

## Canada must increase vetting of People's Republic of China students linked to state actors

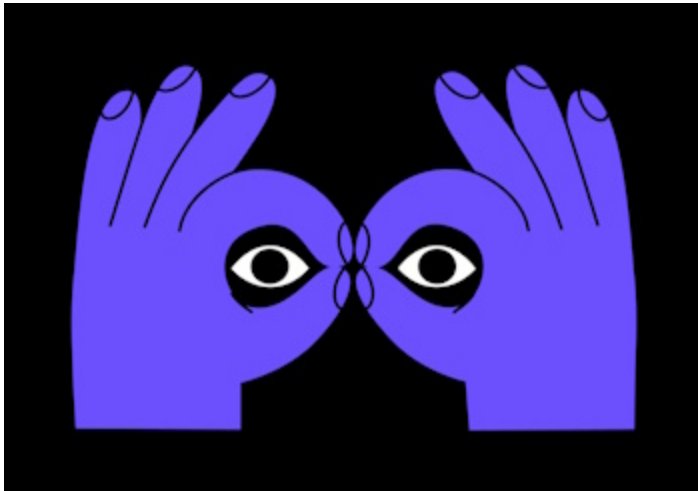
By **Sergio R. Karas**

Law360 Canada (July 21, 2025, 3:31 PM EDT) -- Canada is a target of espionage by the People's Republic of China, and the study permits granted to many PRC students appear to be one gateway used by the Chinese authorities to accomplish their goals, taking advantage of lax security screening by Canadian visa officers, and their security apparatus's ability to pressure and force collaboration by Chinese students abroad.

According to an article published by *The Walrus* on June 4, 2024, since the early 1970s, Canada has welcomed academic exchanges with the People's Republic of China (PRC), particularly encouraging Chinese students to pursue studies in science and technology at Canadian universities. This was viewed as a goodwill gesture, an opportunity to contribute to China's economic and industrial development through access to advanced knowledge and training. In return, Canadian students in China immersed themselves in language, culture and political studies, including the study of Maoism. For decades, this mutually beneficial arrangement appeared benign. However, by the early 2000s, a strategic shift emerged. China's People's Liberation Army (PLA), amid a push for rapid military modernization, began exploiting these academic pathways to advance its goals.



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The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) explained in an article called "Picking flowers, making honey," published on Oct. 30, 2018, that under a covert program dubbed "picking flowers in foreign lands to make honey in China," PLA engineers and scientists, primarily from the National University of Defense Technology (NUDT) and six other military institutions, began concealing their military affiliations to infiltrate Canadian postgraduate research programs. This marked a turning point, transforming educational collaboration into a potential vector for state-sponsored espionage.

A 2018 paper by the International Cyber Policy Centre in Australia states that Canada is the third most targeted country by PLA military scientists, after the United States and the United Kingdom. A

study by United States intelligence company Strider Technologies, quoted by the *Globe and Mail* in January 2023, found that the Chinese military successfully targeted 50 Canadian universities. Strider reported that the University of Waterloo had the most collaborations, whether intentional or not, with NUDT. Other Canadian universities on the list include the University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, the University of Victoria, McMaster University, Concordia University and the University of Calgary. In total, researchers from the top 10 Canadian universities co-authored 240 papers with Chinese military scientists over the past five years.

As of October 2024, there were approximately 50,785 students from the PRC in Canada on study permits. In December 2023, the Federal Court refused a study permit for Yuekang Li, a Chinese PhD student accepted into the University of Waterloo (*Li v. Canada (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration)*, [2023] F.C.J. No. 2354). The court held that his research in microfluidics, a technology with both health and military uses, could pose a national security risk. Officials said Li's ties to a university connected to China's military made it possible that he could be used by the Chinese government to gather sensitive information. This decision sounds the alarm about the risk of espionage through academic research.

In 2020, the U.S. expanded its blacklist of people linked to China's NUDT by denying academic visas to those suspected of trying to steal research with military value. A report by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), dated Dec. 21, 2021, revealed that after these visa restrictions, Chinese scholarship students coming to countries like the United States, Canada, the U.K. and Australia began hiding their ties to the military. They also masked the true nature of their research when applying for visas. Instead of choosing to work in fields that can be linked to the Chinese military when studying at Canadian universities, they chose areas that seem harmless but still have strong military applications.

Most recently, in June 2025, two Chinese nationals, Yunqing Jian and Zunyong Liu, were charged by U.S. authorities for allegedly smuggling a dangerous biological pathogen into the United States. Liu attempted to bring the pathogen through Detroit Metro Airport in July 2024, and Jian, who was affiliated with the University of Michigan and funded by the Chinese government, intended to conduct unauthorized research using the university's lab. Both individuals are facing serious charges, including conspiracy, smuggling, visa fraud and making false statements. This case has raised serious concerns about foreign researchers misusing access to sensitive scientific facilities.

The PRC has enacted legislation that allows its government to require Chinese citizens living in other countries to help with intelligence gathering and operations. Under the 2017 National Intelligence Law, all Chinese citizens and organizations must support and cooperate with China's intelligence agencies if asked and keep any related information secret. This applies no matter where the person lives. Other legislation, including the Data Security Law (2021) and Counterespionage Law (2023), also extends these duties to citizens and companies abroad. This gives the Chinese authorities the power to demand information or assistance from Chinese nationals overseas and even punish them for actions taken outside China. According to an independent, nonprofit research and analysis organization, CNA, the Chinese authorities can go to great lengths enforcing their requests for cooperation, even pressuring Chinese citizens living abroad by threatening their family members still in China.

Canada immigration is not currently implementing sufficient safeguards to prevent foreign students from using study permits as cover for nefarious activities, or from being forced to spy for foreign governments. To ensure national security while maintaining openness to international students, several important steps should be taken. Security screening by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) should increase and deepen background checks, especially for students applying to sensitive programs that can have military applications, like engineering, computer science and advanced technologies.

Applicants who show signs of risk — such as ties to military or government organizations, or work in sensitive research, or have family connections to state entities — should undergo enhanced security screening. The use of predictive analysis and algorithms can help flag such cases. A case-by-case assessment approach should remain in place to ensure accuracy and fairness in decision-making. Educational institutions must comply with mandatory reporting requirements, confirming that students are actively enrolled and meeting the conditions of their study permits, and ensuring that their facilities are not used to conduct unauthorized research. While there are no official country-

specific restrictions, it is important to apply heightened scrutiny to applicants from high-risk countries and strategic adversaries like China, due to growing concerns over intellectual property theft, espionage and national security.

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