digital repression extends to cyber espionage and hacking, which are used to infiltrate the devices of activists and extract sensitive information (Feldstein 2021). Furthermore, the Chinese government also weaponize social media to spread disinformation and manipulate public opinion, creating fake accounts to discredit activists and sow discord within diaspora communities (Special Committee on Canada-China Relations 2024).<sup>7</sup> These tactics not only silence individual voices but also fracture diaspora solidarity, further expanding the CCP's control.

The CCP's digital repression strategies are not only reactive but increasingly preventive, leveraging advanced surveillance technologies to identify and neutralize threats before they fully materialize. Dragu & Lupu's (2019) concept of *preventive repression* highlights how regimes use surveillance to preempt dissent by monitoring potential activists, compiling data on their activities, and intervening before opposition can coalesce. Preventive repression represents another evolving dimension of transnational repression strategies. The *Special Report on Foreign Interference in Canada's Democratic Processes and Institutions* (2024)<sup>8</sup> underscores how China has adapted these strategies in transnational contexts, targeting diaspora communities in Canada through phishing, malware, and social media monitoring.

Platforms like WeChat and TikTok play a central role in this preventive repression. The *Special Report on Foreign Interference* (2024)<sup>9</sup> detailed how these platforms are used to surveil politically sensitive discussions, flag dissenters, and enforce compliance through covert intimidation. For instance, individuals critical of the CCP's policies reported receiving direct threats and seeing their families in China targeted after engaging in political activism or sharing dissenting content online (Abbas 2024; Gorokhovskaia & Linzer 2022). This creates a pervasive climate of fear, com-

elling self-censorship even within Canada's democratic environment.

The CCP's reliance on data-driven approaches, often referred to as *techno-preemptive repression* (Oztig 2023), demonstrates how it uses digital tools not only to suppress dissent but also to shape diaspora behaviors before opposition can emerge. These tools include advanced algorithms that analyze online behavior and flag individuals deemed potential threats, creating a chilling effect on political engagement. A prominent case involved a Chinese dissident in Canada whose social media followers were targeted by CCP-linked accounts, warning them of repercussions if they continued to interact with the dissident's content (Ai 2024). Such tactics illustrate how preventive repression works to neutralize dissent at its roots, extending China's authoritarian practices across borders.

### *Threats to Canadian Sovereignty and Institutions*

The scope of China's repression in Canada extends beyond individual activists, posing a broader threat to Canadian sovereignty and institutional integrity. The *Interim Report on Overseas Police Stations*<sup>10</sup> highlights how CCP-linked overseas police stations have served as hubs for surveillance and intimidation under the guise of providing consular services. These stations undermine Canadian laws, erode trust in Canadian governance frameworks, and compromise the safety of diaspora communities. A important example illustrating the CCP's extraterritorial reach is the case of Chinese-Canadian billionaire Xiao Jianhua. In 2017, Xiao was abducted from his residence at the Four Seasons Hotel in Hong Kong by individuals believed to be mainland Chinese agents and subsequently taken to mainland China. This incident underscores the CCP's willingness to operate beyond its borders, employing coercive measures to target individuals regardless of their location or citizenship (Palmer 2022).

Moreover, the CCP's exploitation of digital tools and non-state actor networks further exacerbates these challenges. By infiltrating Canadian institutions and leveraging digital platforms, the CCP fosters a cli-

mate of fear that discourages political activism and fractures diaspora communities. Canada's response, including the establishment of the *Foreign Interference Commission*<sup>11</sup> and enhanced cyber defenses, represents a step forward. However, significant gaps remain in addressing the full scope of China's transnational repression efforts, particularly in mitigating the role of non-state actors and combating preventive repression strategies.

## **China's Transnational Repression Tactics and Logic**

### *Overview of China's Global Operations*

China's official global operations, such as "*Fox Hunt*"<sup>12</sup> and "*Sky Net*,"<sup>13</sup> exemplify the Chinese government's efforts to extend its authoritarian reach beyond its national borders. While officially launched under the pretense of anti-corruption campaigns aimed at repatriating corrupt officials and economic criminals who have fled abroad, these initiatives are in reality part of a broader strategy to target political dissidents, human rights activists, and other individuals deemed threats to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Investigations show that these operations often circumvent formal legal processes, employing extra-legal tactics like intimidation, harassment, and threats against family members to force compliance (Freedom House 2021; Joske 2020).

"*Fox Hunt*," initiated in 2014, and its broader counterpart "*Sky Net*," have expanded their focus to include a wide range of Chinese nationals, including political dissidents and activists who have sought refuge in democratic countries (Zhu & Wen 2022; Wedeman 2017; Fabre 2017). Although these operations are framed as efforts to repatriate criminals, the Chinese government often circumvents formal legal channels, preferring extra-legal tactics such as intimidation, coercion, and surveillance to pressure individuals to return to China or to silence their dissent (Leung 2024). This aligns with the Chinese Communist Party's broader

practice of exerting control over its nationals abroad, particularly students and academics, through the *United Front Work Department (UFWD)* (McNeill 2023; ACHK 2021).<sup>14</sup> The UFWD has been instrumental in fostering the CCP's overseas influence and maintaining allegiance among Chinese nationals abroad, including students. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, the department's role expanded significantly, especially after 2015, when overseas Chinese students were designated as a "new focus" of United Front work. These students are now seen as valuable assets to promote the CCP's positions and neutralize critics, both in their host countries and back in China (McNeill 2023; Zhao & Leibold 2020).

### *Overseas Police Stations and Extralegal Tactics*

A key element of these operations is the establishment of overseas police stations, which the Chinese government describes as service centers for assisting Chinese nationals with tasks such as passport renewals and legal aid. However, investigations have revealed that these stations, located in countries like Canada, the United States, and several European nations, also serve as hubs for monitoring Chinese nationals, particularly those involved in political dissent or activism (Safeguard Defenders 2022). These police outposts have been reported to facilitate coercive measures such as harassment and intimidation, with threats often extended to family members back in China. This extraterritorial repression is not limited to just economic criminals but has been broadened to encompass Chinese nationals who express political opposition to the CCP. Amnesty International's 2024 Report<sup>15</sup> details numerous cases where Chinese and Hong Kong students studying abroad have been followed, photographed, and intimidated by agents of the Chinese government at protests and political events. In some cases, these students' families back home are threatened with job loss, detention, or worse, in a bid to silence them (Amnesty International 2024).

