
CASE STUDY

Foreign Interference or Domestic Injustice? The Case of the Montreal \"Police Stations\"

Canadians United Against Modern Exclusion

ABSTRACT

This case study examines how an unfounded RCMP investigation transformed two long-standing Montreal community organizations, the Service à la Famille Chinoise du Grand Montréal and the Centre Sino-Québec de la Rive-Sud, from trusted social service providers into symbols of alleged foreign interference. Triggered by a foreign-based NGO report, the investigation led to severe funding losses, program closures, and lasting reputational harm despite no evidence of wrongdoing. By tracing the investigation's origins, media framing, and community fallout, this study reveals how contemporary forms of exclusion operate through suspicion, silence, and the conflation of cultural identity with political loyalty.

Introduction

For decades, two Montreal community organizations, the Service à la Famille Chinoise du Grand Montréal (SFCGM) and the Centre Sino-Québec de la Rive-Sud (CSQRS), have helped Chinese immigrants settle into life in Quebec. In March 2023, that work was suddenly jeopardized when the RCMP announced it was investigating both centres for allegedly operating as “police stations” of the Chinese government.

Neither centre was told what evidence supported the claim, let alone what it meant to be a “police station.” In the absence of explanation, the announcement triggered funding cuts, program closures, and fear among community members who had relied on the centres for support.

Two and a half years later, the RCMP quietly concluded their investigation without recommending any charges, offering no explanation or acknowledgement of the reputational and material harm the organizations had suffered, harm that continues to affect them today. This case study examines how the RCMP's unsubstantiated investigation turned essential community institutions into symbols of foreign interference, treated as suspicious foreign agents not because of anything they did, but because of whom they serve.

Background

The SFCGM was founded in Montreal's Chinatown in 1976 with a mission to support the Chinese and Asian communities in Quebec. Together with the CSQRS, which was established in 1990 on Montreal's South Shore, they are the only community organizations in Quebec dedicated to serving Chinese Canadians, who total more than 115,000 in the province.

Both centres provide essential social services, including those aimed at supporting newcomers: English and French language classes, help finding employment, legal aid, housing support, and family and psychological counselling. They also assist clients with navigating government services and provide interpretation for those who do not speak English or French. Their ability to offer support in Mandarin and Cantonese makes them uniquely equipped to reach certain newcomers and seniors, vulnerable populations who might otherwise struggle to access basic resources. For many, these centres have been not only a bridge to Quebec society but also a rare space of cultural familiarity and trust.

The Allegations and Investigation

On March 9, 2023, the RCMP announced that it was investigating SFCGM and CSQRS for allegedly operating as "police stations" of the Chinese government.

The idea that "Chinese police stations" might exist in Canada did not originate with Canadian authorities. The allegations trace back to reports released in late 2022 by the Spanish NGO Safeguard Defenders, which warned of "Chinese overseas police stations" allegedly used to persuade Chinese nationals abroad who face criminal charges in China to return. According to the reports, these centres were established by Chinese public security bureaus in several countries beginning in 2016 and ostensibly provide administrative services, such as renewing driver's licenses, but have more nefarious motives beneath the surface.

Neither SFCGM nor CSQRS fit this description. Established decades ago by Chinese Canadians, these organizations support newcomers in settling in Canada and engaging with Canadian government services, not foreign authorities. Safeguard Defenders recognizes as much, since they do not label the

two organizations as “police stations.” The report mentions the two centres only once, as members of the Overseas Chinese Service Centers (OCSC) network. This network was established in 2014 by the Chinese State Council’s Overseas Chinese Affairs Office to support the social and cultural integration of Chinese diaspora communities, who may face unique difficulties accessing local services and thus benefit from more resources and support.

This nuance was lost in reporting of the RCMP investigation. For instance, **Le Journal de Montréal** wrote that Safeguard Defenders feared that centres in the OCSC network could or would turn into a Chinese “police station.” Yet this is not what the NGO’s report actually says; rather, the report explicitly distinguishes between the community centres and “police stations.” The article also quotes a spokeswoman for Safeguard Defenders sharing that “All evidence shows that they are very closely tied to the United Front Work Department” as proof of Chinese government influence. However, this claim rests solely on the fact that the OCSC network is sponsored by the United Front, not on any actions by the organizations themselves.

Simply put, the source that prompted the RCMP investigation never accused these organizations of being Chinese police stations. It merely noted their affiliation with the OCSC network, an observation that on its own says nothing about whether they operate under the influence or direction of the Chinese government. The centres are part of the network because they provide essential support to newcomers of Chinese origin in Canada, a role they have played for decades, much like similar organizations serving Chinese communities around the world. Far from acting as extensions of a foreign state, they meet “the legitimate needs of a community, overseas Chinese, that is often underserved or overlooked by local authorities, regardless of the country where they live,” as observed by one source cited in the Spanish NGO’s report.

Taken together, this suggests that the RCMP’s investigation was driven by a perceived association with the Chinese government rather than by concrete allegations or evidence of wrongdoing.

And all of this assumes that the Safeguard Defenders report itself is reliable and can be taken at face value. There are good reasons to question that premise. Legal scholar Jeremy Daum of Yale Law School has criticized the report’s hyperbolic language for fostering “an environment where every Chinese person is viewed as a potential agent of the state.” The fact that the NGO is foreign and most of their staff are anonymous further underscores the need for independent verification before accepting its claims as fact. Some degree of due diligence on the part of the RCMP (at minimum, confirming some allegation of misconduct before publicly characterizing the centres as engaging in “foreign state-backed criminal activities, which may threaten the safety of persons living in Canada”) would have been responsible.

