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Canada's China expertise deficit is a strategic vulnerability

22/08/2026 | City **Stephen R. Nagy**



Canada's embassy in Beijing. If Ottawa is to pursue a knowledge-based China policy, the country needs more citizens with language skills and first-hand experience of Chinese society. Photo: Benjamin Vander Steen / Wikimedia Commons.

If Ottawa intends to navigate the Indo -Pacific region with "eyes wide open," as Industry Minister Mélanie Joly insists, the country must address a serious vulnerability: There is a dramatic asymmetry in human capital and mutual knowledge between Canada and China.

The short version

Canada is experiencing a massive imbalance in China skills, with far more Chinese students coming to Canada than vice versa.

To build strategic capacity, the country must increase exchanges with both free Taiwan and authoritarian China.

Beijing's strict ideological control makes it difficult for Western students to participate in the local education system.

Canadian businesses must fund scholarship programs and internships to secure the necessary language skills and market insight.

Several countries in both the North and the South struggle with similar shortages of crucial China expertise.

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According to Canadian government data, approximately 125,000–130,000 Chinese citizens had study permits in Canada in 2024. They come to Canadian cities to learn the language, gain cultural understanding, and become familiar with the markets. In comparison, pre-pandemic estimates suggest that only 3,000–6,000 Canadians were studying in China. This represents a startling disparity of around 20 to 1. Canada exports its educational resources, while in practice receiving very little direct knowledge and first-hand insight in return.

Prime Minister Mark Carney has referred to China as an inevitable “strategic partner,” rather than a destabilizing force. But a real strategic partnership—or, for that matter, effective strategic competition—requires in-depth and nuanced knowledge. If Canada is to build this expertise, it needs a new generation of Canadians studying in both China and Taiwan.

It is also crucial to distinguish between the two study locations. Taiwan is an open and vibrant democracy and a critical hub for global technology. Studying in Taipei gives Canadians an unfiltered introduction to a free society that operates largely in Mandarin, and allows them to experience a well-functioning, Mandarin-speaking democracy up close. China, by contrast, is a closed, authoritarian superpower that is tightening—not softening—its Marxist-

Leninist governance model and its ethnonationalist, Han-centric identity. Both societies are crucial to Canadian foreign policy and business, but Canada's presence in both is woefully inadequate.

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The few Canadians who make the journey across the Pacific often end up isolated in English-speaking "expat bubbles." To truly understand ordinary Chinese citizens and the society they live in, Canadian students must be integrated into the actual Chinese education system. They must follow the same curriculum as local students. This means sitting in the same lecture halls and participating in the mandatory ideological instruction that is a central part of modern Chinese education, including Xi Jinping Thought and Mao Zedong Thought, as well as mandatory military-related university courses.

But this raises fundamental questions: How can Canada prevent returning students from furthering the Chinese Communist Party's agenda? How can the country protect students from arbitrary imprisonment in China? And does the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) even want Western-educated students alongside the country's own youth?

First, thorough training in democratic resilience before departure and mandatory security briefings after return could reduce the risk of indoctrination and influence from the CCP.

Second, Ottawa must address the threat of arbitrary detention by ensuring clear bilateral security guarantees and robust protocols for consular protection.

Third: If Beijing is serious about its ambitions for global leadership, the authorities must help reduce this asymmetry by opening the national education system to more foreign students, issuing more visas, relaxing the ideological control of education, and offering solid scholarship schemes.

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But therein lies the problem. Beijing exercises tight control over the national narrative. Integrating sharp and observant Canadian students into local classrooms carries, from the government's perspective, a significant risk of ideological "contagion." Imagine Canadian students discussing the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, hostage diplomacy, or Uyghur re-education camps in a Beijing university cafeteria. Imagine them challenging state propaganda by pointing out that today's Japan is a peaceful and democratic state, rather than the militaristic scaremongering portrayed in Chinese textbooks.

Even more problematic for the CCP regime's internal legitimacy is that Canadian students would bring with them the lived reality that the United States—despite deep social problems, polarized elections, and occasionally unconventional presidents—remains a dynamic and forward-looking superpower. This directly contradicts the central ideological dogma promoted by the Politburo Standing Committee and the CCP regime's foremost political thinker, Wang Huning, who argued in *America Against America* that the West is paralyzed by its internal contradictions. The CCP relies on the narrative that the West is in terminal decline while the authoritarian East is on the rise. For Beijing, the prospect of eloquent, Mandarin-speaking Western students who can challenge and pick apart these narratives in real time will be deeply uncomfortable.

The obvious question is who will pay for this massive education effort. The burden cannot be borne solely by the government or the students themselves. Canadian businesses will be among the first to benefit from a workforce with near-native Mandarin, deep cross-cultural competence, and first-hand experience navigating the opaque bureaucracies of Beijing, Shanghai, and Taipei.

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If Bay Street banks, multinational agricultural exporters, and leading technology companies want top executives who can cut lucrative deals in Shenzhen or navigate complex semiconductor supply chains in Taoyuan, they must also be willing to pay for the training. Business must take greater responsibility by funding targeted scholarship programs, extensive paid internships abroad, and attractive job guarantees after graduation for students willing to

take the leap. The private sector benefits from this geopolitical expertise and should therefore also help finance its development.

If Prime Minister Carney's ambitious vision of a strategic partnership is to be realized, and if the "eyes wide open" doctrine is to be more than an empty diplomatic slogan, Canada must take aggressive action to reduce its 20-to-1 student deficit. The country needs Canadians on the ground who are fluent in the language and deeply integrated into the culture of both democratic Taiwan and authoritarian China. Until Canada is willing to study them as closely as they study us, the country will navigate the "Asian Century" almost blindly.

Unfortunately, Canada is far from alone in lacking linguistic and cultural China expertise. Most, if not all, countries in both the global North and the global South lack the necessary expertise to negotiate with China on equal terms.

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