*The Special Report on Foreign Interference in Canada's Democratic Processes and Institutions*



(2024)<sup>16</sup> disclosed that as of March 2023, at least seven such police stations were identified in Canada—three in Toronto, two in Vancouver, and two in Montreal. These stations were housed in inconspicuous locations, such as private residences and even a convenience store. While ostensibly providing administrative services, the report revealed that these stations were operated by Canadian community leaders under the direction of Ministry of Public Safety police officers based in China. The Privy Council Office (PCO) assessed that these operations represent the “institutionalization and intensification” of China’s extra-territorial law enforcement efforts, enabling systematic intelligence collection and surveillance of diaspora communities. The stations were established without Canada’s permission and in direct violation of the *Foreign Missions and International Organizations Act*,<sup>17</sup> underscoring their covert and unauthorized nature (Special Report on Foreign Interference 2024).

The Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) also confirmed that these stations play a critical role in China’s broader repression strategy, which initially focused on anticorruption initiatives such as “Fox Hunt” and “Sky Net” (Special Report on Foreign Interference 2024). While these operations claimed to target economic fugitives, their scope has expanded to include political dissidents, asylum seekers, and students critical of the CCP. The *Special Report on Foreign Interference* (2024)<sup>18</sup> also highlights how surveillance at these stations enables coercive tactics, including threats directed at families back in China to force compliance or silence dissent.

The presence of these police stations underscores a shift from overt, state-driven operations to covert and community-integrated strategies that allow the CCP to extend its reach into democratic societies. By embedding these activities within diaspora networks, China’s government avoids drawing direct attention while deepening its influence. As Canadian intelligence agencies have warned, the continued operation of such covert mechanisms poses a significant threat to Canada’s sovereignty, national security, and the freedoms enjoyed by its residents (Special Report on Foreign

Interference 2024; Safeguard Defenders 2022).

### *Overseas Surveillance and Intimidation*

The operations of transnational repression by Chinese authorities extend far beyond mere surveillance, affecting students and activists even when they are residing in Western countries. Those involved in movements like the Hong Kong pro-democracy protests, the “White Paper” protests against China’s COVID-19 policies, and commemorations of the Tiananmen Square massacre, have often faced threats and reprisals. For instance, one student reported that within hours of participating in a protest abroad, Chinese authorities contacted her father back in China, warning him to curtail her activism (Amnesty International 2024). This tactic, wherein authorities use family members as leverage, is a key indicator of China’s broader strategy of transnational repression. Numerous Chinese students studying abroad have reported surveillance, harassment, and intimidation, often suspecting that individuals acting on behalf of the Chinese state were behind these actions. These incidents commonly occur at political events critical of the Chinese government, such as protests against the crackdown on Hong Kong, commemorations of the Tiananmen Square massacre, and the recent “White Paper” protests against stringent COVID-19 policies (Amnesty International 2024). Surveillance often involves students being photographed or filmed without their consent during protests or other political gatherings. One student in Europe recounted how she participated in a protest related to the Tiananmen Square massacre, only to have her father contacted by Chinese authorities within hours. Despite her efforts to remain anonymous, Chinese officials identified her and used threats against her family to pressure her into abandoning her activism (Amnesty International 2024). This tactic, of targeting family members to silence dissent, is widely employed by the Chinese government. Families in China may face severe repercussions, including job loss, denial of social benefits, or even detention, depending on the perceived severity of the student’s activism abroad. In another case, a student referred

to as “Rowan” described how, despite taking every precaution to remain anonymous at a commemoration for the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown in Europe, Chinese authorities quickly identified her and contacted her father back in China (Amnesty International 2024). These examples demonstrate the precision and reach of China’s surveillance network. The underlying message is clear: even thousands of miles away from home, Chinese nationals cannot escape the watchful eye of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This form of intimidation has created a chilling effect among Chinese students abroad, many of whom live in constant fear that their actions will result in severe repercussions for their families.

### *Digital Surveillance, Self-Censorship, and Disinformation*

Digital surveillance and disinformation also play a critical role in China’s strategy to suppress dissent abroad. By leveraging technological capabilities and manipulating digital platforms, the CCP not only monitors and intimidates Chinese nationals abroad but also spreads disinformation to disrupt solidarity and suppress dissent within diaspora communities (Xu 2021; Khalil 2020). The CCP has developed extensive technological infrastructure to monitor the activities of its nationals abroad. Platforms like WeChat, which are heavily monitored by Chinese authorities, serve as a primary tool for tracking and controlling communication within the Chinese diaspora (Xu 2021; Khalil 2020). Beyond WeChat, surveillance extends to Western platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, where students and activists report experiencing censorship or intimidation for sharing content critical of the Chinese government (Qiang 2019; Plantin & De Seta 2019).

This pervasive digital surveillance fosters a climate of fear that leads to widespread self-censorship. Many Chinese nationals living abroad refrain from participating in academic or political discussions perceived as critical of the CCP. A report from Amnesty International (2024)<sup>19</sup> found that more than half of the Chinese students interviewed admitted to altering

their classroom participation or social media activity out of fear of reprisal. In one instance, Chinese police presented a student’s parents with transcripts of his online conversations, using this evidence to pressure the student into abandoning his activism (Amnesty International 2024). Such tactics illustrate how the CCP uses digital tools not only to monitor dissent but also to exert psychological control over its nationals abroad, effectively silencing voices in diaspora communities and extending its reach into the everyday lives of the diaspora.

In addition to surveillance tactics, disinformation is another core element of the CCP’s repression strategy. The *Special Report on Foreign Interference*<sup>20</sup> highlights the CCP’s deployment of fake social media accounts and automated bots to amplify state propaganda, discredit activists, and foster division within diaspora communities. These accounts target prominent Canadian activists critical of China’s human rights record, spreading fabricated stories and false narratives to undermine their credibility and alienate them from their communities (Lau 2024; Cheng 2024).

