

Chairman, Ranking Member, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Elsa Johnson. I am a junior at Stanford University studying East Asian Studies with a focus on China, and I serve as Editor-in-Chief of *The Stanford Review*. I am here because I was personally targeted by a suspected agent of the Chinese Communist Party while conducting research at Stanford. The consequences of that targeting have followed me ever since.

I am asking Congress to recognize that American universities are failing to protect students who face transnational repression on their campuses. I am asking that institutions receiving federal funding be required to establish reporting mechanisms for students targeted by foreign governments. Stanford sits at the center of Silicon Valley, the heart of American innovation, and has chosen not to address this problem at all.

I grew up in Minneapolis, Minnesota. There, I attended a Chinese language immersion school from Kindergarten through eighth grade. By the time I arrived on Stanford's campus, I had already been studying China, its language, and culture for over a decade. I chose Stanford specifically to deepen my understanding of the country whose culture and language have fundamentally influenced my upbringing and my aspirations for the future.

When I arrived at Stanford, I began working as a research assistant at the Hoover Institution, where I focused on Chinese industry and military tactics. I was surrounded by some of the country's foremost China scholars. I felt like I was exactly where I was supposed to be. However, that sense of belonging was upended during the summer following my freshman year.

In June 2024, a few days after I spoke with one of my supervisors at Hoover about Chinese recruitment tactics targeting American academics, a man calling himself "Charles Chen" reached out to me on Instagram. He had over 100 mutual followers with me and had photos of Stanford on his profile. I had no reason to believe he was anything other than a fellow student.

Over the following weeks, Chen's messages grew more concerning. He told me he was from China and asked detailed questions about my research and background in Chinese. He offered to pay for a trip to China, sent me a flight itinerary from Los Angeles to Shanghai, and sent screenshots of a bank wire to prove he could afford my accommodations once I got there. He also sent me a document outlining a policy that would allow me to travel to China without a visa. He sent me videos of Americans who had gotten rich and famous in China and insisted that I, too, could find wealth and fame in the PRC. Later on, he began incessantly pressuring me to move our conversation to WeChat, a Chinese government-monitored messaging app. When I didn't respond to Charles Chen fast enough, he would delete and resend his messages. He even referenced the whereabouts of Stanford students who were in China at the time of our correspondence.

Then, in July, he publicly commented on one of my Instagram posts in Mandarin, asking me to delete the screenshots I had taken of our private conversation. I had not told anyone I had taken screenshots, and I do not know how he knew. The only explanation I could come up with was that my phone or my account had been compromised somehow.

I contacted two China experts at Stanford whom I trusted, and they connected me with an FBI contact who handled CCP-related espionage cases at the university. I met with the FBI in September and handed over everything I had. The FBI confirmed that Charles Chen had no real affiliation with Stanford. He had likely posed as a student for years and used multiple fabricated social media profiles to target students researching China-related topics. I was told he was likely operating on behalf of China's Ministry of State Security. I later found out that I was one of at least ten other female students targeted by "Charles Chen" since 2020.

My experience with Charles Chen was only the beginning of what I have gone on to experience from the CCP. After my co-author, Garret Molloy, and I published our investigation in *The Stanford Review* in May 2025. After I wrote a first-person account of my experience in *The Times of London*, the repression only worsened.

Last summer, while conducting research on China in Washington, D.C., I began receiving regular phone calls from unknown U.S. numbers. When I answered the calls in English, the callers would switch to Mandarin. In one case, the caller referenced my mother. These bizarre calls were intimidation attempts, designed to remind me that neither my family nor I is safe from transnational repression by the CCP.

Then, this past fall, the FBI informed me that I am being physically monitored on Stanford's campus by agents of the Chinese Communist Party. They told me that my family is also at risk and is being monitored. As a 21-year-old who grew up loving the Chinese language and culture, I never imagined that studying it would put me in a position where a foreign intelligence service is tracking my movements on my own campus and monitoring my family. I fear for my safety and for my family's safety.

The intimidation calls have not stopped. Just this week, I received another call from a U.S. number. After exchanging hellos, the caller switched to Mandarin and asked whether I had finished dinner. That cannot be a coincidence. It is happening to me on American soil because I reported on the activities of a foreign government at an American university.

