

Sowing Hate, Cultivating Loyalists: Mobilizing Repressive Nationalist Diasporas for Transnational Repression by the People's Republic of China Regime

American Behavioral Scientist
1–24

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DOI: 10.1177/00027642241267931
journals.sagepub.com/home/abs



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Abstract

Pundits, advocates, and scholars have increasingly focused on the strategies of transnational repression employed by autocratic states to deter opposition and control the voices of emigrants abroad. Typically, transnational repression is understood as various forms of state-directed tactics executed by institutional actors who are deployed, trained, and organized by the state. Yet, the tactic of inciting hatred and division among emigrants to undermine dissidents—part of a nationalist strategy that mobilizes non-state actors for repression—has not been thoroughly explored. This article reveals a unique form of diaspora actorhood: the repressive nationalist diasporas, which consist of culturally driven migrants who support their authoritarian homelands and exert significant influence in various aspects of transnational migrants' civic life, including student groups, ethnic associations, and grassroots organizations. Through these networks, diaspora migrants provide autocrats with the means to extend their repressive reach internationally. This paper examines the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a case study, demonstrating how the state leverages nationalist sentiments to alienate dissidents and fuel enmity among its loyalists overseas. The consequences are extensive, involving surveillance, harassment, and assaults on dissidents such as Hong Kongers, Tibetans, Uyghurs, Taiwanese, and mainland Chinese—aiming to silence those who criticize the PRC regime. Ethnographic research, interviews, and publicly available data are used to reveal, describe, and analyze the role and global reach of the repressive nationalist diaspora in the transnational repression mechanism as part of modern autocratic statecraft.

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Keywords

transnational repression, authoritarianism, hate, diaspora, China

During a bustling Chinese New Year event at a Chinatown restaurant in Canada, the Consulate General of China vividly reminded the participants, “Don’t forget the way you came.” Her speech was followed by a lengthy narrative of the economic success of Xi’s modern China, characterized as progressive, open, and prosperous. It also included a careful reminder of how to be a good, patriotic, ethnic Chinese “here” in Canadian society. Behind the patriotic discourse lies a rigid boundary between loyalists and “dissidents,” sowing hatred against dissidents by accusing dissenters of inciting a color revolution in the homeland and advocating for separatism. Indeed, inciting hate and enforcing social movement partyism is not merely a phenomenon found in the recent populist rise of democratic states (Van Dyke et al., 2024, this issue). As this paper demonstrates, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) regime instigates hate, mobilizes its loyalists as non-state agents of transnational repression, and attains control among emigrants for a singular, favorable, and loyalist kind of “voice” abroad.

Prior studies exploring diaspora politics often assume that diaspora migrants who have departed autocratic regimes and settled in democratic First World nations tend to align themselves as either anti-regime, pro-democracy activists (Bett & Jones, 2016), or as “long-distance nationalists” (Anderson, 1998), espousing various forms of cosmopolitan principles (Appiah, 1997; Koinova, 2018). However, less attention has been given to unveiling the repressive dynamics within diasporic communities (as noted by Adamson, 2020). Given the significant influence wielded by the PRC, one of the world’s most potent autocratic regimes, there exists a considerable body of documented incidents involving countermovements and activities orchestrated by pro-regime Chinese diaspora migrants aimed at silencing dissident voices abroad through surveillance, harassment, and assault. This paper extends Moss’s (2016) concept of transnational repression to examine and conceptualize the repressive nationalist diaspora as a form of non-state actor that is loyal to the homeland state and active in silencing dissident voices abroad.

The increasing attention on transnational repression has primarily focused on the institutional mechanisms that modern autocratic states employ to suppress opposition and maintain power (Almeida, 2008; Moss, 2016; Tilly, 1978). Agents are typically seen as institutional actors who are directed and organized by the state to carry out repression. Less attention has been paid to the role of the pro-regime diaspora, who actively aid the autocratic homeland regime in exercising long-arm control out of patriotic acts. Like state-employed personnel, the nationalist diaspora also serves the interests of the autocratic state. They engage in surveillance, harassment, assault, and, on some occasions, assassination. However, their motivation is deeply tied to their nationalist identity as loyalists to the homeland regime, acting against oppositional voices abroad. Their actions exemplify a form of “long-distance nationalism” but in a repressive way.

These nationalist diaspora migrants are commonly found in civic organizations, such as ethnic immigrant organizations and international student groups, and seek domination within to build an ethnic representation that also advances their homeland state interest. Moreover, these diverse groups and organizations form an extensive civic network that aids the homeland autocratic regime in mobilizing nationalists against dissidents abroad to execute transnational repression. I refer to this form of transnational repression agents as “repressive nationalist diaspora,” in contrast to the common understanding of anti-regime, cosmopolitan diaspora. This article, based on 5 years of ethnographic field observations, publicized data, and 50 semi-structured interviews, describes and analyzes this form of non-state repression mechanism that autocratic states seek to maintain their power abroad. Additionally, I compiled a dataset to document all countermovement events and transnational repression activities against the Hong Konger dissident diaspora from 2019 to 2023 across 10 countries and 34 cities. The finding demonstrates the global reach of the repressive nationalist diaspora in the transnational repression mechanism as part of modern autocratic statecraft.

The Relational Turn of Studying Transnational Repression

Over the past decade, scholars have devoted increasing attention to examine the global resurgence of autocrats (Bavbek & Kennedy, 2024, this issue; Garrido, 2024, this issue). An emerging body of scholarship on transnational repression has fostered a productive dialog among advocates, policymakers, and academics, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the cross-border nature of authoritarianism (Gorokhovskaia et al., 2023; Moss, 2016; Moss & Furstenberg, 2024; Tsourapas, 2021). As diaspora activists operate beyond the autocrats’ jurisdictions, they are particularly threatening to the dictators by garnering global support. Thus, autocratic regimes find ways to exercise repression that transcends state borders as “extraterritorial authoritarian power” (Dalmaso et al., 2018), where autocrats employ agents both online and offline to maintain their control of the “voice after exit” (Moss, 2020). Cyberattacks, online trolls, countermovements, surveillance, harassment, assaults, and assassinations have been widely reported as repertoires of repression employed by autocrats in today’s world (Gorokhovskaia et al., 2023). The big question is how these emerging autocrats employ these repression tactics to gain and retain global power (Lessa, 2022; Moss & Furstenberg, 2024).

