

Transnational repression in the UK experienced by the Hong Kong diaspora community

Submission to the Human Rights (Joint Committee)
of the UK Parliament

Prepared by
The Hong Kong Scots

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About the Hong Kong Scots

The Hong Kong Scots is a Scotland-based Community Interest Company (SC728635). Founded in 2022, we aim to facilitate better inclusion of Hongkongers into Scottish society. All our co-founders have extensive experience in Hong Kong civil society before residing in Scotland.

Our organisation incubates initiatives launched by Hongkongers, regardless of their immigration status in the United Kingdom, to continue their civic way of life in Scotland. At the same time, we organise events and activities to facilitate dialogue and understanding between Scotsmen and Hongkongers in Scotland.

Author of this submission

Michael Mo

Director, the Hong Kong Scots
Postgraduate Researcher, Newcastle University
Elected member, Tuen Mun District Council (2020-2021)

Contributor

Daniel Kwok

Director, the Hong Kong Scots
Elected member, Kwai Tsing District Council (2020-2021)

Executive Summary

This submission highlights the pervasive transnational repression faced by the Hong Kong diaspora community in the UK. The document draws on the lived experiences of members and supporters to expose surveillance, harassment, and intimidation linked to their pro-democracy activism. It argues that the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and affiliated entities orchestrate these efforts to silence dissent, while the UK's response remains inadequate due to limited resources and awareness.

The submission outlines four types of transnational repression: (a) direct state actions, such as arrest warrants, bounties, and passport cancellations targeting activists; (b) indirect state tactics, like interrogating family members in Hong Kong to isolate UK-based dissidents; (c) explicit repression by state-affiliated entities, including doxxing and workplace intimidation; and (d) implicit repression, such as surveillance at events and universities by groups like the Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSA). These actions create a chilling effect, deterring political engagement among Hongkongers in the UK.

Despite the severity, the UK's capacity to counter this repression is limited. The intelligence community struggles with poor Chinese language skills and excludes BN(O) visa holders from roles due to citizenship requirements. Police responses, such as those in Edinburgh and Glasgow, have been inconsistent and lack follow-through, reflecting low awareness of transnational repression. The Labour government's diplomatic reset with the PRC has further sidelined these concerns, leaving Hongkongers vulnerable.

This submission proposes four recommendations in response to the Joint Committee.

1. **Establish** regular contacts with the Hong Kong diaspora community in the UK to exchange information on transnational repression. At a minimum, an annual meeting between the leaders of the Hong Kong diaspora organisations and intelligence community and the police in four nations.
2. **Recruit** Hongkongers in the UK who are on BN(O) Visa to serve positions in GCHQ, MI5, and MI6 to enhance the capacity of the intelligence community in understanding Chinese language and transnational repression operating in the Chinese languages. Relaxing the rules will only give the intelligence community an advantage.
3. **Conduct** an extensive audit, independent from the delayed China Audit, on affiliated and associated entities of the PRC, CCP, and Hong Kong authorities operating in the UK. Some associations, such as Heung Yee Kuk, a public body under the Laws of Hong Kong, have been operating in the UK without registration for decades. Such organisations are hostile against Hong Kong pro-democracy activists in the UK, and have not registered under the Foreign Influence Registration Scheme (FIRS).
4. **Address** the problems of surveillance conducted by the CSSAs in the campuses across the UK. Allow students who are affected by the surveillance and speech suppression to have direct channels to report the matter in a safe and secure manner. The police and intelligence community should recognise that establishing such channels through universities might not be reliable.

Reason for submission

Since its founding, the Hong Kong Scots has documented ongoing surveillance, harassment, and intimidation targeting its members due to their pro-democracy activism in the UK. Such experience is also shared by the Hong Kong diaspora community at large. While those actions against Hong Kong diaspora community can be conducted by individuals who support the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its ruling party, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), we believe that those actions are supported by the PRC, the CCP as well as entities under their control.

Since Hongkongers moved to the UK under the bespoke visa scheme, known as the BN(O) Visa, local and national authorities in the country did far little to recognise the depth and breadth of transnational repression faced by the Hong Kong diaspora community. Little resource has been allocated to understand it, let alone tackling it.

Members of the Hong Kong Scots anticipate that this submission will facilitate members of the Joint Committee to better understand the approach and strategy employed by the PRC and its affiliated or associated entities in attempts to silence pro-democracy Hongkongers residing in the UK. We also envision that the UK authorities, both national and local, can formulate strategies to better protect the Hong Kong diaspora community.

