



Resisting China's transnational repression

Experiences and actions among the
regime-critical diaspora in Sweden

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Bild/Cover: BOSTON, UNITED STATES: Demonstrators hold white papers and placards during a protest in solidarity with Urumqi people at Tiananmen Memorial on November 24, 2022. (Photo by Tang Ka Huen/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images)

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Sammanfattning

Denna studie undersöker erfarenheter hos den kinesiska regimkritiska diasporan i Sverige som utsatts för Kinas transnationella förtryck (TNR). Med utgångspunkt i tidigare forskning om TNR identifierar studien ett antal metoder som ofta används av auktoritära regimer mot sin diaspora. Den kinesiska partistaten tillämpar i varierande grad samtliga dessa metoder, från bortföranden till spionage och trakasserier. Baserat på 16 intervjuer med kritiker av den kinesiska regimen i Sverige framgår det att flera intervjupersoner utsatts för direkta hot från kinesiska myndigheter; den kinesiska regeringen tycks dock vara försiktig med åtgärder som direkt kan kopplas till dem. Nästan alla de intervjuade beskrev incidenter där anhängare i Kina drabbats av repressalier. Studien undersökte även diasporans aktivism med hjälp av Moss typologi för diaspora-interventioner. Tre typer av interventioner – informationsspridning, representation och medling – var vanligt förekommande bland de intervjuade. Vissa intervjupersoner har framgångsrikt spridit information, bedrivit påverkansarbete gentemot svenska och internationella politiker samt organiserat sig internationellt.

Nyckelord: Kina, diaspora, transnationellt förtryck, aktivism

Summary

This study examines the experiences of the regime-critical diaspora members in Sweden who have been targets of China's transnational repression (TNR). Building on previous research on TNR, the study identifies a set of TNR methods commonly used by authoritarian regimes against their diaspora. The Chinese party-state uses all TNR methods to varying extents, from abductions to spying and harassment. Based on 16 interviews with critics of the Chinese regime in Sweden, the study found that several interviewees had experienced direct threats from Chinese authorities; however, the Chinese government seems to be careful when it comes to actions that can be directly attributed to it. Almost all interviewees described incidents of proxy punishment of relatives in China. The study also examined diaspora activism using Moss's typology of diaspora intervention. Three types of interventions, *broadcasting*, *representing*, and *brokering*, were widespread among the interviewees. Some interviewees have been successful in spreading information, lobbying Swedish and international politicians, and organising internationally.

Keywords: China, diaspora, transnational repression, activism

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Oscar Almén, Stockholm, October 2026.

Abbreviations

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CTA	Central Tibetan Administration
ETGE	East Turkistan Government in Exile
ETIM	East Turkistan Islamic Movement
ETLO	East Turkistan Liberation Organisation
ICIJ	International Consortium of Investigative Journalists
ICPC	Independent Chinese PEN Center
MPS	Ministry of Public Security
MSS	Ministry of State Security
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MUST	Military Intelligence and Security Service
NCCC	Nordic Chinese Christian Church
NFSC	New Federal State of China
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
OCA	Overseas Chinese Affairs
OCAO	Overseas Chinese Affairs Office
POS	Political Opportunity Structure
PRC	People's Republic of China
SCB	Statistics Sweden
SÄPO	Swedish Security Service
TNR	Transnational repression
UF	United Front
UFWD	United Front Work Department
UHRP	Uyghur Human Rights Project
WUC	The World Uyghur Congress

Executive summary

As one way of maintaining its political power, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continuously tries to increase its global influence. A part of this involves the use of transnational repression (TNR) to control any challenge to its rule from outside China's borders.

This study examines (1) how the regime-critical diaspóra experiences China's transnational repression, and (2) what political activities its members engage in. Against the background of the global regime-critical diaspóra, the study specifically examines the Swedish case based on 16 interviews with regime-critical diaspóra members in Sweden.

Building on previous research on TNR, the study identifies a set of TNR methods commonly used by authoritarian regimes against their diaspóra. The Chinese party-state uses all methods to varying extents, from abductions to espionage and harassment.

The targets of the repression are all within the regime-critical diaspóra, including members of the democracy movement, human rights advocates, Falun Gong, Uyghurs, Tibetans, Mongolians, Hongkongers, and Taiwanese. A particularly common method is proxy punishment of friends or relatives in China in order to pressure the activist to cease their political activism.

In the case of Sweden, despite being targets of China's TNR, the interviewees generally felt safe. The Swedish authorities take TNR seriously and the security agencies have had contact with most of the interviewees.

Some of the interviewees had experienced direct threats from Chinese authorities while residing in Sweden. Twelve of the 16 interviewees described incidents where relatives or friends in China have been harassed or punished by Chinese security authorities because of their connection to the interviewee.

The regime-critical diaspóra includes a number of groups, including state-seeking nationalists such as ethnic minorities and Hong Kong activists that strive for independence or extended autonomy and improved human rights. Other groups, including Falun Gong and the democracy movement, strive for regime change for the whole of China.

Currently, because the domestic political situation is relatively stable and the regime has extensive means to monitor and control the population, the Chinese regime is not seriously threatened by regime-critical diaspóra movements. However, this can quickly change if a major upheaval, what social movement researchers call a *quotidian disruption*, happens.

The 2022 Blank Paper Protests in connection with the COVID-19 lockdown were probably the closest mainland China has come to such a disruption since the 1989 student protests. In such a situation, the regime-critical diaspora can play an important role by intervening in the rebellion.

The study used Moss's typology of diaspora intervention and found that the first three interventions, *broadcasting*, *representing*, and *brokering*, were widespread among the interviewees. Some interviewees have been successful in spreading information, lobbying Swedish and international politicians, and organising internationally. Two of the interventions, *remittances* and *volunteering on the front lines*, were far less common.

This too can be explained by the Chinese regime's strong capacity for surveillance and control. In the absence of a quotidian disruption such as the Tiananmen protest or, to a lesser extent, the Blank Paper Protest, it is unlikely that diaspora interventions will have a major impact on the political situation in China.

Nevertheless, diaspora activism can still make a difference in individual cases. The Chinese regime cares about outside criticism; its massive TNR policy to silence the diaspora is evidence of that. Several interviewees pointed to the importance of maintaining media attention on the human rights situation in China in general and on individual cases in particular.

China will most likely continue to expand its TNR. It will be of increasing importance for liberal democracies such as Sweden to maintain focus on how to guard against TNR, to ensure the safety of refugees, and to make sure that members of the diaspora can continue their lawful political activities.

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1 Introduction

As one way of maintaining its political power, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continuously tries to increase its global influence. A part of this involves the use of transnational repression (TNR) to control any challenge to its rule from outside China's borders. TNR undermines the principle of state sovereignty and is a direct challenge to democracies such as Sweden, which strives to uphold the international rules-based order and principles of citizenship. Non-Chinese citizens have increasingly been targets of China's TNR, and as China's global power grows, any critic of the Chinese regime, even one without a Chinese background, runs the risk of being targeted. In the crossfire of this struggle between authoritarian control and liberal principles are the diasporas of authoritarian regimes. In China's case, the CCP pursues a very active policy directed towards the large Chinese diaspora around the world. It uses certain parts of the diaspora as a tool to spread Beijing's political narrative and in some cases even as a way to influence politics in other countries.¹

Within the diaspora that is critical of the Chinese regime, certain individuals carry out important work by organising demonstrations, lobbying politicians, gathering and disseminating information about China, and presenting a counter-message to the party's narrative. This mix of groups and individuals forms the regime opponents in exile.

How to analyse and understand authoritarian regimes' TNR has become an urgent focus for researchers and policymakers in liberal democracies, not only out of concern for the diaspora community, but also because of how it may affect politics in these countries. Yet, the diaspora is not simply a passive victim of TNR but consists of actors with agency. While China's TNR affects and shapes how the diaspora acts, diaspora activism also shapes the actions of the Chinese regime. The CCP puts great resources into silencing the regime-critical diaspora because it considers it a threat. This fact alone points to the importance of analysing diaspora activism. If we want to understand how a future China might develop, the diaspora contains clues to possible alternatives to the dominance of the CCP. This study examines how the regime-critical diaspora in Sweden experiences China's TNR and what political activities its members engage in.

A growing body of research and reports covers China's TNR and diaspora activism around the world, especially in countries with a large Chinese diaspora such as Australia, the US, the UK, Canada, and several Southeast Asian countries. However, many blind spots remain both in terms of geographic areas covered

¹ Oscar Almén. *The Chinese Communist Party and the Diaspora: Beijing's extraterritorial authoritarian rule* (FOI-R--4933--SE, 2020). <https://www.foi.se/en/foi/reports/report-summary.html?reportNo=FOI-R--4933--SE>.

and perspectives included. This study is based on interviews with 16 regime-critical individuals with roots in China who live in Sweden. Many of them have fled China and all have experienced China's transnational repression to varying extents. The study presents their unique experiences of TNR, their different ways of dealing with it, and their political activism.

The study examines two specific research questions: 1) What experiences do the regime-critical diaspora members in Sweden have of China's transnational repression? 2) What political activities have they engaged in?

1.1 Methods and sources

In order to analyse the activism of the Chinese regime-critical diaspora in Sweden, the study builds on the theoretical foundations of the research fields of *transnational repression* and *diaspora activism*. While there is plenty of empirical data on Chinese diaspora activism and TNR experiences in some parts of the world, the Swedish case has so far been sparsely covered. By studying the Swedish case, this study contributes to knowledge of experiences of TNR among the Chinese diaspora in Sweden; it adds to empirical research on Chinese diaspora activism globally as well as to theoretical understanding of diaspora activism in general.

The main part of the study is based on in-depth interviews with 16 members of the diaspora living in Sweden who have experience of China's transnational repression. All but two are first-generation diaspora members, that is, born in China. One was born in Taiwan and one in Sweden. Some of them left China as refugees; others have experienced China's TNR because of their political activism abroad. They come from diverse ethnic and geographical backgrounds, including Han Chinese from mainland China (9), as well as Uyghurs (5) from Xinjiang. Some initial contacts were established with potential Tibetan interviewees, but the lack of responses meant that no interviews took place. Some interviewees arrived in Sweden quite recently; others have been in the country since the 1980s.

While some diaspora members might be using extreme and illegal methods in their political activism, none of the interviewees expressed any sympathy towards such methods. All the activism described in the interviews complied with Swedish law.

The interviewees were identified using a combination of previous contacts and snowball sampling. A research assistant, himself a member of the Chinese diaspora, had previously established contacts with some interviewees. In addition, some interviewees introduced their own contacts. A few prospective interviewees who were contacted did not want to participate in the study due to the sensitivity of the topic. Others were willing to participate but, due to limitations of time and travel, the interviews never took place.

All interviews were conducted face to face and most of them were recorded and later transcribed with an offline translation and transcription program developed at FOI. The interview language varied between Chinese, English, and Swedish depending on the interviewee. In some cases, an interpreter was used to translate from Uyghur to Swedish. Some of the interviews were conducted together with the research assistant. Due to the politically sensitive nature of the study, and to ensure the safety of the interviewees and their relatives, the interviewees have been pseudonymised. This study was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority before it commenced.²

1.2 Definitions and delimitations

Diaspora is defined here as “exiles, émigrés, expatriates, refugees, and emigrants of different generations who attribute their origins to a common place.”³

A diaspora often consists of sub-groups that do not always share the same view of what the homeland is. For example, the Chinese diaspora consists of several groups of different origin and ethnicity. Generally, many exiled Uyghurs and Tibetans would not refer to themselves as part of the Chinese diaspora at all since they do not recognise the PRC as their homeland or “Chinese” as a national identity. However, because the geographic area that they consider their homeland is within the territorial borders of the PRC, they are referred to throughout this study *both* as part of the Chinese diaspora *and* as part of the Uyghur or Tibetan diaspora. After the introduction of the National Security Law in Hong Kong, parts of the Hong Kong diaspora are also included as they have fled Hong Kong and cannot return. I do not include Taiwanese as part of the Chinese diaspora because, although they are targets of China’s TNR and seen by China as renegades, in practice they have a homeland and do not live in exile from China.

Estimates of the size of the Chinese diaspora differ quite widely depending on the source. While some claim the Chinese diaspora worldwide is as large as 100 million, official figures range from 40–60 million. In 2017, China’s late Prime Minister Li Keqiang spoke of 60 million overseas Chinese.⁴ Official figures from Taiwan’s Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO) put the number at 50 million.

² Swedish Ethical Review Authority decision Dnr 2025-03358-01.

