

SINOPSIS

**Mapping CCP
Transnational
Repression in Japan:
*From Self-censorship to
Institutional Pressure***

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1. Abstract

This paper examines the mechanisms and impacts of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) transnational repression in Japan through fourteen semi-structured interviews conducted between July and November 2024. Our research reveals systematic patterns of surveillance, harassment, and institutional pressure targeting Chinese nationals, ethnic minorities, academics, and critics of the CCP. The study identifies three key dimensions of repression: direct intimidation, societal and institutional pressure, and impacts on academic freedom and expression. Findings indicate that CCP-linked actors employ sophisticated networks for information gathering and monitoring, often operating through seemingly legitimate organizations and utilizing both digital and physical surveillance methods.

2. Introduction

China's overseas police stations and transnational repression activities have garnered significant international attention in recent years. In 2022, the NGO Safeguard Defenders released a groundbreaking report titled "110 Overseas: Chinese Transnational Policing Gone Wild",¹ which exposed the existence of numerous Chinese police stations operating extraterritorially, primarily in Europe. This revelation prompted investigations and diplomatic responses from several countries. For instance, the Irish and Dutch governments ordered the closure of unauthorized Chinese police stations in their territory, while Canada launched investigations into reported stations in Toronto.

These actions reflect the growing concern over China's extraterritorial reach. Concurrently, Freedom House's 2021 report "Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach"² detailed China's global campaign against diaspora communities, highlighting cases such as the abduction of Swedish citizen Gui Minhai from Thailand. The use of digital technologies in these operations has also come under scrutiny, with reports of China leveraging platforms like WeChat to monitor and intimidate users abroad.³ These patterns reflect a broader shift in how authoritarian states attempt to control political expression beyond their borders, raising questions about sovereignty, civil liberties, and global governance.

The concept of transnational repression plays a crucial role in understanding how authoritarian regimes, such as China, extend their influence beyond their borders. It describes the actions of authoritarian governments that expand their control methods outside their borders to target dissidents, critics, and expatriates residing in other countries.⁴

¹ Safeguard Defenders, "110 Overseas: Chinese Transnational Policing Gone Wild", 2022, [online](#).

² Schenkan, N., & Linzer, I., "Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach: The Global Scale and Scope of Transnational Repression". *Freedom House*, 76, 2021, [online](#).

³ Office of Public Affairs, "40 Officers of China's National Police Charged in Transnational Repression Schemes Targeting U.S. Residents," *U.S. Department of Justice*, April 17, 2023, [online](#).

⁴ Gerasimos Tsourapas, "Global Autocracies: Strategies of Transnational Repression, Legitimation, and Co-Optation in World Politics," *International Studies Review* 23, no. 3 (2021): 616–44, [online](#).



Rather than being limited to spectacular incidents, recent scholarship emphasises that transnational repression often operates through subtle and everyday mechanisms, including digital surveillance, community monitoring, and pressure mediated by institutions in host countries. This perspective is crucial for examining how authoritarian influence adapts to democratic environments where coercion must remain discreet.

According to Glasius, transnational repression refers to “the exercise of a regime’s power to suppress voices in a target population beyond its borders”.⁵ This can include methods such as surveillance, intimidation, or even drastic actions, like kidnapping or assassination plots.⁶ Transnational repression from authoritarian countries often takes the form of what Østergaard-Nielsen called “long-distance policing” in her work on the persecution of Turks and Kurds in Germany.⁷ In this way, Chinese communities and individuals who criticize the CCP government are monitored, intimidated, and occasionally pressured, even if they are not physically in China. In addition, technological advancements have greatly empowered these regimes to enforce control internationally, thereby increasing the effectiveness of transnational repression.⁸ While the overseas police stations have gained international attention, this is only one expression of the intricate system that the CCP has deployed to control its citizens abroad, as well as minorities and dissident groups mobilizing their diaspora groups⁹—for example, the Uyghur community has been subjected to “indiscriminate” ethnic persecution abroad.¹⁰ At the same time, Hongkongers face consequences from the recent implementation of the National Security Law in 2021, even when they migrate to democratic countries such as the UK.¹¹

Japan is located geographically close to China and has become a destination for Chinese students due to its increased quality of living and cultural similarities.¹² Moreover, the Chinese diaspora is the largest in Japan, representing 27% of all foreign residents in 2020.¹³ Given the size of this population, Japan is

⁵ Marlies Glasius, “Extraterritorial Authoritarian Practices: A Framework,” *Globalizations* 15, no. 2 (2018): 179–97, [online](#).

⁶ Alexander Dukalskis et al., “Transnational Repression: Data Advances, Comparisons, and Challenges,” *Political Research Exchange* 4, no. 1 (2022): 2104651, [online](#).

⁷ Eva Østergaard-Nielsen, *Transnational Politics: The Case of Turks and Kurds in Germany*. London: Routledge, 2003, [online](#).

⁸ Marcus Michaelsen, *The Digital Transnational Repression Toolkit, and Its Silencing Effects*, Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2020; Joanna Smetek et al., *Digital Technologies as a Means of Repression and Social Control*, Brussels: European Parliament, Policy Department for External Relations, 2021.

⁹ Kennedy Chi-Pan Wong, “Sowing Hate, Cultivating Loyalists: Mobilizing Repressive Nationalist Diasporas for Transnational Repression by the PRC Regime,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 68, no. 12 (2024): 1655–78, [online](#).

¹⁰ Edward Lemon, Bradley Jardine, and Natalie Hall, “Globalizing Minority Persecution: China’s Transnational Repression of the Uyghurs,” *Globalizations* 20, no. 4 (2023): 564–80, [online](#).

