
CASE STUDY

Foreign Interference and the Exclusion of Chinese Canadians

Canadians United Against Modern Exclusion · 1 September 2025

ABSTRACT

This case study examines how the Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference contributed to the exclusion of Chinese Canadians. Although framed as a neutral investigation into foreign threats to democracy, the inquiry marginalized the perspectives of the majority of Chinese Canadians and treated contested claims as objective evidence of interference. In doing so, it reinforced harmful assumptions that Chinese Canadians act under the direction of the Chinese government rather than their own judgment. These dynamics show how stated efforts to safeguard democracy can reproduce racialized narratives, constrain political participation, and reinforce broader patterns of exclusion.

The Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference

The Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference in Federal Electoral Processes and Democratic Institutions (PIFI) was established by the government of Canada in September 2023 with a mandate to examine the extent and impact of foreign interference in the 2019 and 2021 federal elections, the actions of the government in response to alleged instances of interference, and government capacity to address foreign interference. The inquiry advertised itself as an impartial arbiter of fact and led a seemingly neutral investigation into foreign threats to Canadian democracy. However, in practice it entrenched suspicion of the Chinese Canadian community and deepened their exclusion.

This happened in two main ways. First, it directly excluded the majority of Chinese Canadian voices while amplifying the perspectives of narrow, unrepresentative groups that framed the community in terms of “good” versus “bad.” Second, it lent legitimacy to speculative and unsubstantiated allegations of foreign interference, treating contested interpretations and ordinary political behaviour as evidence of Chinese government direction. Together, these dynamics show that, far from protecting democracy, the inquiry undermined it by reinforcing racialized suspicion and stigmatizing Chinese Canadians’ full participation in political life.

Modern Exclusion in Practice

1. Exclusion Through Underrepresentation

First, exclusion manifested itself in the people who were heard from during the inquiry. Allegations of foreign interference rested heavily on assumptions about how Chinese Canadians think and act, such as in claims that the Conservative Party lost votes and perhaps even seats in the 2021 election because Chinese Canadians were manipulated into not voting for them. However, the inquiry did not substantively engage with Chinese Canadians themselves, even though the credibility of these allegations relies on the idea that Chinese Canadians are uniquely susceptible to the Chinese government’s direction or disinformation campaigns.

Rather, those invited to represent Chinese Canadians came from small groups representing specific portions of the diaspora: the Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project (representing a community estimated at around 2,000 in Canada), the Falun Dafa Association (with perhaps a few hundred adherents), and the Toronto Association for Democracy in China (who have a few thousand social media followers at most). These organizations bring important perspectives, but they cannot plausibly be said to reflect the diversity of the more than 1.7 million Canadians who identify as Chinese.

These voices reinforced a narrative of “good” Chinese Canadians, those who oppose the Chinese government, and “bad” ones who are presumed to uncritically follow its instructions. For instance, Winnie Ng of the Toronto Association for Democracy in China claims that the Chinese government seeks to “force the loyalty among people of Chinese descent,” while Grace Dai Wollensak of the Falun Dafa Association blanketly refers to Chinese Canadian media as “controlled by the CCP to replicate anti-Falun Gong articles.” The effect of these statements is to stigmatize any Chinese Canadian voice that does not align with this anti-China narrative: if someone expresses skepticism about Falun Gong or speaks positively about China, they must be doing so as vessel for the Chinese government rather than of their own volition.

When broader voices beyond these narrow interests were eventually heard from, their testimony did not

support these exclusionary narratives. Rather, they emphasized the dangers of assuming that Chinese Canadians act under the influence of the Chinese government. Teresa Woo-Paw, Chair of the Canadian Race Relations Foundation and a former MLA in Alberta, described how some Chinese Canadians chose not to make political donations or run for public office out of fear that doing so could lead to scrutiny of their loyalty to Canada. Another participant, who requested anonymity out of fear of retaliation for sharing her views, underscored the damaging impact of these narratives: “Many other politicians, journalists, and activists... push the narrative that Chinese Canadians who don’t adopt a harshly critical view of China should be suspect of being foreign agents. This is unfair, dangerous, and it reduces us to second-class citizens in our own country.”