³ Dana M. Moss. *The Arab Spring Abroad: Diaspora Activism against Authoritarian Regimes* (Cambridge University Press, 2022). p.3.

⁴ An Baijie. Overseas Chinese can help build Belt, Road. *China Daily* (13 June 2017). http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-06/13/content_29719481.htm.

Most of these live in Southeast Asia and the US. Only a minority of these, about 11 million, are Chinese citizens.⁵

This study is concerned with the members of the Chinese diaspora who are actively critical of the Chinese government and are usually referred to as *dissidents*. The extent to which they are actively engaged in pursuing political change in China or advocating for the rights of groups or individuals varies, but they have either been forced into exile from China or are or have been targets of some form of transnational repression from the Chinese regime. As such, they form a small minority of the Chinese diaspora in Sweden. However, their views on the Chinese regime may be shared by many within the Chinese diaspora who are not actively voicing their political opinions. It could be argued that basically the entire Chinese diaspora is being subjected to monitoring by the Chinese government. To clarify, this study distinguishes between general monitoring and more directly targeted TNR, which is directed against regime critics.

The study is based on interviews with 16 individuals. As the basis of their selection has been snowball sampling, they do not constitute a representative group of all regime-critical diaspora members. For example, while five Uyghurs are included, there are no Tibetans represented. This means that some perspectives are not represented in the interview study.

⁵ Joaquín Beltrán Antolín. How Many Chinese are Living in Europe? Chapter 1 in Mette Thunø and Simeng Wang (eds.) *Handbook of Chinese Migration to Europe* (Brill, 2025), pp. 41–42.

2 Transnational repression

The main focus of this study is on the experiences and actions of the diaspora. However, since members of the diaspora are reacting to efforts by the Chinese regime to silence and repress them, some discussion on transnational repression (TNR) is called for. TNR can be defined as “a set of practices that authoritarian regimes and their proxies adopt to persecute and silence dissenters abroad.”⁶

Before we discuss different aspects of TNR, it should be mentioned that repression is only one of several ways authoritarian regimes relate to their diasporas. Adamson and Han show that states engage in differentiated strategies of diasporic geopolitics in which some elements of the diaspora are elevated, some are ignored, and others are repressed.⁷ In a similar vein, Glasius divides what she calls extraterritorial authoritarian practices into three main strategies for authoritarian stability: repression, legitimization, and co-optation. Furthermore, the state may decide to include the diaspora in or exclude it from the polity. Depending on which strategy the authoritarian state uses, it can approach its nationals as subjects or outlaws (repression); as patriots or traitors (legitimation); and as clients (co-optation). Members of the diaspora who resist being included in the polity of the authoritarian state as subjects or patriots risk being excluded and treated instead as outlaws or traitors.⁸ Because this study focuses on TNR, it concentrates on the exclusive approaches, in which the diaspora members are treated as outlaws or traitors, even though the authoritarian state may occasionally try to use inclusive approaches to influence or co-opt individual diaspora members. For example, some of the interviewees relayed that agents of the Chinese regime had made efforts to recruit them.⁹

TNR involves a broad spectrum of different methods. Based on previous research, the following list sums up TNR methods. The discussion that follows examines these methods in the Chinese context.

⁶ Lucia Ardovini & Bahar Baser. Voices across borders: exploring transnational activism and repression through diaspora perspectives. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (28 February 2026), p. 3.

⁷ Fiona B. Adamson & Enze Han. Diasporic geopolitics and differentiated policies of transnational repression. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (27 February 2026).

⁸ Marlies Glasius. Extraterritorial authoritarian practices: a framework. *Globalizations*. 15:2 (2018).

⁹ A previous study on CCP relations to the diaspora analysed both inclusive and exclusive approaches. See Almén. *The Chinese Communist Party*.

Table 1: Typology of TNR methods

Lethal retribution	Assassination
Abduction	Forcibly removing individuals, often in collaboration with the host state
Harassment	Verbal or written threats; physical attacks
Surveillance	By regime agents, loyalists, or coerced individuals
Spying	Infiltrating and reporting to Chinese security forces
Proxy punishment	Punishing or harassing diaspora members' relatives in the home country
Exile	Including the threat of harm that prevents diaspora members from returning
Extradition requests	Politically motivated, including Interpol Red Notices
Defamation	Smear campaigns, deepfake pictures
Hacking	Of e-mail, bank, or social media accounts
Economic sanction	Withdrawing scholarships; freezing bank accounts

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While TNR is intimately connected to diaspora communities, it does not exclusively target the diaspora but can also be directed at others such as journalists, politicians, scholars, and other perceived opponents of the regime.¹¹ For example, in the Chinese case, the German anthropologist Adrian Zenz, who was instrumental in exposing the extent of the persecution of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, became a target of an intense disinformation campaign by the Chinese regime and was also sued by Chinese companies in China.¹² Nevertheless, diaspora members typically face far worse risks if they actively oppose their home regime than non-members do.

Adamson and Han further divide transnational repression strategies against the diaspora into three forms: *direct*, *indirect*, and *mediated*. Direct strategies involve the regime directly targeting the diaspora members through coercive or punitive measures carried out by state agents. Indirect strategies refer to threats,

¹⁰ The list is based on previous studies, with additions by the author. Moss. *The Arab Spring*, p. 72; Alexander Dukakis, Saipira Furtstenberg, Yana Gorokhovskia, John Heathershaw, Edward Lemon, & Nate Schenkkan. *Transnational repression: data advances, comparisons, and challenges. Political Research Exchange* (July 2022), p. 4; Bradley Jardine. *Great Wall of Steel: China's Global Campaign to Suppress the Uyghurs* (Wilson Center, 2022).

¹¹ Tara Degn & Kaori Kenmutsu. *Transnational Repression (TNR): A Game of Whack-a-Mole. Creighton International and Comparative Law Journal*. 16:1 (2025), p. 13.

¹² Eva Dou. *Academic faces Chinese lawsuit for exposing human rights abuses in Xinjiang. Washington Post* (10 March 2021). China sues academic Adrian Zenz whose work on Uighur abuses in Xinjiang sparked U.S. sanctions – The Washington Post.

propaganda, and the use of members of the diaspora to create a climate of fear in order to suppress or marginalise dissident voices. Mediated strategies involve the use of third parties, including host-state governments, private entities, or international organisations. A home state may, for instance, use different forms of pressure to persuade a host state to assist it in repressing an opposition group within the diaspora.¹³ The relationship between the host state and the home state as well as the host state's regime type are important for how repression from home states plays out. Michaelsen and Ruijgrok show that to target exiles in autocratic host states, perpetrators primarily rely on the cooperation of authorities, whereas in democratic host states they resort more often to direct attacks.¹⁴ However, regime type does not fully explain the difference. A recent empirical study of 608 cases of direct physical TNR involving host states that include some democracies finds that "autocracies are better able to elicit cooperation on human rights violations from states that have shared economic interests and a weak rule of law."¹⁵

2.1 China's transnational repression

The Chinese regime's capacity for transnational repression has increased along with China's rising global power. Naturally, as China has become more powerful in economic, political, diplomatic, and military domains, its global influence has increased. In particular, the Chinese government uses its economic influence as a means to attain political and strategic goals, in what is often termed economic statecraft.¹⁶ In addition to these open forms of influence, the Chinese government uses a plethora of covert influence operations including espionage and cyber-attacks directed at foreign governments in order to gain strategic advantages.¹⁷ While this study does not focus on China's foreign influence operations, TNR sometimes has the additional purpose of influencing foreign governments. In addition, some members of the regime-supporting diaspora who act in support of the government, either voluntarily or after being co-opted by the regime, constitute a part of China's foreign influence operations.

¹³ Adamson & Han. *Diasporic geopolitics*, p. 10.

¹⁴ Marcus Michaelsen & Kris Ruijgrok. *Autocracy's long reach: explaining host country influences on transnational repression*. *Democratization* 31:2 (2024).

¹⁵ Rebecca Cordell & Kashmiri Mehdi. *Transnational Repression: International Cooperation in Silencing Dissent*. *International Studies Quarterly* 68:3 (2024), p. 1.

¹⁶ James Reilly. *Orchestration: China's Economic Statecraft Across Asia and Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); William J. Norris. *Chinese Economic Statecraft: Commercial Actors, Grand Strategy, and State Control* (Cornell University Press, 2016); Oscar Almén & Christopher Weidacher Hsiung. *China's Economic Influence in the Arctic Region: The Nordic and Russian Cases* (FOI-R--5326--SE, 2022).

¹⁷ Alex Joske. *Spies and Lies: How China's Greatest Covert Operations Fooled the World* (Hardie Grant Books, 2022); Peter Mattis & Matthew Brazil. *Chinese Communist Espionage: An Intelligence Primer* (Naval Institute Press, 2022).

China's long history of transnational repression of its diaspora has been thoroughly documented in a large number of media reports, think tank reports, and academic research published over the years and covering large parts of the world.¹⁸ The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) published a number of reports in 2025 based on interviews with the Chinese diaspora. They interviewed 105 victims of the Chinese state's transnational repression in 23 countries.¹⁹ Similarly, the organisation *Article 19* interviewed 29 representatives of diaspora communities on their experiences of China's TNR.²⁰ A number of studies have examined experiences of the Chinese diaspora in specific countries.²¹ There are also studies focusing on China's TNR of particular groups such as Uyghurs.²²

While this study's focus is on the regime-critical diaspora and this group is the main target of China's TNR, it should be mentioned that others within the diaspora are also affected by China's TNR to different extents. For instance, Chinese students attending foreign universities are generally aware of being monitored by the Chinese regime and practise self-censorship by avoiding sensitive topics in discussions and on social media.²³ A recent report tells of Chinese students at British universities who are offered cash through a state-linked mobile app for showing political loyalty to the CCP and tracking their peers but are penalised for acts of dissent.²⁴ It is difficult to establish to what extent the general Chinese diaspora are affected by China's TNR as there are few surveys that explore that question. A study by Amnesty International based on interviews with 32 mainland and Hong Kong students abroad describes in detail how the Chinese government has increased monitoring of students at foreign universities.²⁵ One

¹⁸ Almén. *The Chinese Communist Party*; Clive Hamilton. *Silent Invasion: China's Influence in Australia* (Melbourne: Hardie Grant Books, 2018); Clive Hamilton & Mareike Ohlberg. *Hidden Hand: Exposing How the Chinese Communist Party is Reshaping the World* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2020); Ray Wong Toi-yeung. *No Sense of Safety Under Heaven: China's Transnational Repression in Germany* (Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, Policy Paper, November 2025); Hsu Szu-Chien & J. Michael Cole. *Insidious Power: How China Undermines Global Democracy* (Eastbridge Books, 2020)

¹⁹ Scilla Alecci & ICIJ. *Inside China's machinery of repression – and how it crushes dissent around the world* (International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, 28 April 2025).

²⁰ Article 19. *Going Global: China's transnational repression of protesters worldwide* (June 2025).

²¹ Cherie Cheuk Yin Wong. *Capturing the Realities of Diaspora & Dissident Communities Experiencing Transnational Suppression from the Chinese Party-State Apparatus* (Master's thesis, Carleton University, 2024); Wong. *No Sense of Safety*.

²² Jardine. *Great Wall of Steel*.

²³ Sarah Cook. *The Chinese Communist Party's Latest Propaganda Target: Young Minds* (Freedom House, 30 April 2019); <https://freedomhouse.org/article/chinese-communist-partys-latest-propaganda-target-young-minds>.

²⁴ Richard Holmes. UK university students "paid" to support Chinese propaganda. *The i Paper* (25 March 2026). <https://inews.co.uk/news/uk-university-students-paid-spread-chinese-propaganda-4304902>.

²⁵ Amnesty International. "On my campus, I am afraid": China's targeting of overseas students stifles rights (13 May 2024). <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa17/8006/2024/en/>.