The CCP’s disinformation campaigns often focus on eroding trust between diaspora members and their host societies. Testimony to the *Special Committee for Canada-China* (2024)<sup>21</sup> described how these campaigns manipulate both Chinese and global social media platforms to deliver state-approved messages and suppress alternative voices. Fabricated stories and disinformation are tailored to sow mistrust, creating divisions within diaspora communities and furthering the CCP’s objectives to disrupt collective activism (Ai 2024; Henry 2022). By spreading false narratives that vilify dissenters and distort political realities, the CCP seeks to control diaspora narratives while undermining cohesion and trust. Lee (2022) sheds light on why disinformation is particularly effective within diaspora Chinese communities. Disinformation often spreads through trusted social networks, such as family, friends, or acquaintances, who share content on platforms like WeChat and Weibo. This sense of “trust” is often not based on the content’s credibility but on the

familiarity of the source. These trust dynamics, compounded by cultural and linguistic ties, make diaspora communities uniquely vulnerable to state-sponsored disinformation. In addition, cultural and language barriers further isolate diaspora members, who often rely on these platforms for news and information. This creates a feedback loop in which CCP narratives dominate, limiting access to alternative perspectives and reinforcing disinformation (Lee 2022).

Digital surveillance and disinformation campaigns are not separate tactics—they reinforce one another in ways that amplify the CCP's reach. Surveillance helps identify targets for disinformation, while disinformation magnifies the effects of surveillance by isolating and delegitimizing those who speak out. For instance, surveillance of online conversations has been used to fuel harassment campaigns, where followers of prominent Chinese dissidents in Canada are contacted and intimidated by CCP-linked accounts. These coordinated efforts make activists feel increasingly vulnerable and discourage others from joining the fight against repression. Collectively, surveillance and disinformation create an environment where dissent feels dangerous and support for activism becomes fractured. They not only silence individual voices but also divide diaspora communities and sow mistrust in host societies like Canada. These methods are powerful not just because of their reach but because of the way they exploit fear, isolation, and division, ensuring that the CCP's control remains unchallenged even in places far beyond its borders.

### *Non-State Actors and Outsourced Repression*

Non-state actors, such as Chinese-language media outlets, diaspora organizations, and influential community members, play a key role in China's strategy to monitor and control its nationals abroad. These actors are often pressured, coerced, or incentivized to align with the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) goals. This allows the CCP to extend its influence abroad while avoiding direct involvement in ways that could expose its interference.

The CCP's influence over Chinese-language media in Canada has been well-documented. Victor Ho, a veteran journalist, testified during *Canada's Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference*<sup>22</sup> that Chinese-language media outlets in cities like Vancouver and Toronto often operate “under the immense influence” of Beijing. These outlets avoid covering sensitive topics, such as Taiwan, Hong Kong protests, or Uyghur human rights abuses, while amplifying CCP-friendly narratives under the guise of local reporting (Bronskill 2024). On the other hand, financial incentives are one way the CCP exerts control. Advertisers linked to the Chinese government have been known to reward compliant media outlets with lucrative contracts while threatening to pull funding from those that deviate from the CCP's preferred messaging. Ronald Leung, a Chinese-Canadian television host, admitted exercising caution in his reporting to avoid crossing Beijing's “red lines.” He explained that violating these boundaries could jeopardize his ability to continue working in Chinese-language media (Bronskill 2024). A 2023 intelligence assessment by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) described how pervasive censorship and self-censorship among Chinese-language media in Canada result in a narrow spectrum of acceptable narratives (Thompson 2024).

The CCP's influence also extends to diaspora organizations and community leaders who may be coerced or pressured into supporting its objectives. The United Front Work Department (UFWD), a CCP body responsible for managing diaspora affairs, coordinates efforts to recruit influential community members. These individuals are often encouraged to promote Beijing's positions or monitor dissenters within their communities (The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats Report 2021).<sup>23</sup> This approach has been used to target pro-democracy activists, such as those advocating for Hong Kong or Uyghur human rights. Testimony presented during the *Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference* highlighted how some community leaders and organizations were pressured to align with CCP messaging, while those who resisted faced threats to their safety or to

their family members in China. These efforts effectively suppress dissent while promoting CCP narratives abroad (Thompson 2024).

China's use of non-state actors to influence media, social networks, and diaspora organizations poses significant challenges to Canada's democratic institutions. By leveraging these actors to promote its narratives, the CCP creates divisions within diaspora communities and erodes trust in Canadian governance. The domination of Chinese-language media by CCP-friendly voices, as described in the 2023 CSIS intelligence assessment presented at the inquiry, was deemed a "national security threat" due to its potential to disrupt public discourse and democratic processes (Bronskill 2024; Thompson 2024).

The Canadian government has taken initial steps to counter foreign interference, such as establishing the *Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference*<sup>24</sup> and enhancing oversight of foreign-influenced media. However, more must be done to address these challenges. Strengthening transparency in media operations, regulating digital platforms like WeChat, and building resilience within diaspora communities are critical steps toward safeguarding Canada's democratic values (Yeung & Nadjibulla 2024).

### *Broader Implications for Canadian Sovereignty*

China's use of non-state actors to influence media, social networks, and diaspora organizations poses significant challenges to Canada's democratic institutions. By leveraging these actors to promote its narratives, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) creates divisions within diaspora communities and undermines trust in Canadian governance. The domination of Chinese-language media by CCP-friendly voices, as highlighted in the 2023 Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) intelligence assessment, has been identified as a "national security threat" due to its potential to distort public discourse and disrupt democratic processes (Bronskill 2024; Thompson 2024).

Critically, investigations and testimonies shared by diaspora members have revealed how the CCP's transnational repression tactics have evolved over time. Initially centred on official initiatives like "Fox Hunt" and "Sky Net"—which targeted high-profile dissidents, corrupted officials, activists, and asylum seekers—these tactics have shifted to more covert strategies. The establishment of overseas police stations, often operating in collaboration with diaspora organizations under the guise of providing consular services, marks a significant escalation. Informational repression, disinformation campaigns, and narrative control in diaspora communities now form a pervasive and insidious mechanism of control.

This evolution has culminated in an everyday form of transnational repression that targets ordinary diaspora members. By using preventive repression mechanisms, the CCP extends its reach into daily life through informational control, fostering an environment of fear and compliance. For example, Chinese nationals abroad are closely monitored through platforms like WeChat, where their online activity can be flagged and used as grounds for intimidation or threats. In some cases, even seemingly mundane discussions or criticisms have led to warnings directed at family members back in China, discouraging further dissent and compelling individuals to self-censor.