Community voices outside the inquiry reinforce this point. Andi Shi, Executive Director of the Chinese Professionals Association, warned against treating voting patterns as proof of foreign control, writing: “Ten-thousand independent minds could make the same logical decision. Casting that independent decision by many as a mindless action at a foreign government’s bidding is an insult to our intelligence.” Mark Johnson, a Conservative candidate in the 2021 election, observed that many Chinese Canadians were alienated from the Conservative Party not by Chinese government propaganda but by language from the party that “offended” them and that “came across as obsessively anti-China, and brushed the line of intolerance.”

2. Exclusion Through Presenting Opinions as Fact

A second way PIFI contributed to exclusion is through its unquestioned acceptance of subjective interpretations of events as evidence of foreign interference. A few specific instances include:

Allegation of Foreign Interference: Disinformation and misinformation about the Conservative Party was spread by Chinese government-affiliated entities during the 2021 election.

The inquiry was not able to definitively attribute the relevant posts and articles to the Chinese government. However, it continued to refer to these reports as “disinformation” and “inaccurate” even in its final report, a framing that rests on subjective judgment rather than objective fact. The statements in question included claims that then-leader Erin O’Toole wanted to break off diplomatic relations with China and that Chinese Canadians were scared of the Conservative platform. Other sources have argued that these claims are not inherently false or misleading, but rather conclusions one could reasonably draw from the Conservative Party’s campaign platform and O’Toole’s public statements criticizing China. By presenting these contested characterizations as evidence of a “disinformation campaign,” the inquiry implied that those who viewed the Conservatives as hawkish on China could only have arrived at that view because of foreign interference, rather than through their own independent judgment.

Allegation of Foreign Interference: Chinese government-affiliated entities spread false claims about former MP Kenny Chiu’s proposed Foreign Agent Registry Bill that contributed to his loss in the 2021

election.

The inquiry was also not able to definitively attribute the relevant posts and articles to the Chinese government. However, instead of questioning the implications of this gap in evidence, the inquiry moved in the opposite direction, concluding that definitive attribution is not necessary for a finding of fault. As the final report put it: “While there may not have been a direct ‘tasking’ by the PRC, this may not have been necessary: those who wish to assist the PRC often know what to do without being told.” By suggesting that proof of coordination is unnecessary, the inquiry effectively allows any statement that aligns with the Chinese government’s position, or that runs counter to the prevailing narrative in Canada, to be branded as foreign interference. Such reasoning is dangerous because it collapses the distinction between genuine foreign interference and legitimate political disagreement, casting suspicion on Canadians who simply hold divergent views.

The core claim made against Chiu was that his proposed Foreign Agent Registry bill would require any individual or group with ties to China to register as a foreign agent. The inquiry calls this a “false narrative,” despite the fact that this is a conclusion one could reasonably draw. Yet PIFI unquestioningly accepts the view that this interpretation of the bill is false.

Perhaps most strikingly, the inquiry also concluded there was a “reasonable possibility that the media narrative discussed above could have impacted the result” of the election in Chiu’s riding. But for this to be true, it would require that enough voters, specifically Chinese Canadians, changed their minds in response to these posts, and that they would not have done so absent the supposed foreign interference. This logic rests on a troubling stereotype: that Chinese Canadians primarily consume content from outlets allegedly tied to the Chinese government, and that they uncritically accept and act on whatever those outlets say.

Allegation of Foreign Interference: Chinese government influence or direction caused Chinese Canadian community organizations to stop inviting MP Jenny Kwan to events after she became more vocal in her criticisms of the Chinese government.

The inquiry’s final report cites intelligence findings that the “the PRC worked to exclude particular political candidates from public events in 2019, and that this strategy continued in 2021,” describing Jenny Kwan’s supposed lack of invitations as “suspected foreign interference.” The core assumption behind this allegation is that Chinese Canadian community organizations act under the direction of the Chinese government, even though there was no evidence presented to substantiate this claim. At no point did the inquiry consider the more straightforward explanation: that these organizations themselves may have disapproved of her actions and chose not to invite her absent any outside influence. Instead, her account was taken at face value. The final report platformed her complaints, emphasizing her perception of exclusion rather than engaging in an analysis of the evidence. By framing ordinary

decisions made by community organizations as the product of foreign control, the inquiry cast suspicion on the autonomy and integrity of Chinese Canadians and risks branding everyday behaviour as evidence of foreign interference.