¹¹ Fung Tsui and Shui Yu, *Activism in the Face of Repression: UK Universities as Allies for Hong Kong Activist Students and Academics*, UNESCO Chair Working Paper, York: University of York, 2023.

¹² Jamie Coates, “‘Unseeing’ Chinese Students in Japan: Understanding Educationally Channelled Migrant Experiences,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 44, no. 3 (2015): 125–54, [online](#); Gracia Liu-Farrer, “Chinese Newcomers in Japan: Migration Trends, Profiles and the Impact of the 2011 Earthquake,” *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 22, no. 2 (2013): 231–57, [online](#).

¹³ “在留外国人統計（旧登録外国人統計）月次 2020 年 12 月,” 政府統計の総合窓口 (e-Stat), 2020, [online](#).



a plausible site for the forms of monitoring documented elsewhere, which is what makes it worth examining empirically. At a political level, concerns have been raised in public and policy debate about direct and indirect pressure from the CCP, misinformation campaigns, and the extent of authoritarian influence from Beijing more broadly. These concerns are particularly salient in academia, where such practices may indirectly affect freedom of expression and academic work through anticipated risk or self-censorship.

When analysing the existing literature on overseas repression, as well as in public discussions and the media discourse, we found that Japan has been kept at the margins of research and practical actions on transnational repression. This absence is surprising given Japan's deep economic, academic, and social ties with China, which should make it an important site for studying how repression is adapted to democratic contexts. Anecdotal reports suggest that forms of intimidation may occur, but establishing this requires systematic evidence rather than isolated accounts, which is the motivation for the present investigation.

In a more structured work and source of evidence, the NGO Human Rights Watch recently gathered testimonies to shed light on this issue. In their report,¹⁴ they focus on minorities and dissidents from China and Hong Kong residing in Japan, documenting that despite the overall sense of security in the country, there are accounts of repressive practices that limit Chinese citizens' freedom of expression.

However, existing reports do not explain how repression is mediated through Japanese institutions or social norms, nor how it affects individuals who are not outspoken activists. This gap makes Japan a valuable case for understanding how authoritarian influence can be softened, normalised, and embedded within democratic societies.

In this paper, we consider the extensive and heterogeneous nature of the Chinese community in Japan, as well as students, academics, activists, and journalists who have been critical of the CCP and who are not part of the Chinese diaspora.

This article therefore examines how Chinese transnational repression is experienced and adapted within Japan. Rather than asking simply how the CCP represses dissidents, it investigates how repression becomes indirect, socially mediated, and normalised in a democratic setting. We ask: How does the Chinese Communist Party adapt its transnational repression practices within Japan's democratic environment, and through what institutional and social mechanisms are these practices enacted?

To achieve this, we resort to interviews with a sample of Chinese students, journalists, activists, and members of academia. We garnered the profiles by snowball method of recommendation, but we needed to be more deeply informed of the interviewee's experiences and political background in advance.

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch. (2024, October 9). *Japan: Chinese Authorities Harass Critics Abroad* | Human Rights Watch, [online](#).



Fourteen interviews were conducted between July 18, 2024, and November 8, 2024, in Japanese, English, and Chinese language, in a semi-structured manner. Not all interviewees reported direct threats; several instead described institutional barriers and self-censorship, which is analytically significant because repression can operate through fear and anticipation rather than explicit coercion. We also consider the experiences of Chinese students who were not subjected to pressure but self-censored and took personal measures for their safety.

We recognize the limitations of this exploratory piece, which rests on participant testimony rather than on documentary or official evidence. Still, interviewees who were not connected to one another offered broadly consistent narratives, and we have refrained from building claims on isolated anecdotes, focusing instead on patterns recurring across accounts. In the conclusions of this paper, we present possible lines to deepen this research and actions to be taken in this regard. Although some might argue that the state of transnational repression in Japan has not reached levels of violence as those experienced in other countries, this paper sheds light on a phenomenon that has overall remained invisible. The subtle but institutionalized pressure on democratic activists in these countries can easily escalate if unpunished. Therefore, we establish a framework for analysis, but also a record of the state of the art on this issue in East Asia, despite assumptions of Japanese resilience in this regard. We expect this to establish an overall coherent framework that can be utilised to further the exploration of cases of transnational repression in Japan and other countries that experience similar conditions.

3. Theoretical Framework

Existing research on political repression shows that controlling dissent rarely depends only on overt coercion. Authoritarian governments also rely on institutional arrangements, informal pressures, and social expectations that shape what individuals believe can be safely expressed.¹⁵ This insight is central to understanding how repression extends beyond state borders. Transnational repression can be seen as the continuation of domestic control strategies, adapted to new environments where governments lack direct jurisdiction.

Within this literature, scholars argue that repression abroad is not simply exported violence. Rather, it often works through channels that blur state and society. Glasius conceptualises this as the exercise of state power across borders,¹⁶ while earlier work by Østergaard-Nielsen highlights how states mobilise communities, organisations, and diaspora networks to discipline critics from afar.¹⁷ More recent studies emphasise digital monitoring, informal coercion, and the involvement of non-state actors, including student associations, cultural groups, and technology platforms, which can reproduce state influence

¹⁵ Lynette H. Ong, *Outsourcing Repression: Everyday State Power in Contemporary China*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2022.

¹⁶ Glasius M., "Extraterritorial Authoritarian Practices: a framework," *Globalizations* 15(2), 2018, 179-197, [online](#).