The chilling effect is evident in diaspora communities, where fear of reprisal leads many individuals to avoid engaging in political discourse or activism. This is particularly pronounced in academic settings, where Chinese students often steer clear of sensitive topics out of concern that their views will be reported back to Chinese authorities. The result is a pervasive system of repression that extends beyond high-profile targets to influence the behavior of ordinary diaspora members on a daily basis (Calhoun 2023; Feng, Zhang & Ho 2021).

The Canadian government has acknowledged the severity of these threats and has taken initial steps to counter foreign interference. Measures such as the establishment of the *Public Inquiry into Foreign In-*



terference<sup>25</sup> and Foreign Interference online reporting systems<sup>26</sup> represent progress. However, significant gaps remain. Strengthening transparency in media operations, regulating digital platforms like WeChat, and fostering resilience within diaspora communities are critical to safeguarding Canada's democratic values (Yeung & Nadjibulla 2024).

## **Repression Methods and Mechanisms Overview**

China employs a sophisticated combination of physical surveillance, coercion, and digital tactics to suppress dissent, especially among the Chinese diaspora. These methods are increasingly being utilized on a global scale, targeting not only dissidents within China but also Chinese nationals living abroad, including students, activists, and journalists. By leveraging physical and digital surveillance, as well as psychological intimidation, the Chinese state is able to extend its reach far beyond its national borders.

### *The United Front Work Department (UFWD): A Critical Tool in China's Transnational Repression*

The United Front Work Department (UFWD) is central to the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) strategy of influence and control, both domestically and abroad. Established in 1979, the UFWD was initially tasked with building alliances with non-Communist groups within China, but its scope has since expanded to include global operations (ACHK 2021).<sup>27</sup> Under Xi Jinping, the UFWD has been elevated significantly, with its mission evolving to include co-opting diaspora communities, suppressing dissent, and shaping foreign narratives. Xi has described united front work as a "magic weapon" for securing the Party's success, reflecting the department's critical role in the CCP's broader authoritarian strategy (Eckert 2024; Joske 2020).

The UFWD now employs a broader suite of tools, including collaborations with diaspora organizations

and cultural associations, to exert influence and carry out informational repression. This transition marks a shift from overt campaigns to subtler, everyday mechanisms of control. For instance, the UFWD uses platforms like WeChat to surveil diaspora members and disseminate CCP narratives, fostering an environment of self-censorship and preventing the formation of opposition movements (Eckert 2024; Freedom House 2021). Most importantly, UFWD's operations blur the line between legitimate cultural engagement and covert foreign interference, raising serious concerns for host countries like Canada. The *Special Committee on Canada-China Relations*<sup>28</sup> emphasized that foreign interference occupies a "grey zone," characterized by covert, deceptive, and manipulative actions that go beyond traditional diplomacy. While informational autocracies like China use the UFWD to project influence, the covert nature of these operations challenges efforts to clearly differentiate between "soft power" and foreign interference.

The UFWD's activities pose a significant challenge to the sovereignty of democratic nations like Canada. By using non-state actors, such as community organizations and media outlets, the CCP blurs the line between civil society and state control. This creates an ecosystem of influence that undermines social cohesion, fractures diaspora communities, and erodes trust in host country institutions. The 2023 CSIS intelligence assessment identified these operations as a "national security threat" to Canada, emphasizing their potential to distort public discourse and disrupt democratic processes (Bronskill 2024; Freedom House 2021). According to the *Special Report on Foreign Interference in Canada's Democratic Processes and Institutions*<sup>29</sup> (2024), it highlights that the Chinese diaspora communities are UFWD's primary target "to control the overseas Chinese diaspora populations and co-opt Canadian civil society for its own benefit." The UFWD's global reach also highlights its dual function: while it targets dissidents and critics abroad, it simultaneously aims to project an image of unity and strength for China. This paradoxical approach helps the CCP maintain control over its nationals

while reshaping global perceptions to align with its ideological goals (Eckert 2024; Joske 2020).

### *Co-optation of Diaspora Organizations*

The UFWD strategically co-opts diaspora organizations, such as Chinese students and scholars associations, hometown associations, and overseas Chinese friendship organizations, to advance its objectives. The *Special Committee on Canada-China Relations* (2021)<sup>30</sup> identified these organizations as critical to the UFWD's strategy, acting as intermediaries to promote CCP narratives while monitoring and influencing diaspora communities. For example, the China Overseas Friendship Association and the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese are known UFWD-linked organizations used to maintain ideological loyalty and suppress dissent (Special Committee on Canada-China Relations 2021; Eckert 2024).

These groups often blur their roles by presenting themselves as cultural or community associations while covertly advancing the CCP's goals. Reports like the *Freedom House 2021*<sup>31</sup> study on transnational repression highlight how UFWD-affiliated organizations engage in monitoring dissidents abroad, reporting on their activities, and facilitating harassment campaigns to silence criticism of the CCP (Freedom House 2021). The covert nature of these activities allows the CCP to maintain plausible deniability while extending its influence into host societies.

### *Surveillance and Coercion*

Beyond organizational co-optation, the UFWD's operations rely heavily on surveillance and coercion to control diaspora communities. Members of the Chinese diaspora, including ordinary citizens, students, and activists, are subject to monitoring through platforms such as WeChat. Testimonies presented during the *Special Committee on Canada-China Relations* (2021) revealed how dissenters face intimidation, with threats often directed at family members still residing in China. These efforts create a chilling effect, fostering self-censorship and stifling political

dissent even in democratic environments like Canada (Special Committee on Canada-China Relations 2021; Freedom House 2021). For instance, the UFWD leverages networks like the Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSAs) to monitor Chinese international students, ensuring their alignment with CCP positions. Students who express dissent may face consequences, including being reported to Chinese consulates or targeted with threats to their families (Freedom House 2021).