The Implications of Modern Exclusion

The Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference presented itself as a neutral body tasked with assessing allegations of past foreign interference and recommending reforms to prevent future harm. Instead, it perpetuated and deepened existing harms against the Chinese Canadian community by reinforcing harmful stereotypes and suspicions about them. Rather than preventing harm, the inquiry amplified it by treating normal political activity and community behaviour as suspect.

These harms are not just hypothetical: Chinese Canadians have been feeling the negative consequences of a narrative that views them as loyal to a foreign government until and unless they categorically place themselves in opposition to it. For example, when organizing an event recognizing the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 2023, Teresa Woo-Paw encountered funding barriers “because no one wanted to be associated to anything Chinese Canadian, or to a Chinese Canadian event, or Chinese Canadian organization.” The anonymous inquiry witness, a STEM professor, described how “overly broad and vague research security measures” forced her to withdraw from research collaborations and funding applications out of fear that her work would be cast as suspect due to her Chinese background.

Community groups indicated similar concerns. A letter signed by 49 co-signatories, representing a wide array of Chinese Canadian academics, activists, and associations, drew parallels between PIFI and the 1885 Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration that culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act. They argued that PIFI is another example of how government-funded bodies, presented as neutral, can legitimize discrimination and produce exclusionary outcomes. Their concern was that, once again, an entire community was being marginalized and treated with suspicion, undermining its right to free political participation. This concern is not abstract. Two of the signatories, the Chinese Family of Services of Greater Montreal and the Centre Sino Québec of South Shore, lost significant funding after being accused by the RCMP of surveilling the community on behalf of the Chinese government. Branded as alleged “police stations,” these organizations suffered severe reputational harm and stigmatization and have since launched a lawsuit against the RCMP.

The inquiry recognized the harm that results from widespread accusations of foreign interference against an entire community. Its public consultations recorded concerns about “unsubstantiated overreach” in government efforts against foreign interference and the risk that allegations rooted in racism could cause serious harm to both individuals and their families. They received submissions that warned that individuals who maintain open relationships with Chinese authorities or who simply hold

views that align with those of the CCP could be unfairly targeted. The effects, as noted by the inquiry, include self-censorship, distrust within targeted communities, abandoning ambitions for public office, and the “fear that Chinese Canadians will be further excluded from Canada’s political arenas.”

However, the inquiry repeatedly referred to these harms as “unintended consequences” of otherwise legitimate efforts to combat foreign interference rather than a direct and foreseeable result. This distinction between investigating foreign interference and contributing to anti-Chinese racism reveals that the inquiry was unaware (or unwilling to accept) that its very framework for defining and assessing foreign interference reproduced racialized assumptions that cast Chinese Canadians collectively as potential proxies of the Chinese government. First, by excluding the majority of Chinese Canadian voices from its examination of alleged election interference in 2019 and 2021, it accepted misinformed claims about the motivations behind Chinese Canadians’ voting behaviour. Second, by uncritically adopting biased and sensationalist allegations of interference unsupported by evidence, the inquiry legitimized discriminatory views that conflate Chinese Canadians and their organizations with the Chinese government, and that label as “foreign interference” any position not categorically anti-China. In doing so, the inquiry not only failed to distinguish legitimate political participation from foreign interference but also reinforced a climate of suspicion that excludes Chinese Canadians from full and equal participation in Canadian society and politics.