¹⁷ Østergaard-Nielsen E., *Transnational Politics: The case of Turks and Kurds in Germany*, Routledge, 2004.



without explicit direction.¹⁸ These perspectives point to a form of repression that becomes embedded in everyday practices rather than solely enforced through obvious state action.

Guided by this scholarship, the present analysis examines transnational repression as a set of practices that adapt to the opportunities and constraints of the host society. The interview material gathered for this study suggests that repression, as participants experienced and described it, operates through three interrelated mechanisms. The first is coercive pressure, involving surveillance, intimidation, or the targeting of family members in China. The second is institutional complicity, in which universities, student associations, or other organisations enable or tolerate pressure, sometimes unintentionally, because of political sensitivities or dependencies. The third is self-censorship and internalised control, where individuals limit their expression due to anticipated risks rather than direct threats. Taken together, these mechanisms offer a way to analyse how authoritarian influence is sustained through diffuse and ordinary interactions, even in democratic settings.

4. Methodology

This study is based on fourteen semi-structured interviews conducted between July and November 2024 with individuals who have either experienced, witnessed, or worked in proximity to transnational repression linked to the CCP in Japan. Interviewees included students, academics, journalists, and activists of Japanese, Chinese, and Hong Kong origin. This diversity was intentional, as repression often affects not only outspoken dissidents but also those who study China, report on related issues, or share workspaces with affected groups.

Participants were recruited through a combination of professional networks and snowball sampling. Several initial contacts introduced the researchers to other potential interviewees, reflecting the reluctance of many to openly discuss sensitive political issues without personal referrals. Because informal networks played a significant role in access, the sample does not claim statistical representation. Instead, it aims to capture the variety of ways repression is experienced, perceived, and internalised among people whose work or identity makes them vulnerable to CCP scrutiny.

Interviews were conducted online and in person, depending on each interviewee's availability, preference, and assessment of personal risk. Conversations took place in Japanese, English, or Chinese, and interviewees were given the option to choose the language in which they felt most comfortable. All participants were informed of the purpose of this research, assured full anonymity, and assigned pseudonyms. No interviewees were asked to disclose information that could put them or their families at risk; any topic that generated discomfort was not pursued further. These ethical precautions were necessary because, for some participants, fear of repercussions extended to relatives living in China.

¹⁸ Dukalskis et al., "Transnational Repression"; Michaelsen, *Digital Transnational Repression Toolkit*; Lemon, Jardine, and Hall, "Globalizing Minority Persecution"; Tsourapas, "Global Autocracies."



Interview data was analysed inductively. After transcription and close reading, thematic patterns were identified across cases. These patterns consistently aligned with three mechanisms through which repression operated in Japan: coercive pressure, institutional complicity, and self-censorship. These categories were not imposed in advance but emerged through repeated narratives across interviewees with different professional and social backgrounds. Analytically, this approach draws on elements of narrative inquiry, which privileges participants' own ordering of events and interpretations, enabling the identification of patterns across individual accounts without predetermining their structure.¹⁹ In this sense, the analysis draws from grounded elements of the testimonies while connecting them to broader debates on authoritarian practices beyond national borders.

5. Findings: Mechanisms of Transnational Repression in Japan

5.1. Coercive Pressure: Direct Intimidation and Surveillance

5.1.1 Direct Harassment and Spam Calls

This subsection examines how phone calls and online harassment functions as a form of coercive pressure that extends state-linked control into everyday life. Across the interviews, participants consistently described a pattern of unsolicited phone calls and online harassment directed at them and, in several cases, their families, which they interpreted as a form of transnational repression. As reported, this harassment arrived through automated calls and through direct contact by police in China. Participants understood this as a form of pressure extending beyond the targeted individuals to their relatives.

Reports of harassment frequently involve phone calls that interviewees suspected were linked to the Chinese embassy, an experience described by several participants. For example, a Japanese university professor (Professor 1) was reached by robot calls claiming to be from the embassy, and she promptly blocked them out of concern for privacy and security reasons.²⁰ Interviewees interpreted this recurring pattern of automated calls as intended to unsettle recipients while obscuring the origin of the calls; who placed them could not be independently verified. Similarly, a Japanese journalist (Journalist 1) investigating China's overseas operations described a troubling pattern of harassment, which she believes to be a form of transnational repression by China. Over a single day, she received eight calls from anonymous numbers. Most callers spoke a language she could not understand, which she took to be Chinese, and did not switch to English or Japanese. She could not confirm whether any caller was connected to the Chinese government, but considered it likely given the nature of her investigative work. One of the calls featured a mechanical voice instructing her to "come to the Chinese embassy to pick up items." Taken alongside other accounts in the sample, this suggests that such calls are not confined to Chinese nationals, but also reach non-Chinese journalists reporting on sensitive issues and academics

¹⁹ Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008.

²⁰ Professor 1 (Japanese professor of Chinese studies), in-person interview, July 19, 2024.



working on related topics. Journalist 1 chose not to answer most of the calls but reported that their frequency and content had left her concerned for her safety.²¹

For Chinese nationals, the harassment often extends to family members remaining in China, creating additional pressure through familial connections. A particularly illustrative account comes from Professor 1, who reported that a student of hers from Inner Mongolia had been told that police officers contacted the student's parents in China, pressuring the student to discontinue their research.²² Similarly, Student 1 described how one of his friends received calls from Chinese police through the friend's parents, demanding cessation of participation in social movements.²³ Activist 1, a Uyghur activist, reported hearing of several cases in which members of his community received calls from China in which, as he understood it, police pressed family members to ask them to stop participating in movements critical of the Chinese government. Activist 1 himself received similar messages when attempting to contact his family in Xinjiang.²⁴ Interviewees consistently interpreted this family-directed pressure as a deliberate use of familial relationships as leverage. Accounts of direct contact by police in China represent a further element of the pattern described by participants. Student 1 recounted that police officers from his hometown in China contacted him directly after he arrived in Japan, though he remained uncertain how they had obtained his Japanese contact information. He recalled that the conversation ended with a warning to "be careful," which he understood both as confirmation that he was being watched and as an implicit threat.

