

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## How the Beijing regime terrorises Chinese students abroad

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On May 13, UK-based human rights organization Amnesty International released a comprehensive report, titled, "[On my campus, I am afraid](#)", documenting what the report claimed to be the most extensive analysis thus far of the Chinese Communist

Party (CCP)'s transnational surveillance of overseas Chinese students. Notably, the report **labeled** the phenomenon of CCP surveillance, harassment and policing as transnational repression: "government actions to silence, control or deter dissent and criticism by nationals abroad, in violation of their human rights".

**Student interviewees mentioned in the report** had expressed their fears that they were being surveilled by either the CCP government or their agents. The report indicated CCP security officials harassed and intimidated families of overseas Chinese students deemed to be dissidents of the CCP back home in China. Moreover, Chinese "state surveillance of student activities overseas and censorship of their online expression" were other instances of CCP efforts to "curtail academic freedom and other rights" of overseas Chinese students, causing the latter to live and study "in a climate of fear", worrying that they would be "targeted under China and Hong Kong's national security and intelligence laws and regulations".

**One student, alluded to in the report as "Rowan,"** described how CCP security officials in China reached out to her father just hours after she had participated in a commemoration of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. These security officials instructed Rowan's father to "educate his daughter who is studying overseas not to attend any events that may harm China's reputation in the world." In response, Rowan expressed shock as to the speed and ability of the CCP regime to identify her and relay her movements to CCP officials back in China, as she had not disclosed her real identities at the commemoration nor posted online about her activities.

**More than a year later,** after attending a vigil near a Chinese diplomatic mission in her city, Rowan's father was informed about her overseas "activities". When interviewed, Rowan told Amnesty International that the message the CCP authorities wanted to give was clear: "You are being watched, and though we are on the other side of the planet, we can still reach you."

**Rowan's case is not an isolated one.** Other overseas Chinese students interviewed by Amnesty International admitted that "they self-censored to some degree in their expression, both online and offline, and in their activities – in some cases extensively – fearing repercussions from Chinese authorities".

**For instance, "Charlotte"** (pseudonym used by the Amnesty International report), acknowledged that due to fear of being pursued by the CCP regime, she had to avoid taking some politically sensitive classes in school: "I've done my best to avoid taking political classes where I know there will be other Chinese students, because I know that I

probably wouldn't be able to control myself and would probably say something that would get me in trouble."

**Likewise, student interviewees said their fears** of being harassed caused them to alter their academic interests. Students like "Logan" (pseudonym) who may have published their academic works related to human rights or politics chose not to do so for fear of reprisals: "If I didn't have these kinds of concerns, I would really want to publish my thesis, so that others would be aware of these issues. But I'm worried, so I chose not to."

**Also, "Alexandra",** a Chinese student in North America, described how her concerns being publicly identified by the CCP stopped her from pursuing certain academic topics. "There were times when I wanted to do certain research, but I felt I couldn't, for example researching social media and the impact of censorship. If I do an honors thesis then I have to do a public lecture and I can't do that... things I want to do. If I want to do research with [my university], to apply for a research grant, I would have to present publicly."

**Alexandra's fears were not unfounded,** as other students interviewed by Amnesty International noticed unknown individuals taking photographs of participants or presenters at events in apparent attempts to physically surveil them. The report illustrated: "One student attending a university workshop in 2019 about the Hong Kong anti-extradition law movement reported that some individuals, who they thought might be Chinese students, showed up and started taking photos of the presenter."

**Strikingly, the report contended** that almost one-third of interviewees claimed CCP officials had intimidated their families over their criticisms of the Chinese government, including threats to revoke their passports or to ruin their job opportunities. At least three students explained how CCP police coerced their families into not supporting them financially at all.

**For instance, the report illustrated the following:** "Uyghur students in the USA, whose parents were detained in camps as a part of the Chinese government's campaign of mass arbitrary detention targeting Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, were cut off from financial support from their parents. They have struggled to pay tuition fees and support themselves, according to incidents recorded by the Uyghur Human Rights Project dating back to 2017."

**Besides, the report disclosed how overseas Chinese students** felt socially isolated

from their peers in their host countries, as they were unable to express their opinions freely while “feeling cut off” from family and friends back in China. Another student interviewee from Hong Kong, known as “Hannah”, conceded: “[E]ven [in this country], I don’t feel like I belong. I feel like I am in the middle. I don’t have the social support network I had in Hong Kong. No one can understand the fear I have like they could in Hong Kong. When I came [overseas] at first it was very hard, I was very lonely... as a migrant, I don’t feel like I am supported.”

**Alarmingly, students interviewed by Amnesty International** said that they were not only worried about being identified for anti-CCP activities by Chinese government officials or their agents, but also from their fellow Chinese counterparts studying abroad with them. One interviewee recounted how some people from the overseas Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSAs) “posted in a student WeChat group chat about ‘hunting down’ overseas Chinese students who had put up posters that were critical of the human rights situation in China because the ‘embassy really want[s] to know this [who is putting up posters]’.”

**According to the report, a pro-CCP student** even requested one university tutor to reveal their the names of other students who “raised China-related human rights issues in class, such as the treatment of ethnic and religious minorities in Xinjiang”. Fortunately for these other students, the tutor refused to do so due to privacy concerns.

**Additionally, the report posits how the CCP relied** on exploitable Chinese state-approved apps like WeChat to digitally monitor and censor overseas Chinese students who use these apps to communicate with their family and friends in China. Over half of the students interviewed by Amnesty International had to constantly self-censor their conversations and posts on digital platforms to avoid CCP surveillance and monitoring. The report exemplified the degree of the CCP’s “long-arm” of surveillance by including the case study of how CCP police revealed transcripts of a student’s online WeChat conversations with family members to the student’s parents.

**The report recommended that schools hosting overseas Chinese** students implement “policies and codes of conduct related to transnational repression,” set up a confidential reporting mechanism, ensure that students “are sufficiently informed of policies prohibiting threats against other students or staff,” and guarantee the availability of technical assistance for students who think they might become targets of CCP surveillance, such as “providing free virtual private networks”.

**Regarding the report’s findings, Sacha Deshmukh,** Amnesty International UK’s chief

executive, declared in a statement [published on the organization's website](#) that it was “hugely disturbing that the long-arm of the Chinese government is reaching onto campuses here and interfering with the rights of students to study, debate, protest and speak freely—this is nothing less than the Chinese state terrorizing students abroad.” Deshmukh posited that it was “obvious” the CCP regime was attempting to “replicate the climate of fear which gags people in China and Hong Kong making students terrified of how they are being perceived and suspicious of their fellow students.”