They come here for the promise of a good education and a better future. Then they discover the target on their backs

THE PERILOUS LIVES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

BY SIMON LEWSEN

PEOPLE WHO KNEW

Ian Chan didn't believe he'd get involved in a kidnapping. An international student who'd moved to Canada to study commerce, he spoke slowly and came across as naive and eager to please. But he could also be impulsive and greedy.

Once, during a visit to the Pacific Mall in Markham, Chan broke into a closed retail kiosk and made off with an armful of sports memorabilia. A few hours later, overcome with guilt, he broke into the kiosk again, this time to return the stolen goods. Both breaches were caught on camera. The first one resulted in Chan's arrest; the second allowed his lawyer to negotiate a year-long suspended sentence rather than jail time.

Chan was 21 years old when, in early 2020, he received a WeChat message from Zeyu Zang, his former roommate. Chan admired Zang. Sent to Canada, alone, at age 16, Chan lacked parental guidance in his day-to-day life. Zang, who was 12 years older, was like a big brother to Chan. Occasionally, he'd treat Chan to boozy nights out in Markham.

Zang always seemed to have ready cash, and Chan was always looking for ways to supplement the income his parents sent him. In the WeChat message, Zang proposed a lucrative opportunity. "I want to kidnap somebody," he wrote. In Mandarin, the language of Chan and Zang's correspondence, that last sentence was ambiguous. For "kidnap," Zang used the Chinese verb "bang," which has a few colloquial meanings. It can mean to abduct someone—or perhaps just to tie them up. Chan knew that Zang was into illegal activities—Zang had a documents lab in his Scarborough apartment, where he could forge seemingly anything, from driver's licences to health cards—but he didn't strike Chan as evil. Chan told himself that Zang's intentions were likely less sinister than they might seem. Perhaps Zang was just looking to settle an old score, to get back at someone who'd ripped him off. He decided not to ask too many questions about the nature of the assignment. The less he knew, the better.

Early the next morning, Chan drove out to meet Zang in the lobby of his building. The older man gave him a tracking device and texted him a photograph of a white BMW belonging to Wenbo Jin, a 24-year-old statistics major at the University of Toronto whose father was a partial owner of a coal mine in China. Zang instructed Chan to infiltrate Jin's building on Grenville Street, near College and Yonge, and plant the device on the chassis of the BMW. At Zang's behest, Chan also purchased a couple of ski masks, a dolly and a digital camera.

Securing the keys to Jin's apartment was more complicated. Zang paid an acquaintance to go to a house party where Jin would be in attendance, swipe Jin's keys from his jacket pocket and drop them in a mailbox outside so Zang could get them copied. Keys in hand, Zang met up with Chan to head over to Jin's 32nd-floor apartment on Grenville. Once inside, the men checked for security cameras and, seeing none, rifled through Jin's drawers. Zang found $2,000 in Canadian and Chinese cash, which he gave to Chan as partial payment for his services.

As they drove away from the apartment, Zang laid out the plan: he'd hired a couple of men to kidnap Jin, and since he knew that they would likely pillage the apartment for valuables, he wanted to take what he could for himself first. For Chan, there was no longer any ambiguity regarding what was about to transpire, but he didn't back out. Instead, he stood his ground on one point: he wouldn't be directly involved in the abduction itself.

Three nights later, on January 21, at just past 3 a.m., Chan picked up Zang at his home and drove him to College Street near the Grenville building. A Dodge van was waiting for them. They were soon joined by two men Zang had hired for the abduction: Kristopher Matthews, whose rap sheet included burglary, arson and assault, and Jevaughn Myers.

Chan's instructions were to stay in his vehicle, wait for the kidnappers to exit the building with Jin, and then follow them as they drove off in the Dodge. If a cop car happened to pass by, he'd begin speeding, diverting attention from the van. Chan knew that what he was doing was wrong. But, he told himself, at least he wasn't participating directly in the violence.

JIN DROVE an expensive car, but he otherwise rejected the usual rich-kid trappings like designer clothes and party drugs. His passion was data: the way it could be used to predict various phenomena, from the speed at which oil will move through a pipeline to the number of people a disease is likely to infect in a community.

The night he was kidnapped, Jin had been at a restaurant in Chinatown. He got home at 11 p.m. and, as always, locked his door before heading to bed. He awoke shortly after 4 a.m. to the sound of voices in his apartment. Terrified, he kept quiet. Maybe the men were burglars. Maybe they'd quickly take what they wanted and go.