Some of these tactics rely on hiding the origin of the caller. A former Hong Kong politician, Activist 2, reported receiving harassment calls that displayed numbers from the United States and Canada, which she took to indicate spoofing. These calls often came at midnight, which she interprets as a deliberate attempt to cause psychological distress through sleep disruption.²⁵

Interviewees often struggled to conclusively link these calls to specific state agencies, yet they interpreted them as authoritative and potentially dangerous. This ambiguity is itself part of the coercive effect; as Glasius argues, extraterritorial repression does not depend on clear proof of state responsibility, but on the perception that the state can reach individuals abroad.²⁶ In this sense, the combination of anonymous calls, pressure on family members, and implied threats functions within these accounts as a form of coercive pressure, and it is notable that it was described not only by vocal activists but also by academics, journalists, and students in Japan.

5.1.2. Surveillance and Monitoring

Accounts of in-person surveillance describe a form of coercive pressure that leaves activists and members of ethnic minorities in Japan with the sense that they are being watched even outside China. The interview data indicate a recurring pattern of monitoring that participants described as combining overt and covert techniques, contributing to an atmosphere of persistent unease. Activist 1, an Uyghur

²¹ Journalist 1 (Japanese journalist reporting on Chinese overseas operations), in-person interview, November 8, 2024.

²² Professor 1 (Japanese professor of Chinese studies), in-person interview, July 19, 2024.

²³ Student 1 (Chinese student in Japan), in-person interview, July 23, 2024.

²⁴ Activist 1 (Uyghur activist), in-person interview, July 18, 2024.

²⁵ Activist 2 (Hong Kong activist, researcher, and former politician), in-person interview, July 24, 2024.

²⁶ Glasius, "Extraterritorial Authoritarian Practices".



activist, related a serious incident reported to him by a member of his community: a Chinese man in Japan approached the man's daughter at her school and asked her to telephone her father, then used the call to press the community member to work as an informant for the Chinese government. As Activist 1 understood the episode, approaching the daughter at school was itself a demonstration that the family could be reached. He also described incidents in which individuals he suspected of acting on behalf of Chinese authorities sought to join Uyghur organisations in order to collect information, and he emphasised that the monitoring he perceived was directed not only at individuals but at ethnic and political groups.²⁷ This account resonates with a further report of monitoring involving a Hong Kong activist group in Osaka. From the start of their event, participants recalled noticing several individuals stationed outside the venue whom they believed to be observing them. The activists said they identified these individuals by their dress, which they associated with people carrying out tasks on behalf of the CCP, and by their behaviour; having encountered comparable surveillance in Hong Kong, they interpreted the signs as familiar. They reported that when they walked to a restaurant after the event, the same group followed and remained outside. Such accounts suggest that participants experience surveillance as continuous with practices they knew in Hong Kong rather than as isolated, country-specific incidents, though the interviews cannot establish who these individuals were or on whose instruction they acted.

Photography features prominently in these accounts and was reported consistently across different activist groups. Activist 1 described recurring instances of unidentified individuals photographing participants at public demonstrations. Student 1 likewise reported that people followed and photographed participants during protest activities, and understood these photographers to have been paid by Chinese nationals, though he could not verify this.²⁸ Activist 2 reported that individuals she identified as pro-CCP journalists attempted to photograph her at her workplace.²⁹ Activist 3, a Hong Kong activist, likewise described being photographed and confronted during demonstrations.³⁰ Several interviewees independently described unidentified individuals attending events in order to photograph attendees and the material presented, a pattern that we were able to observe directly during a Hong Kong-related event at a national university in July 2024. In that incident, for which we hold photographic and documentary records, an attendee photographed activists, presentations, and sensitive material and forwarded the images to a contact on WeChat before being asked to leave the event.

In these accounts, the intimidating effect of surveillance is amplified where monitoring appears deliberately visible. Several participants described being watched by people who made no effort to conceal themselves, as in Activist 2's account of individuals she believed to be affiliated with the Ministry of Public Security waiting outside a restaurant. Activist 1's description of counter-protests that he believed to have been organised by the Chinese embassy, in which paid participants confronted Uyghur demonstrators, illustrates how, in participants' experience, observation can shade into direct confrontation.³¹

Participants described lasting psychological effects. Professor 1 recounted developing the habit of checking whether she was being followed and taking evasive routes while walking.³² Activist 1 reported

²⁷ Activist 1 (Uyghur activist), in-person interview, July 18, 2024.

²⁸ Student 1 (Chinese student in Japan), in-person interview, July 23, 2024.

²⁹ Activist 2 (Hong Kong activist, researcher, and former politician), in-person interview, July 24, 2024.

³⁰ Activist 3 (Hong Kong activist), in-person interview, July 25, 2024.

³¹ Activist 1 (Uyghur activist), in-person interview, July 18, 2024.