Key elements of transnational repression

Rather than suggesting a definition of transnational repression, it is crucial to acknowledge the matrix of transnational repression in the nexus of actors and actions based on the lived experience of members and supporters of our organisation. On one hand, transnational repression can be conducted directly by the state, or indirectly through its affiliated or associated entities. These entities are not necessarily registered or present within the territories in the UK. On the other hand, actions of transnational repression can be explicit or implicit.

		Actors	
		State	Affiliated or associated entities
Actions	Explicit	(a)	(b)
	Implicit	(c)	(d)

Table 1: Matrix of transnational repression. A conceptual framework

The above table conceptualises four types of transnational repression faced by the Hong Kong diaspora community in the UK, and they are

- (a) *Direct repression conducted by the state*
- (b) *Indirect repression conducted by the state*
- (c) *Explicit repression conducted by the state-affiliated or associated entities*
- (d) *Implicit repression conducted by the state-affiliated or associated entities*

The objective of transnational repression is rather simple: To silence dissidents who criticise their home country while residing elsewhere in the world. In the case of the Hong Kong diaspora community in the UK, transnational repression means actions taken by state actors or their affiliates or associates in attempts to stifle criticisms against the Beijing or Hong Kong authorities.

Illustration of each type of the actions will be detailed in the next section of this submission, ***Methods of transnational repression in the UK.***

Methods of transnational repression in the UK

The Hong Kong diaspora community is facing transnational repression, both explicitly and implicitly, conducted by the Chinese and Hong Kong authorities. Actions against Hongkongers residing in the UK are also conducted by entities affiliated or associated with Beijing and Hong Kong authorities. While the explicit repression is a direct response to the Hong Kong pro-democracy activism by campaigners living in the UK, implicit repression, mostly conducted by state-affiliated entities, are a creation of narrative which discourages Hongkongers from living in the UK.

The following sections account for the four aforementioned types of transnational repression.

a) Direct repression conducted by the state actors

One of the tactics which the Hong Kong authorities adopt to repress Hongkongers residing in the UK is to **issue arrest warrants and issue bounties** over individuals who expressed criticisms against the Hong Kong authorities. From corruption to security offences, different law enforcement bodies in Hong Kong target dissidents living in the UK for their peaceful expression of thoughts and opinions. Speeches such as appealing for boycotting elections in Hong Kong, which are completely lawful in the UK, are considered as unlawful by the Hong Kong authorities.

The impact of arrest warrants and bounties on individuals residing in the UK are mainly financial damages. For instance, these people may have their assets, such as bank accounts, pension fund (Mandatory Provident Fund, or MPF) accounts and residential properties in Hong Kong, frozen by the Hong Kong authorities. Recently, a former legislator had his assets, along with assets of his family members, seized by the Hong Kong authorities¹.

It is worth noting that one of our directors has been wanted by the city's anti-corruption agency for his appeal for boycotting the Legislative Council Election².

Cancelling passports of Hong Kong pro-democracy activists is one of the tactics which the Hong Kong authorities conducted recently³. The measure may make activists residing in the UK having difficulties in visiting overseas, those who were granted asylum in particular. While such cancellations are rather symbolic, Hong Kong refugees in the UK may face prolonged preparation time for overseas travel plans. They have to apply for Home Office travel documents as well as travel visas of countries they intend to visit.

b) Indirect repression conducted by the state actors

Subsequent to the direct repression, **interrogating families, relatives, and friends of pro-democracy activists who remain in Hong Kong** is a common practice of the Hong Kong police. By conducting such an action, the Hong Kong authorities may attempt to isolate

¹ <https://www.rfa.org/english/china/2025/02/18/china-hong-kong-freezes-assets-exiled-lawmaker/>

² https://www.icac.org.hk/en/rc/wanted/index_id_72.html

³ <https://news.rthk.hk/rthk/en/component/k2/1784806-20241224.htm>

pro-democracy activists residing in the UK. Hongkongers residing in the UK may refrain from supporting these activists to avoid troubles, especially if they may make regular visits to Hong Kong.