Conventionally, the literature on repression has focused on the aspect of state-directed repression, where state authorities seek to rewrite the law (Holgado & Urribarri, 2024, this issue; Khalil, 2024, this issue), naturalize persecution using national security discourses (Achugar & Amilivia, 2024, this issue), manipulate elections (Prozorova, 2024, this issue), and control media (Monetti, 2024, this issue) to establish state control and undermine opposition (Almeida, 2008; Fu, 2018; Slater, 2003; Tilly, 1978). I refer to the research on transnational repression that aligns with such conceptual foundation as the state-institutional model. For instance, there have been numerous accounts of state-directed repression in news media reports, ranging

from the mass shooting at an Anti-Gaddafi protest in 1984 at the Libyan embassy in London, UK, to the assassination of Kim Jong-Nam in 2017 by the North Korean regime in Malaysia. Beyond these well-known cases, studies have indicated that authoritarian states monitor and control their diaspora abroad through their institutional policy and outposts (Baser & Ozturk, 2020; Michaelsen, 2018; Moss, 2016). In particular, autocrats draw on state resources, direct agents, and cross-border networks to “operate through institutional outposts such as embassies, missions, and consulates” (Moss, 2016, p. 482) that serve as an “extension and in the service of the authoritarian state” (Brand, 2006, p. 111). These institutional outposts are linked to transnational repression tactics to dismantle resistance efforts by harassing, assaulting, and killing the opposition in a transnational setting (Loveman, 1998; Moss, 2016).

Indeed, autocrats not only repress dissidents through institutional means but also extend their control to the political and civic lives of emigrants. This relational aspect has been recently emphasized by scholars, particularly those studying the global network of transnational migrants (Moss et al., 2022). This evolving literature highlights a broadening of analytical focus, moving from solely examining government-directed actions to a more comprehensive consideration of global governmentality that also through non-state agents presented in migrants’ global networks. A compelling instance within this framework is that of “proxy punishment,” which targets activists’ families residing in their home country to control dissident voices abroad (Moss, 2021). This strategy significantly impacts exiles due to the transnational nature of their everyday relationships, resulting in an impact on familial and social ties as repercussions of their anti-regime activism reverberate across borders (Schenkkan et al., 2020). Moss et al.’s (2022) study of diaspora activists from Syria, Iran, Egypt, and Libya identified five forms of proxy punishment: (a) harm and confinement, (b) threats and harassment, (c) forced participation in regime propaganda and slander, (d) resource deprivation, and (e) travel bans. Similar cases can also be found among Central Asian autocrats (Cooley & Heathershaw, 2018), in the PRC (Deng & O’Brien, 2013), and in other regions (see a review by Tsourapas, 2021). Another strategy involves semi-state institutional engagement with ethnic migrant groups to extend the sending state’s control into the migrant’s everyday life. For example, in the case of Tunisia, the establishment of “Amicales des Travailleurs Tunisiens en France” functioned both as an institutional outpost for the Tunisian state and a social space for Tunisians abroad for various cultural activities, including second-generation language education (Brand, 2006). It also allows the state to exert control over its diaspora and monitor their activities and networks. Comparable spaces are evident in the Chinatown events described at the beginning of this paper, as well as digital space (Dragu & Lupu, 2021; Michaelsen & Thumfart, 2023), where autocrats deployed online users pretending to be friends, allies, and journalists to surveil and spy on dissidents abroad. In general, recruited hackers, online users, and robots are used to actively surveil, harass, spam, and attack dissidents domestically and abroad on various online platforms (Gorokhovskaia et al., 2023). In China, a massive group of nationalist online users, known as “fifty cents” or “little pink,” are actively involved in digital threats, phishing attacks, malware, and other forms of repression (Lemon et al., 2023). In some cases, autocrats also combine

online and offline tactics to go after an exiled dissident and their family and friends (Hall & Jardine, 2021).

It is important to note that these online and offline proxy agents consist of loyalists who voluntarily engage in repression activities. This study seeks to deepen comprehension of this relational shift by examining how autocrats sow hatred to cultivate loyalists abroad to advance the global reach of their authoritarian arm.

Conceptualizing Repressive Nationalist Diaspora

For decades, sociologists have extensively studied repression and nationalism, yet transnational repression through the mechanism of nationalism has received limited attention. To be sure, in the literature on diaspora, Anderson's idea of nationalism has been applied to understand transnational migrants as "long-distance nationalists" (Anderson, 1998). However, the current literature either commonly assumes diaspora activists as anti-regime dissidents or cosmopolitan actors, and less attention has been paid to the repressive nature of diaspora politics in relation to the long-distance nationalist framework (as also identified by Adamson, 2020). Following the call to examine the actorhood (Tsutsui, 2017) of transnational mobilization, I systematically map two identified actorhood in the literature and conceptualize a new form of diaspora actorhood: the repressive nationalist diaspora.

Cosmopolitan Dissident Diaspora

Studying cases of anti-regime mobilization, scholars have examined diaspora politics as a form of resistance that seeks to advance a cause of progressive, democratic regime change that aligns with the idea of cosmopolitanism (Appiah, 1997; Betts & Jones, 2016; Moss, 2021). From the case of the Chinese revolution of 1911 that overturned the Qing dynasty (Ching-hwang, 2008) to the Arab Spring that democratized certain autocratic states in the MENA region (Moss, 2021), scholars have focused on various cases of diasporic involvement in revolutions worldwide that demonstrate the agency of migrants in mobilizing against autocratic states. For example, through grassroots advocacy work in the United States and the Netherlands, Filipino migrants can leverage the host land diplomatic relations to exert pressure on the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos (Quinsa, 2019, 2024). Betts and Jones's (2016) study of Rwanda and Zimbabwe suggests that the refugee diaspora could be a key player as an "animator" on the world stage to challenge the homeland regime for human rights abuses. Yazdani's (2022) study of Iranian Americans demonstrates that diaspora can also contest the hostland racial boundary. In the case of the Koreans in Japan, a diaspora organization can even transform the international human rights norms in defining citizenship rights (Tsutsui 2017).