2026 survey of over 1,000 Hongkongers in the UK found that two-thirds of the respondents feel at risk of TNR.²⁶

2.1.1 Primary TNR actors and China's overseas Chinese policy

China's TNR involves many different institutions and actors at different levels, including the Chinese security apparatus, the judicial branches, government and party entities at central and local level. The primary agencies in China's TNR are the powerful Ministry of State Security (MSS), responsible for China's foreign intelligence, and the Ministry of Public Security (MPS). The MPS is usually responsible for proxy punishment, the repression of relatives of the targeted individual who reside in China. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and Chinese embassies around the world are also very much involved in TNR.²⁷

China's overall policy towards the Chinese diaspora is referred to as *qiaowu*, or overseas Chinese affairs (OCA). It can be described as a comprehensive strategy that involves party and government departments at all levels, as well as civil organisations and diplomatic offices around the world. Based on a mass of official documents and handbooks for OCA work, James To's extensive study from 2014 showed how the strategy instructs OCA workers to influence overseas Chinese. This can include aspects such as strengthening the person's sense of Chineseness and encouraging them to accept Beijing's political views. Ironically, the strategy even spells out how the OCA workers should avoid revealing their intentions to influence the overseas Chinese and the public, as revealing these intentions could damage the policy's public face.²⁸

Officially, the Chinese government distinguishes between Chinese citizens abroad (华侨) and foreign citizens of Chinese descent (华人), a category that includes anyone who has Chinese ancestors, even several generations back. However, in practice and in much of the CCP discourse, the boundaries between these two groups are blurred. When referring to who is to be regarded as Chinese, the CCP often use concepts such as "race" and biological traits such as hair and skin colour. It is clear that the Chinese leadership consider foreign citizens of Chinese descent as Chinese, but with the inconvenient addition of having a foreign passport. It

²⁶ Hong Kong Watch. *New Hong Kong Watch survey research on TNR calls for enhanced foreign interference measures* (11 May 2026). <https://www.hongkongwatch.org/all-posts/2026/5/11/new-hong-kong-watch-survey-research-on-tnr-calls-for-enhanced-foreign-interference-measures>

²⁷ Jardine. *Great Wall of Steel*.

²⁸ James To. *Qiaowu: Extra-territorial policies for the overseas Chinese* (Brill Academic Pub., 2014).

does not stop the regime from trying to influence them and sometimes to coerce them.²⁹

While OCA has a long tradition within the CCP, under Xi Jinping the Chinese regime has markedly stepped up OCA work and made it a political priority. OCA work is led by the government's OCAO and it is a crucial part of the United Front (UF), which is the CCP's strategy to influence organisations and individuals outside the Party. Mao Zedong once famously called the United Front one of the CCP's magic weapons, together with "Armed Struggle" and "Party Building."³⁰ UF work is led by the CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD). In a government reshuffle in 2018, OCAO, together with the two government departments for ethnic and religious affairs, came under the purview of the UFWD. This made the UFWD the leading institution for religious, ethnic, and overseas Chinese affairs and marked its raised status in the Chinese political system as well as Xi's increasing focus on UF work.³¹ Another important institutional actor for UF work is the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) which "is the one place where all the relevant actors inside and outside the party come together: party elders, intelligence officers, diplomats, propagandists, soldiers and political commissars, united front workers, academics, and businesspeople."³²

As China's interests have expanded far beyond its own borders, overseas UF work has become a crucial political tool for global governance and ultimately for China to achieve its goal of national rejuvenation, which essentially means becoming a dominant global power.³³ A Jamestown report identified over 2,000 organisations that work to help the Chinese government achieve its goals in the United States, Germany, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Globally, the network likely consists of more than 10,000 organisations. Most of these are overseas Chinese community organisations such as Chinese identity organisations, business organisations, and student organisations. Some of the leaders of these organisations have

²⁹ For a longer discussion of the CCP's view of Chineseness, see Almén. *The Chinese Communist Party*.

³⁰ Peter Mattis & Alex Joske. *The Third Magic Weapon: Reforming China's United Front. War on the Rocks* (24 June 2019). <https://warontherocks.com/the-third-magic-weapon-reforming-chinas-united-front/>.

³¹ Gerry Groot. *The Rise and Rise of the United Front Work Department under Xi. China Brief*. 18:7 (18 April 2018). <https://jamestown.org/the-rise-and-rise-of-the-united-front-work-department-under-xi/>.

³² Peter Mattis. *The Center of Chinese Influence: the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference*. In Hsu & Cole. *Insidious Power*, pp. 3-39.

³³ Flora Sapio. *The United Front Principle: Expansion and Adaptation. European Journal of East Asian Studies*. 18 (2019), p. 153.

been actively involved in TNR such as threats and harassment against the Chinese diaspora.³⁴

The Chinese government has enacted a number of laws in recent years that increase China's extraterritorial jurisdiction over overseas Chinese. For instance, the National Intelligence Law of 2017 states that Chinese citizens who reside overseas are obliged to inform the Chinese security agencies of activities that might threaten national security.³⁵ Hong Kong's National Security law from 2020 specifies that acts outside Hong Kong that threaten national security are illegal and punishable in Hong Kong, including acts by foreign citizens.³⁶ Most recently, the Ethnic Unity Law that came into effect on 1 July 2026 forms a part of Xi Jinping's policy of assimilating ethnic minorities into the majority Han population. The law applies outside China and includes non-Chinese citizens. Article 63 reads:

“When organisations or individuals outside the mainland borders of the People's Republic of China engage in acts aimed at the People's Republic of China that sabotage ethnic unity and progress and manufacture ethnic separation, legal responsibility shall be pursued according to law.”³⁷

To what extent the Chinese government or local governments will use these laws to prosecute foreign citizens remains to be seen. In the words of legal scholar Donald Clarke, who has analysed the Ethnic Unity Law: “Perhaps they are hoping to get the benefit of scaring people without paying the cost in bad publicity of actually prosecuting anyone.”³⁸

2.1.2 China's methods of TNR

China's TNR includes a plethora of methods. Freedom House's report on China's TNR concludes that China “conducts the most sophisticated, global, and comprehensive campaign of transnational repression in the world.” It stands out for how it targets a broad variety of groups, how it uses the full spectrum of tactics,

³⁴ Cheryl Yu. *Harnessing the People: Mapping Overseas Chinese United front Work in Democratic States*. China Brief, Jamestown (11 February 2026), p. 6. <https://jamestown.org/report/harnessing-the-people-mapping-overseas-united-front-work-in-democratic-states/>.

³⁵ China Law Translate. *PRC National Intelligence Law* (as amended in 2018) (27 June 2017). <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/national-intelligence-law-of-the-p-r-c-2017/>.

³⁶ *The Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region* (3 July 2020). [https://www.elegislation.gov.hk/fwddoc/hk/a302/eng_translation_\(a302\)_en.pdf](https://www.elegislation.gov.hk/fwddoc/hk/a302/eng_translation_(a302)_en.pdf).

³⁷ China Law Translate. *Ethnic Unity and Progress Law* (3 March 2026). <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/ethnic-unity-and-progress-law/>

³⁸ Donald Clarke. *Chinese Law Notes*. Extraterritorial criminal liability under China's Ethnic Unity Law (26 June 2026). <https://donaldclarke.substack.com/p/extraterritorial-criminal-liability>

and for its sheer breadth and global scope.³⁹ It primarily targets the following groups: Uyghurs, Tibetans, Mongolians, Falun Gong practitioners, human rights defenders, journalists, and others who criticise the CCP, Hong Kong democracy advocates, and citizens of Taiwan. Arguably, the repression against overseas Uyghurs and Tibetans is broader than against overseas Chinese in general as it targets not only activists but basically all members of the diaspora.⁴⁰ Similarly, as mentioned above, Hongkongers abroad often feel at risk of TNR.

The Chinese regime uses all of the tools of TNR listed above although reports on extraterritorial *assassinations* directed by the Chinese government remain comparatively sparse. However, many such incidents are never publicly reported.⁴¹ In a rare exception, Czech Republic intelligence officials reported that Chinese diplomats plotted to arrange a car accident during Taiwan vice president Hsiao Bi-khim's visit to Prague in March 2024. China denied the accusations.⁴²

In recent years, the Chinese government has increasingly used judicial means to hunt down and prosecute a large number of expatriates. In 2014, it initiated *Operation Fox Hunt*, which was merged the following year into the more comprehensive *Operation Sky Net*. According to estimates by the NGO Safeguard Defenders, by 2023, Operation Sky Net had resulted in at least 12,292 successful apprehensions from over 120 countries. To be sure, many of these apprehended individuals had been involved in crimes that seriously hurt Chinese society such as telecom fraud and corruption. However, the methods the Chinese regime uses follow the handbook of TNR. A majority of the individuals were retrieved through the persuade-to-return method, which includes “online surveillance, threats, and harassment; surveillance, extensive interrogation, and repeated visits of and to family members in China; (collective) punishment of relatives in China; or direct threats, surveillance, and harassment of the target abroad by (undeclared) PRC agents or their proxies.”⁴³

³⁹ Freedom House. *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach: The Global Scale and Scope of Transnational Repression* (27 January 2021). https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/FH_TransnationalRepressionReport2021_rev012521_web.pdf.

⁴⁰ Jardine. *Great Wall of Steel*.

⁴¹ There are far more reports on extraterritorial killings of diaspora members by the governments of Russia, India (against Sikhs), and Iran.

⁴² Helen Davidson. China “planned car collision” during Taiwan vice-president’s visit to Prague. *The Guardian* (28 June 2025). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jun/28/taiwan-vice-president-undeterred-after-czech-reports-of-alleged-chinese-car-collision-plot>. Another possible assassination case is the murder of Li Jinjin in 2022, although it is not entirely clear that the murderer worked for the Chinese authorities. Xun Jia. *How China Targets Dissidents in the U.S. – A Case Study on Transnational Repression*. Human Rights Research Center (26 March 2024). <https://www.humanrightsresearch.org/post/how-china-targets-dissidents-in-the-u-s-a-case-study-on-transnational-repression>.

⁴³ Laura Harth & Yenting Chen. *Chasing Fox Hunt: Tracing the PRC’s Forced Return Operations around the Globe* (Safeguard Defenders, 15 April 2024).

In the report, evidence reveals that Chinese official documents instruct authorities in China to use methods, including kidnapping, that are clearly a breach of the territorial sovereignty of other countries. This shows the Chinese government's determination to use any means it deems necessary to hunt down and persecute individuals it considers to be criminals.

In two other reports from 2022 and 2024, Safeguard Defenders revealed that Chinese authorities had established 102 “police stations” in 53 countries abroad, the first established as early as 2016. The Chinese government claimed that these offices were aimed at helping overseas Chinese with practical problems. However, the report shows that some stations, set up by Chinese local governments, had been used for persuade-to-return operations.⁴⁴

One interviewee for this study spent time in Thailand during the 2010s and witnessed how Chinese law enforcement was active there:

At that time, there was a lot of discussion about pursuing corrupt officials who had fled the country. Many lower-level officials fled to Thailand, while higher-level ones went to Europe and America. There was even an initiative called “pursuing fugitives,” where each province’s public security bureau had an overseas division. I often saw them in Chinatown... I could tell they were plainclothes officers. Their approach – those police officers, those undercover officers – was quite noticeable. They would stake out areas to catch these people who had fled the country.⁴⁵

As mentioned, there are numerous cases of members of the Chinese diaspora being *abducted* by Chinese authorities on foreign soil and brought to China. This primarily involves Chinese citizens, but there are also cases of foreign citizens. A prominent case is that of the Swedish citizen Gui Minhai, whom Chinese security officers abducted in Thailand and brought to China in 2015. This case is further described in Chapter 4. The Gui Minhai case shows, together with numerous other examples, that the security forces of many countries cooperate with the Chinese government and detain and sometimes deport CCP critics and refugees. Freedom House lists cases in India, Thailand, Serbia, Malaysia, Egypt, Kazakhstan, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, and Nepal. Uyghurs have been particularly affected, and hundreds have been deported to China.⁴⁶

Counter-demonstrations, a TNR practice commonly used by the Chinese regime, involve both *harassment* and *surveillance*. On Xi Jinping’s foreign trips, Chinese

⁴⁴ Safeguard Defenders. *Patrol and Persuade – A Follow Up on 110 Overseas Investigation* (2 May 2024). <https://safeguarddefenders.com/en/blog/patrol-and-persuade-follow-110-overseas-investigation>; Safeguard Defenders. *Involuntary Returns* (12 September 2022). <https://safeguarddefenders.com/sites/default/files/pdf/INvoluntary%20Returns.pdf>; Caleigh Pan. China’s Ever-Evolving Ways of Elongating Its Reach: Utilizing “Secret Overseas Police Stations” to Suppress Dissidents Abroad. *Synergy* (22 February 2026). <https://utsynergyjournal.org/2026/02/22/chinas-ever-evolving-ways-of-elongating-its-reach/>.

⁴⁵ Interview 6.