³² Professor 1 (Japanese professor of Chinese studies), in-person interview, July 19, 2024.



that he and his community had adapted their organisational practices, becoming more cautious about admitting new members and introducing security measures at their events. These accounts indicate that, even in a democratic context, the anticipation of surveillance shapes everyday behaviour in the absence of any explicit sanction.³³

The intensity of surveillance fluctuates with political events and public activism. Activist 3 recalled heightened surveillance during 2019–2020, coinciding with the Hong Kong protests, while Activist 1 described ongoing monitoring that he perceived to intensify around community events and public demonstrations. As described by participants, this variable intensity reinforces the coercive effect by tracking moments of visibility and political salience.

Across interviews, participants shared an expectation that their activism would be documented and potentially reported to authorities. As Glasius argues, extraterritorial repression is effective not because direct violence occurs abroad, but because the perception of reach constrains behaviour.³⁴ In Japan, visible surveillance works as coercive pressure by signalling that distance from China does not eliminate political risk.

5.2. Institutional Complicity and Domestic Reactions to Chinese Influence

5.2.1. Academic Institutions

This subsection examines how universities can become indirect channels of transnational repression, not by issuing threats themselves, but by anticipating political sensitivities connected to China. The interview data also point to a recurring pattern of institutional pressure within Japanese academia. As participants described it, this pressure comes from both CCP-related and Japanese organizations, operates through several channels and bears on academic freedom and research activity related to China.

Academics of Chinese, Japanese, and other nationalities described particular challenges arising from their research. Several interviewees attributed setbacks in career advancement to networks of influence they associated with the CCP. Professor 2, at a national university, reported that her pre-nomination to a senior post within the institution was withdrawn; while she cannot establish causation, she attributes this primarily to her research on Chinese affairs. Professor 1 similarly described being professionally marginalised when her profile was removed from the university's Chinese studies website. Neither account can be independently corroborated, but both are consistent with a dynamic in which institutions distance themselves pre-emptively from politically sensitive scholarship.

Collaborative research is described as similarly constrained. Several interviewees reported that colleagues had withdrawn from joint research or declined to have their names appear on reports out of

³³ Activist 1 (Uyghur activist), in-person interview, July 18, 2024.

³⁴ Glasius, "Extraterritorial Authoritarian Practices".



concern for their continued access to China. Professor 2 explained that even supportive colleagues decline formal collaboration to protect their ability to conduct future research in China.³⁵

Participants also described pressures on students in the classroom, which they observed to vary with the surrounding community. Professor 3's observations are instructive here. In his experience, mainland Chinese students in the social sciences tend to be more critical of the CCP than those in STEM fields, while short-term exchange students are typically more vocal in supporting official Chinese positions than full-time international students. These are impressions formed over years of teaching rather than systematic findings. His account that his university had shared lists of student attendees with the Chinese embassy, if accurate, would raise serious concerns about institutional monitoring; we were not able to verify it independently.³⁶

The account of Student 4 illustrates how views of academic freedom can shift. Initially, she was unconcerned and said she could discuss a range of topics in China and Japan without feeling restricted. She also believed she would be safe if she refrained from leading large-scale movements or actions. She began to question this view when she was approached through a government office responsible for managing relations between Japan and China. The officials advised her to stop her research topic, citing concerns about the relationship between the two countries. The fact that the pressure she described came from Japanese rather than Chinese authorities is significant, suggesting that constraints on research may be transmitted through several institutional avenues.³⁷ Her account resonates with those of other academics who reported that their publications and career prospects had been affected by their positions on CCP-related issues. For Professor 4, it came in the form of a recommendation to change his dissertation topic away from US-China relations for reputational and security reasons;³⁸ other academics described top-down decisions limiting their public visibility; Professor 1 attributed the removal of her profile from the research website to the same dynamic, though this could not be independently verified.

Organising academic events emerged as a further site of difficulty. Professor 1 reported obstacles in inviting activists and researchers,³⁹ while Professor 2 described professional isolation after organising Hong Kong-related events.⁴⁰ These accounts point to both administrative barriers and social costs attached to engagement with sensitive topics. Interviewees also identified institutional relationships with Chinese universities as a pressure point. Professor 2's account of her university's expanding ties with Renmin University, which she attributed to a "strong power inside the university," suggests how such relationships may bear on academic independence. Professor 3 likewise pointed to the presence of Confucius Institutes and to longstanding institutional ties as complicating factors.

³⁵ Professor 2 (professor of international relations), in-person interview, July 26, 2024.

³⁶ Professor 3 (professor of media studies), in-person interview, July 31, 2024.

³⁷ Student 4 (Chinese student in Japan; former government official and CCP member), in-person interview, September 26, 2024.

³⁸ Professor 4 (professor of international relations), in-person interview, August 2, 2024.

³⁹ Professor 1 (Japanese professor of Chinese studies), in-person interview, July 19, 2024.

⁴⁰ Professor 2 (professor of international relations), in-person interview, July 26, 2024.



The interviews reveal varying institutional responses to Chinese influence across Japanese universities, highlighting tensions between academic freedom and institutional interests. Professor 2's account of her own institution suggests a prioritisation of institutional relationships. Despite serving as assistant vice president for international affairs, she was, in her account, deliberately excluded from an event involving a Renmin University figure known to her for a record of student surveillance, and she reported that the administration instructed students and professors to "stand up and clap" during the visit. She also noted that the president had been "treated 'very good'" on his own visit to Renmin University and drew a connection between such hospitality and subsequent institutional decisions. Reporting on a colleague at another university, she described a case in which "the university tried to censor her because the university depends a lot on Chinese students." These are second-hand and interpretive accounts, but they indicate how participants understand economic dependencies to bear on protections for academic freedom.