Repressive Dissident Diaspora

Not all anti-regime diaspora migrants are committed to cosmopolitan principles in the name of democratic movements. A recent study by Adamson (2020) found some cases

of diaspora politics that draw on repressive tactics to suppress allied members within the dissident diaspora. Adamson (2020, p. 150, italicized) found that “non-state actors in the diaspora also sometimes use such repressive strategies to mobilize internally, gain hegemony *within* the diaspora, and marginalize or eliminate internal rivals.” Surveillance activities, threats, assaults, and even assassinations are found to be deployed by the diaspora organizations in the study, that is, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). These organizations are undoubtedly dissident diaspora forces to the homeland’s autocratic regime but seek to maintain their organization and influence within the diaspora using repressive tactics. I identify this actorhood as a repressive dissident diaspora, in contrast to the cosmopolitan dissident diaspora examined by previous studies.

Repressive Nationalist Diaspora

Building upon the intersection of diaspora governance and transnational repression, the main cause of this study lies at the other end of the spectrum, where diaspora members are pro-regime nationalists who mobilize for their homeland regime and employ repressive tactics to deter opposition. Studies have examined domestic cases of how autocratic regimes are bolstered by populist movements (McKenna & O’Donnell, 2024, this issue) or grassroots support from below (Cruz, 2024, this issue). In transnational settings, some recent studies examined how homeland regimes cultivate their “ideal citizen” abroad (Orjuela, 2023), through patriotic parents (Hirt, 2023), state preferential treatment (Tsourapas, 2015), and exploiting the polarized emigrant stances on homeland politics (Wackenhut, 2024, this issue). From a relational perspective, autocrats cultivate loyalists abroad by fostering “new forms of ethnonationalism [. . .] based on exclusivist forms of ethnic, national, or sectarian identities” (Adamson, 2016, p. 296). These loyalists abroad operate in two main capacities: Firstly, they play a significant role in global public diplomacy, leveraging their positions to advocate for state interests and bolster the state’s global image (Baser & Ozturk, 2020; Dukalskis, 2021). Secondly, and central to this paper’s focus, nationalist diasporic members affiliated with autocratic regimes could perform as proxy, non-state agents of transnational repression. (Table 1 illustrates the key areas of distinction between three types of diaspora actorhood.)

Repressive nationalist diaspora is culturally motivated diaspora migrants who are ethnic immigrants of the hostland state but also loyalists of their homeland’s authoritarian regime. That means these diaspora migrants, who are loyal to the homeland regime, would draw on the state discourses to antagonize their opposition. With the disinformation and propaganda campaign orchestrated by the autocratic homeland regime, the repressive nationalist diaspora is mobilized to repress the dissidents abroad and view their acts as patriotic and legitimate. Through their extensive influence in various aspects of immigrants’ civic life, such as international student groups, hometown associations, and grassroots organizations, the repressive nationalist diaspora provides a wide-reaching network for autocrats to carry out surveillance, harassment,

Table 1. Key Distinctions Between Three Actorhood Types of Diaspora Politics.

Actorhood type	Relationship to the homeland regime	Distinctive cause of activism	Distinctive action(s)
Cosmopolitan dissident diaspora	Dissident	Advance a homeland cause that aligns with cosmopolitan principles.	Engage in anti-homeland regime projects; uphold democratic practices within the diaspora.
Repressive dissident diaspora	Dissident	Attain a hegemonic position within the anti-regime diaspora.	Act against internal rivals; dominate resources and public attention.
Repressive nationalist diaspora	Loyalist	Represent homeland regime interests and counter oppositions.	Organize countermovements in the host country; engage in surveillance, harassment, and assault activities against dissidents; report dissident information to the home country regime.

and assault abroad. An example case could be found in a recent study of the pro-government Turkish and non-Turkish Muslim diaspora groups that engaged in violence and repression to deter the dissident diaspora (Yilmaz et al., 2023). This study furthers this line of inquiry using the case of the PRC state diaspora to reveal and conceptualize this form of diaspora actorhood within the mechanism of transnational repression.

Method

This project initially studied Hong Kong diaspora mobilization, beginning in the summer of 2019. I first encountered pro-PRC nationalists—international students and Chinese migrants—mobilizing against Hong Kong activists, and photographing dissidents at rallies in the United States and Canada. Dissident activists urged event participants to protect their identities. I realized that this loyalist countermovement is not a peaceful political expression of homeland political stance. Their activities lead to dire consequences for the dissidents and their friends and relatives at home. On social media, loyalists share dissidents’ rally photos exposing the identities of the participants, rooted in celebrating Chinese nationalism against “separatists” and “CIA plots.” This discovery of the fusion of nationalism and repression led to the term “repressive nationalist diaspora.”

To further my understanding of how non-state transnational repression occurs and deters opposition, an extensive period of observation and grounded analysis of qualitative data is required. For observations, I draw upon 4 years of online and offline ethnographic research conducted from 2019 to 2023 by participating in public rallies and observing the countermovements and repression activities in three cities of the United States, Los Angeles (3 years), San Francisco (2 weeks), and Washington, DC (6 months) and two cities of Canada, Vancouver (2 months) and Toronto (3 months).

I supplement my findings with the analysis of the following sources:

- (1) Fifty anonymous interviews with diaspora migrants from eight cities in the United States and Canada.
- (2) Thirty-six joint statements published by 90 pro-PRC-regime organizations in 19 countries.
- (3) Ten speech transcripts published by pro-PRC-regime organizations in San Francisco and Vancouver Chinatown.
- (4) One hundred forty-five social media posts on Chinese social media platforms, including WeChat and Weibo.