⁴⁶ Freedom House. *Out of Sight*, p. 17.

diplomats typically engage diaspora groups to demonstrate their support for the Chinese leader and to work as a counterforce against protest demonstrations critical of the Chinese government. An extensive investigation by the *Washington Post* found that when Xi Jinping visited San Francisco in November 2023, at least 35 pro-China diaspora groups were mobilised by Chinese diplomats to participate in demonstrations that harassed and silenced protesters. The pro-CCP activists were involved in violent physical attacks with extended flagpoles and chemical spray as well as punches and kicks.⁴⁷ On such occasions, regime supporters often engage in filming demonstrators in order to identify them.

Other common forms of harassment include verbal or written threats and online harassment. For instance, reports in 2018 said that Chinese police used WeChat to pressure Uyghurs in France into surrendering personal data and ID documents. Those who refused faced threats of repercussions against their relatives in Xinjiang.⁴⁸ Female targets often suffer sexualised harassment such as online rape threats, defamation, and sexualised smear campaigns including deepfake pornographic images and disinformation.⁴⁹

A common practice used against diaspora activists who have family in China is *proxy punishment and threats* to pressure family members in China to convince the activists to stop certain activities that displease the Chinese authorities. Half of the 105 interviewees in the ICIJ report mentioned above said that their families in China had been harassed by the authorities because of the interviewees' activism abroad. It should be noted that this form of collective punishment, holding other family members responsible for the actions of one individual, has a long tradition domestically in China and persists despite discussions about abolishing the practice.⁵⁰

A number of members of the Chinese diaspora have been indicted or convicted for *spying* in the US, including Linda Sun, former top aide to New York governor Kathy Hochul, and Wang Shujun, a dissident convicted of spying on the overseas Chinese pro-democracy community for the CCP.⁵¹ Ethnic minorities, including Tibetans and Uyghurs, are particularly targeted. There have been numerous convictions in Western countries, including Sweden, of individuals belonging to

⁴⁷ Shibani Mahtani, Meg Kelly, Cate Brown, Cate Cadell, Ellen Nakashima, & Chris Dehghanpoor. Pro-China activists harassed anti-Xi Jinping protesters in San Francisco. *Washington Post* (3 September 2024).

⁴⁸ Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, The Chinese Communist Party is still afraid of Sun Yat-Sen's shadow. *Foreign Policy* (8 March 2019).

⁴⁹ Wong. No Sense of Safety Under Heaven.

⁵⁰ Huang Yuxin & Kelly Wang. In Depth: Punishing People for 'Their Relatives' Crimes Comes Under Scrutiny in China. *Caixin* (19 September 2024). <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2024-09-19/punishing-people-for-their-relatives-crimes-comes-under-scrutiny-in-china-102237902.html>.

⁵¹ Yaqiu Wang. *Supporting Activists against CCP Repression*. Written Testimony by Yaqiu Wang before the US Senate. Freedom House (12 September 2024)

ethnic minorities who have been coerced or persuaded to infiltrate and spy for the Chinese security agencies.⁵²

Exile is a double-edged sword for the Chinese regime. By forcing dissidents out of the country and refusing to allow them to return, the CCP tries to get rid of a domestic political stability problem and at the same time avoid foreign criticism of domestic political repression. However, sometimes opposition forces can become a bigger threat to the regime outside China. In the case of Uyghurs, the regime has actively strived to repatriate them, and in many cases it has succeeded.

The Chinese government also uses *economic sanctions* against individuals. For instance, Jardine lists examples of Uyghurs who have had their assets frozen either in the Uyghur region or by a host state.⁵³

⁵² Freedom House. *Out of Sight*, p. 19. More on the Swedish cases in Chapter 4.

⁵³ Jardine. *Great Wall of Steel*, pp. xxxv, 76.

3 Diaspora activism

Much has been written on authoritarian states' TNR; however, the transnational activism of diasporas remains relatively under-researched.⁵⁴ While diaspora activism can include activities directed towards improving the diaspora's position and advancing its interests within their new host countries, such as fighting discrimination or demanding political rights, the focus in this study is activism as a form of resistance to TNR. That is, the focus of activism is on changes in the home country. As Dana Moss argues, diaspora movements that mobilise transnationally can be a formidable force for change in their home countries by "naming and shaming immoral and illegal practices, remitting cash to freedom fights, lobbying for intervention, and disrupting regimes' monopolies on information and public goods."⁵⁵

Moss analysed the conditions under which diasporas successfully intervened on behalf of rebellion and relief in the Arab Spring protest movements in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. She finds that two factors work to weaken the diaspora's anti-authoritarian voice: transnational repression and conflict transmission. Conflict transmission means that home-country conflicts are transmitted to the diaspora. "Members' common ties to a home-country can therefore *undermine* their willingness and capacity to work together when shared origins embed them in partisan homeland politics, stigmatized identities, and intra-opposition cleavages."⁵⁶ However, both these factors can be neutralised by what she calls a *quotidian disruption* in the home country. When conflict and turmoil in the home country result in changes to regime control and power relations, they "travel abroad through members' ties."

Finally, for diasporas to be able to intervene in meaningful ways in rebellions in their home countries, two additional conditions are required. First, they need to be able to *convert resources* (including material, social capital, knowledge, and networks) to a shared politicised cause. A second condition is the extent to which the movement gains *geopolitical support* from outside power-holders.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Lucia Ardovini & Bahar Baser. Voices across borders: exploring transnational activism and repression through diaspora perspectives. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (28 February 2026); Raam Dutia. Diaspora transnationalism and transitional justice: theorising the politics of engagement. *The International Journal of Human Rights*, 30:1 (2026).

⁵⁵ Moss. *The Arab Spring Abroad*, p. 32.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

Moss also developed a typology of diaspora interventions in the Arab Spring that is useful for understanding diaspora activism towards authoritarian home countries more generally.

Table 2: Moss's typology of diaspora interventions

Broadcasting	Disseminating facts and claims for a shared cause through protest, online activism, and by holding awareness-raising events.
Representing	Serving as formal delegates or informal proxies for home-country causes and organisations to outside audiences and decision-makers, including through lobbying and in the policymaking process.
Brokering	The linking of previously unconnected actors and entities inside and outside of the home-country for the purposes of facilitating anti-regime mobilisation and relief on the ground.
Remitting	The channeling of tangible and intangible resources to the home-country for the purposes of rebellion and relief.
Volunteering on the front lines	Traveling to the home-country and its border areas to participate directly in rebellion and relief efforts.

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The extent to which diaspora groups engage in these activities varies depending on many factors related to the home country, the host country, and the diaspora group itself.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, host countries matter for how the authoritarian regime practices repression. For example, authoritarian governments are generally more likely than democracies to assist the home country in repressing the diaspora. Baser and Swain incorporate the two fields of diaspora studies and social movement studies. They point out that a diaspora's opportunities to engage in social movement mobilisation, such as demonstrations, lobbying, sit-ins, hunger strikes, and other mobilisation activities are dependent on the political opportunity structures (POS) of their host countries.⁵⁹ Such opportunities, which come from basic freedom of expression and organisation, tend to increase in democracies.⁶⁰

Waldinger and Shams distinguish between diaspora groups depending on their relationship to the territory of the home country. On the one hand, stateless

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 139.

⁵⁹ Bahar Baser & Ashok Swain. Stateless Diaspora Groups and their Repertoires of Nationalist Activism in Host Countries. *Journal of International Relations* 8:1 (2010).

⁶⁰ Roger Waldinger & Tahseen Shams. Cross-Border Politics: Diasporic Mobilization and State Response. *Annual Review of Sociology* (2023), p. 406.

diasporas, such as those of ethnic minorities, strive for an independent state with boundaries that differ from the home country's. On the other hand, there are groups that do not question the territorial boundaries of the state itself but are intent on changing the regime. They refer to these forms of diaspora activism as state-seeking nationalism and regime-changing mobilisation.⁶¹

3.1 Diaspora activism and the Chinese regime

The extent to which the CCP-critical diaspora is organised varies greatly. While some are engaged in more or less formal organisations, others act on an individual basis or might be active solely online. There are a number of more or less organised diaspora groups that actively oppose the Chinese regime. These groups vary in terms of identity and the goals they strive for. For example, while some groups mainly strive for independence from China, other groups simply oppose CCP rule but do not necessarily question China's territorial boundaries. I use Waldinger and Shams's conceptualisations of these two categories of diaspora movements: *state-seeking nationalism* and *regime-changing mobilisation*. The categories are overlapping and diaspora movements may engage simultaneously in state-seeking nationalism and regime-changing mobilisation.⁶²

3.1.1 State-seeking nationalism

A significant category of the regime-opposing diaspora is made up of ethnic minorities, mainly Tibetans and Uyghurs, but also Mongolians. It could be argued that it also includes parts of the Hong Kong diaspora that strive for an independent Hong Kong. These groups are what Baser and Swain refer to as stateless diasporas, which strive for an independent state or at least far more ethnic autonomy than they currently have.⁶³

Uyghur movement

An estimated 600,000 Uyghurs live outside China.⁶⁴ While the repression of Uyghurs goes back a long way, it has increased dramatically during the last two

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., p. 409.

⁶³ Baser & Swain. Stateless Diaspora Groups.

⁶⁴ Güner Özkan. *The Uyghur Movement in Exile* (4 December 2023), p. 3. Other sources offer estimates of 1–1.6 million. Amnesty International. Nowhere feels safe: Uyghurs tell of China-led intimidation campaign abroad (21 February 2020). <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2020/02/china-uyghurs-abroad-living-in-fear/>.

decades.⁶⁵ Uyghurs had long expressed discontent with increasing Han migration to Xinjiang and economic discrimination against Muslims. In June 2009, Uyghur migrant workers in Shaoguan, Guangdong province, were beaten to death by locals. This triggered large-scale student-led protests in Urumqi, capital of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region. The local security forces responded with violence, which led to riots resulting in 197 deaths, both Han and Uyghur, according to official Chinese figures, although Uyghur sources claim vastly more Uyghurs were killed.⁶⁶ In 2014, in a series of internal speeches, Xi Jinping ordered the CCP to “show absolutely no mercy” in the “struggle against terrorism, infiltration, and separatism” in Xinjiang.⁶⁷ This signalled the start of an unprecedented campaign of surveillance and repression in Xinjiang. Since 2017, an estimated one million people have been detained in camps. Several Western parliaments have declared the repression in Xinjiang a cultural genocide and a UN report stated that it could amount to crimes against humanity.⁶⁸

Over the years, many Uyghurs have fled Xinjiang to go abroad. The Chinese government has made it increasingly difficult for Muslims to leave Xinjiang and actively pressures Uyghurs who have Chinese citizenship to return to China, often by threatening repercussions for their families if they do not comply. Some governments have cooperated with China and deported Uyghurs back to China.⁶⁹

The World Uyghur Congress (WUC) was formed in Munich in 2004 by uniting the East Turkestan National Congress and the World Uyghur Youth Congress to consolidate a previously fragmented exile movement. Today, it acts as an umbrella organisation representing 90% of Uyghur groups abroad.⁷⁰

Unlike radical fringe groups such as The East Turkestan Liberation Organization (the ETLO, which is now defunct), the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), and the East Turkistan Government in Exile (ETGE) that advocate armed struggle and are classified as terrorist organisations, the WUC utilises moderate, democratic, and human rights-based advocacy. This approach has earned the WUC international acceptance and cooperation, allowing it to challenge China by operating within Western democratic frameworks. Additionally,

⁶⁵ For an excellent and thorough study of China’s TNR against the Uyghurs, see Jardine. *Great Wall of Steel*.

⁶⁶ World Uyghur Congress. *The Urumqi Massacre* (8 December 2009). <https://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/the-urumqi-massacre/>.

⁶⁷ Lily Kuo. “Show no mercy”: leaked documents reveal details of China’s mass Xinjiang detentions. *The Guardian* (17 November 2019). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/17/show-no-mercy-leaked-documents-reveal-details-of-chinas-mass-xinjiang-detentions>.

⁶⁸ Council on Foreign Relations. *China’s Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang* (3 October 2025). <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/china-xinjiang-uyghurs-muslims-repression-genocide-human-rights>

⁶⁹ Freedom House. *Out of Sight*, p. 17.

⁷⁰ Güner Özkan. *The Uyghur Movement*.

the WUC actively works to raise awareness of Uyghur internment camps among governments in the Muslim and Turkic worlds, carefully navigating these nations' complex political ties with Beijing.⁷¹

Tibetan movement

The Tibetan diaspora is estimated to number around 150,000. About 100,000 of its members live in South Asia (India, Nepal, and Bhutan) but an increasing number have moved to Western countries.⁷² Chinese repression in Tibet shares many similarities with that in Xinjiang. In fact, as Party Secretary and the top official in Tibet, Chen Quanguo first implemented measures in pursuit of “ethnic stability,” such as surveillance technologies and the infamous “grid management system,” in Tibet before he expanded them further in Xinjiang, where he was in charge from 2016 to 2021.