A minute later, Matthews and Myers burst into Jin's bedroom wearing ski masks. One of the men put Jin in a chokehold and the other pointed a gun—a convincing replica, it would turn out—at his head. The men covered his eyes and mouth with duct tape and bound his wrists and ankles with zip ties. After a few minutes, one of them ripped off the tape covering Jin's mouth and forced him to swallow a five-milligram tab of Seroquel, a powerful sedative.

The kidnapping was meant to happen quickly—Matthews and Myers had planned to leave the apartment with Jin as soon as he passed out. They hadn't factored in how terrified Jin would be. The Seroquel was no match for the adrenalin that coursed through Jin's body. Over the next few hours, Matthews and Myers gave Jin three or four more doses, but he remained wide awake and fearful. The kidnappers initially passed the time by ransacking the apartment. Eventually, they just sat down and waited.

As the sky brightened, Chan started to panic. "What are you up to? It's already 6 o'clock," he texted Zang, who was sitting in his own car nearby. "Waiting," Zang replied curtly. By 7:40 a.m., Zang started worrying that the kidnappers were pulling a stunt of their own. "Go up there and take a look," Zang texted Chan. "I think they are playing a trick." Holding fast to the bargain he'd made with himself, Chan refused.

At 10 minutes to nine, Jin's morning alarm went off. He'd been tied up for nearly five hours. Zang decided they couldn't wait any longer—Jin's absence would be noticed, at which point a concerned friend might show up at the apartment. It was time to clear out, even if Jin was still awake.

At roughly 9 a.m., Matthews and Myers entered Jin's room with a large hockey bag and instructed him to curl up into a tight ball. His heart sinking, Jin did as he was told. Once he was in the bag, the men covered him with clothes. Jin quickly grew hot and sweaty and struggled to breathe. The men loaded the bag onto a dolly and wheeled it down a hallway and into an elevator. They got off at the fourth floor and carried Jin down a stairwell, which led to a back exit. Jin felt the winter air pierce the cloth of the bag. Then he felt himself being loaded into a vehicle.

On the road, Jin finally passed out. After 45 minutes, the men stopped at 2 Marengo Drive, a Richmond Hill house Zang had rented under an alias. Jin awoke as he was being carried to the third floor. He didn't know where he was or how long he'd been in transit. And he had no idea that, in a few hours, his captors would demand a ransom in exchange for his safe return.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS like Jin are vulnerable to a range of criminal schemes, most of which would be unthinkable to Canadian citizens. They may study and attend lectures alongside their native-born peers, but they live in a reality in which exploitation is endemic, legal protections are elusive and safety is far from guaranteed.

For decades, students have come to Canada from India, Pakistan, China and elsewhere to study. As early as 1970, they made up about five per cent of the student population. But the numbers started surging in the 1990s, after provinces deregulated out-of-country tuition fees, allowing post-secondary institutions to charge as much as they wished. What was initially a windfall to schools has morphed into a necessity: recent government cuts to higher education have prompted more and more institutions to tap into this lucrative revenue stream.

"In absolute terms, the Ontario government is spending 28 per cent less on post-secondary institutions than it was 10 years ago," says Alex Usher, founder and president of the consultancy Higher Education Strategy Associates. "Since Doug Ford took office, domestic tuition has been reduced by roughly 25 per cent. Foreign tuition is now the only source of swing money in the system. You can't really run a university without it." (In late February, Ontario's minister of colleges and universities, Jill Dunlop, announced more than $1.2 billion in funding over three years to colleges and universities—

ZEYU ZANG, THE MASTERMIND BEHIND THE ABDUCTION

IAN CHAN, ZANG'S ACCOMPLICE

OPENER BY CHRISTOPHER KATSAROV LUNA. SENECA AND NIAGARA COLLEGES VIA X; ZANG AND CHAN BY THE TPS

ARMINA SOLEYMANI WAS THE VICTIM OF A RENTAL SCAM; LOVEPREET SINGH WAS GIVEN A FAKE ADMISSION LETTER

but, spread across the province's 48 public post-secondary institutions, it will barely make a difference.)