Additionally, I compiled a dataset to record all countermovement events and transnational repression activities against the Hong Kong dissident diaspora from 2019 to 2023. This dataset is an integration of 41 news reports, interview data from this study, and a report published by the Alliance Canada Hong Kong (2020). The dataset comprises 118 incidents of repression activities, including assault, harassment, and surveillance, as well as 50 countermovement events targeting the Hong Kong dissident diaspora during the specified period, across 10 countries and 34 cities. The dataset is not an exhaustive effort to capture all repression activities but serves as an illustration of the global occurrences and their significant overlaps between countermovement and repression activities. I coded my data using the logic of grounded theory to provide an analysis of the newly established conceptual framework of the repressive nationalist diaspora (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Cultivating Loyalists Abroad Through the “Big Overseas Chinese Work” Initiative

In the PRC, the institutionalization of “overseas Chinese work” (僑務工作; qiao wu gong zuo; kiu4 mou6 gung1 jok3) is deeply integrated into the state structure while extended to overseas Chinese organizations, including hometown associations and student groups. “Overseas Chinese work” can be traced back to the founding of the Zhigong Party in San Francisco in 1920, but major structural implementation of modern Chinese Communist Party (CCP) diaspora governance emerged in the late 1970s. Against the backdrop of reform and opening-up, the CCP established five structures of overseas Chinese governance (五僑; wu qiao; ng5 kiu4)¹ to operate at each of the five levels of Leninist party-state system: (a) central level, (b) provinces,

autonomous regions, and municipalities, (c) prefectures, (d) counties, and (e) townships (Liu & Van Dongen, 2016, p. 809).

In 1995, current PRC President Xi Jinping, standing Committee of the Fujian Provincial Committee of the Chinese Communist Party at the time, advocated for “Big Overseas Chinese Work” (大僑務 *da qiao wu*; *daai6 kiu4 mou6*) that consists of both wide (horizontally global) and deep (vertically from state-institution to civic level) cooperation between China and the Chinese overseas. This “Big Overseas Chinese Work” vision has primarily been driven by economic interests in cultivating economic ties between the PRC and different host countries of overseas Chinese. This vision has later extended into overseas political control and operations, including a widely reported “Operation Fox Hunt” in coopting targets to return to China (Safeguard Defenders, 2022b). Since the 2010s, particularly after Xi Jinping consolidated his leadership within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) the regime has intensified its management of the overseas Chinese community. This effort was marked by an elevation of the United Front Work Department—a political unit focused on national security and foreign policy strategies—as the primary state instrument for implementing diaspora governance policies. To this end, the PRC regime has incorporated decades of overseas Chinese work into its global political operations. It is crucial to note that the PRC regime has increasingly employed repressive tactics, including intimidation, assault, and harassment, in these political operations targeting overseas Chinese dissidents. Operation Fox Hunt has led to the arrests of 40 individuals and the repatriation of 680 targeted overseas Chinese to China (Gan 2015). The Operation exemplifies the wide—from domestic to global—and deep—from state to civic level—of Xi’s “Big Overseas Chinese Work.”

From the state to emigrants, the PRC regime has sought to maintain a unifying voice that promotes the positive narrative of China while repressing any opposition to the regime. As of 2023, the PRC regime has about 265 bilateral posts (embassies and consulates) in 171 countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2023). These state outposts are also highly linked to the non-state overseas Chinese institutions in different parts of the world. In 2022, the international non-governmental organization Safeguard Defender systematically documented 102 Chinese Overseas Police Service Stations in 53 countries (Safeguard Defenders, 2022b). These stations are not only set up in major cities of Global North countries, such as San Francisco, Vancouver, London, and Sydney; they are also found in Global South countries, such as Ethiopia, Tanzania, Vietnam, Chile, other Belt and Road Initiative states, and other PRC-related states. Many of these Chinese Overseas Police Service Stations are set up in ethnic hometown associations. According to a report by PRC state-sponsored media *Economic Times* (2017), reposted by the Chinese government website (gov.cn), in 2017, there were “63 police liaison officers stationed at 40 embassies and consulates in 31 countries including China’s missions in the United States, Canada, Thailand, Malaysia, Germany, and more.”

One key mission, as reported to be an achievement of the South African center, is to have “the police liaison officers from our country *unite with the local major overseas Chinese communities* to establish a Chinese law enforcement and civilian center”

(*Economic Times*, 2017, italicized). The collaborations between state agents and overseas Chinese migrants as non-state agents could be found in another report by Safeguard Defenders on the operations to force the “fugitives” overseas to return to China (Safeguard Defenders, 2022a). In particular, the Chinese state hires local citizens as non-state agents to intimidate and threaten their targets. In Los Angeles, local thugs are hired to smash the windows of a target Peng Xufeng (Safeguard Defenders, 2022a, p. 41).

Over the course of 4 years of field observations, there have been at least five documented instances where screenshots of messages from the Chinese consulate have encouraged overseas Chinese to participate in either countermovement to the Hong Kong movement or to rally support for the PRC. In November 2023, just before the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Francisco, a widely circulated screenshot of a WeChat message read,

Good afternoon, committee members! Just received a notification from the Los Angeles Consulate that President Xi will be visiting the United States next week from the 13th to the 17th. CSSA students have been invited to attend the welcoming event in San Francisco and participate in the meeting [. . .] The consulate will cover all expenses for transportation, accommodation, and meals.

In the same week, Hong Kong exiled advocate Anna Kwok, who has a million-dollar arrest warrant, received death threats on social media. Her photo was widely circulated on Chinese social media platform WeChat, with the label of “modern traitor” (現代漢奸; *xian dai han jian*; *yin6 doi6 hon3 gaan1*). Some loyalist accounts threatened to “bounty hunt” Anna Kwok and encouraged people to “drop her unconscious body at the Chinese consulate” under her post about protesting President Xi during the APEC Summit.

At the APEC rally, overseas Chinese and international students arrived in big buses, joining together to demonstrate their patriotism to the PRC. Also, I observed the presence of Chinatown thugs and violent assaults targeting anti-PRC dissidents. Over the 4 days of the APEC Summit, a preliminary count reveals at least 13 counts of assault, 9 counts of harassment, and 4 counts of surveillance activities against the exiled Tibetans, Hong Kongers, Uyghurs, and mainland Chinese dissidents. Also, three dissident phones and one local reporter phone are reported to be forcefully taken by the pro-PRC nationalists. One of the phones was found to be sent to Hong Kong a week after the protest (as reported by Twitter user @XiaoweiPeng5).