Tibet's theocratic leader, the Dalai Lama, fled to India in 1959 and first established his government in exile in Mussoorie before establishing it at its present site, in Dharamshala, in 1960. Over the years, it has developed into a modern democratic governance structure: the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), including a legislature, judiciary, and executive.

While the Dalai Lama relinquished formal administrative and political authority in 2011, he is still very important to the Tibetan movement, both as a leader and because of his international popularity. The official position of the Tibetan government in exile is that it strives for extended autonomy for Tibet within the Chinese state, but it does not demand secession. This has failed to convince the Chinese government, however, which continues to perceive the Dalai Lama and the exile government as separatists.⁷³

Tibetan Buddhism has functioned as a unifying force that has bridged regional, sectarian, and class divides, enabling exile elites to project Tibet internationally as a unified moral community. However, according to a recent study of Tibetan youth in India, “many Tibetan youth increasingly feel that the moral-spiritual framing of Tibet through non-violence, compassion, and Buddhist exceptionalism has narrowed the political language through which the Tibetan struggle is internationally understood. In response, younger Tibetans increasingly seek to

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Dina Lowe, Tibetan communities' new challenge – people are leaving, *The Upstream Journal* (9 April 2025). <https://upstreamjournal.org/tibetan-communities-are-losing-strength/>.

⁷³ Hari Har Jnawali, Tibet's response to state nationalism: Utilising China's fear of secession. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*. 23:2 (September 2023).

frame Tibet not primarily as a spiritual or civilisational cause, but as a political condition shaped by occupation, sovereignty, and dispossession.”⁷⁴

Hong Kong movement

The Hong Kong diaspora became a target of Beijing’s TNR after the widespread demonstrations in 2014 and particularly in 2019. As the Hong Kong national security law was enacted in 2020, a large number of Hongkongers fled the territory to avoid persecution and have continued their political activism abroad. During the 2019 demonstrations in Hong Kong, the Hong Kong diaspora was very active in trying to mobilise international pressure on the Hong Kong government. However, after China’s suppression of the protests and subsequent increased political control of the territory, the movement lost momentum. The Hong Kong diaspora became isolated and detached from host countries. China also succeeded in mobilising a countermovement, which presented a real threat to personal safety and discouraged potential participants.⁷⁵

The goals of the Hong Kong diaspora in exile vary greatly and include demands for increased political freedoms in Hong Kong, opposition to CCP rule in China, and Hong Kong’s independence from China. In other words, parts of the Hong Kong diaspora movement are involved in regime-changing mobilisation.

3.1.2 Regime-changing mobilisation

History is full of dissidents striving for regime change in China, not least among the Communist Party itself. Sun Yat-sen, founder of the Republic of China, spent many years in exile fighting first the Qing and later the Yuan Shikai government. Deng Xiaoping experienced his political awakening as a young worker in France in the 1920s. Since the CCP took power in 1949, it has continuously fought anti-CCP opposition groups in the diaspora. Demands for political change in China continued after the opening-up policy when Chinese could once again travel abroad and experience foreign democratic systems.

After the suppression of the 1989 Tiananmen movement, many protesters fled China and joined democracy activists in the diaspora to form the *Overseas Democracy Movement* (Minyun). However, the democracy movement has failed to become the unifying opposition force that many hoped for after 1989. Jie Chen notes that since its peak years following the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown, the Chinese political opposition in exile “has declined in terms of organisational

⁷⁴ Kalyani Rajendra Yeola. Negotiating Political Legitimacy: Tibetan Youth, Religion, and Exile Politics. *Asian Affairs* (2026).
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/03068374.2026.2698583?needAccess=true>.

⁷⁵ Ming-Sho Ho. Hongkongers’ International Front: Diaspora Activism During and After the 2019 Anti-Extradition Protests. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*. 54:2 (2024).

membership, popularity of leaders, international media exposure, domestic penetration, and influence on Western governments and UN agencies.”⁷⁶

The other major Chinese diaspora movement is *Falun Gong*, a religious movement with roots in Buddhism and Taoism. Despite an intense campaign of repression against Falun Gong since 1999, the movement maintains a strong presence in China.⁷⁷ According to Safeguard Defenders, estimates of the number of Falun Gong practitioners in China range from 7 to 40 million.⁷⁸ Outside China it continues to expand, both in its number of practitioners and geographically. The total number of followers is difficult to estimate, as Falun Gong does not have a formal membership system, but its press centre claims that it has practitioners in over 100 countries and around 10,000 in the US alone.⁷⁹ The expansion has not gone unnoticed by the Chinese authorities. According to leaked reports, in 2022 Xi Jinping put the MSS in charge of stepping up the suppression of Falun Gong practitioners outside China.⁸⁰

After the persecution campaign against Falun Gong in 1999, the movement under the leadership of its founder Li Hongzhi became strongly anti-CCP, and its followers began to persuade CCP members to renounce their membership. Falun Gong strives to create a China without the CCP and to revive, as they put it, China’s true five-thousand-year-old history.⁸¹

In a comprehensive study, Andrew Junker compared Falun Gong and Minyun from a social movement perspective and found that Falun Gong, although far more culturally conservative than Minyun, more closely resembles a social movement because of its larger number of activists, diversity of protest repertoires, and global audience and impact. Minyun, in contrast, suffers from factionalism, elite control, hierarchy, and bureaucratism.⁸²

⁷⁶ Jie Chen. The Chinese Political Opposition in Exile: A Chequered Development. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 70:1 (2016), p. 128.

⁷⁷ Xi Chen & Jing Xu. State Coercive Power and the War on Cults in China. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*. 58:1 (March 2025) pp. 53–76.

⁷⁸ Safeguard Defenders. *25 years on: China’s criminalization of Falun Gong in numbers* (7 October 2024). <https://safeguarddefenders.com/en/blog/25-years-chinas-criminalization-falun-gong-numbers>.

⁷⁹ Nicole Hong, Michael Rothfeld & Tiffany May. How a Persecuted Religious Group Grew Into a Global Movement. *New York Times* (16 August 2024). <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/16/nyregion/shen-yun-falun-gong.html>.

⁸⁰ Tasnim Nazeer. Leaked CCP files expose global crackdown on dissent. *The Diplomat* (24 February 2025). <https://thediplomat.com/2025/02/leaked-ccp-files-expose-global-crackdown-on-dissent/>.

⁸¹ Wehsuan Lin. A China without the Chinese Communist Party: The Geopolitics of the Falun Gong. *Geopolitics*. 27:2 (2022).

⁸² Andrew Junker. *Becoming Activists in Global China: Social Movements in the Chinese Diaspora* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

New York is the site of Falun Gong's headquarters and a key node in its global campaign to fight the CCP. Falun Gong practitioners meditate daily on the sidewalks opposite the Chinese consulate.⁸³ Falun Gong's newspaper, *The Epoch Times*, has become one of the largest Chinese-language newspaper groups outside China. Falun Gong has also been successful in gaining the attention of Western politicians. For instance, in 2025, a Swedish parliamentarian submitted a written question to the government regarding threats against Falun Gong's dance company Shen Yun, which was to hold a performance in Sweden later that year.⁸⁴

Christians are also being persecuted in China. While formally allowed, churches are heavily supervised, and the CCP views Christianity as “vehicles for foreign influence and potential subversion because of their transnational linkages.”⁸⁵ As the Party has stepped up control of religion, according to some estimates, 15–20 per cent of those leaving China are Christians.⁸⁶ There are, however, fewer reports of TNR against Christians outside China than against ethnic minorities and Falun Gong followers.

Among the more influential activists for Christians in China is Bob Fu (傅希秋). Fu left China in 1996 and is now based in the US, where he founded the China Aid association in 2002. China Aid's mission includes “exposing human rights abuses and promoting truth, justice and freedom by advocating for religious freedom and the rule of law in China.”⁸⁷ The organisation engages in training religious leaders, rescuing persecuted leaders, providing financial support, and exposing abuse. Fu has been instrumental in securing the release of prominent Chinese dissidents such as Chen Guangcheng.⁸⁸

In a rare study of Chinese Christians in Sweden, the author describes in her master's thesis how members of the Nordic Chinese Christian Church (NCCC)

⁸³ Weishan Huang, Globalization as a Tactic – legal campaigns of the Falun Gong Diaspora, in Paul R. Katz & Stefania Travagnin (eds.) *Concepts and Methods for the Study of Chinese Religions* (De Gruyter, 2018), pp. 233–257.

⁸⁴ Sveriges Riksdag, *Skriftlig fråga till statsråd*. 2024/2025 Hotbilden mot Shenyun (3 March 2025). https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/skriftlig-fraga/hotbilden-mot-shenyun_hc11958/.

⁸⁵ Peitong Jing & Karrie J. Koesel, Church and state in contemporary China: securing Christianity. *Politics and Religion*. 17 (2024), p. 108.

⁸⁶ *Chinese Church Support Ministries*. Chinese Christians Leaving China (24 January 2026). <https://ccsmglobal.org/en/chinese-christians-leaving-china-abandonment-or-gospel-expansion>.

⁸⁷ China Aid. China Aid's History. <https://chinaaid.org/china-aid-history/> (accessed 10 September 2026).

⁸⁸ Mary Kissel, Bob Fu: The Pastor of China's Underground Railroad. *Wall Street Journal* (1 June 2012). <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303640104577438562289689498>.

in Malmö navigate the Chinese government's digital surveillance through self-censorship, strategic adaptation, and platform jumping.⁸⁹

Another active anti-CCP grouping is the cyber-based New Federal State of China (NFSC) initiated by the controversial exile billionaire Guo Wengui (also called Miles Guo). The group was founded on 4 June 2020 by Guo in collaboration with former Trump strategist Steve Bannon and pursues a right-wing political agenda. In a recent study of online Chinese diasporic political activism, Zeng and Fang found that the NFSC has a strong presence and a large user base on X, which it uses as a "central battleground for their online activities."⁹⁰ After Guo was sentenced to 30 years in prison for fraud on 29 June 2026, the future of this populist project is unclear.⁹¹

3.1.3 Unorganised opposition

The organised opposition groups mentioned above involve only a minority of the Chinese diaspora. However, among the large majority that is not politically organised, many still express negative views of the CCP. Shen Ding argues that the Chinese government's efforts to co-opt overseas Chinese into supporting the regime might not be overly successful. In a study of overseas Chinese in the US, he finds that new-generation overseas Chinese have developed increasingly negative views of the Chinese regime, and that these negative views were exacerbated during China's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹² This comparatively negative view of China is supported by survey data. A 2023 Pew Research survey found that Chinese Americans stand out among Asian Americans for being one of the few origin groups that rate other Asian places more favourably than their own place of origin. The survey also showed that the longer they had lived in the US, the more negative their views of China were.⁹³ Similarly, Zeng and Fang conducted an extensive study of political discussion on X among groups using the simplified Chinese characters that are taught in mainland China (*Jianzhong Quan*), which indicates that these groups include diaspora Chinese from the

⁸⁹ Lue Dong. *Platform Jumping as Religious Practice: Digital strategies of Chinese Christians in Sweden*. Master's thesis. Lund University (2025). <https://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordId=9188581&fileId=9188584>.

⁹⁰ Jing Zeng & Hongbo Fang. Negotiating issue visibility in the diaspora: a study of political discussion within Jianzhong Quan on X, 2014–2023. *Convergence*. 31:3 (2025): pp. 1009–1030.

⁹¹ United States Attorney's Office. *Miles Guo Sentenced to 30 Years in Prison for Leading Billion-Dollar Fraud* (30 June 2026). <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/miles-guo-sentenced-30-years-prison-leading-billion-dollar-fraud>.

⁹² Sheng Ding. Changing diasporic identity and increasing global backlash: the Xi government's tactics and challenges of engaging new generation overseas Chinese. *Globalizations*. 22:1 (2025): pp. 151–166.