Among the biggest beneficiaries of foreign tuition are community colleges in Ontario, which, according to Usher, are composed of 55 per cent international students. In total, there are more than 400,000 international students in the province today, each paying between three and 10 times the domestic tuition rate. Usher estimates that this cohort brings in roughly $8.1 billion in annual college and university revenue, more than four times as much as provincial government grants.

In theory, none of this is a problem. There is no reason why our schools shouldn't seek to educate talented students from around the world. In reality, though, education isn't the only commodity being sold, and bad actors abound.

Prospective students are often approached by professional recruiters who assure them that they'll be allowed to work for a few years in Canada after graduation, at which point they can leverage their employment history to apply to remain in the country. It is the possibility of permanent residency—by no means a guarantee—that many educational institutions are really selling.

Not all institutions are quite so cynical. A degree at a respected Canadian academy may be a worthwhile investment in itself: it can lead to lucrative jobs, at home or abroad, or placements at prestigious business or law schools. But even the most well-meaning universities are failing to protect international students from people determined to exploit them.

This past January, federal immigration minister Marc Miller announced a two-year cap on study permits for out-of-country students, limiting the number to around 360,000—roughly 65 per cent of the 2023 cohort. But this measure is largely intended to give the housing and health care sectors an opportunity to catch up with demand, which has been exacerbated by the influx of international students. It won't protect students from shady landlords, exploitative bosses, scam artists and violent abusers.

WHEN LOVEPREET SINGH, a 25-year-old Sikh man from Punjab, arrived in Canada in 2017, he had already paid $17,500 to a recruiter. Nearly half of that money was supposed to cover his first semester at Lambton College in Mississauga, where he expected to study business. The recruiter had even given Singh an offer letter on what appeared to be official Lambton stationery. But, when Singh showed up at Lambton on registration day, the attendant at the front desk couldn't find his name on the enrolment lists. Over the weeks that followed, Singh returned to Lambton several times, offer letter in hand, to plead his case in front of college officials. Each time, he was rebuffed. In desperation, he wrote to the dean, who set up an in-person meeting in January of 2018. When Singh arrived, agents from the Canadian Border Services Agency were waiting for him. They arrested him and seized his passport, claiming that he was in the country on a fraudulent pretext. Nobody went after the fake recruiter in India, who'd disappeared after taking Singh's money.

A nightmarish tug of war ensued. The CBSA issued a deportation order, which Singh fought in court and lost. Singh's lawyer appealed directly to Ahmed Hussen, then the federal minister of immigration, who reversed the order. When Singh's passport was finally returned to him, he applied to a business program at Matrix College in Montreal and was accepted. His first day of class was in December of 2019, two years after he'd planned to begin his studies.

The delay proved costly. Once Singh started at Matrix, there wasn't enough time left on his student visa to finish the degree, so he applied for an extension but was denied again. He is now fighting another removal order, which has been repeatedly deferred but not yet repealed. The surprise arrest, the pending deportations, the tribunal hearings—these are all punishments, it seems, for falling prey to a scam. The money Singh lost to the fake recruiter is almost paltry compared to the $30,000 he paid in legal fees—all to redress a shockingly common con. In June of 2023, the ministry of immigration struck a task force to review 285 similar cases, each involving students from India, Vietnam or China who came to Canada with what appear to be fraudulent admission letters.

SOLEYMANI BY EDUARDO LIMA, SINGH BY EVAN MITSUI/CBC

Of course, a genuine acceptance letter is no guarantee of safety. When international students arrive in Canada, they're often deep in debt. For shady employers, this desperation is an exploitable resource. Some bosses will subject students to dangerous conditions or punishingly long shifts. Others will insist on paying students in cash, at rates well below the minimum wage. Study permits currently limit the number of hours students can work to 20 per week. Knowing about this restriction, a boss may force a student to work overtime and decline to pay for the extra labour. Students fear that, if they report the wage theft, they'll end up being deported for breaking the terms of their visa.

In the fall of 2023, an international student from India named Kawaljeet—who asked to be identified by her first name only—was hired as a receptionist at a medical clinic in Brampton. The job wasn't complicated, and within hours of her first training session, she was tackling many tasks on her own. At the end of her shift, the clinic manager showed up to explain the terms of her employment. She would work unpaid, he said, for the duration of her month-long training, after which he'd evaluate her performance and decide whether to keep her on.