### *Cultural Diplomacy and Propaganda*

The UFWD also employs cultural diplomacy and propaganda as tools of influence. Institutions like Confucius Institutes, while ostensibly promoting Chinese culture and language, have come under scrutiny for suppressing discussions critical of the CCP, such as those involving Taiwan, Tibet, or Hong Kong. These institutes serve as vehicles for CCP-approved messaging while marginalizing alternative perspectives. Reports from the *Australian Strategic Policy Institute* (ASPI)<sup>32</sup> demonstrate how UFWD-linked institutions control narratives in overseas Chinese communities, ensuring favorable depictions of China while silencing dissent (Joske 2020). Moreover, Chinese-language media abroad is often directly or indirectly influenced by the UFWD. As highlighted in the *Special Committee on Canada-China Relations* (2021), many media outlets in Canada avoid topics deemed "red lines" by the CCP—such as the Hong Kong democracy movement, Uyghur human rights abuses, or Taiwan—due to financial and political pressures.

### *Espionage and Intelligence Operations*

In addition, the UFWD operates in collaboration with China's intelligence agencies, engaging in espionage and covert intelligence-gathering activities abroad. Evidence presented in the *European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats Report* (2021)<sup>33</sup> outlines how consulates and diplomatic staff facilitate harassment campaigns, coordinate counter-protests against dissident voices, and gather intel-

ligence on political activists. These operations extend the CCP's ability to monitor and suppress criticism beyond China's borders.

### *Physical Surveillance and Coercion*

Physical surveillance remains one of the primary tools employed by the Chinese government to monitor and suppress opposition. This tactic is particularly evident in countries where China has significant political or economic influence, such as Southeast Asia. A notorious example of China's physical repression is the kidnapping of Chinese journalist Li Xin in Thailand in 2016. Li Xin, a vocal critic of the Chinese government, was forcibly abducted by Chinese authorities while in exile and subsequently returned to China, highlighting the extent of China's operations beyond its borders (Phillips & Holmes 2016). Similarly, human rights defender Tang Zhishun was kidnapped in Myanmar and repatriated to China, where he faced persecution for his activism (Hwang 2023). These cases underscore how China employs extralegal tactics, including abduction and forced repatriation, to neutralize political dissidents, particularly in Southeast Asia. In addition to these high-profile cases, Chinese authorities routinely employ intimidation tactics that affect a broader population. Hong Kong pro-democracy activists such as Nathan Law, who fled to the United Kingdom after the implementation of the National Security Law, have faced severe reprisals, including passport cancellations and financial penalties (Leung 2024). The National Security Law has provided the Chinese government with sweeping powers to silence dissent, not only within Hong Kong but also internationally, furthering its transnational repression. This law allows China to target individuals globally, applying penalties and threats of arrest for any actions deemed to endanger Chinese national security, regardless of the activist's current location.

### *Digital Surveillance and Cyber Repression*

Digital repression plays an increasingly critical role in China's repression tactics. The Chinese state utilizes advanced digital technologies to monitor and track the online activities of dissidents, human rights

activists, and diaspora communities across the globe. Through platforms like WeChat, TikTok, Weibo, and other Chinese state-sponsored digital apps, the government is able to maintain a close watch on the online activities of its nationals abroad, even when they use non-Chinese social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter (Liu & Liu 2020; Khalil 2020). This allows the Chinese government to monitor dissenting voices and preemptively suppress any mobilization efforts among the diaspora. The *European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats Report* (2021) notes that CCP-affiliated entities use these platforms to disseminate disinformation and harass individuals who criticize the Chinese government. In many cases, Chinese authorities utilize intimidation by proxy, where family members of students and activists abroad are contacted by Chinese officials to pressure the individuals into halting their participation in protests or political activities (Michaelsen & Ruijgrok 2024; Lemon & Jardine 2024). This tactic is made more effective by the pervasive surveillance mechanisms that the Chinese government employs, combining physical and digital tracking. For instance, students involved in pro-democracy activities in Western countries often find their families back in China targeted with threats, including job loss or detention, to force them into silence.

### *Use of Coercion to Silence Dissent Abroad*

Coercion is another method frequently used to maintain control over Chinese nationals abroad. In many instances, the Chinese government applies pressure not only to the individuals engaging in activism but also to their families still living in China. This form of transnational repression is intended to stifle dissent by threatening the livelihoods, freedom, or safety of activists' relatives. The rapid identification and targeting of individuals participating in protests abroad—such as those involved in the 2022 “White Paper” protests—demonstrates the precision with which China can track dissenters and extend its influence into foreign nations (Amnesty International 2024). For example, following participation in pro-democracy protests, Chinese authorities contacted the

families of several students abroad, warning them to “educate” their children and prevent further participation in activities that could harm China’s image (Amnesty International 2024). These warnings often come with threats of job loss, denied access to social services, or worse, as a means of leveraging control over the students. The fear of reprisal against their families has caused many Chinese nationals abroad to self-censor or withdraw from political activities altogether.

### *Everyday Psychological Repression and Erosion of Community Trust*

Beyond digital repression, psychological control plays a critical role in maintaining CCP influence over diaspora communities. Everyday acts of repression, such as disinformation campaigns, social isolation, and subtle coercion, foster a pervasive sense of fear that shapes behavior and identity. Members of the Chinese diaspora, particularly those with family ties to China, often refrain from discussing politically sensitive topics, even in democratic spaces like Canada (Amnesty International 2024; Han & Tong 2021; Sinski 2020). This creates an environment where repression becomes normalized, embedding itself into the daily lives of the diaspora.

These systematic monitoring and harassment tactics have profound psychological impacts on the diaspora. Many individuals report self-censorship, withdrawing from political activities, and experiencing mental health issues such as anxiety, paranoia, and social isolation due to the pervasive fear of surveillance and reprisal. For students, in particular, the knowledge that their families back in China could be targeted compounds this anxiety, creating a chilling effect that suppresses dissent and curtails freedom of expression, even in democratic spaces like Canada (Al-Jizawi et al. 2022; Xu 2021). This form of repression extends beyond direct intimidation and becomes deeply entrenched in the everyday lives of diaspora members, influencing their behavior and sense of identity.