The cooperation between institutional outposts and ethnic organizations of migrants and international students has established a broad network of non-state actors capable of carrying out repressive actions in foreign territories. This expanded reach does not rely solely on coercion or incentivizing loyalty but also on disseminating state-sponsored propaganda. This propaganda actively spreads misinformation and nationalist rhetoric to justify the repression of dissidents through methods like assault, harassment, and surveillance, depicting these actions as patriotic endeavors. Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend how the autocratic narratives of the PRC disseminate within overseas communities, effectively mobilizing the repressive nationalist diaspora. In

the following, I first uncover the process of discursive transmission in which state discourses against opposition become the nationalist claims found in countermovement and repression activities. In the second part of the finding, I rely on ethnographic observations, interview data, and the dataset to explore the global presence of the Repressive nationalist diaspora of the PRC regime and its deterrence effect on Hong Konger dissidents abroad.

Drawing Nationalist Boundaries to Cultivate Nationalist Diaspora

To comprehend how the PRC regime cultivates the repressive nationalist diaspora, we must first examine how the state's discourse against dissident movements was transmitted to the pro-regime diaspora. From PRC state releases, PRC-controlled media reports, the joint statements published by pro-PRC diaspora organizations, online posts, and public speeches, I identify two predominant ways of boundary-making to antagonize dissidents.

Territorializing Chinese Identity by Antagonizing Dissidents as Separatists

As highlighted in prior securitization studies, autocratic regimes frequently employ discursive strategies to delegitimize dissident groups by branding them as separatists and terrorists (Yilmaz et al., 2023). In the context of the PRC, discourses related to national security are prevalent in state official rhetoric, legislation, and PRC state-sponsored media. Specifically, the *Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region* designates "secession," "subversion," "colluding with a foreign country," and "terrorist activities" as major criminal offenses (Young, 2021). This legislation was enacted in 2020 and has since been employed to detain local dissidents and issue arrest warrants for overseas Hong Kongers. In public addresses and media, the PRC state consistently characterizes Hong Kong as "China's Hong Kong," framing dissidents who identify as "Hong Kongers" (as opposed to "Hong Kong Chinese") as separatists, terrorists, and perceived threats to national security. This discursive boundary extends to exclude other anti-PRC movements, such as the Taiwanese, Uyghurs, and Tibetans (as illustrated in Figure 1).

Such discourse is transmitted to the pro-PRC-regime diaspora and widely adopted by the ethnic organization. Here is an example speech made by the chairperson of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, a major Chinatown organization in the Bay Area, in the United States.

Hong Kong has belonged to Chinese territory since ancient times. As far back as two thousand years ago, during the Qin and Han dynasties [. . .] Since the protests related to the extradition bill in 2019, anti-China forces have openly advocated for Hong Kong independence[. . .]. They have carried out acts of terrorism.

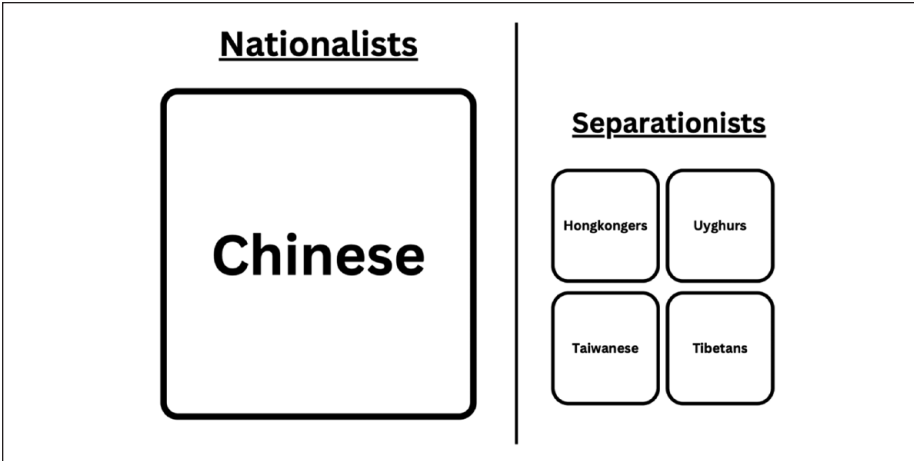


Figure 1. Territorializing PRC-nationalist identity.
 Note. PRC = People's Republic of China.

Such discourse is being used not only in Chinatown organizations but also in call-to-action messages online. Here is an illustrative example of a social media post created by overseas Chinese students in Canada regarding their countermovement against a Hong Konger rally on August 17, 2019.

Chinese in Canada are quick to respond and organize spontaneous demonstrations against the separationists of Hong Kong. To “meet” the provocations of the Hong Kong Independents. Defend national dignity! Chinese and international students from all over joined hands to fight back. To all of Hong Kong, all of Canada, and the whole world, we declare, One China! (Chinese Social Media on 2019 Hong Kongers rallies in Canada)

These examples highlight a cooccurrence between the state’s official discourse and the diaspora in drawing the boundary to portray opposition groups as terrorists or separatists. As depicted in Figure 1, the territorialization of Chinese identity has resulted in the identification of Hong Kongers, Taiwanese, Uyghurs, and Tibetans as identities adopted by dissidents advocating for separatism. This characterization, in turn, inflames nationalist sentiments that antagonize these dissidents, thereby reinforcing their repressive actions.

Orientalizing Chinese Identity by Antagonizing Dissidents as Western-Influenced

Commonly found in other autocratic regimes, such as Libya, dictators often perceive opposition movements as “color revolutions” being supported by foreign influences

aiming to undermine state power. Since the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Movement, the PRC regime has employed an orientalist categorization of “China versus West” to frame the resistance as a Western-influenced “color revolution” seeking to advance an anti-China agenda. By framing dissidents as receiving Western support, loyalists have cultivated Chinese ethnic nationalist identity to mobilize against the opposition. The following examples demonstrate that both state public discourse and pro-regime diaspora discourse have closely intertwined anti-Western imperialism and nationalist narratives. In 2019, Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Hua Chunying stated,

Abundant facts and evidence indicate that *these non-governmental organizations*, in various ways, have *supported anti-China elements* in Hong Kong, actively *inciting them to engage in extreme violent criminal activities* and foment “Hong Kong independence” separatist activities.