Kawaljeet was shocked. She immediately sought advice from a family member who had studied in Canada. Her relative explained that Kawaljeet was the target of a well-known scam: after extorting her for free labour, the employer would almost certainly fire her. The next day, Kawaljeet called her boss and turned down the job. It then took her four months to find work elsewhere. Rather than feeling relief at having dodged a scam, she regretted passing on what now seemed like her most promising employment opportunity. "I thought, *I should have taken the job just for the experience*," she says. Desperation, Kawaljeet discovered, can compel people to do things they know they shouldn't.

In the summer of 2022, Armina Soleymani, an engineering student from Iran, was in the second year of her PhD at the University of Waterloo when her roommate announced she was moving out. The pair had been splitting $1,400 a month in rent, which Soleymani couldn't carry on her own. She immediately gave notice to her landlord and began looking for a new place.

The market was terrible. Incoming students were snapping up units, few of which were in Soleymani's price range anyway. On Facebook, Soleymani found a rental listing posted by a woman named Sandra Rowley, who was offering to sublet, for $1,000 a month, a bedroom in a shared apartment not far from campus. At 9:30 a.m. on a Saturday morning, Soleymani showed up at the building for a look at the multi-bedroom unit. The tour was brief, and Rowley insisted on communicating in whispers because, she claimed, the other renters were still sleeping.

When Soleymani indicated that she was interested in the unit, Rowley handed her a lease and advised her to sign it immediately. She explained that she was eager to move out and would offer the room to anybody willing to take it right away. Rowley also insisted that Soleymani pay first and last month's rent upfront, in cash. When Soleymani asked Rowley why she couldn't accept an e-transfer, Rowley explained that she had just applied for a new job. Her prospective employer would likely review her bank records; if he saw that Rowley had $2,000 in her account, he might conclude that she didn't need the work and offer the job to someone else.

Rowley's explanation made no sense to Soleymani, but given how little she knew about Canadian work culture, she didn't ask any more questions. Plus, she didn't have time to think things through—her need for housing outweighed her creeping skepticism. She withdrew $1,000 from her bank (the maximum daily amount) and borrowed the remaining $1,000 from a friend.

To protect herself, Soleymani insisted on three additional precautions. First, she paid Rowley in the vestibule of the building, in full view of security cameras. Second, she asked Rowley for ID. Rowley showed Soleymani a driver's licence with a name and photograph that matched Rowley's Facebook profile. Whether the photograph matched her face was harder to tell: Covid was in full swing, and Rowley was wearing a mask. After handing over her entire savings, Soleymani tested out her new fob on the front door of the building. It didn't work. But Rowley was ready with an explanation: the fob would be activated on Soleymani's move-in date.

Soleymani's need for housing outweighed her skepticism

Soleymani returned to the apartment shortly before she was due to move in, unable to shake her growing unease. She spoke with the building manager, who told her that he'd been contacted by other people who'd recently toured the apartment with Rowley—and that they'd all been scammed. The building manager speculated that Rowley, working under an alias, had sublet a room in the shared unit for several days—long enough to conduct a few tours and shake down a few prospective tenants—then disappeared. Soleymani reported the scam to the police, who opened an investigation, with no results.

As devastating as it was for Soleymani, her story is relatively mild compared to those of her peers. Because landlords are often unwilling to rent to international students, those who do have enormous leverage over their tenants. Some international students have found themselves paying to live in family homes where they are insulted, shunned or restricted to their bedrooms. Others are subjected to appalling living conditions: in January, the City of Brampton's bylaw enforcement officers discovered 25 international students crammed into the basement of a single home.

When Soleymani started telling her story to fellow international students, she discovered that many had been victims of similar crimes. Because they were students, Soleymani and her peers were desperate for scarce end-of-summer rentals; because they were newcomers, they were easy targets. They were unfamiliar with Canadian customs and struggled to determine whether a landlord's behaviour was normal or shady.

Language barriers, limited knowledge of criminal codes and a lack of local support leave international students open to other forms of exploitation, including sexual assault by employers, landlords and fellow tenants. In September of 2020, a 19-year-old Indian woman named Maryam arrived in Canada to begin her undergraduate studies in Montreal. (Maryam is a pseudonym—her identity is protected by a publication ban.) During a layover at Pearson, customs officials told her that she'd have to quarantine for two weeks before continuing on to her destination. She couldn't afford a hotel, but with the help of family acquaintances, she got a room at a cheap Airbnb in Corktown with a shared kitchen and bathroom.