Apart from interrogating people in connection to high profile pro-democracy activists, ***the Hong Kong Police have also approached family members of activists especially during the holidays***. One of our supporters, who is living in-exile in the UK, has his family members approached by Hong Kong on a regular basis.

c) Explicit repression conducted by the state-affiliated or associated entities

One of our former supporters, who resides in Scotland, has been intimidated at his workplace by students from the PRC. With his identities exposed in the Chinese messaging app, the supporter involved faced intimidations on non-Chinese messaging apps, such as WhatsApp, and had the door of his accommodation vandalised. Our organisation cannot confirm if such actions against our supporter is a state-initiated action, and it is also unlikely that the PRC or the Hong Kong authorities were involved in those harassments and intimidations. Nevertheless, we believe that these actions were coordinated by Chinese diaspora communities in messaging apps created or managed by Beijing-affiliated or associated entities in the UK.

Doxxing is also one of the methods commonly used by pro-Beijing entities to harass or intimidate Hongkongers residing in the UK. While actors may not reveal their identities or exposing identities of those who are targeted, anonymous doxxers may provide traces of information, such as photos of individuals and their previous jobs in Hong Kong, which is enough to assemble or trace the real identities of those Hongkongers⁴. While these actions may be conducted by entities or actors for shaming the lives of Hongkongers in the UK, such an action creates a chilling effect on Hongkongers for their activities in the UK, especially engaging in political activities.

d) Implicit repression conducted by the state-affiliated or associated entities

Surveillance is one of the common methods which members of these affiliated or associated entities conduct on behalf of Beijing, or showing their patriotism to the PRC entities in the UK. Our organisation encountered several ethnic Chinese recorded participants of an event hosted at the Scottish Parliament specifically for the Hong Kong diaspora community in Scotland. On another occasion, our members were followed by ethnic Chinese in masks after attending UN Human Rights Committee meetings in Geneva. The meetings involved were part of the session assessing the state of human rights in Hong Kong.

⁴ <https://x.com/RazvenHK/status/1887444196430389698>

These ethnic Chinese, all wearing surgical masks, were in the vicinity of our annual vigil commemorating victims of Tiananmen Massacre. These individuals took pictures of the event using their phones and shared it on, believed to be, a Chinese social media messaging group. Similar experiences were shared by organisers of Hong Kong pro-democracy protests in Leeds.

Apart from surveillance conducted by Beijing affiliated or associated entities, ***the pro-Beijing entities in Hong Kong are also believed to conduct surveillance on the Hong Kong diaspora community in the UK***. Individuals who conduct surveillance are not affiliated with the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office (HKETO) in London. Rather, they are believed to be members of, or reported to members of, pro-Beijing research institutes based in Hong Kong and China. While some of these individuals are believed to be residing in the UK, some of them made trips to the UK to conduct such surveillance.

In terms of actual actions, these individuals approach Hong Kong pro-democracy activists in the UK, in attempts to learn about the network and organisation of pro-democracy activism in the country. They also participated in meetings or events that were organised by the Hong Kong diaspora groups.

- The objectives of these surveillance activities remain unclear, but their presence at Hong Kong diaspora events suggests a systematic effort to monitor pro-democracy activism. Nevertheless, their presence in the Hong Kong diaspora community meetings and events is an indication that pro-democracy activism has been watched closely by the pro-Beijing entities.

Apart from the Hong Kong diaspora groups, surveillance is also apparent in the university campuses in the UK. A preliminary finding of a scholarly research discovered that the Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSA) in the UK are conducting surveillance on Chinese students for the Beijing's mission in the UK⁵. With their apparent presence in university campuses, our organisation received allegations that student societies concerning Hong Kong in Oxford, such as the Oxford University Hong Kong Scholars Association and the Oxford University Hong Kong Society, are avoiding political expressions.

Reports of harassment directed at Hong Kong students by their Chinese counterparts, particularly within the context of peaceful protest participation, have also emerged as a matter of concern in Oxford, with particular apprehension expressed towards the Oxford University Chinese Society. We cannot verify if those allegations are true. However, these allegations appear in the same pattern discovered in the aforementioned scholarly research.

⁵ <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/china-institute/2025/02/13/why-become-a-student-cadre-overseas/>

Limited capacity and effectiveness in response to transnational repression

Our organisation views that the UK government has limited capacity to respond to transnational repression conducted by the PRC, the CCP and its affiliates in an effective manner. Limited capacity of the intelligence community and limited guidance to the police made response to transnational repression ad-hoc and piecemeal instead of well-coordinated and pre-emptive ones.

