

Developments in China: Helping Chinese Students Stay Safe.

Practical Thoughts from Derrah Jackson, Director of Research & Innovation

With the changes in China over the past couple of years regarding increased security and camera surveillance, there have been questions from ISI staff about what is safe and will not get students into trouble. Some have asked about the advisability of even doing returnee visits.

Many Chinese students see no problem and don't realize how extensive a lack of privacy they face at home...which creates the situation of them unwittingly getting themselves into trouble. We, as ISI staff, surely don't want to be the cause of our returnees getting into trouble with their government. So below are some suggestions we hope will be helpful to you.

If the returnee is not a professor, communist party member, pastor, Muslim, or Christian leader, then you only have to be careful about what you say in emails and Skype or phone sessions. ALL email and ALL Skype sessions and ALL phone calls (including WeChat and WhatsApp) are monitored by the government looking for key words like church, God, Jesus, Bible, sin, salvation, etc. or democracy, rebellion, revolt, protest, etc. You get the picture of what communications are being screened for. A former ISI staff member, who has lived in China for the last 15 years, suggests that we substitute more typical words and let the returnee know what we are doing. "God" = "Dad,,"; "Bible" = "my favorite book," "church" = "extended family" or "my community", etc. If you communicate your code for key words via email or an attachment, something like the following examples using symbols within sensitive words (G**, C_h#u*r_c-h, B*b_l*, etc.) will help to avoid screening attempts.

If the returnee IS a professor, communist party member, pastor, Muslim, Christian leader, or they have been detained by the police about any of their activities, then the screening is more severe and constant. Hence, it is very difficult to communicate with them without getting the returnee in trouble. The government especially fears involvement with the general public by Westerners.

Regarding visits to China, you need to be aware that there are cameras everywhere—more than one million cameras on the streets (500,000+ in Beijing alone). When you enter China, your picture is taken, and the government has outstanding facial recognition software. That means that the government will know wherever you are—airport, train station, hotel, restaurant, or bus stop. If you are visiting one to three students, there will probably not be a problem provided you had some kind of relationship with them while they were here in the US. On the other hand, if you plan to visit seven or more students, you will probably find the government intervening. An ISI staff member who recently visited many returnees in China was met with some very invasive questions by one of the students he visited (meaning that the police had known the ISI staff would be there and already coached the returnee regarding questions to ask and information to gather about the remainder of the staffer's trip). Fortunately, this staff member recognized the awkwardness of the situation, sensed something was amiss, and did not reveal further trip details. The point is that the police were somehow a step ahead of the staff member!

Many missionaries reaching out to Muslims in western China have been kicked out in the last year and barred from re-entering the country. When asked how bad it is for Christians in China right now, a former ISI staff member now living in China said that it is "the worst in decades."

If you want to discuss specifics, feel free to contact Derrah Jackson directly (214.477.6609).