My experience is disturbing, but it reflects a much larger pattern playing out on campuses across the country. According to Freedom House, the Chinese government is the greatest perpetrator of transnational repression targeting students and scholars in the United States. Their 2024 report found that international students and faculty face surveillance and coercion by foreign governments. More than 1.3 million international students study at American colleges and

universities, yet many are unable to exercise the freedoms that are supposed to define an American education.

Our investigation at The *Stanford Review* confirmed this. Under China's 2017 National Intelligence Law, all Chinese citizens are legally required to cooperate with state intelligence work regardless of their location. The Chinese Scholarship Council, which funds approximately 15 percent of Chinese students studying in the United States, allegedly requires recipients to submit regular reports about their research to Chinese diplomatic missions. Students who refuse to cooperate face consequences. In some cases, their families are brought into police stations in China.

There is also infrastructure already embedded on American campuses that facilitates this system. Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSAs) exist at roughly 150 American colleges and universities, including Stanford. The U.S. State Department has stated plainly that the CCP created the CSSA to monitor Chinese students and mobilize them against views that dissent from the Party's stance. The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission found in 2018 that CSSAs receive guidance from the CCP through Chinese embassies and consulates, and that they are active in carrying out work consistent with Beijing's United Front strategy. In some cases, the local Chinese consulate must approve CSSA presidential candidates. Documents obtained by Foreign Policy showed that at Georgetown, the CSSA accepted embassy funding amounting to roughly half its total annual budget.

At Stanford, the Association of Chinese Students and Scholars at Stanford, or ACSSS, is a recognized student organization that receives university support and funding. It operates as a social and cultural group, and I want to be clear that many of its members almost certainly have no knowledge of the broader structure I am describing. That is what makes it so effective. The CCP's United Front uses these organizations as vehicles for surveillance and influence without the consent or awareness of most participants. I thank Chairman Walberg for co-signing the March letter to Secretary Rubio, requesting that CSSAs be evaluated for designation as foreign missions under the *Foreign Missions Act*. This is a very important step in the right direction. Universities should not fund or officially recognize organizations that function as extensions of a foreign intelligence apparatus, and students within those organizations deserve to know the truth about the institutional ties that govern them.

At Stanford alone, there are over 1,100 Chinese international students. Despite coming to the United States to pursue their education in an environment of liberty, many of these students find that such freedom is out of reach. Even within a free society, they remain under the persistent influence of a foreign power, which prevents them from exercising their right to speak and study without constraint.

In 2024, Amnesty International reported on transnational repression across eight countries. A third of the Chinese students they spoke to said Chinese officials harassed their families for

speaking out against the government while studying abroad, and almost half said they were afraid to return to China. In December 2025, the Council on Foreign Relations reported that transnational repression increased significantly over the past year. The PRC government, in particular, has expanded digital and in-person operations.

Through research I conducted previously at the Foundation for American Innovation, I have studied the federal policy infrastructure meant to address foreign influence on American campuses. There has been some meaningful progress. Section 117 of the Higher Education Act requires postsecondary institutions to disclose foreign gifts or contracts totaling \$250,000 or more, and the Department of Education recently approved a new foreign funding reporting portal that launched earlier this year. The creation of this database is a step forward, and Congress deserves credit for pushing it into existence.

The Section 117 database is a significant step toward transparency in foreign funding and will ultimately help hold institutions like Stanford accountable. However, it still does not address the impact foreign governments have on students and researchers. One of the biggest issues remains the intimidation and coercion of students that occurs on American soil, not only to international students but also to American students. Transparency alone does not mitigate this problem.

For far too long, Section 117 enforcement has been neglected. A bipartisan Senate investigation found that 70 percent of schools with a Confucius Institute that received more than \$250,000 in a given year failed to report it properly. When the Department of Education finally opened compliance investigations beginning in July 2019, universities were forced to disclose \$6.5 billion in previously unreported foreign gifts and contracts, much of it filed retroactively for earlier years. The Department's new foreign funding portal, launched earlier this year, has now documented \$67.6 billion in total foreign funding reported by American universities since Section 117 was enacted in 1986.

Universities have financial incentives to look the other way. Chinese students contribute an estimated \$12 billion in tuition to American institutions annually. Without external pressure, universities are reluctant to take any action that would disrupt that revenue stream, even when a foreign government is coercing their students.