⁹³ Neil Ruiz. *Chinese Americans' Views of China and Other Places*. Pew Research (19 July 2023). <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/07/19/chinese-americans-views-of-china-and-other-places/>.

mainland or mainland Chinese with access to a VPN. They found that *activists* opposing CCP rule far outnumbered the *patriot* group showing support for the CCP in both the number of accounts and the number of tweets.⁹⁴

Some individuals have become influential opinion builders without being part of organisations such as the democracy movement. A recent example is artist Li Ying, who, using the online pseudonym 李老師不是你老師 (“Teacher Li is Not Your Teacher”) gained many followers, first on Weibo and, after his Weibo account was shut down, on X. Based in Italy, Li was active in spreading information about the COVID-19 protests in China and the subsequent Blank Paper Protests (see below). He became a key source of information for foreign media. The Chinese authorities have pursued an intense harassment campaign against him both from China and in Italy. In March 2026, eight Chinese nationals were expelled to China on national security grounds for harassing Li.⁹⁵

Parts of the diaspora that are not taking part in political organisations may become politically mobilised around dramatic events with political significance in their home countries, that is, around what Moss refers to as a quotidian disruption.

The Blank Paper Movement

The closest China has come to a quotidian disruption since the Tiananmen protests in 1989 is arguably the Blank Paper Movement. During the later phases of China’s COVID lockdown in 2022, people became increasingly angry about the policy and the draconian methods of keeping people locked down. Despite heavy censorship, many complained online, and occasional street protests, such as Peng Lifa’s Sitong bridge poster in the middle of Beijing, even erupted. Some weeks later, when a fire in an apartment in Urumqi killed ten people and netizens suspected that the quarantine measures had obstructed escape routes, thousands of citizens around China took to the streets to protest. Many of them held blank sheets of paper because protests against the COVID policy were not allowed, but it was quite clear to most that the papers were a protest against the COVID lockdown and simultaneously a protest against the lack of freedom of speech in China.⁹⁶

The Blank Paper Protests were quickly taken up by Chinese diaspora communities around the world. Protests erupted in North America, Europe, and Australia. To many, the Blank Paper Protests became a rare chance to collectively express their

⁹⁴ Zeng & Fang. Negotiating issues.

⁹⁵ Safeguard Defenders. *Italy Expels 8 Chinese on National Security Grounds* (8 March 2026).
<https://safeguarddefenders.com/en/blog/italy-expels-8-chinese-national-security-grounds>.

⁹⁶ Han Zhang. How Members of the Chinese Diaspora Found Their Voices. *The New Yorker* (11 June 2024).
<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/essay/how-members-of-the-chinese-diaspora-found-their-voices>.

frustration with the Chinese regime. But protesters also felt unease because of the risk of being surveilled or attacked by Chinese regime agents or regime supporters such as the so-called “little pinks,” nationalist internet users who fiercely defend China online.

Twitter played an important role in mobilising the Chinese diaspora. Zeng and Cheng have examined how the Chinese diaspora discussed the Blank Paper Protest on Twitter. They found that the general Chinese diaspora showed a negative view of Chinese authorities during the Blank Paper Protest, but mainly focused on the COVID policy. Later, however, the discussion became dominated by more radical views calling for regime change.⁹⁷

The Blank Paper Protest stemmed from negative experiences during the COVID lockdowns, making it unique in that regard. It spread rapidly and, above all, it worked. However, once the COVID restrictions were lifted, the driving force behind the protests vanished. Yet, some of those who were involved are now trying to find new goals and new motivations.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Jing Zeng & Calvin Yixiang Cheng, Diasporic citizen journalism: Exploring the discussion on the 2022 blank paper protests. *Journalism*, 26:5 (May 2025): pp. 1047–1066.
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/14648849241250191>.

⁹⁸ Interview 1.

4 **Diaspora experiences and actions in Sweden**

This chapter first presents previous research and information about the Chinese diaspora in Sweden before moving on to the analysis of the interviews for this study. According to the latest statistics from Statistics Sweden (SCB), in 2024 there were 38,976 individuals in Sweden who were born in the PRC. 24,025 of these were Chinese citizens.⁹⁹ Considering that the Chinese global diaspora numbers around 50 million and Europe hosts 2.5 million of these, the Chinese-born population in Sweden is comparatively large, but far smaller than in countries such as Australia, the UK, and Canada.¹⁰⁰

Reports by media and think tanks have contributed to some understanding of the Chinese diaspora in Sweden. In two previous FOI reports, I have discussed the CCP's relations with the Chinese diaspora more generally and, briefly, the Swedish case.¹⁰¹ Pär Nyrén authored a report on the United Front's activities in Sweden in which he analysed UF-connected overseas Chinese organisations.¹⁰² The Swedish National China Centre has published reports on Chinese-language schools,¹⁰³ and two reports on Chinese-language media.¹⁰⁴ In addition, media reports have covered issues such as China's TNR against individuals in Sweden, including the

⁹⁹ Statistics Sweden (SCB).

https://www.statistikdatabasen.scb.se/pxweb/sv/ssd/START_BE_BE0101_BE0101E/FodelslandArK/table/tableViewLayout1/ (accessed 18 June 2026).

¹⁰⁰ Joaquín Beltrán Antolín. How Many Chinese are Living in Europe? Chapter 1 in Mette Thunø & Simeng Wang (eds.) *Handbook of Chinese Migration to Europe* (Brill, 2025), p. 43.

¹⁰¹ Almén. *The Chinese Communist Party*; Ivar Ekman (ed.), Oscar Almén, Maria Engqvist, Karolina Lindén & Aron Lund. *Diaspora och påverkan från främmande makt: En översikt över fem staters extraterritoriella styre* (FOI-R-5436--SE, March 2023). <https://www.foi.se/rapporter/rapportsammanfattning.html?reportNo=FOI-R-5436--SE>.

¹⁰² Pär Nyrén. The CCP's United Front Network in Sweden. *China Brief*. 20:16 (2020). <https://jamestown.org/the-ccps-united-front-network-in-sweden/>.

¹⁰³ Frida Lindberg & Erika Staffas Edström. *Chinese language schools in Sweden and their connections with the Communist Party of China* (Swedish National China Centre, 2023). <https://kinacentrum.se/en/publications/chinese-language-schools-in-sweden-and-their-connections-with-the-communist-party-of-china/>.

¹⁰⁴ Erika Staffas Edström. *Ro med kommunistpartiets åror: en granskning av kinesiska medienärvaron i Sverige* [Rowing with the Communist Party's oars: an examination of Chinese media presence in Sweden] (Swedish National China Centre, 2023). <https://kinacentrum.se/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/ro-med-kommunistpartiets-aror-en-granskning-av-den-kinesiska-medianarvaron-i-sverige-1.pdf>; Erika Staffas Edström. *Navigating Chinese presence in the Swedish media landscape* (Swedish National China Centre, 2024). <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/other-publications/navigating-chinese-presence-in-the-swedish-media-landscape.pdf>.

cases of Gui Minhai's daughter Angela Gui, Liu Dongling, and several Uyghur activists living in Sweden.¹⁰⁵

Harb and Wackenhut's study of Uyghur diaspora activists in Sweden is one of the few academic studies on China's TNR in Sweden. The study includes interviews conducted in 2022–2024 with seven Uyghur activists and focuses on experiences of Chinese efforts to silence their voices.¹⁰⁶

4.1 The Gui Minhai case

Without doubt, the most important case of Chinese transnational repression against the Chinese diaspora in Sweden was the abduction and imprisonment of the book publisher Gui Minhai. Gui, a Swedish citizen since 1993, was abducted by Chinese agents outside his apartment in Thailand in 2015. In 2016, he appeared on Chinese state television "confessing" to an old crime and stated that he had voluntarily returned to China to serve the remainder of his prison sentence. Nothing was mentioned about his activities as a publisher of politically sensitive books. In 2017, he was released from prison but remained under surveillance in China. In 2018, when Swedish diplomats were travelling with Gui by train to Beijing for a medical visit, the train was stopped and security agents again arrested Gui. In February 2020, he was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment for the crime of illegally providing intelligence overseas. The Chinese authorities also announced that Gui had regained his Chinese citizenship and therefore was no longer a Swedish citizen.¹⁰⁷

The real reason Gui Minhai was punished was his work as an author and book publisher, although this was never officially mentioned by the Chinese government. Together with his colleagues at the bookstore, Causeway Bay Books, Gui published books about the Chinese leadership, including on Xi Jinping's lovers, likely with little basis in reality. However, because the books were very popular among mainlanders travelling to Hong Kong, they became politically sensitive for the nervous Chinese leadership. Three of Gui's other colleagues were also abducted in Hong Kong and interrogated by the Chinese authorities, but only Gui Minhai was finally sentenced.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ See, for instance, Tobias Andersson Åkerblom. Här är Kinas måltavlor i Sverige och världen. *Göteborgs Posten* (29 April 2025). <https://www.gp.se/nyheter/gp-granskar/har-ar-kinas-maltavlor-i-sverige-och-varlden.711f5c8b-4f72-4b42-80ff-9ade00159e16>.

¹⁰⁶ Michel Harb & Arne F. Wackenhut. Transnational repression in an age of global authoritarianism: experiences of Uyghur diaspora activists in Sweden. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (12 February 2026).

¹⁰⁷ According to the Swedish government, no application to revoke his Swedish citizenship has been received, which means that by law he is still a Swedish citizen.

¹⁰⁸ For a longer analysis of the Gui Minhai case, see Almén. The Chinese Communist Party.

The Gui Minhai case was one of the main reasons for the very strained Sino-Swedish relationship over the last decade. Other factors include Sweden banning Chinese telecom operators from participating in the development of 5G, China halting the approval of export licences for essential artificial graphite to Sweden, and the unusually aggressive statements by the then Chinese ambassador to Sweden, Gui Congyou. By 2025, relations had started to normalise and Sweden was granted visa-free travel privileges, indicating a possible thaw in relations.¹⁰⁹

The Swedish government continues to raise Gui's case in talks with Chinese counterparts as well as in international forums. Gui's daughter Angela Gui has consistently since his abduction advocated for his release. However, China has so far not made a single concession, and Swedish representatives have not been permitted to visit Gui in prison.

4.2 TNR experiences of the Chinese diaspora in Sweden

Sweden is home to a diverse diaspora whose members actively oppose the CCP. They include Chinese dissident writers and other democracy promoters, Falun Gong activists, and Hong Kong, Uyghur and Tibetan refugees. While there are many differences between individuals and groups, many also share similar TNR experiences that can be attributed to the Chinese government.

Sweden takes TNR seriously, and in their reports, the Military Intelligence and Security Service (MUST) and the Security Police (SÄPO) identify China, together with Russia and Iran, as one of the three states most involved in antagonistic acts, including TNR, against Sweden.¹¹⁰ Several individuals with a background from China have been convicted of spying for the Chinese security authorities over the years. Swedish authorities are highly unlikely to cooperate with the Chinese government in its efforts to persecute refugees, and Sweden and China do not have an extradition treaty. This became clear in the case of Qiao Jianjun, a former Chinese grain official accused of embezzling over USD 30 million in China, who was arrested in Sweden in 2018 at China's request.¹¹¹ One year later, the Swedish

¹⁰⁹ Malin Oud & Oscar Almén (eds.). *China as a global development actor: transforming the international aid landscape* (EBA, Stockholm, 2025), p. 24.

¹¹⁰ MUST. *Årsöversikt 2025*. Försvarmakten (2026). <https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/globalassets/02-om-forsvarsmakten/myndighetsinformation/dokument/aktuellt/nyheter/must-arsoversikt-2025.pdf>; Säkerhetspolisen. *Säkerhetspolisen 2025/2026* (2026). <https://sakerhetspolisen.se/download/18.6811139019dbc04c6055c/1777443118955/L%C3%A4gesbild%202025%E2%80%932026.pdf>.

¹¹¹ Oskar Jönsson & Phelan Chatterjee. In English: One of China's most wanted fugitives detained in Sweden. *SVT Nyheter* (2 August 2018). <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/utrikes/in-english-one-of-china-s-most-wanted-fugitives-detained-in-sweden>.

Supreme Court decided that he would not be extradited to China because he would risk torture and death. The Chinese government reacted strongly, and the Chinese ambassador to Sweden said he hoped that Sweden would not become “a safe haven for criminals.”¹¹² Five days later, Qiao was again arrested at the request of the US. He had previously been indicted in the US for several criminal offences. In June 2020, Sweden extradited Qiao to the US.¹¹³

In other words, as a strong democracy with a high degree of respect for the rule of law, Sweden is a comparatively safe place for refugees from China. This perception was also evident in the interviews. Despite being victims of China’s TNR, the interviewees generally felt safe in Sweden. Many of them expressed the relief they felt once they arrived in Sweden. One interviewee said that he had recurring nightmares of being imprisoned in China when he was leaving, but that they decreased when he had been in Sweden for a while.¹¹⁴

SÄPO has been in contact with many of the interviewees over the years, which the interviewees described positively.