Shortly after settling in, Maryam struck up a conversation with Kavin (also a pseudonym), a 26-year-old man staying on her floor. Maryam spoke primarily Punjabi, but her English was strong enough for her and Kavin to build a rapport. The next day, they chatted in the kitchen and then went to Kavin's room to watch a movie.

Five days into Maryam's quarantine, Kavin came to her room to ask if she wanted to watch another movie, and she agreed. His attitude was different this time, less deferential. They started out on opposite sides of the bed, but Kavin quickly closed the distance between them and began rubbing Maryam's arm. She told him to stop, but he only became more aggressive. Suddenly, he was kissing Maryam on the mouth, pulling up her shirt and forcing himself on her. The assault was swift and brutal. Equally horrifying was Maryam's realization that she was now trapped, by law, in a house where the only person she knew was her rapist.

She tried to avoid Kavin, but a few days later he raped her a second time. Once the attack was over, she asked him if he'd ejaculated inside her. "Don't you need babies?" he sneered. Kavin returned again that night and tried to force himself into her room. Their struggle went on for 10 minutes, until a food-delivery man arrived with an order Kavin had placed. The interruption allowed Maryam just enough time to break away. She ran downstairs and told the residents there to call the police. Kavin was arrested that night.

At trial two years later, Kavin's lawyer asked Maryam why she'd continued to live in the house after the first assault and why she'd waited days to call the authorities. Maryam testified that Kavin had threatened her with a lie commonly used by people who exploit international students: he said he was well connected and could have her deported at a moment's notice. She knew nothing of Canadian immigration law, and his threat seemed credible enough to scare her. The last thing she wanted was to find herself back in India, her dreams of a foreign education crushed.

In September of 2022, a judge sentenced Kavin to seven years in prison. He rejected the notion that Maryam might have somehow avoided being assaulted or that she'd had any real leverage over Kavin. Like many international students, Maryam believed her abuser had all the power.

JIN'S CAPTORS didn't beat or torture him, but neither did they treat him particularly well. At the house on Marengo Drive, a board covered the window in the bedroom where Jin was held, and a camera monitored the door. With no access to sunlight, Jin learned to count days by the cycles of activity around him: when the rap music blaring in the living room died down, he figured it was nighttime. Various men came into his room once or twice a day to feed him pizza or takeout from McDonald's.

> The kidnappers demanded $5.5 million for Jin's safe return

Jin wasn't allowed to shower or change clothes. At first, he relieved himself in a bucket in the corner of the room, but when the stench became overpowering, the men let him use a nearby toilet. After a few days, the men granted him other small mercies too. They replaced the duct tape over his eyes with a more comfortable cloth blindfold. They also traded the zip ties around his wrists and ankles for a chain and padlock, allowing him to move around more easily. Jin never saw his captors, but he learned to recognize their voices and those of their girlfriends, who came and went.

Jin's only contact with the outside world was two phone calls with his father, Yumin. The first, arranged the evening after the kidnapping, was to convey a ransom demand. At Zang's directive, Chan set up the call using a burner phone and Jin's WeChat account. When the call came through, Yumin was relieved to see his son's name pop up. (He'd been notified of Jin's disappearance by his nephew, a student at York University who had become concerned when Jin hadn't returned his messages.) Then Yumin heard the terror in Jin's voice. Jin explained that the kidnappers wanted 500 Bitcoins in exchange for his safe return. As instructed, he begged his father to immediately pay the ransom and warned him against contacting the police, a move that he said could put his life in jeopardy.

Minutes after the call, the kidnappers sent Yumin a link, via Jin's WeChat, to the website of VirgoCX, a Toronto crypto exchange. "This is just one of the ways," the message read. "You can also

find your own way to buy Bitcoins. If you want your son to be safe and sound, the sooner the better." The ransom Zang wanted amounted to $5.5 million. Had the kidnappers requested less, Yumin might have paid up promptly. But, by demanding an impossibly high ransom, they forced him to do the very thing they'd warned him against doing: contact the authorities.