In the overseas setting, PRC Institutional outposts actively disseminate such a discourse against Hong Kong dissidents publicly. As H.E. CONG Peiwu, Chinese Ambassador to Canada wrote in a local op-ed,

For a long time, Western countries [. . .] incited “color revolutions” in other countries, and even blatantly overthrew foreign governments. This is the real interference in other countries’ internal affairs. (H.E. Cong on *Ottawa Life Magazine*)

Such a discourse is further exemplified by a semi-governmental institution that actively connects the Chinese nationalist diaspora in the world.

The anti-China forces in the United States, closely linked with the radical elements in Hong Kong, are the main driving force behind the ongoing violence in Hong Kong. [. . . They] cunningly aim to orchestrate a “*color revolution*” of sorts in Hong Kong. (Statement released by All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese, italicized)

Within the diaspora, nationalists have embraced the state discourse by orientalizing Chinese identity through the dichotomy of “West versus China.” Here is an example speech made by Zhonghua Huang, president of Ningyang Association.

With the support of *anti-China forces overseas*, a riot erupted in Hong Kong on July 1, 2019. [. . .] Hong Kong will gradually *remove the remnants of “colonialization,”* reform its education and judicial systems, and ensure long-term stability. (A speech by Zhonghua Huang, italicized)

A similar discourse could be found among the nationalist Chinese diasporas on social media. Here is an example speech on social media made by an activist who organized anti-Western imperialism, anti-racism movement in the United States,

In 2014, there was the Hong Kong occupy movement which [. . .] was vastly supported by the United States and the Western power. [From] 2019 to 2020, a color revolution was launched in Hong Kong.

The same discourse is widely observed and reported by informants in the international Chinese student groups on WeChat and in pro-PRC-regime organization events in Chinatown. As illustrated in Figure 2, the discursive strategy of linking Western influences and anti-regime dissidents has been widely adopted in the pro-PRC-regime diaspora to create a nationalist narrative antagonizing the dissidents.

The Global Activities of PRC-Regime Repressive Nationalist Diaspora

As a result of the discursive boundary fomenting the division of anti- and pro-regime migrants, the localists are motivated to actively counter the anti-regime diaspora abroad and report their activities to the state. Repression tactics exercised by the pro-regime diaspora often manifest through nationalist countermovements. Figure 3 illustrates the global extent of repression by pro-PRC-regime diasporas, which significantly overlaps with their countermovement activities. Out of the 118 reported repression activities, 102 are associated with countermovements, while 3 are linked to local ethnic anti-racism rallies. Table 2 and 3 display the distribution of repression activities across the categories of assault, harassment, and surveillance. In general, mass mobilization provides pro-regime nationalists with the opportunity to legitimize their repression activities, portraying acts of assault, harassment, and surveillance as patriotic and commendable actions against “separatists” and “Western imperialists.” I further substantiate this finding using evidence from ethnographic observation, interviews, and the dataset of repression and countermovement activities.

Assault and Harassment in Nationalist Countermovement

Assault, harassment, and surveillance against dissidents are extensively reported by the informants in the data, as well as observed during interviews and fieldwork. In particular, assault and harassment are explicitly associated with nationalist discourses used to justify these actions, both at protest sites and online. For instance, in August 2019, following coordinated actions by Hong Kongers in multiple cities worldwide, a call for countermovements circulated on Chinese social media platforms. Posters featuring the PRC-regime flag and slogans such as “calling all patriots,” “love China, love Hong Kong,” “oppose Hong Kong separatists,” and “anti-violence” were widely distributed. Nationalist countermovements were organized in 28 cities across Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, France, and Japan.

Notably, in Vancouver, Canada, the Hong Kong democracy rally faced opposition from hundreds of pro-PRC nationalists from the Chinese international student groups and civic organizations from Chinatown. On Chinese social media WeChat, there were users posting threats to the dissidents with an image displaying a gun (later verified as a prop gun). From the data collected in the Alliance Canada Hong Kong report, there were WeChat groups set up, with hundreds of pro-PRC members joining to coordinate countermovements (Alliance Canada Hong Kong, 2020). In the afternoon, the dissident diaspora gathered at the Broadway City Hall Station in Vancouver for a rally in support of the

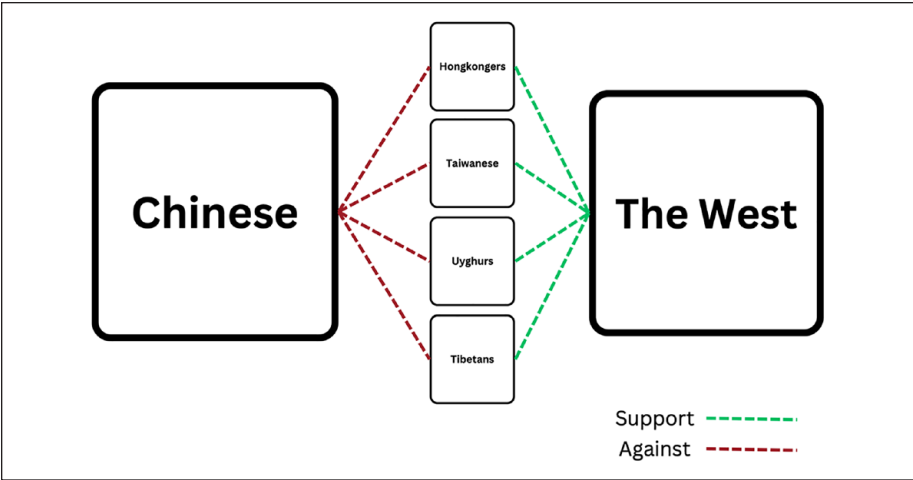


Figure 2. Orientalizing PRC-nationalist identity.
Note. PRC= People’s Republic of China.