They... said that as long as you are a resident of Sweden, the Swedish government will provide protection, no matter what your relationship is with the Chinese government.¹¹⁵

Interviewees were told to inform SÄPO if something suspicious happened, but were also warned that certain individuals they encountered could be spies and that providing information to the Chinese authorities could be illegal.

Despite the assurances of the Swedish authorities, the long arm of the CCP was still felt. In the words of one interviewee:

I think that the Swedish government cannot help me alleviate this pressure from the outside world. Actually, not only the Swedish government, but no government of any other country can eliminate it. There’s a clear example with Sweden, like Gui Minhai. He already has Swedish citizenship, but he was still taken by China. The Swedish government has reached out and done a lot of work on this issue, but the outcome is still unsatisfactory. This isn’t just happening in Sweden; some incidents in other countries also prove this point. No matter what they do, the governments of these democratic countries cannot completely eliminate the threats and pressure from the Chinese government.¹¹⁶

¹¹² Sofia Clason. Efterlyst ekobrottsling lämnas inte ut till Kina. *Expressen* (9 July 2019). <https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/efterlyst-ekobrottsling-lamnas-inte-ut-till-kina/>.

¹¹³ US Immigration and Customs Enforcement. *Former Chinese official extradited to the US to face charges of laundering millions of dollars stolen* (1 June 2020). <https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/former-chinese-official-extradited-us-face-charges-laundering-millions-dollars-stolen>.

¹¹⁴ Interview 5.

¹¹⁵ Interview 4.

¹¹⁶ Interview 5.

Some interviewees were hesitant to travel to certain countries, including Thailand and Turkey, fearing that the Chinese authorities could reach them there.

Among the interviewees, members of the Uyghur community have experienced comparatively more direct and brutal forms of TNR than Han exiles. It seems that Chinese authorities are more hesitant to use harsh methods against pro-democracy dissidents than against ethnic minorities.

Harassment and surveillance

Some of the interviewees had experienced direct threats from Chinese authorities while residing in Sweden. However, the Chinese government seems to be careful when it comes to actions that can be directly attributed to it. Some interviewees have received threatening e-mails and comments on social media but consider them normal given the politically divisive nature of the issue and therefore they cannot say whether they come from the Chinese government or just from nationalist netizens.

One interviewee described the psychological pressure of being contacted by the Chinese police, who warned him by phone to be careful about what he said and posted online:

What they do say is enough to make you feel very scared, creating a sense of fear because you don't know what they are going to do next. Actually, after interacting with them for so many years, I have noticed that when they express themselves in person, they might not be as terrifying as their words imply, but it still creates a significant psychological impact.¹¹⁷

All of the Uyghur interviewees have been contacted and threatened by the Chinese authorities. One interviewee said that after he had appeared in Swedish media talking about the situation in Xinjiang, he received several phone calls from China urging him to stop talking to the media.¹¹⁸

Even though some of the 16 interviewees had not received direct threats, all interviewees were aware of being constantly monitored by the Chinese state or its proxies, and they expressed caution in their contacts with other diaspora members. Several of the interviewees said that they practised self-censorship to some extent, on social media or in publications, to avoid receiving too much attention from the Chinese authorities and triggering some kind of retribution against themselves or their families in China.

¹¹⁷ Interview 5.

¹¹⁸ Interview 9.

Proxy punishment

The TNR method most commonly used by Chinese security authorities is to threaten or punish relatives in China. 12 of the 16 interviewees, described incidents in which relatives or friends in China had been harassed or punished by Chinese security authorities because of their connection to the interviewee. Punishments ranged from threats to imprisonment. While most interviewees said that they did not feel personally threatened, many expressed great concern about their family and friends in China. Most have decided, or been forced, to cut off contact with friends in China to avoid creating trouble for them. Many of the relatives have been urged by the Chinese authorities to tell their relatives to cease their political activities. Several interviewees told similar stories of being called by a relative and of it being apparent that the relative was saying things they would not have said without being pressured to do so:

... he called me at a number of times and asked me very specific things that I didn't think seemed as likely as things he would ask me about ... so he called me and wanted to know who had financed my trip and who was there and so on.¹¹⁹

One interviewee stopped his political activism to make sure his parents were not further punished by the Xinjiang authorities.

I quit from the board of the organisation. I just want my parents to sit in their own home, sleep under their quilt, and drink tea in their home. Not be in prison.¹²⁰

Others decided that exposing their own and their family's cases helped put pressure on the Chinese authorities, which could actually improve the situation for the relatives.¹²¹

Exile

Naturally, as refugees, most (13 of 16) of the interviewees cannot travel to China because they will not be let in or because they risk punishment. However, a few had actually been able to go back because they had ceased their political activities, or had been allowed to go temporarily during less repressive periods.

The Chinese authorities' attitude towards exiles varies between individuals and it also varies between the different levels and agencies of the Chinese state. Some dissidents have been allowed to leave China and are not allowed to return as they are seen as troublemakers and threats to the regime. For example, one interviewee wanted to renew his Chinese passport, but the Chinese Embassy refused his application without explanation.

¹¹⁹ Interview 16.

¹²⁰ Interview 11.

¹²¹ Interview 9.

Another interviewee had the opposite experience and claimed to have been urged by the local authorities to return:

I know that the Chinese government has tried to persuade me to return to China on several occasions. They contacted my mother when she was ill and asked her to convince me to come back. Their reason was that I wasn't participating in any subversive organisations while abroad. Although I oppose the Communist Party as an individual, they didn't see my writings as being part of a larger organisation or movement. They thought I wasn't that dangerous. Also, later, I realised that our local security bureau probably wanted me to return because they needed funding and enemies. If they haven't had any "enemies" for a while, they can't get funding. As long as I go back, they'll immediately be able to apply for funding to buy cars and other things. So, they need an enemy, and I was their local, relatively famous "enemy."¹²²

None of the Uyghur interviewees said that they could travel to China.

Espionage

A common practice, especially in relation to ethnic minorities such as Tibetans and Uyghurs, is to pressure members of the diaspora to spy on and report on activities within the diaspora communities. Two Uyghurs and one Tibetan have been convicted in Sweden for spying on the diaspora for the Chinese security agencies.¹²³ According to some of the interviewees, the Chinese authorities have even successfully infiltrated the World Uyghur Congress.¹²⁴ Several of the Uyghur interviewees have been approached by agents of the Chinese state who pressured them to provide such information by threatening that their families back in China would otherwise suffer consequences. The tactic has been successful in creating distrust within the Uyghur community. By creating this mistrust, the Chinese regime manages to undermine the Uyghur movement by strengthening what Moss calls conflict transmission. One interviewee said that he had cut off contact with basically all other Uyghurs because he does not know whom to trust. There are, for example, some Uyghurs who have been allowed to go back to China and then return to Sweden again, something he found very suspicious:

What makes it possible for them to return? They must have cooperated with the Chinese police to be able to do this.¹²⁵

¹²² Interview 3.

¹²³ Tobias Andersson Åkerblom. Misstänkt kinesisk spion gripen i Sverige – ska ha spionerat på Uighurer. *Göteborgs-Posten* (9 September 2025; updated 24 September 2025). <https://www.gp.se/nyheter/sverige/misstankt-kinesisk-spion-gripen-i-sverige-ska-ha-spionerat-pa-uighurer.9ff67cb6-b8de-472b-b521-df61a5a5c6ee>.

¹²⁴ Interview 10.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

One report reveals that Uyghurs in Australia whom the Chinese government has permitted to return to Xinjiang to visit family were interrogated by the authorities and pressured to reveal information about diaspora activities in Australia.¹²⁶

In 2024, a Chinese journalist was convicted of spying and expelled to China. The official grounds for the expulsion have not been publicly revealed. The journalist was known for repeating messages from the Chinese government and filming protesters critical of the CCP.¹²⁷

4.3 Diaspora activism in Sweden

The level of organisation and activism differs between groups and individuals. Many interviewees said that they were not part of any organisation at all. In some cases, the interviewees were politically active in China and as a result were forced to leave to avoid punishment but are not engaged in political activism in Sweden. In other cases, their political activism started outside China. One Uyghur interviewee said that his political activism started when he came to Sweden:

When I was in China I didn't know we had a nation with a name and a national flag. I knew nothing of the history.¹²⁸

According to estimates by the Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP), the Uyghur population in Sweden is around 3,000. Most of them have likely left China as refugees.¹²⁹ A significant portion of these, including all of the five Uyghur interviewees in this study, have been actively engaged in the Uyghur rights movements. A number of organisations working on Uyghur issues have been established in Sweden, including The Swedish Uyghur Committee, actively advocating for an independent East Turkestan, and The Sweden Uyghur Education Association, which mainly deals with strengthening Uyghur culture and identity.¹³⁰ In 2006, the first PEN International Uyghur Center, with members around the world, was established in Sweden. As is the case for many diaspora movements, unity has been a challenge. While the organisations all strive to improve Uyghur rights, they differ in how to conduct the struggle and what the end goal is, such as whether

¹²⁶ Human Rights Watch. *Australia: Chinese Government Menaces Uyghur Diaspora* (16 August 2026). <https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/08/16/australia-chinese-government-menaces-uyghur-diaspora>.

¹²⁷ Sveriges Television. *Därför kan kinesiska Xuefei Chen Axelsson ha utgjort ett allvarligt hot mot Sveriges säkerhet. SVT Nyheter* (21 November 2024). <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/granskning/ug/darfor-kan-kinesiska-xuefei-chen-axelsson-ha-utgjort-ett-allvarligt-hot-mot-sveriges-sakerhet>.

¹²⁸ Interview 11.

¹²⁹ Harb & Wackenhut. *Transnational repression*, p. 7.

¹³⁰ The Sweden Uyghur Education Association (accessed 10 June 2026). <https://uymaarip.org>.

to mainly strive to improve Uyghur rights in China or to strive for full independence from China.

As mentioned, the Chinese MSS is actively trying to infiltrate the Uyghur movement. As reported by Harb and Wackenhut and also confirmed in the interviews for this study, this has created a sense of distrust within the Uyghur community. However, some diasporans also reacted by increasing their political activism as a response to increased surveillance and coercion.¹³¹

While the Tibetan diaspora is not represented among the interviewees, it should be mentioned that several of the other interviewees described the Tibetan movement as skilful in advocacy work, and many had participated in events together with them.¹³²

The China democracy movement in Sweden currently consists mainly of an informal group of friends. According to one interviewee who was involved in the 1989 democracy movement, the exile organisations that were established after 1989 did not work well outside China because they did not understand the rules of foreign non-profit organisations:

They were all raised under an authoritarian regime, and when they came to the West, they would apply the same methods to organising.¹³³

In 2001, the Independent Chinese PEN Center (ICPC) was formed, and several Chinese dissident writers residing in Sweden were among the founding members.¹³⁴

Using Moss's typology of diaspora interventions (see Figure 2) as a starting point, the following section discusses how the interviewees engage in different activities directed towards China.

4.3.1 Broadcasting

Demonstrations and protests are among the more common activities among exiles. The Uyghur community organises recurring demonstrations three times a year. These take place on 5 February to commemorate the 1997 Ghulja massacre, 5 July to commemorate the 2009 Urumqi massacre, and 1 October, China's national day.¹³⁵ Similarly, one recurring event for parts of the dissident groups is

¹³¹ Harb & Wackenhut. Transnational repression.

¹³² Interview 1; Interview 3; Interview 9; Interview 12.

¹³³ Interview 3.

¹³⁴ Yu Zhang, ICPC Origin and Development. *Independent Chinese PEN Center* (6 February 2020). <https://www.chinesepen.org/english/icpc-origin-and-development>.

¹³⁵ Interview 9.

the commemoration of the 4 June Tiananmen massacre. Some of the interviewees, in particular those who were engaged in the 1989 movement, still take part in the commemoration ceremony every year. However, they have noticed a clear decline in the number of participants as the years go by.¹³⁶

Protests can be collective or individual. One activist demonstrated alone, displaying photos of his imprisoned parents for several years.¹³⁷

When the Hong Kong protests against the extradition law began in 2019, Hong Kong activists started to organise demonstrations, webinars, and other events in Sweden.

The internet is of course a crucial platform for spreading information and advocacy. In addition, organisations competing for funding might find it necessary to show online what they have accomplished.¹³⁸ However, since many diaspora activists are dealing with sensitive issues, they have to be careful with what information they post online. On a personal level, many interviewees said that they had either no or just limited presence on social media. One reason is to avoid exposing themselves to Chinese security authorities.