Yumin promised his son's captors that he'd gather the funds within three days. Then, he and Jin's mother quietly boarded a plane for Canada. On January 25, the couple showed up at 52 Division on Dundas West, where they told the police what they knew. The cops reassured Yumin that they would do everything in their power to find Jin, but they were worried about the short window of the ransom request. The best thing Yumin could do, the cops said, was play for time. They advised him to pretend to cooperate with the kidnappers while giving compelling excuses for why the ransom was delayed. The longer Yumin could draw things out, the greater the chance of a positive outcome.

Fate provided Yumin with a credible excuse. The pandemic hadn't yet arrived in Canada, but the virus was raging across China and generating panicked headlines worldwide. In his WeChat exchanges with Zang, Yumin fixated on Covid. The transcript of those conversations is a study in contrasts. Yumin comes across as both anguished and cunning, a man deeply concerned with his son's captivity but wily enough to deceive his captors. The kidnappers, on the other hand, appear desperate and cruel.

On January 24, before leaving China, Yumin begged for Jin to be put on the phone again. "I wish to hear my son's voice," he said in a WeChat audio message. "Please allow my son to say something. I also hope that you don't beat him, yell at him or abuse him." His request was denied. Zang's response that day was ominous. "Don't force us to do anything we don't want to do," he texted. "If you guys don't cooperate with us, you'll bear the consequences."

The next day, Yumin told the kidnappers about the havoc that Covid was wreaking in China. "Right now, there are government notices all over the city," he said in a voice note. "Some cities are being closed off. Some villages are being sealed off too." With the banks closed, Yumin explained, he couldn't possibly secure the ransom funds. But he was optimistic that the situation would soon resolve itself—he just needed a few more days.

Repeatedly, Yumin asked for a deadline extension. Zang granted his requests, perhaps because he had no other choice: his plans hadn't factored in the possibility of a pandemic. When Yumin asked for reassurances about Jin's safety, the reply was terse and cryptic: "At least he has not been infected with the virus."

On January 31, perhaps to prove that Jin was still alive, Zang granted Yumen's request to speak with his son. Before the call, Zang reminded Jin that if he didn't want to be injured or beaten, he must speak guardedly. During their conversation, Jin reassured Yumin that he was physically unharmed. Before signing off, Yumin told his son to be brave. "I'm going to bring you home," he promised.

FROM THE PERSPECTIVE of a would-be kidnapper, wealthy international students are appealing marks in part because they can be convinced that the local police are incompetent or uninterested in the plight of foreign nationals. "No Canadian would think for a second that a kidnapper could buy off the RCMP," says Dale McCartney, a historian at the University of the Fraser Valley who studies international students in Canada. "But, if you don't know much about the country, this notion could seem plausible."

On March 23, 2019—less than a year before Jin was stuffed into a hockey bag—a 22-year-old international student named Wanzhen Lu was abducted from the parking garage of his high-end condo building in Markham. Three men in hoodies tasered Lu, punched him in the head and threw him into the back of a van. They drove him to an unheated barn outside of Hamilton, where they duct taped him to a chair. Then they called his girlfriend and demanded 500 Bitcoins (worth, at the time, $2.5 million) for his release.

Shortly after his capture, Lu attempted to escape by wriggling free of the duct tape and running from the barn. The kidnappers quickly caught up to him, held a knife to his throat and threatened to shoot him if he tried to flee again. They then brought him back to the barn, where they cuffed his hands and chained his legs. The crime soon generated headlines across the country, putting pressure on the kidnappers. After three days, they decided to abandon the plan: the men drove 200 kilometres north to Gravenhurst and dropped Lu off on the side of a rural road. He made his way to a nearby house, where the owner called the police.

Ultimately, four men were convicted for Lu's kidnapping. At the sentencing hearing for one of them, the judge expressed outrage over the extreme nature of the offence.

KIDNAPPING COURTESY OF THE ONTARIO SUPERIOR COURT

THE KIDNAPPERS DRUGGED WENBO JIN, STUFFED HIM IN A HOCKEY BAG AND THEN DROVE HIM TO THEIR HIDEOUT IN RICHMOND HILL

He described Canada as a country where people can "walk about in the world without being accosted and kidnapped," his point being that crimes like abduction don't happen here. But, in the case of some international students—like Kai Kong Jackie Lee, who was kidnapped in Vancouver in 2004; Si Nong Li, who was kidnapped in Richmond, BC, in 2013; and Wenbo Jin—they clearly do.