At the community level, these tactics foster an ero-

sion of trust among diaspora members. Everyday acts of repression—such as disinformation campaigns, social isolation, and subtle coercion—normalize fear and suspicion within the community. For instance, the threat of informants reporting politically sensitive discussions, whether online or in person, creates an environment where individuals are hesitant to engage in open conversations. This pervasive distrust fractures diaspora solidarity, weakening community ties and discouraging collective action against authoritarian influence (Moss 2016; Göbel & Li 2021). As a result, the CCP’s repression not only silences individual voices but also disrupts the social fabric of diaspora communities, ensuring compliance through psychological control rather than overt coercion.

## **Why China’s Transnational Repression is a Threat to Canada’s National Security**

China’s transnational repression threatens Canada’s national security by undermining sovereignty, weakening democratic processes, and eroding social trust. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) employs tactics that blur the line between foreign influence—legitimate diplomatic or economic advocacy—and foreign interference, which is covert, deceptive, or coercive in nature. The *Special Committee on Canada-China Relations* (2021)<sup>34</sup> has emphasized the challenge of distinguishing between the two, as many CCP activities operate within a “grey zone” where malign interference is disguised as cultural diplomacy or legitimate engagement.

Tactics such as the co-optation of diaspora organizations, establishment of covert police stations, disinformation campaigns, and surveillance through platforms like WeChat demonstrate the evolving nature of these threats. While official operations like “Fox Hunt” and “Sky Net” target high-profile dissidents, covert repression increasingly focuses on ordinary



diaspora members through psychological intimidation, disinformation, and everyday mechanisms of repression. Such actions not only silence dissent but also fracture diaspora communities, fostering distrust and self-censorship (ACHK Report 2021; Freedom House 2021).

The threat extends to Canada's national institutions. As noted by Public Safety Canada (2023)<sup>35</sup>, foreign interference “diminishes Canadians’ trust in institutions” and threatens the integrity of governance processes, such as electoral systems, policy decisions, and public discourse. Recent reports underscore that foreign interference also targets academia, critical infrastructure, and vulnerable communities, undermining Canada's ability to safeguard its democratic values (Public Safety Canada 2024).

### *Existing Gaps in Canada's National Security Framework*

Despite the increasing awareness of China's transnational repression activities, Canada's national security framework remains ill-equipped to address this growing threat. The current security infrastructure, designed primarily to deal with conventional state-to-state threats and domestic terrorism, struggles to adapt to the complex and covert nature of transnational repression. This gap in preparedness leaves Canada vulnerable to foreign interference, particularly from authoritarian states like China that employ both state and non-state actors in their operations.

**The Challenge of Detecting Disinformation and Everyday Repression:** Detecting high-profile foreign interference, such as election meddling or forced detention of dissidents, often captures significant public and governmental attention. However, focusing solely on these overt and exceptional incidents risks overlooking the more pervasive and adaptive forms of transnational repression that authoritarian states, like China, employ. These tactics include disinformation, misinformation, censorship, and surveillance, which operate subtly within diaspora communities, influencing their everyday behaviors and decision-making

processes.

A key challenge lies in monitoring and detecting disinformation disseminated through channels that evade traditional regulatory oversight. Platforms like WeChat subscription accounts have become primary vehicles for spreading Chinese state-sponsored narratives and misinformation among diaspora communities. These subscription accounts—often technically registered in China—fall outside the Canadian government's jurisdiction, making it nearly impossible to regulate or intervene effectively. Unlike domestic media outlets, platforms like WeChat subscription accounts remain beyond the scope of Canadian oversight, creating a blind spot for detecting state-sponsored disinformation. As a result, the CCP can leverage these platforms to amplify propaganda, silence dissenting voices, and embed state-controlled messaging into the digital ecosystems of diaspora communities. Unlike overt incidents of foreign interference, such as election interference, these “soft power” tactics are far more insidious. They create invisible boundaries of control by normalizing self-censorship and embedding fear and mistrust within the community. In addition, there is a lack of systematic studies to understand how disinformation and psychological repression function within diaspora communities and influence their behaviors over time. The covert nature of these tactics makes them difficult to quantify and analyze, leading to an underestimation of their impact.

While the Canadian government has taken steps to address high-profile foreign interference—such as safeguarding electoral integrity, establishing the Foreign Interference Commission<sup>36</sup>, and investigating overt intimidation—the systemic and covert nature of informational repression remains largely unaddressed. Canada's current security infrastructure is not equipped to detect or mitigate disinformation campaigns that are embedded in platforms like WeChat, TikTok, Weibo and other diaspora-specific digital spaces.

**Inadequate Legal Frameworks:** In recent years,

Canada has bolstered its legal defenses against foreign interference. The Foreign Influence Transparency and Accountability Act (FITAA), enacted in 2024, established the Foreign Influence Transparency Registry. This registry requires individuals and entities engaged in activities on behalf of foreign principals to disclose their arrangements, enhancing transparency in political and governmental processes (Government of Canada 2024). Complementing FITAA, Bill C-70, also passed in 2024, amended several existing laws to further counter foreign interference. Most importantly, it introduced new offences related to foreign-influenced threats and violence under the Security of Information Act, providing law enforcement with more robust tools to address covert foreign activities (House of Commons 2024).

Despite these advancements, challenges persist. While the current legislation enhances the detection and prosecution of foreign interference, there is an ongoing need for specific measures to protect individuals within diaspora communities from state-sponsored harassment and coercion. Additionally, regulating foreign-language media and digital platforms, which can disseminate disinformation and suppress dissent, remains a complex issue requiring further legislative attention. Critics advocate for additional actions, such as establishing dedicated support systems for victims of transnational repression and implementing stricter oversight of foreign state-affiliated organizations operating in Canada. These steps are essential to ensure that national security measures do not inadvertently infringe upon the rights and freedoms of residents, particularly those from vulnerable communities. In summary, while Canada's legal framework has evolved to address the multifaceted challenges of foreign interference, continuous assessment and adaptation are necessary. This approach will help effectively counter the sophisticated tactics of transnational repression and uphold Canada's democratic values.