Professor 3 drew a sharp contrast between Western and Japanese approaches to Chinese influence. In his view, Western institutions tend to confront these issues directly, whereas Japanese institutions prioritise harmony and the maintenance of relationships, producing what he described as a "complex environment for academic freedom." This comparison is his own, and the present study did not examine Western cases; it is offered here as a hypothesis worth testing, namely that norms of conflict avoidance and institutional harmony may accommodate subtler forms of control.

Taken together, these accounts are consistent with what scholars describe as institutional complicity—a process through which universities reproduce the effects of transnational repression by acting cautiously, protecting funding or partnerships, and anticipating political risks. On the evidence of these interviews, academic freedom is constrained less through direct coercion than through routine administrative decisions and professional calculations that align, whether intentionally or not, with CCP preferences.

5.2.2. Chinese Student Associations

Chinese Student Associations (CSAs) occupy a central place in participants' accounts of what we characterise as institutional complicity. Interviewees repeatedly described these associations as intermediaries between students and actors they understood to be linked to the Chinese state, and as facilitating forms of monitoring that they regarded as exceeding ordinary student-group activity. It should be emphasised that this characterisation rests on participants' perceptions and second-hand knowledge rather than on documentary evidence of the associations' internal organisation.

Student 1's testimony is the most explicit on the connections he perceived between these associations and Chinese authorities. According to his experience with Chinese friends from a Japanese Language School, "the spy web of Chinese students in other Japanese Universities is deeply rooted and has strong



influences. The Chinese embassy has connections with some of the students' associations."⁴¹ Professor 3 also described his experience at the university, noting that "they will occasionally invite or have members from the embassy or CCP going to their event to give a talk."⁴² On the basis of these accounts, interviewees described the associations as connected to the embassy and, in some cases, to the Chinese Ministry of Public Security, and as organised in the manner set out in Figure 1, which reflects these interviewees' accounts. Several interviewees also reported that members were financially incentivised to take part, describing payments of between ten and thirty thousand yen for active participation in activities. Professor 4 narrated in his interview that one of his Chinese acquaintances in Japan got in touch with him when he was still a student at a Japanese University. He presumed that he had been approached because he had never stated his political position publicly and because his father worked at a public university in China, which may have led the acquaintance to assume he would be receptive. He was offered work assigned by the student association at his institution. He refused the offer, but that acquaintance continued cooperating with the association and ended up having a close professional connection with the embassy. According to Professor 4, the student accepted a "scholarship" from the Chinese government that improved his circumstances in Japan and subsequently obtained a government post in China. As recounted, this trajectory suggests how CSAs may function as recruitment and vetting mechanisms for politically reliable students, although a single account cannot establish that this is their general role.

[Figure_1]

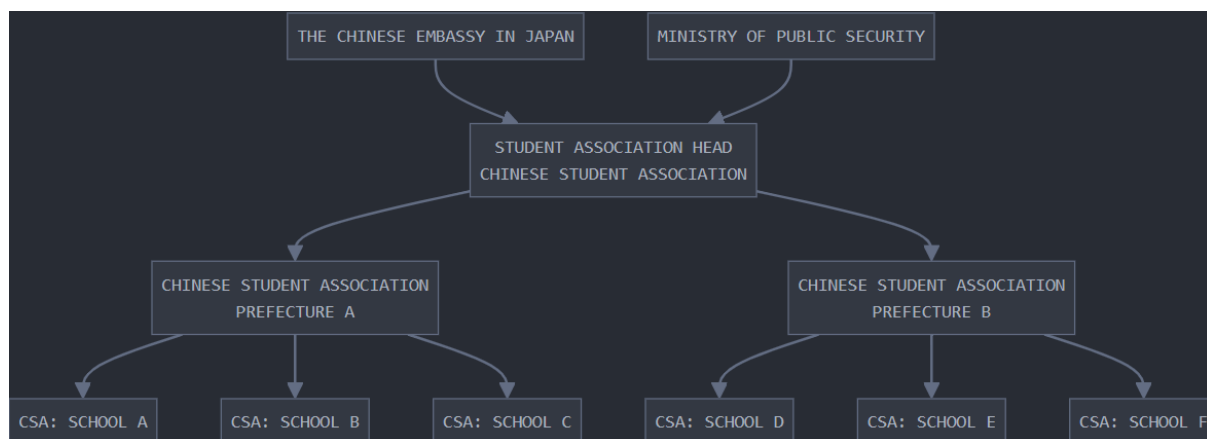


Figure 1. Structure of Chinese Student Associations in Japan and their connections with the Chinese Government. (Professor 4, In Person, August 2, 2024, Interviews; Student 1 in Japan, In Person, July 23, 2024, Interviews).

Interviewees identified WeChat as central to the coordination they described. Professor 2 reported learning from her students of a WeChat group close to the embassy that is giving instructions to the

⁴¹ Student 1 (Chinese student in Japan), in-person interview, July 23, 2024.

⁴² Professor 3 (professor of media studies), in-person interview, July 31, 2024.



students. A researcher at the same university gave a corresponding account, and both understood such channels to permit rapid mobilisation and information sharing.⁴³ Similarly, Student 1 noted that the student group chat continuously had Chinese members joining to survey activities and conversations, which forced everyone inside to become anonymous and even cover their faces when they attended events, something not often discussed in the Japanese environment.⁴⁴

Professor 3's account of his own university speaks to the perceived reach of these networks. He reported that some years earlier the institution had allegedly shared lists of student attendees at events with the Chinese embassy, which he read as institutional cooperation in monitoring; the claim could not be independently verified.⁴⁵ Other scholars express that they carefully navigate relationships with fellow Chinese and deliberately avoid interacting with student associations.⁴⁶

Taken together, these testimonies suggest that CSAs are experienced as part of a layered oversight structure resembling what Glasius describes as "long-distance authoritarian governance."⁴⁷ Within this sample, student associations appear as a vehicle of institutional complicity in which incentives, ideological vetting, and embassy contact extend the CCP's capacity to observe and influence behaviour on Japanese campuses. What participants describe is not overt coercion but a dense environment of observation that shapes how students speak, organise, and interact.

