CUAME

CASE STUDY

Modern Exclusion in the Digital Public Square

Canadians United Against Modern Exclusion

ABSTRACT

This case study examines a government-funded 2024 report by Digital Public Square, which claims to shed light on Chinese government interference in Canada. While raising legitimate concerns about transnational repression, the report paints Chinese Canadians as a monolithic group uniquely susceptible to foreign influence, conflates opinion with fact, and lacks methodological transparency. Its framing may contribute to the marginalization of the Chinese Canadian community and reflects a broader trend of modern exclusion, where individuals are too often presumed disloyal based on ethnicity alone.

What is Digital Public Square?

In late 2024, the Toronto-based not-for-profit Digital Public Square (DPS) released two reports funded through the Department of Canadian Heritage's Digital Citizen Contribution Program. Through this program, DPS received close to $1 million to "strengthen our understanding of PRC foreign influence, disinformation, and transnational repression campaigns in Canada, and to build societal resilience to such campaigns and associated efforts that seek to undermine social cohesion."

This funding from the Canadian government allowed DPS to launch their Foreign Interference Resilience and Education Initiative (FIRE), which includes two reports on foreign interference in Canada from the Chinese government. This case study focuses on one of them, titled "PRC Foreign Interference and Transnational Repression in Canada: Insights from Vulnerable Diaspora Communities." The report presents findings from a survey of and interviews with select individuals from various diaspora groups

(specifically, Chinese, Hong Kong, Taiwanese, Tibetan, Uyghur, and Falun Gong), focusing on their experiences with transnational repression. It also points out flaws in existing government efforts to support these communities and suggests reforms.

Modern exclusion in practice

To be clear, we do not seek to question or criticize the report's efforts to share the experiences of activists with transnational repression. They are certainly an important and unique group that merits individual study. However, they are not the only group the report discusses: the broader Chinese Canadian community is referenced throughout the report and described as being under the control of the Chinese government through "foreign information manipulation and interference campaigns." That the report authors would purport to understand almost two million Canadians based solely on their ethnic origin is incredibly problematic and is the focus of this case study.

The report paints the Chinese Canadian community with a broad brush, characterizing them as a monolithic group capable of being shaped as the Chinese government desires. For instance, Chinese Canadians are described as "consuming content from multiple PRC-controlled channels" that "offer the PRC a steady and open stream through which to communicate and impose their official narratives, overshadowing and marginalizing alternative viewpoints and manipulating facts" (page 10). According to the report, the Chinese government has complete control over the media consumption diets of Chinese Canadians, allowing it to push messaging that "emphasizes national pride and loyalty to the CCP, with the goal of promoting a sense of belonging to China rather than Canada" (page 19).

There are at least two issues with this depiction. The first is obvious, but bears repeating: Chinese Canadians are not a monolith who all consume the same media. Many do not even speak Chinese, and some have little to no personal connection to China.

Second, while some individuals do consume Chinese media, the corollary is not that they unquestioningly accept its content. It should not be difficult to understand that individuals, no matter their ethnicity, are capable of critical thought. Further, acknowledging that some individuals do believe reports shared by the Chinese government, this does not mean that their worldview is solely shaped by such information. It is possible, for instance, for one to hold a dialectical view that acknowledges both "progress and prosperity" (page 18) and reports of human rights violations in Xinjiang. These two beliefs are not mutually exclusive. Complex issues demand careful scrutiny rather than dismissal of either side, and to believe that certain Canadians are incapable of such scrutiny due to their ethnicity reflects a broader, troubling trend of anti-Chinese racism.

Also troubling is the report's portrayal of Chinese Canadian associations and groups as mere instruments

of Chinese government influence. No new evidence is offered to support this claim, and what exists is by no means conclusive. Blanketly labelling these organizations as fronts for the United Front Work Department dismisses the important role they play in supporting integration and offering community services to Chinese Canadians.

A final concern is the report's methodology, which relies on two sources: prior reporting and original data from surveys and interviews. The former is troubling because the authors appear to selectively cite evidence that supports their conclusions, without engaging with critiques of that evidence. The latter is also concerning, as the report provides no information about how the participants were recruited or who they are. Limited transparency around participant recruitment raises concerns about confirmation bias: namely, that participants may have been pre-selected based on their likelihood of supporting the report's conclusions. And while the need to protect anonymity is understandable, the absence of even basic descriptors such as the participants' roles or diaspora affiliations raises questions about how accurately the findings reflect the experiences of the "vulnerable diaspora communities" the report claims to represent.

The implications of modern exclusion

According to the Government of Canada website, the Digital Citizen Contribution Program seeks to "support democracy and *social inclusion* in Canada by enhancing and/or supporting efforts to counter online disinformation and other online harms and threats." It is surprising and disappointing, then, that an initiative they chose to support may contribute to the exclusion of certain Canadians based on their ethnic origin.

All Chinese Canadians are impacted because of the report's assumption that they are inherently susceptible to Chinese government influence. Those who engage in politics, and especially those who express anything positive about China or do anything perceived to "align with Beijing's interests" (page 8), face the added burden of being caricatured as agents or proxies.

This characterization reinforces a binary narrative that casts Chinese Canadians as either pro- or anti-China and, by extension, anti- or pro-Canada. The report authors criticize Chinese government tactics that seek to divide the Chinese Canadian community into pro-PRC and pro-Hong Kong factions (page 19), yet fail to recognize that their approach reinforces the same false dichotomy.

Such a narrative is misleading and risks fueling division, with real-world consequences for those implicated. For instance, one of the report's recommendations is to "regulate social media" by asking platforms to "remove or label state-affiliated entities to identify them and moderate their platforms to remove inauthentic behavior" (page 24). How would state affiliation be determined? According to the

report, anyone sharing views not in alignment with the dominant narrative of the “China Threat” might be seen as being affiliated with the Chinese government.

It is certainly within the authors’ rights to take a strong position on the question of whether and to what degree China poses a “threat” to Canada. However, the report’s failure to acknowledge that holding views to the contrary is not only acceptable but essential to healthy public discourse is a dangerous limitation, as is their conflation of subjective judgments with established facts. It is unfortunate that the Canadian government’s decision to fund this project may have lent its findings more credibility than they merit, particularly given the risk that such narratives contribute to a climate of exclusion in which certain Chinese Canadians are unfairly marginalized.

References

1. https://www.thecanadafiles.com/articles/canadian-government-funded-kill-chain-proposal-targeting-chinese-canadian-community

2. https://fire.digitalpublicsquare.org/

3. https://digitalpublicsquare.org/insights/community-consultations-on-foreign-interference-in

4. For instance, RCMP investigations into two organizations serving the Chinese Canadian community in Quebec have lasted over two years, with no information provided to date as to what these organizations have been charged with doing aside from nebulous claims of being “police stations.” https://montrealgazette.com/news/rcmp-investigates-chinese-state-police-stations-in-montreal-and-brossard/

5. As one example, the report cites articles written by Sam Cooper, who, when at Global News, wrote stories such as one claiming that former MP Han Dong had supported the continued detention of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor. An ensuing lawsuit resulted in a settlement, with Global News recognizing that the story was false. https://globalnews.ca/news/11242170/han-dong-global-news-settlement/

6. https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/online-disinformation/digital-citizen-contribution-program.html