**Insufficient Reporting Mechanism:** While Canada has taken initial steps to address transnational repression, such as implementing reporting mechanisms through agencies like the RCMP, CSIS,

the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security (CSE), and the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA)<sup>37</sup>, these efforts remain insufficient for tackling the everyday psychological and community-level impacts of CCP influence. These agencies provide telephone hotlines and online reporting portals for individuals to report national security threats, cyber incidents, and suspicious activities. However, many diaspora members hesitate to use these systems due to fear of reprisal, mistrust in government institutions, or concerns about being stigmatized as complicit. The mechanisms often fail to account for the pervasive and invisible nature of everyday transnational repression, such as self-censorship, disinformation campaigns, and psychological intimidation, which do not always meet the threshold of urgent national security threats.

**Informal Channels and Non-State Actors:** China's use of informal channels and non-state actors, such as business networks, community organizations, and diaspora groups, adds another layer of complexity to the threat landscape. These actors often operate in a legally ambiguous space, making it difficult for Canadian authorities to identify and counter their activities. The influence of these networks can be subtle yet pervasive, as they often function under the radar of traditional security measures. This informal influence, combined with the use of digital platforms to spread disinformation and monitor dissidents, complicates Canada's efforts to combat foreign interference.

## **Policy Recommendations to Enhance Canada's Counter Transnational Repression Strategies**

### *A Broader Approach to Addressing Transnational Repression*

To effectively counter transnational repression, Canada must shift its perspective from a narrow focus on high-profile incidents toward a broader, more adaptive framework that addresses the embedded and invisible nature of informational control and disinformation. A key starting point is the design of effec-

tive regulation and monitoring systems to target the dissemination of misinformation on platforms like WeChat and other diaspora-specific digital spaces. While regulatory measures must carefully balance privacy and free speech concerns, Canada should collaborate with technology companies to enhance transparency and reduce the spread of algorithm-driven disinformation that amplifies state-sponsored narratives.

At the same time, systematic research is necessary to develop a deeper understanding of the scope and mechanisms of informational repression. This involves mapping the digital ecosystems where misinformation circulates and analyzing its psychological and behavioral impacts on diaspora communities. Comprehensive studies can uncover how these dynamics influence individual behavior, foster self-censorship, and erode trust within diaspora networks.

Moreover, building digital resilience within diaspora communities is essential to mitigate the effects of state-sponsored disinformation and strengthen individual capacity to critically evaluate content. Media and digital literacy programs must be culturally tailored and made accessible in multiple languages to ensure they reach diverse segments of the diaspora population. By equipping individuals with tools to recognize disinformation, critically assess its sources, and break the cycle of misinformation consumption, Canada can help reduce community vulnerability to external influence (Lee 2022). These measures—regulatory innovation, systematic research, and investments in digital resilience—provide a cohesive and targeted strategy for addressing the evolving nature of transnational repression while safeguarding both diaspora communities and Canada's democratic institutions.

### *Public Awareness and Support Programs*

A critical step in countering China's transnational repression is raising awareness within the Chinese diaspora community about their rights and the protections available to them in Canada. Many individuals

within these communities may not be fully aware of the legal protections they are entitled to or may be hesitant to report incidents of harassment and intimidation due to fear of reprisal or mistrust of authorities.

To address this, the Canadian government should collaborate closely with local NGOs, community organizations, and diaspora groups to establish comprehensive support networks. These networks can serve as trusted intermediaries between the Chinese diaspora and Canadian authorities, helping to build confidence in the system. These organizations can provide educational resources, legal assistance, and mental health support to victims of repression, ensuring they have access to the protection they need. Public awareness campaigns should also be launched to inform the broader public and diaspora communities about the nature of transnational repression, emphasizing the importance of reporting incidents and utilizing available legal protections. Workshops, seminars, and online resources could be developed in multiple languages to ensure accessibility. By empowering the community with knowledge and support, Canada can help mitigate the effects of China's transnational repression and foster a more resilient diaspora.

### *Protective Measures for At-Risk Individuals*

Protective measures for at-risk individuals, particularly community leaders, activists, and outspoken critics of the Chinese government, are essential in mitigating the personal risks associated with transnational repression. These individuals often find themselves targets of harassment, intimidation, and surveillance, both online and in physical spaces. The Canadian government should implement security enhancements for these at-risk individuals, which could include measures such as increased physical security, cyber protection, and, in extreme cases, relocation assistance. NGOs and community organizations can play a crucial role in identifying individuals who may be at heightened risk and facilitating the implementation of protective measures.

However, the effectiveness of these initiatives is

undermined by the reluctance of diaspora members to report their experiences using existing mechanisms, such as the RCMP hotlines and other national security reporting systems. This reluctance stems from multiple factors. First, there is a widespread fear among diaspora members of being accused of collusion or complicity with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The covert nature of transnational repression, combined with its psychological and social impacts, means that victims often feel trapped in a dilemma: reporting harassment may expose them to further scrutiny and suspicion rather than providing relief.

Second, racism and discrimination play a significant role in deterring diaspora members from seeking assistance. The rising tide of anti-Asian sentiment has created an environment where reporting transnational repression can result in further stigmatization and marginalization (Balintec 2023; Ngo et al. 2023). Many diaspora members, particularly those who have sought refuge in Canada for its democratic values and human rights protections, now fear being unfairly labeled as security threats. These concerns are especially pronounced in light of systemic biases that have historically affected minority communities, causing deep mistrust in government institutions.

Moreover, the pervasive fear of retaliation—both for themselves and their families still residing in China—compounds the silence within diaspora communities. Individuals targeted by transnational repression often understand that reporting their experiences could escalate threats to their families abroad, who may become further subject to intimidation, harassment, or even detention by CCP authorities (Amnesty International 2024). This chilling effect reinforces self-censorship and isolation, making it difficult for victims to come forward or seek help.

To overcome these barriers, trust-building must be at the core of Canada's protective strategies. The government must work closely with trusted community leaders, NGOs, and diaspora organizations to engage at-risk individuals and provide assurances of safety and support. Collaborative outreach efforts are criti-

cal to fostering confidence that reporting incidents of transnational repression will not lead to further harm or stigmatization.

In addition, the creation of a rapid response team within Canadian law enforcement—specialized in handling cases of transnational repression—could offer immediate protection and intervention for victims. This team would be responsible for assessing threats, coordinating protective measures, and ensuring that victims receive necessary support without fear of discrimination or further intimidation. By prioritizing the safety and dignity of diaspora communities, Canada can address the unique challenges posed by transnational repression while upholding its commitment to human rights and democratic values.