5.3. Self-Censorship and its Impact on Academic Freedom and Expression

5.3.1. Self-Censorship

Self-censorship recurs across the interviews with Chinese dissidents, academics, and students in Japan, including among students with no connection to political activity. These accounts illustrate how repression may operate indirectly, shaping behaviour through anticipated consequences rather than direct threats. Participants described an academic environment in which the perceived presence of CCP-linked entities and individuals affects how Chinese students relate to fellow nationals and how they express themselves inside and outside the classroom. Although none of the students in this sample reported being directly threatened, three said they avoid controversial opinions in class discussions and are wary of forming close ties with other Chinese students, and reported having witnessed peers harassed within their circles, particularly in the context of Japanese language schools.⁴⁸

Student 2's testimony offers a particularly nuanced view of everyday self-censorship. Although he has lived in Japan for five years, he remains careful about whom he speaks to and avoids political discussion, preferring economic subjects. He acknowledged not feeling entirely safe in conversation, at times even

⁴³ Professor 2 (professor of international relations), in-person interview, July 26, 2024. Professor 4 (professor of international relations), in-person interview, August 2, 2024.

⁴⁴ Student 1 (Chinese student in Japan), in-person interview, July 23, 2024.

⁴⁵ Professor 3 (professor of media studies), in-person interview, July 31, 2024.

⁴⁶ Professor 4 (professor of international relations), in-person interview, August 2, 2024.

⁴⁷ Glasius, "Extraterritorial Authoritarian Practices".

⁴⁸ Student 1 (Chinese student in Japan), in-person interview, July 23, 2024. Student 2 (Chinese graduate student in Japan), remote interview, August 8, 2024. Student 3 (Chinese student in Japan), remote interview, August 9, 2024.



with close friends, and said he refrains from voicing criticism even when he holds strong views. His case is telling because he self-censors not only with Chinese nationals but also with Japanese interlocutors, out of concern about nationalist views. He avoids other Chinese students as a protective measure, while remaining conscious that he is Chinese and holds a Chinese passport.⁴⁹ Accounts of this kind indicate how social distance and mistrust can make it difficult for Chinese students to form supportive peer networks, even among those of similar background.

Student 3 described similar experiences. Although she has not been pressured directly, she avoids specific topics and limits her contact with other Chinese students.⁵⁰ Student 1 also described holding back his thoughts when conversing with Chinese citizens and even with his “buddies,” avoiding revealing personal opinions “until others had expressed their perspective.” This behaviour also carries over to other contexts; he finds it challenging to express himself openly during class discussions out of concern about being targeted.⁵¹

Taken together, these accounts indicate that self-censorship in this sample operates through internalised caution and strategic silence, bearing on both individual expression and community relationships. What emerges is a narrowing of what individuals feel able to say or do, and a corresponding contraction of the space for free expression in the absence of any explicit intervention.

5.3.2. Information Gathering, Mistrust, and the Anticipation of Surveillance

The interviews point to recurring patterns of information gathering directed at activists, academics, and diaspora communities in Japan. As described, these practices resemble what scholars’ term “soft surveillance,” in which the collection of information operates less through overt coercion than through the uncertainty and psychological pressure it generates. One Japanese professor described encounters with “Chinese nationals asking her about her connection with Chinese research and activists,” including an occasion on which someone sought background information about a German journalist. She interpreted these approaches as purposeful and coordinated.⁵²

Testimony from Hong Kong participants suggests a similar regularity. One activist recalled that acquaintances—former colleagues and friends from Hong Kong—travelled to Japan specifically to meet her every four to five months from 2023 onwards.⁵³ She did not regard these as isolated visits but as part of a pattern in which people from varied backgrounds approached her seeking similar information. Interviewees reported hearing of comparable cases among Taiwanese and Tibetan communities in Japan and among Hong Kong contacts in the United Kingdom and the United States.

Participants also described what they took to be organised attempts to penetrate community groups. Activist 2 alleges that, while her former colleagues and friends are no longer working in politics and activism, they still put considerable effort into contacting and seeking information about her activities.

⁴⁹ Student 2 (Chinese graduate student in Japan), remote interview, August 8, 2024.

⁵⁰ Student 3 (Chinese student in Japan), remote interview, August 9, 2024.

⁵¹ Student 1 (Chinese student in Japan), in-person interview, July 23, 2024.

⁵² Professor 1 (Japanese professor of Chinese studies), in-person interview, July 19, 2024.

⁵³ Activist 2 (Hong Kong activist, researcher, and former politician), in-person interview, July 24, 2024.