After Garret Molloy and my investigations were published, Stanford issued a statement saying it was looking into the reports and had reached out to federal law enforcement. That was over a year ago. Nothing meaningful has changed. The university has not established a reporting mechanism for transnational repression. It has not provided resources for students targeted by foreign governments.

Stanford sits in Silicon Valley, at the frontier of artificial intelligence and emerging technology. By any measure, it is one of the most strategically significant universities in the world for a

foreign adversary seeking to acquire sensitive research and technology. And the university has decided to treat this as not requiring a response.

That silence creates an environment that stifles innovation and academic freedom. When students and researchers know they are being watched but have nowhere to turn, they self-censor and stop collaborating openly. The very qualities that make American universities engines of innovation are being undermined by a threat that the universities themselves refuse to acknowledge.

I was fortunate enough to be working at the Hoover Institution when I was targeted, and the scholars there knew exactly what was happening and connected me with the FBI. If I had not been at Hoover, I do not know how I would have gotten help. There was no university resource to call and no tip line to contact. I was a freshman and had to navigate a foreign intelligence operation targeting me with no institutional support from the university I attend.

I believe that is unacceptable. And it is unacceptable for every student on that campus and on campuses across the country who is facing the same thing without the connections to find their way to the FBI on their own.

Based on my personal experience and my previous research, I respectfully offer the following recommendations to the Committee.

I want to start with what Stanford should be doing right now, without waiting for legislation.

Stanford should establish an anonymous tip line for students facing transnational repression. Right now, no such infrastructure exists. A student who is being surveilled or coerced by a foreign government has nowhere to go within the university. The institution that collects their tuition has no system in place to protect them. The University of Wisconsin-Madison has already created an information guide and reporting structure that directs targeted students to relevant offices and connects them with law enforcement. Stanford should adopt this model immediately. It does not require an act of Congress.

Stanford should build a dedicated office to handle cases of transnational repression, rather than treating each incident as an isolated event to be quietly managed. The response to our investigation was a single public statement, followed by silence. There is no designated office and no institutional memory for these cases. Students who come forward should be met with a clear and secure process. This is an administrative decision that the university can make tomorrow.

Stanford should stop treating transnational repression as a secret. Information about transnational repression should be incorporated into the onboarding process for incoming students and faculty.

Students arrive on campus with no understanding of the threat they face and no knowledge of where to turn if they are targeted.

I was fortunate enough to be working at the Hoover Institution when I was targeted, and the scholars there connected me with the FBI. Most students do not have that access. Stanford has the resources to build these systems. The question is whether the university has the will.

At the federal level, I urge Congress to continue strengthening enforcement of Section 117 of the Higher Education Act. The new foreign funding reporting portal is a welcome development. The Foundation for American Innovation has also recommended that the Department of Education publish annual compliance reports, modernize the public dashboard for foreign contribution disclosures, and establish a dedicated office with appropriate staffing to oversee these functions. I also urge the Senate to take up the DETERRENT Act, which passed the House in March 2025 with bipartisan support. The bill would lower the minimum reporting threshold from \$250,000 to \$50,000 for most foreign gifts and down to zero for gifts from countries of concern, including China. Transparency about foreign money is the necessary foundation for everything else.

I also urge Congress to ensure that the dissolution of the China Initiative in 2022 has not left a void in the federal government's capacity to investigate foreign intelligence operations on American campuses. The underlying threat has only grown. The FBI's transnational repression page documents a growing list of indictments and convictions related to CCP operations on American soil.

Finally, I ask the Committee to recognize that this is a human rights issue as much as a national security issue. Chinese international students who are coerced into reporting on their classmates are themselves victims. Any policy response must protect them. The goal is to make all students free to pursue their education without fear that a foreign government will cross borders to punish them for it.

I came to Stanford wanting to study China after growing up learning Mandarin, and I expected to feel safe pursuing that interest at one of the world's best universities. Instead, I have spent the past two years being targeted by a foreign intelligence service and getting physically surveilled on my own campus. No student should be in such a position, especially at an American institution.

I am testifying before you today because if this can happen to me, it is happening to students across this country who do not have a platform and who do not have a path to the FBI.

American universities are supposed to be places where people can think and speak freely. Right now, for too many students, they are not.

Thank you.

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