Chinese-language media have become a battlefield for influence over the China narrative. While the Chinese government pursues a very active strategy to dominate the media narrative, members of the diaspora create counter-narratives.¹³⁹ One interviewee, describing himself as an independent journalist, said that his main job was to influence the narrative on China in Chinese-language media.¹⁴⁰

Media exposure can also be a way to affect individual cases. One Uyghur interviewee, although he had no evidence of a causal connection, claimed that when media report on individual Uyghurs, those individuals have in many cases been released from the internment camps or have had their sentences shortened. He said that the Chinese authorities do this as a way to remove the “playing cards” the Uyghurs have in their hand to play against Chinese authorities. Once the person is released, those cards disappear:

At least it is a way to stop them from dying in prison as that would give us very strong cards.¹⁴¹

¹³⁶ Interview 2.

¹³⁷ Interview 10.

¹³⁸ Interview 12.

¹³⁹ David Bandurski. Supporting relevance: countering China’s global information challenge through service journalism, in Malin Oud and Oscar Almén (eds.). *China as a global development actor: transforming the international aid landscape* (EBA, Stockholm, 2025), pp. 236–257.

¹⁴⁰ Interview 1.

¹⁴¹ Interview 9.

Some of the interviewees are writers and musicians and use art as a way to broadcast information and opinion. This is also a possible way to reach people in China. Occasionally, books on sensitive topics still get published and distributed, and people with a VPN can access YouTube and other channels to access videos and music. One interviewee proudly explained how he managed to annoy the Chinese government:

There were internal photos that emerged showing xxx using my music video as an example, labelling it as content from foreign hostile forces attacking our country's leaders. It seems he used this as a negative example, teaching his students about such things.¹⁴²

4.3.2 Representing

Many interviewees have contacted politicians and other decision-makers to raise their issues on the political agenda. For instance, one interviewee has organised seminars at the Swedish parliament on human rights in China.¹⁴³

One Uyghur interviewee who was very active in contacting Swedish politicians said that Swedish members of parliament from all political parties, left to right, were very receptive to their requests. A number of motions regarding the human rights situation for Uyghurs in Xinjiang have been submitted to the Swedish parliament. He mentioned Gustav Fridolin and Mehmet Kaplan, both Members of Parliament (MPs) for the Green Party, as particularly active. According to the same interviewee, active lobbying of Swedish politicians and decision-makers had resulted in two very important decisions. First, he claimed to have influenced the Swedish Migration Authority to treat Uyghurs separately from other Chinese migrants, making it far easier for the former to receive residence permits. Second, in 2019, the authority decided that no Uyghurs or other Muslim minorities would be expelled to China.¹⁴⁴ Another MP who the Uyghur activists have been in contact with is Markus Wiechel, from the right-wing Sweden Democrats. In 2021, in a question to the Government, he raised the issue of naming the persecution of Uyghurs in China a genocide.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Interview 6.

¹⁴³ Interview 13.

¹⁴⁴ Interview 9; Daniel Velasco. Uighurer får flyktingstatus. *Sveriges Radio* (18 March 2019). <https://www.sverigesradio.se/artikel/7179213>.

¹⁴⁵ *Sveriges Riksdag*. Folkmordet i Xinjiang. Skriftlig fråga 2020/21:1362 av Markus Wiechel (SD) (accessed 10 June 2026). https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/skriftlig-fraga/folkmordet-i-xinjiang_h8111362/.

Hong Kong activists have also been in direct contact with Swedish politicians:

In Sweden, specifically, it's mainly with parliamentarians but also with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We bring a lot of different topics to them . . . about immigration policy, where Hongkongers are concerned.¹⁴⁶

Some activists have also lobbied political institutions outside Sweden. Angela Gui, daughter of Gui Minhai, testified before the US Congress in May 2016 and she has continuously advocated for his cause within the EU.¹⁴⁷ In October 2025, ten years after Gui Minhai was abducted from Thailand, the European Parliament, with a landslide majority, adopted a resolution calling for his immediate release.¹⁴⁸

Uyghur activists as well as Hong Kong activists have actively lobbied within the EU to provide information and keep attention focused on their issues. While Uyghur activists seemed quite satisfied with the EU's actions, one Hong Kong activist expressed more scepticism:

It's a complicated issue because it has spoken out when it comes to, say, Uyghur genocide, to an extent. It hasn't been perfect, but it is speaking out. And it's easy to get the European Parliament to take a firm stance. In the last resolution that they adopted, they did recommend sanctions on Hong Kong officials responsible for the 2019–2020 human rights violations that took place during that time. But, you know . . . a lot of member states can agree on an action. They just don't necessarily want to be the first one to say, hey, this is what we should do, to make the proposal. At least that's been my experience when we've been advocating for sanctions and actions like that. Like, we've got a lot of support, but no one wants to be the first one to do it.¹⁴⁹

4.3.3 Brokering

While the different groups and individuals forming the regime-critical diaspora have diverse aims and focus, they also share their opposition to the CCP. Hence, they sometimes co-arrange events and participate together in demonstrations. For example, one dissident musician said that he had played at an event organised by

¹⁴⁶ Interview 12.

¹⁴⁷ Angela Gui. *Statement of Angela Gui. Congressional-Executive Committee on China* (24 May 2016). <https://www.cecc.gov/sites/evo-subsites/cecc.house.gov/files/CECC%20Hearing%20-%20Long%20Arm%20-%202024May16%20-%20Angela%20Gui.pdf>; Reporters Without Borders (RSF). *European parliament renews its call on China to release Swedish publisher Gui Minhai, kidnapped 10 years ago* (9 October 2025). <https://rsf.org/en/european-parliament-renews-its-call-china-release-swedish-publisher-gui-minhai-kidnapped-10-years>.

¹⁴⁸ European Parliament. *Motion for a European Parliament resolution on the 10th anniversary of the detention of jailed Swedish publisher Gui Minhai in China* (2025/2906(RSP)) (7 October 2025). https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-10-2025-0433_EN.pdf; <https://rsf.org/en/european-parliament-renews-its-call-china-release-swedish-publisher-gui-minhai-kidnapped-10-years>.

¹⁴⁹ Interview 12.

Falun Gong.¹⁵⁰ Similarly, one Falun Gong practitioner actively took part in demonstrations organised by Tibetans and Christians.¹⁵¹

Collaboration is often international and involves connecting with diaspora members from the same sub-group or other sub-groups outside Sweden. The Uyghur organisations in Sweden actively collaborate with other Uyghur organisations internationally, particularly in Turkey, the US, Germany, and other European countries.

Collaboration also takes place outside the specific China sphere. In the words of one interviewee:

I have also worked in collaboration with various human rights organisations, often larger international organisations such as Amnesty, PEN, International Human Rights Watch, Reporters Without Borders, and so on, organised campaigns together and events and such things. It has also contributed, at least I hope, to keep the issue alive and relevant.¹⁵²

There is less contact and collaboration with regime opponents in China, mainly because of fear that it will affect them negatively. Of course, the interviewees were very aware that the Chinese authorities would monitor any communication on legal platforms such as WeChat. One interviewee described how he managed to connect with a dissident in China using four layers and many steps to hide a connection between the two. However, his go-between in China was questioned by the security police, who had monitored the whole WeChat dialogue between the go-between and the dissident.¹⁵³

4.3.4 Remittances

There are few examples among the interviewees of the last two types of interventions in Moss's typology: *Remittances* and *Volunteering on the front lines*. First, remittances are most common in cases where the exile has moved to a country that is significantly richer than the home country. Since China has become more prosperous, exiles today do not necessarily have more financial resources than friends in China. Intangible resources such as knowledge and information may still be valuable. However, the Chinese state apparatus, through its sophisticated monitoring system, makes it very difficult for the regime-critical diaspora to channel any kind of resources to China. In addition, sending support from abroad would immediately put the receiver at great risk if it could be tied to the activist outside China.

¹⁵⁰ Interview 6.

¹⁵¹ Interview 14.

¹⁵² Interview 16.

¹⁵³ Interview 1.

4.3.5 Volunteering on the front lines

Travelling to China or even to neighbouring countries in order to influence political developments in China has proven increasingly risky. As long as Hong Kong was under British rule, it remained a safe haven for oppositional forces. Many fled to Hong Kong after the 1989 crackdown and continued their political work there, including some of the older interviewees. After Hong Kong returned to China in 1997, many oppositional activists also decided to leave Hong Kong because they feared that the Chinese security forces could reach them there. Some stayed on, however. Gui Minhai moved to Hong Kong in 2006 to start his publishing company, The Mighty Current. Together with his associates, he authored and published books exposing claimed rumours about the Chinese leadership, books that were very popular among mainland visitors. The abduction of Gui and his associates, who were all later released, marked a new era of Chinese TNR. It signalled that foreign passports and foreign territories were no longer safe for opponents to the Chinese Communist Party.

5 Conclusions

This study set out to examine the experiences of members of the diaspora in Sweden who have been targets of China's TNR. Building on previous research on TNR, the study identifies a set of TNR methods commonly used by authoritarian regimes against their diaspora. The Chinese party-state engages to varying extents in all TNR methods, from abductions to spying and harassment. The targets of the repression are members of the diaspora who express opposition to the CCP, including members of the democracy movement, human rights advocates, Falun Gong, Uyghurs, Tibetans, Mongolians, Hongkongers, and Taiwanese. A particularly common method is proxy punishment of friends or relatives in China in order to pressure the activist to cease political activism.

In the case of Sweden, the interviewees, despite being targets of China's TNR, generally felt safe. The Swedish authorities take TNR seriously, and the security agencies have had contact with most of the interviewees. A number of individuals with a background from China have been convicted in Sweden of spying for the Chinese intelligence services. Interviewees describe how this has created a degree of mistrust within the diaspora communities.

Some of the interviewees had experienced direct threats from Chinese authorities while residing in Sweden. However, the Chinese government seems to be careful when it comes to actions that can be directly attributed to it. Twelve of the 16 interviewees described incidents where relatives or friends in China have been harassed or punished by Chinese security authorities because of their connection to the interviewee.

The regime-critical diaspora includes a number of state-seeking nationalists, such as ethnic minorities and Hong Kong activists who strive for independence or extended autonomy and improved human rights. Other groups, including Falun Gong, democracy movements, and the conservative New Federal State of China, strive for regime change for the whole of China.

Currently, because the domestic political situation is relatively stable and the regime has extensive means to monitor and control the population, the Chinese regime is not seriously threatened by regime-critical diaspora movements. However, this can quickly change if a major upheaval, what social movement researchers call a *quotidian disruption*, happens. The 2022 Blank Paper Protests in connection with the COVID-19 lockdown were probably the closest mainland China has come to such a disruption since the 1989 student protests. In such a situation, the regime-critical diaspora can play an important role by intervening in the rebellion.

Using Moss's typology of diaspora intervention, the first three interventions, *broadcasting*, *representing*, and *brokering*, were widespread among the interviewees.

Some interviewees have been successful in spreading information, lobbying Swedish and international politicians, and organising internationally. Two of the interventions, *remittances* and *volunteering on the front lines*, were far less common. This too can be explained by the Chinese regime's strong capacity for surveillance and control. In the absence of a quotidian disruption such as the Tiananmen protest or, to a lesser extent, the Blank Paper Protest, it is unlikely that diaspora interventions will have a major impact on the political situation in China.

Nevertheless, diaspora activism can still make a difference in individual cases. The Chinese regime cares about outside criticism; its massive TNR policy to silence the diaspora is evidence of that. Several interviewees pointed to the importance of maintaining media attention on the human rights situation in China in general and on individual cases in particular. They said that without the attention that cases such as those of jailed friends or relatives received, the victims of repression in China would suffer even worse consequences. There are also examples of how activism has influenced laws and policies in Sweden, for instance when it comes to the refugee status of Uyghurs.

China will most likely continue to expand its TNR. It will be of increasing importance for liberal democracies such as Sweden to maintain focus on how to guard against TNR, to ensure the safety of refugees, and to make sure that members of the diaspora can continue their lawful political activities.

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How to analyse and understand authoritarian regimes' transnational repression (TNR) of the diaspora has become an urgent focus for researchers and policymakers in liberal democracies, not only out of concern for the diaspora community, but also because of how it may affect politics in these countries. Yet, the diaspora is not simply a passive victim of TNR but consists of actors with agency. While China's TNR affects and shapes how the diaspora acts, diaspora activism also shapes the actions of the Chinese regime.

This study examines China's regime critical diaspora. Based on interviews with 16 regime-critical individuals with roots in China who live in Sweden, the study presents their unique experiences of TNR, their different ways of dealing with it, and their political activism.