She believes some former members to be compromised, citing their appearances in pro-CCP media at the same time as they sought contact with the Hong Kong community in Japan. She further noted that, while other activists' families were subject to interrogation, the families of these individuals were not, which she read as evidence of coordination with the authorities. This is her inference from an observed asymmetry rather than a documented link.⁵⁴ A second interviewee (Activist 4) described the same episode in comparable terms.⁵⁵

Interviewees also raised concerns about digital infiltration. Alongside the WeChat monitoring described above, several reported threatening online behaviour. One Hong Kong activist reported receiving messages from numerous accounts that he judged to be inauthentic. He described Hong Kong activist communities in Japan as living with a persistent fear of infiltration, which in his account generates internal disputes, exclusions, and in some cases the collapse of democratic initiatives. In his interpretation, those he associates with the CCP seek not only to gather information, but also to erode community cohesion.⁵⁶ Activist 2, for her part, explained that she cannot confide in anyone because she cannot know whether they are working for the police or may be compromised later, and she described this condition as leaving lasting trauma and altering how activists relate to their communities.⁵⁷ On these accounts, the effect of suspected digital infiltration is internal fragmentation: solidarity is weakened and open communication curtailed, whether or not any given suspicion is well founded.

Taken together, these accounts suggest how information gathering can function as a form of transnational repression: not through direct punishment, but through uncertainty, mistrust, and the anticipation of surveillance. Notably, this effect does not depend on the accuracy of participants' suspicions in any individual case. Where trust within diaspora networks erodes, the conditions for self-censorship are created and collective political action is constrained—even in a democratic setting such as Japan.

6. Key Findings for the Chinese Transnational Repression in Japan.

We identified three mechanisms of transnational repression in the interview material: coercive pressure, institutional complicity, and self-censorship. These categories emerged inductively from participant narratives and structure the analysis above. They describe how repression is experienced and interpreted by those in this sample; the study is not designed to measure how widespread these experiences are among Chinese, Hong Kong, and other communities in Japan, nor to establish the chain of authority behind the incidents described.

Across the interviews, these mechanisms recurred, though participants described their intensity as varying across academic, social, and community settings in Japan. Most Chinese and Hong Kong interviewees reported experiences of pressure, surveillance, or indirect constraint. Monitoring that participants associated with the CCP was described as generating an atmosphere of suspicion and self-censorship among academics, and as producing a persistent sense of pressure for students of Chinese

⁵⁴ Activist 2 (Hong Kong activist, researcher, and former politician), in-person interview, July 24, 2024.

⁵⁵ Activist 4 (Hong Kong activist, student, and politician), in-person interview, September 23, 2024.

⁵⁶ Activist 4 (Hong Kong activist, student, and politician), in-person interview, September 23, 2024.

⁵⁷ Activist 2 (Hong Kong activist, researcher, and former politician), in-person interview, July 24, 2024.



nationality who had expected greater freedom under Japan's democratic institutions. Whether the individuals and organisations involved acted under direction from Chinese state bodies cannot be determined from interview evidence alone; what the data established is the consistency of the experience and its behavioural effects.

Not all interviewees reported experiencing direct harassment or intimidation. Several described avoiding political discussions, concealing opinions in academic settings, or restricting what they posted online despite never receiving explicit threats. This variation is analytically significant. The absence of direct repression does not necessarily indicate the absence of control; it may instead point to the internalisation of risk and the normalisation of caution. Such self-protection, particularly in academic spaces, forms part of a broader environment in which the possibility of surveillance shapes behaviour even without clear evidence of coercion. This aligns with research on authoritarian reach, which emphasises that repression often operates through anticipatory and indirect forms of control rather than overt coercion alone.

Together, these findings indicate that transnational repression as experienced by participants in Japan does not rely on overt violence. It is described instead as unfolding through layered pressures that reshape behaviour, restrict expression, and bear on academic institutions, producing a climate in which critics adjust their conduct in anticipation of possible repercussions. This is a claim about mechanism rather than magnitude: the interviews demonstrate that such pressures operate and show how they are experienced, but they cannot establish their prevalence across the Chinese and Hong Kong populations in Japan.

7. Limitation

While this research offers substantial testimonial evidence of transnational repression mechanisms and their effects in Japan, several limitations should be noted. The study documents and analyses how surveillance and pressure are manifested and experienced, as reported by participants. However, the internal organisational structure of these operations and their direct administrative links to Chinese government institutions remain outside our investigative reach. This is partly due to the deliberate opacity of CCP-linked networks, which often operate through informal intermediaries, diaspora organisations, or individuals whose institutional ties are intentionally obscured.

The opaque and decentralised nature of transnational repression systems means that while we can identify patterns and effects, the precise operational mechanics and chains of command within Chinese institutions are not accessible through our research methodology. Such limitations are characteristic of research on authoritarian influence, where access to documentation, personnel, and internal communication channels are structurally restricted. Interview-based research is particularly vulnerable to these constraints, as participants often cannot fully ascertain whether a given threat, call, or surveillance incident originates from the state, affiliated organisations, or independent actors sympathetic to the CCP. This ambiguity is itself part of how repression functions.



In addition, safety considerations restricted the types of questions that could be asked and the level of detail participants felt comfortable sharing. Some accounts may therefore underreport incidents out of caution or incomplete knowledge. Finally, because recruitment relied on personal networks, the study does not claim representativeness; instead, it offers insight into recurring dynamics experienced across different professional groups. It is true that compared to other studied nations, the Japan-occurring cases might not seem as urgent or violent; however, we argue that this research is not only a novel attempt at illustrating concerning behavior that is often ignored in the domestic space, but also a clear example of deeply rooted mechanisms of diaspora control, as well as pressure toward domestic actors such as professors, activists, and even students.

Despite these constraints, the accounts gathered here display consistent patterns that align with transnational repression practices documented elsewhere. This convergence lends plausibility to the view that the mechanisms identified reflect broader structural tendencies rather than isolated cases, though establishing that would require evidence beyond what interviews of this kind can provide.

8. Authors

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