Intelligence community

The intelligence community currently lacks sufficient expertise in reading, analyzing, and producing content in Traditional Chinese, which hampers their ability to monitor and counter transnational repression effectively. For instance, Illustration (i) shows an advertisement recruiting Chinese reading workers for MI5, MI6 and GCHQ displays a simplified Chinese slogan with poor grammar.



Illustration (i) Recruitment advertisement of MI5, MI6 and GCHQ

In Illustration (i), the Simplified Chinese 保护英国的利益, translated as protect Britain's interest, is factually correct. However, a more coherent expression should be 捍衛英國利益 in Traditional Chinese, or 捍卫英国利益 in Simplified Chinese (English: Defend Britain's interest). In Chinese language, it is odd to use the word protect as an adjective for the word interest, and translation of possessive suffix can be omitted.

The aforementioned advertisement is one of the examples of reflecting the quality of Chinese language capacity of the intelligence community, which is underwhelming. Even if Hongkongers residing in the UK would be eager to improve the Chinese language capacity of the intelligence community, they are barred from doing so. Positions of the intelligence community, including languages graduate roles, require candidates to be British Citizens. Hongkongers who are residing in the UK under BN(O) Visa are effectively barred from applying for those positions. In other words, there is no way for BN(O) Hongkongers to utilise their multilingual skills to contribute to the intelligence community.

Police

Based on the experience of our organisation, the effectiveness of the response by the police has room for improvement. For instance, the Edinburgh Police contacted our organisation after receiving a report from the PRC Consulate in Edinburgh regarding our protest outside of their building. Instead of treating it as an implicit repression attempt by the PRC, the Edinburgh Police appeared to treat the report by the PRC Consulate against our organisation lightly. There is no follow-up by the Edinburgh Police to ensure the safety and well-being of our members and supporters are not affected by the action taken by the PRC Consulate.

There is another occasion that the Edinburgh Police did not treat the safety of our members and supporters as a matter of concern. In our annual vigil commemorating the victims of the Tiananmen Massacre, the Edinburgh Police did not question to stop ethnic Chinese wearing surgical masks from taking pictures or photos of vigil participants for an extensive period. There were no further actions from the officers at the Scott Monument, where the vigils were held, or follow-ups by the Edinburgh Police.

For the aforementioned case in which the phone of our affiliated member of the time got stolen, the Glasgow Police has not contacted the victim for taking a statement.

Overall, the awareness of transnational repression among the police we engaged with was inadequate, let alone the potential support. There is no regular or annual meetup between the police and the Hong Kong diaspora community in Scotland on the matter.

What should be done

The Labour government's effort to reset diplomatic relations with the PRC has deprioritized concerns over transnational repression, leaving Hongkongers in the UK vulnerable. Meetings between leaders of the Hong Kong diaspora community and the UK ministers yield vague assurances on ensuring safety of Hongkongers in the UK, let alone making promises on protecting Hongkongers from transnational repression conducted by the PRC, the Hong Kong authorities and their affiliated or associated entities within the UK.

Setting aside Westminster, the intelligence community, and the police can still improve to better protect Hongkongers from transnational repression conducted by the PRC, CCP, the Hong Kong authorities, and their affiliated and associated entities.

5. **Establish** regular contacts with the Hong Kong diaspora community in the UK to exchange information on transnational repression. At a minimum, an annual meeting between the leaders of the Hong Kong diaspora organisations and intelligence community and the police in four nations.
6. **Recruit** Hongkongers in the UK who are on BN(O) Visa to serve positions in GCHQ, MI5, and MI6 to enhance the capacity of the intelligence community in understanding Chinese language and transnational repression operating in the Chinese languages. Relaxing the rules will only give the intelligence community an advantage.
7. **Conduct** an extensive audit, independent from the delayed China Audit, on affiliated and associated entities of the PRC, CCP, and Hong Kong authorities operating in the UK. Some associations, such as Heung Yee Kuk, a public body under the Laws of Hong Kong, have been operating in the UK without registration for decades. Such organisations are hostile against Hong Kong pro-democracy activists in the UK, and have not registered under the Foreign Influence Registration Scheme (FIRS).
8. **Address** the problems of surveillance conducted by the CSSAs in the campuses across the UK. Allow students who are affected by the surveillance and speech suppression to have direct channels to report the matter in a safe and secure manner. The police and intelligence community should recognise that establishing such channels through universities might not be reliable.