Finally, it is essential to emphasize that addressing transnational repression must not come at the cost of racial profiling or indiscriminate targeting of diaspora communities. Many members of the Chinese diaspora have lived in Canada for generations and are deeply embedded in the fabric of Canadian democratic society. To effectively combat foreign interference, Canada must recognize that diaspora communities are often the victims of authoritarian repression, not its enablers. By providing safety nets, fostering trust, and ensuring that reporting mechanisms are inclusive and protective, Canada can build a more resilient framework to counter transnational repression while protecting those most at risk.

### *Legislative and Policy Reforms*

While recent legislative initiatives such as Bill C-70 and Bill C-65 represent progress in addressing foreign interference, significant gaps remain in Canada's legal and policy frameworks. Bill C-70 enhances intelligence-sharing and law enforcement powers but does not fully address the role of non-state actors or adequately protect diaspora communities facing harassment and coercion. Bill C-65 aims to improve electoral integrity but fails to cover party nomination processes, leaving vulnerabilities in political interference strategies.

Canada's Foreign Influence Transparency Registry<sup>38</sup>, created under the Foreign Influence Transparency and Accountability Act (FITAA) in 2024, is a significant step toward increasing transparency in foreign lobbying efforts. However, its effectiveness depends on strong enforcement and oversight. The registry primarily focuses on direct influence over government and political processes, overlooking covert influence through economic coercion, social intimidation, and proxy actors. Expanding its scope to include influence campaigns targeting civil society, media, and educational institutions would better safeguard against covert foreign interference.

Digital influence operations remain a critical challenge. Existing regulations do not effectively address state-backed disinformation campaigns on platforms such as WeChat, TikTok, and diaspora-controlled media outlets. Strengthening oversight by requiring disclosure of foreign-funded political messaging and influence campaigns is essential. Regulatory bodies like the CRTC (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission) should extend their jurisdiction to digital platforms serving diaspora communities to prevent their exploitation for propaganda and psychological manipulation. Legal protections for victims of transnational repression must also be reinforced. Bill C-70 introduces stronger enforcement measures but does not explicitly define transnational repression as a distinct legal offense. Establishing clear legal definitions, strengthening witness protection programs, and creating a dedicated CSIS-RCMP task force to investigate foreign intimidation cases would provide stronger legal pathways for affected individuals. A centralized reporting mechanism should also be formalized to ensure coordinated national security responses.

Non-state actors involved in foreign interference remain an area of concern. Many of China's influence activities are carried out through community organizations, business networks, and cultural associations linked to the United Front Work Department (UFWD). While Bill C-70 penalizes individuals acting as foreign proxies, it lacks sufficient financial

disclosure requirements for organizations receiving foreign funding. Strengthening intelligence-sharing between regulatory agencies and law enforcement, alongside stricter auditing and reporting mandates for foreign-affiliated organizations, would help disrupt covert influence networks. Beyond legislative measures, Canada must adopt a stronger diplomatic stance against transnational repression. Stricter enforcement of persona non grata (PNG) measures should be applied against foreign diplomats engaged in interference activities. While PNG designations have historically been reserved for extreme cases, Canada should use this tool more assertively to deter coercion and harassment. Additionally, a formal declaration on foreign interference norms, similar to Canada's Arbitrary Detention Declaration, would help rally international support against state-led repression.

The evolving nature of foreign interference demands a multi-faceted response that integrates legislative reform, law enforcement action, regulatory oversight, and diplomatic countermeasures. While Canada's Foreign Influence Transparency Registry, Bill C-70, and Bill C-65 address parts of the challenge, further reforms are necessary to close loopholes and strengthen resilience against covert foreign influence operations. A comprehensive strategy that enhances enforcement mechanisms, expands digital transparency measures, strengthens victim protections, and reinforces diplomatic deterrence will be crucial to safeguarding Canada's sovereignty and protecting diaspora communities from coercion and repression.

## Conclusion

China's transnational repression represents a complex challenge to Canada's national security and democratic principles. It is not merely an issue of protecting individual dissidents or activists within the Chinese diaspora; it is a direct challenge to Canada's sovereignty, legal integrity, and democratic resilience. By leveraging both overt and covert strategies, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has systematically expanded its authoritarian reach into Canadian so-

ciety, blurring the line between state and civil society. These tactics not only silence dissent but also undermine trust in Canadian institutions, disrupt democratic participation, and create an atmosphere of self-censorship within diaspora communities.

The implications of China's transnational repression are far-reaching. On an individual level, activists, dissidents, community leaders, and ordinary diaspora members face persistent harassment, intimidation, and digital surveillance, even on Canadian soil. This creates a chilling effect on free speech, civic engagement, and political activism, eroding the rights and freedoms that are central to Canadian society. The fear of transnational repression extends beyond direct targets, shaping the behavior of entire diaspora communities and discouraging political participation for fear of retaliation against themselves or their families in China. On a national level, the unchecked expansion of Chinese influence through informal channels, non-state actors, and digital surveillance threatens to compromise Canada's sovereignty and the integrity of its democratic institutions. The infiltration of diaspora organizations, business networks, and social media platforms has allowed the CCP to exert outsourced repression while maintaining plausible deniability. Despite recent legislative measures, including Bill C-70 and the Foreign Influence Transparency Registry, gaps remain in Canada's ability to counter disinformation, surveillance, and covert foreign influence operations.

A stronger, more targeted response is urgently needed. While recent policy developments signal progress, Canada's current approach remains largely reactive rather than preventative. A more robust strategy must integrate enhanced intelligence-sharing, stronger legal protections for victims of foreign intimidation, stricter regulations on diaspora-focused media and digital platforms, and diplomatic countermeasures against states engaging in foreign interference. Canada must also strengthen partnerships with diaspora communities to build trust and empower civil society organizations to resist external coercion. Ultimately, Canada's ability to safeguard its democracy depends on its willingness to confront the evolving

nature of transnational repression. Without decisive action, China's growing influence will continue to erode the very foundations of free expression, civic participation, and national sovereignty. By adopting a proactive, multi-faceted strategy, Canada can reaffirm its commitment to protecting human rights, defending democratic values, and ensuring that diaspora communities feel empowered and not threatened on Canadian soil.



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