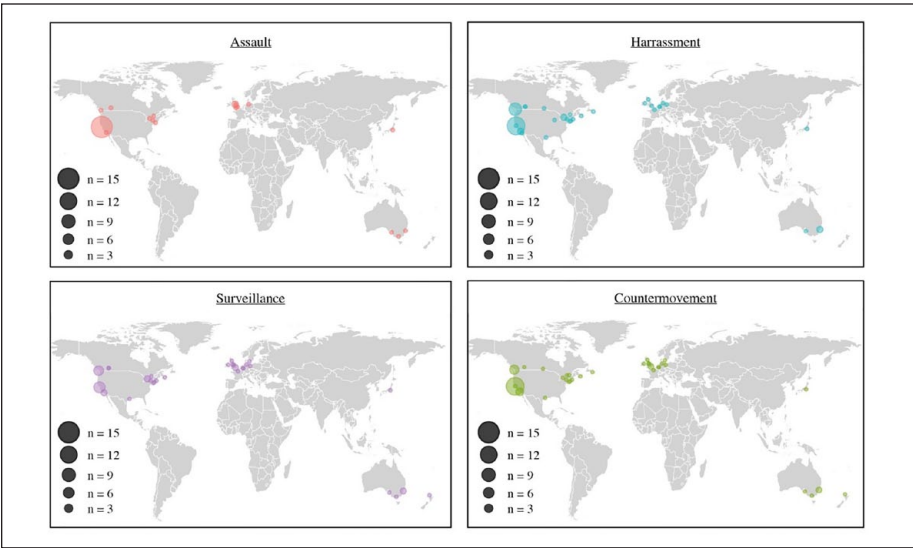


Figure 3. A global map of repressive activities of pro-PRC-nationalist diaspora from 2019 to 2023.
Note. PRC= People’s Republic of China.

Hong Kong movement. Simultaneously, participants from the pro-PRC countermovement assembled, waving PRC flags and chanting “One China!” Some nationalists brought knives to the rally, threatening to “eliminate the Hong Kong toxins,” as reported by an

Table 2. The Global Distribution of Repression Activities of the Pro-PRC-Nationalist Diaspora From 2019 to 2023.

Countries	Surveillance	Harassment	Assault	Total (by country)
Australia	4	3	3	10
Canada	10	14	4	28
Denmark	1	0	0	1
France	1	1	0	2
Germany	4	4	1	9
Ireland	1	1	0	2
Japan	1	1	1	3
New Zealand	1	0	0	1
United Kingdom	5	2	5	12
United States	12	21	17	50
Total (by repression activities)	40	47	31	118

Note. PRC=People’s Republic of China.

Table 3. The Distribution of Reported Countermovements and Repression Activities.

Repression activities	Countermovement-related	Separate event
Assault	26	5
Harassment	39	8
Surveillance	37	3

interview respondent. Others brought high-definition cameras to film the dissidents and take photographs. Similar countermovement events occurred in Vancouver in the evening and the following day, resulting in a filming screening event being canceled and a prayer meeting at a church surrounded by hundreds of pro-PRC diaspora protesters.

At the 2023 APEC Summit rally in San Francisco, a number of pro-PRC loyalists brought sticks and other offensive weapons to the rally and actively intimidated anti-PRC dissidents. Here is an example of an assault I observed at the rally.

On November 15, 2023, a gathering of individuals identified as pro-PRC nationalists occurred in front of the Hyatt Regency Hotel. It is reported that President Xi was present inside the hotel at the time. Concurrently, groups of Tibetan and Hong Kong protesters were holding demonstrations against President Xi on the opposite side of the street. During the event, a number of the pro-PRC individuals, who were carrying national flags, crossed over to where the dissidents were and initiated physical confrontations using metal flagpoles. In the course of these actions, one Tibetan protester was injured, receiving a two-inch laceration on their arm. I provided first aid to the injured Tibetan protester. Throughout this period, several pro-PRC nationalists were observed continuing to engage in aggressive behavior toward other protesters. Other pro-PRC nationalists across the street were actively chanting, singing nationalistic songs, and recording videos of the dissident protesters.

In the database, similar assault and surveillance activities were reported in at least 29 other cities around the world, where Hong Konger dissident diaspora encountered the nationalist movements.

Doxing and Stalking as Surveillance Activities After the Protests

After the protest, there were reports of the images and identities of participants in the anti-regime movement being exposed online and circulated on Chinese social media. These participants were labeled as “separatists,” “garbage,” “anti-China elements,” and “colluding with Western forces.” The posts also praised the “brave” actions of the “patriotic Chinese” for countering the dissident diaspora. From the pro-PRC rally participants’ online posts, it is evident that the participants view their actions in countering the Hong Konger dissident rally as a patriotic act. Here is an excerpt from a post written by a first-time participant,

The slogan “Love China, Love Hong Kong, Oppose Hong Kong Independence, Oppose Violence” resounded through the sky. [. . .] Because every person holding the Chinese national flag knows that we are all descendants of the dragon. Wherever there are people trying to smear or divide our homeland, there will be people standing up[. . .].

On the other hand, on social media, the Hong Konger dissident diaspora who organized or participated in anti-PRC-regime rallies received messages of death threats, phone calls with harassment, and stalking by strangers. These activities were widely reported in the United States, Canada, Germany, and France. For instance, in Canada, an interview respondent captured a group of Chinese individuals performing the Nazi salute while singing the National Anthem of the PRC. The respondent shared the video on social media and then received multiple death threats through direct messages. Another respondent, actively involved in organizing the anti-PRC-regime diaspora movement, received an anonymous phone call that disclosed their resident address and threatened harm to their family. Another incident of stalking activities was observed after the APEC Summit.

On November 19, 2023, during dinner with three advocates from Hong Kong at a Chinese restaurant in San Francisco, I observed suspicious individuals at the only other occupied table in the restaurant. Throughout our meal, these individuals consistently held up their phones, seemed to focus their attention on one of the advocates, Anna Kwok, and engaged in odd behavior, such as holding the phone up to take pictures, repeatedly pacing around, and feigning trips to the restroom without actually doing so.

These doxing and stalking activities have been commonly experienced by activists since 2019. These activities have instilled widespread fear. Interview respondents commonly mentioned that they would conceal their faces and constantly worry about the risk of being identified when participating in rallies supporting democracy in Hong Kong.