Yet that verification never came. As months passed, the organizations were never told what they were accused of. The RCMP’s inaction left the case hanging, allowing suspicion to linger and exclusion to take

root.

Modern Exclusion in Practice: Funding Cuts and Social Stigma

Although framed as an investigation rather than a set of proven charges, the RCMP's public announcement all but suggested that the two organizations were fronts for a foreign state. Its language was extraordinary, particularly given that no evidence or even allegations of wrongdoing had been made public.

Officials explained that the investigation was publicized early to encourage individuals who might feel intimidated to come forward. That rationale is understandable, but it does not explain why the two centres had to be named explicitly. Any reasonable observer could have foreseen the consequences that publicly naming them would have: two long-standing community organizations were branded as security threats, their decades of service reduced to suspicion.

The repercussions were immediate and concrete. Once the centres were viewed as liabilities, their funding was cut by more than 70% as government partners withdrew. These were not abstract losses. French classes were cancelled, programs for seniors were suspended, and newcomers who relied on the centres for housing and job assistance were left without support. The financial strain was so severe that by May 2024, the SFCGM faced foreclosure. It survived only because its executive director and some members of the community mortgaged their homes to save the organization.

The crisis was not only financial. Fear quickly spread within the community: those who continued to visit the centres risked being seen as "Chinese spies" and those who defended them feared consequences from the RCMP. May Chiu, one of the community leaders who mortgaged her home to keep SFCGM open, described how residents began to avoid the organization altogether. One family in Toronto, she recalled, hesitated to contact the centre to check on elderly parents in Montreal because they were not sure if it was safe to do so.

The fallout from the RCMP's announcement also extended to individuals. Xixi Li, the executive director of both centres and a Brossard city councillor, learned of the investigation only when it became public. Overnight, she became a political target with no way to defend herself against the vague and unsubstantiated allegations. According to Li, in the wake of the allegations Brossard Mayor Doreen Assaad pressured her to resign from city council. Rather than tempering speculation, the mayor's public comments seemed to amplify it. In interviews with CBC, Assaad said that "people from the city's Chinese community have raised concerns with her about the centre" and that she feared a "risk to democratic life" in her municipality. She also questioned the need for organizations like the SFCGM and CSQRS, since newcomers are typically referred to a general agency, the Maison internationale de la Rive-Sud.

The implication was clear: organizations dedicated to serving the Chinese community were not viewed as integral parts of the city's social fabric, but as potential liabilities.

The RCMP's silence only deepened the harm. After announcing the investigation, it provided no updates, conducted no visits to the centres, and offered no guidance with regard to next steps. The organizations were publicly accused, but given no opportunity to respond or clear their names. Yet even as the RCMP remained silent, public officials continued to speak as though the allegations were established facts. For instance, in June 2023, during testimony before a parliamentary committee, then-national security and intelligence adviser to the prime minister Jody Thomas said she was "aware of two ['police stations'] in Montreal and work is being done to ensure that they cease to operate." When the RCMP finally closed its investigation in September 2025 without recommending charges, it offered no explanation, apology, or acknowledgment of the profound harm its public allegations had caused to the organizations and the communities they serve.

Implications of Modern Exclusion

It is important to emphasize that the RCMP can and should investigate potential cases of foreign interference, and it is understandable that not all evidence can be disclosed while an investigation is ongoing. The concern in this case lies not with the decision to investigate, but with how the investigation was made public and managed. By announcing that SFCGM nor CSQRS were under investigation without later offering clarification, progress updates, or closure, the RCMP allowed serious allegations to hang in the air for more than two years. That prolonged uncertainty fostered suspicion: the centres lost funding, credibility, and the confidence of their community, even though no wrongdoing was ever found.

In effect, the investigation became a trial in the court of public opinion rather than in a court of law. The two centres were judged not for their actions, but for their perceived association with China. That they were targeted precisely because they serve the Chinese community ironically underscores why such organizations are essential in the first place. Chinese Canadians continue to be regarded with suspicion whenever their work or cultural identity is linked, however loosely, to China or to Chinese institutions.

This case illustrates how modern exclusion operates: not through formal bans or overt prejudice, but through suspicion and silence that isolate entire communities. But exclusion is not where the story ends. Both the SFCGM and CSQRS have taken legal action against the RCMP, seeking to recover lost federal funding and repair the reputational harm they suffered. Their response is an act of resilience: rather than accepting the stigma imposed on them, these organizations are asserting their place within Canada's civic landscape and demanding recognition as legitimate partners in building inclusive communities.

References

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2. Page 10, <https://safeguarddefenders.com/en/blog/patrol-and-persuade-follow-110-overseas-investigation>
3. Services provided by SFCGM and CSQRS to Chinese immigrants are funded by the Canadian and Quebec governments. With the increase of Chinese nationals with temporary status in Canada beginning in 2016 (as students and business visitors, for example), there was an increased demand for services supporting these individuals that was not under federal and provincial funding. This need for more support is what led the organizations to join the OCSC network.
4. Original in French: L'ONG espagnole Safeguard Defenders craignait déjà, dans un rapport publié en décembre, que ce genre de centre de service soit ou se transforme en « poste de police » chinois.
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