References

1.
https://foreigninterferencecommission.ca/fileadmin/user_upload/PIFI - Public Hearings - Volume 6 -March 27 2024-English interpretation.pdf
2. Palmer et al. 2021. “The ‘Uyghurs in the Diaspora in Canada’ 2021 Survey Report.” *Journal of the Council for Research on Religion* 3(1): 1-12. <http://dx.doi.org/10.26443/jcreor.v3i1.60>
3. 2021 Canadian Census. Includes the 730 respondents who identify as Chinese who indicated their religion as “Personal faith or spiritual beliefs” or “Other religions or spiritual traditions.” The total Chinese population in the census is 1,715,770, so the upper limit of Falun Gong practitioners would be 0.04%. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=9810034201>
4. <https://www.facebook.com/TADCToronto/>
5. Page 158-159,
https://foreigninterferencecommission.ca/fileadmin/user_upload/PIFI - Public Hearings - Volume 6 -March 27 2024-English interpretation.pdf
6. Page 116,
https://foreigninterferencecommission.ca/fileadmin/user_upload/PIFI - Public Hearings - Volume 6 -March 27 2024-English interpretation.pdf
7. Page 24,
https://foreigninterferencecommission.ca/fileadmin/user_upload/PIFI - Public Hearings - Volume 26 - October 22024-English Interpretation.pdf

-
8. Page 40,
https://foreigninterferencecommission.ca/fileadmin/user_upload/PIFI - Public Hearings - Volume 26 - October 2024-English Interpretation.pdf
 9. <https://www.hilltimes.com/story/2024/05/13/chinese-canadians-have-brains-they-too-can-think-independently/421360/>
 10.
<https://thehub.ca/2023/03/20/mark-johnson-we-must-be-cautious-in-our-statements-about-meddling-by-china-let-the-police-go-to-work/>
 11. Page 5, https://foreigninterferencecommission.ca/fileadmin/report_volume_1.pdf
 12. Page 33, https://foreigninterferencecommission.ca/fileadmin/report_volume_1.pdf
 13.
<https://senatoryuenpauwoo.ca/en/domestic-outreach/public-inquiry-on-foreign-interference-2024/submission-concerning-allegations-of-foreign-interference-against-mr-erin-o-toole-and-mr-kenny-chiu-during-the-44th-general-election/>
 14. Page 141, <https://foreigninterferencecommission.ca/fileadmin/PIFI - Final Report Vol. 2025 .pdf>
 15. Page 34, https://foreigninterferencecommission.ca/fileadmin/report_volume_1.pdf
 16.
<https://senatoryuenpauwoo.ca/en/domestic-outreach/public-inquiry-on-foreign-interference-2024/submission-concerning-allegations-of-foreign-interference-against-mr-erin-o-toole-and-mr-kenny-chiu-during-the-44th-general-election/>; similar concerns were raised about Bill C-70, which passed a foreign agent registry into law:
<https://nationalmagazine.ca/en-ca/articles/law/hot-topics-in-law/2024/foreign-influence-registry-raises-solicitor-client-privilege-concerns>
 17. Page 142, <https://foreigninterferencecommission.ca/fileadmin/PIFI - Final Report Vol. 2025 .pdf>
 18. Page 36, https://foreigninterferencecommission.ca/fileadmin/report_volume_1.pdf
 19. Page 36, https://foreigninterferencecommission.ca/fileadmin/report_volume_1.pdf
 20. Page 19,
https://foreigninterferencecommission.ca/fileadmin/user_upload/PIFI - Public Hearings - Volume 26 - October 2024-English Interpretation.pdf
 21. Page 43-44,
https://foreigninterferencecommission.ca/fileadmin/user_upload/PIFI - Public Hearings - Volume 26 - October 2024-English Interpretation.pdf
 22. <https://www.lapresse.ca/debats/opinions/2023-04-28/citoyens-d-origine-chinoise/nous-sommes-tous-canadiens.php>
 23. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/montreal-chinese-police-stations-lawsuit-rcmp-1.7136059>
 24. Page 33,
https://foreigninterferencecommission.ca/fileadmin/foreign_interference_commission/Documents/Public_consultation/Summary_Report_-_What_we_heardEN_.pdf
 25. Page 35,
https://foreigninterferencecommission.ca/fileadmin/foreign_interference_commission/Documents/Public_consultation/Summary_Report_-_What_we_heardEN_.pdf
 26. Page 34,
https://foreigninterferencecommission.ca/fileadmin/foreign_interference_commission/Documents/Public_consultation/Summary_Report_-_What_we_heardEN_.pdf