As an outcome of stalking and doxing activities, some dissident diaspora rally participants are being detained and arrested when they return to Hong Kong. In one widely reported case, an activist who participated in rallies in Manchester and Glasgow in the UK was detained at a Hong Kong police station after returning to Hong Kong for a visit in 2022. As recalled by the activist during a media interview, the police took out pictures of him participating in the rallies and said, “You took part in demonstrations and gave speeches in foreign countries, which is enough to constitute terrorist activities” (Yang, 2023). Another Hong Kong student in Japan was arrested upon returning to Hong Kong in 2023. The student was imprisoned for 2 months for posting “13 pro-Hong Kong independence social media posts on Facebook and Instagram published between September 2018 and March 2023” (Pang, 2023).

Discussion: Sowing Hate to Cultivate Non-State Agents of Transnational Repression

This paper uncovers a distinct, repressive form of actorhood within diaspora politics—the repressive nationalist diaspora. These actors are culturally motivated ethnic migrants in the hostland state, acting as loyalists to their homeland’s authoritarian regime. Autocratic governments adeptly nurture these loyalists, exploiting the rifts between pro- and anti-regime factions, and instigating hate within the scattered emigrant populations to mobilize loyalists. It is crucial to recognize that not all individuals involved in PRC-related countermovement events become radicalized and engage in violent activities. However, as illustrated by the APEC example, a loyalist crowd provides a mass for the state to carry out a series of repressions. The outcomes include (a) the political persecution of individuals identified as having participated in anti-regime rallies; (b) the exposure of dissidents’ information with loyalists filming dissidents at rallies, which further propels harassment, intimidation, and other forms of repressive activities; and (c) a crowd that provides cover for some radicalized loyalists to engage in further violent assaults and harassment. While experts often categorize pro-regime loyalist movements as being either financially supported by the homeland’s dictatorial regime (the instrumental explanation) or entirely voluntary (the nationalism explanation), this paper proposes a shift in focus from the question of “why” to “how.” It examines how the establishment and reinforcement of two nationalist boundaries—labeling dissidents as “separatists” and “Western-influenced”—lay a cultural groundwork for fostering division, engendering animosity against dissidents, and galvanizing the loyalists.

This approach represents a cultural, non-state mechanism for expansively spreading propaganda, inciting division in the host country, and maintaining connections with loyalists. By providing an antagonistic target to fuel hatred, the regime strengthens the bonds with its supporters abroad. The pro-PRC protest in Vancouver served as a prime example of how the mobilization of loyalists crafted a public representation of the PRC in host land society, countering dissidents abroad as a “soft repression” tactic (Ferree, 2004). The ongoing project of building state-loyalist sentiment abroad through propaganda extends beyond immediate tangible benefits; even if it fails to

yield immediate repression outcomes, the effort required is minimal for the regime to cultivate a massive crowd of loyalists abroad. This low-cost strategy ensures that the regime maintains its influence over diaspora communities, making it a sustainable approach for long-term control and a strategy of diaspora governance, in connection with their active transnational repression of dissidents abroad.

The concept of repressive nationalist diaspora presents a bridge between the studies of diaspora governance and transnational repression, offering a non-state framework for examining transnational repression orchestrated by contemporary autocratic regimes. It extends to show how autocratic regimes leverage their supporters abroad to achieve political control. In Moss's analysis of Arab Spring diasporas, instances of similar countermovements and repressive activities emerged among Libyans (2020, p. 100), Syrians (Moss, 2020, p. 103), and Yemenis (Moss, 2020, p. 110). Additional reports highlight cases of Turkish nationalists and Rwandan loyalists employing intimidation tactics, and in some instances, even engaging in assassinations abroad (Freedom House, 2021a, 2021b). These cases broaden the scholarly investigation of the global transmission of homeland conflict, where domestic states are fueled by conflicts in positions on crime and order (Cruz, 2024, this issue), religion (Israel-Palestine, Syria, and Yemen), gender (Saudi Arabia), and race (Han Chinese-Uyghurs), that create distinct factions of loyalists and dissidents at home and abroad. The presented two mechanisms of nationhood identification—labeling dissidents as terrorists/separatists and foreign-influenced—offer valuable insights, particularly applicable to autocratic regimes embroiled in territorial conflicts (such as Kashmir-India) or operating in the context of post-colonial states (such as Libya and Venezuela).

In conclusion, amidst a global resurgence of authoritarianism, it is imperative for pundits, lawmakers, scholars, and advocates to broaden their examination of transnational repression. This expansion must encompass its relational and non-state dimensions, moving beyond the confines of the institutional framework. Of particular importance is the need for comprehensive investigations into the global impacts of repressive nationalist diasporas. Understanding their influence in shaping the political dynamics not only within hostland countries but also in broader geopolitical spheres is crucial. Further exploration of these aspects can provide valuable insights into the evolving landscape of transnational repression and the global presence of modern autocrats.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the special issue editors, Deisy Del Real and Cecilia Menjivar, as well as to the two anonymous reviewers. My thanks also go to Paul Lichterman, Nina Eliasoph, Hajar Yazdiha, Manuel Pastor, Audrye Wong, Kritika Pandey, Maria Labourt, Dana Moss, Sharon Quinsaat, Diana Fu, Lisa Sundstrom, Nikola Mirilovic, Dan Slater, members of an anonymous Hong Kong overseas graduate student reading group, and the participants in the XX ISA World Congress of Sociology and International Studies Association Annual Convention 2023 for their comments on the process of developing the major conceptual argument of this article. Additionally, I want to acknowledge several scholars, graduate students, and policy advocates who provided insightful comments but cannot be identified here due to the political sensitivity

in Hong Kong. This article was made possible with grants from the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and the University of Southern California.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

This article was made possible with grants from the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and the University of Southern California.

Note

1. These “five overseas Chinese structures” (五僑; wu qiao; ng5 kiu4) are the State Council Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO), the China Zhigong Party, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee of the National People’s Congress (NPC), the Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan Compatriots and Overseas Chinese Affairs Committee of the CPPCC, and the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (ACFROC).

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