Ransom schemes don't always involve actual kidnappings—sometimes the victim is tricked into going into hiding. In November of 2017, a 20-year-old international student at U of T named Juanwen Zhang got a call from a stranger claiming to be a representative from the Chinese consulate. The caller told Zhang that criminals were using her bank account to conduct illegal activities, including international drug sales, and advised her to go on the lam, shut off her phone and avoid social media—or else she could be arrested by Interpol.

Zhang took a bus to Montreal. But, because she was travelling without ID, hotels refused to put her up. She spent a sleepless night at a 24-hour McDonald's. Then she got another bus to Ottawa, where she managed to find a bed and breakfast that would take her. Once Zhang had left town, the scammer called her father, Zeng, in China. The caller said he'd kidnapped Zhang and demanded $1 million for her safe return. "Do not call the police," he added, "or you'll get a dead body."

Ultimately, Zhang's boyfriend in Toronto reported the disappearance. Police then contacted Zhang's roommate, who'd overheard the phone conversation with the alleged caller from the consulate. Police put out a notice asking Zhang's friends to contact her and encourage her to come forward.

After two days in Ottawa, Zhang turned on her phone and saw a stream of messages explaining that she'd been tricked. She contacted her family right away. At the time of her disappearance, two other students—16-year-old Ke Xu and 17-year-old Yue Lui—had also gone missing under similar circumstances. They, too, were found within days.

In Canada, Jin was met with violence and terror

JIN'S KIDNAPPERS made some big mistakes. The first was overestimating Yumin Jin's wealth; the second was misjudging the anonymity of a burner phone. True, a burner isn't usually connected to a known user's IP address, but it's still an internet-enabled device, full of information that investigators can access and analyze.

In order to make the ransom call from Jin's WeChat, the kidnappers first had to get through a multi-factor identification process, which required them to log in to Jin's email. This was the smoking gun. With the help of Microsoft, the police's digital forensics team was able to see that somebody—they weren't sure who—had accessed Jin's email account the day after the kidnapping. Bell Canada was then able to supply the IP address of the burner phone from which the email account had been accessed. And Apple, in turn, found that the user of the burner phone had logged on to the device using Ian Chan's email address, which police already had on file: they'd taken it down when Chan had been arrested for the sports-kiosk robbery.

Chan immediately became a person of interest in the case, and police seized the records of his recent phone activity. They now knew that he'd logged on to the Wi-Fi at 2 Marengo Drive and that he'd been in regular contact with another cellphone user. They didn't yet know the second user's identity, but they had a phone number, which meant they could ping the phone and monitor that individual's whereabouts as he moved through the city. On January 27, 2020, they tracked him as he got on and off Highway 407. To administer tolls, the 407 ETR Concession Company—the consortium that owns the highway—takes timestamped photos of every vehicle that enters and exits. Only one car matched the exact movements of the suspect: a Jeep Wrangler belonging to Zeyu Zang.

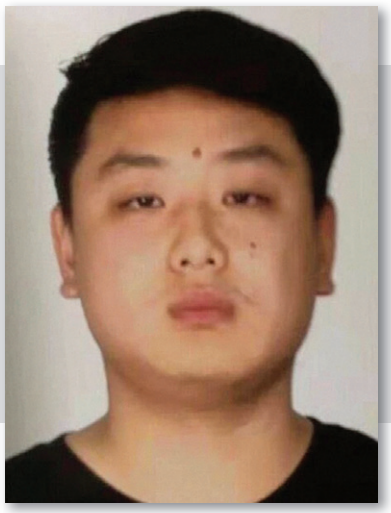
In the middle of the night two days later, police secretly installed a surveillance camera on a telephone pole outside 2 Marengo Drive, enabling them to watch the Wrangler as it came and went. They now had good reason to suspect that Jin was being held inside the house, but they weren't certain. They faced a dilemma: the sooner they raided the property, the more likely they would be to find Jin alive—but by raiding the house, they'd also announce their presence. If Jin was being held elsewhere, the kidnappers would know that Yumin had reported the abduction and might retaliate by killing his son.

If police were to go in, reasoned Michael Kerr, the lead detective on the case, they'd have to be almost certain they had the right location. On January 31, when Yumin spoke to his son for the second time, the cops were with him. And because they were keeping watch on the Marengo house, they could see Chan enter the property right before the call began and leave right after it ended. It was the evidence Kerr needed to make his move.

On the afternoon of February 2, cops with the Emergency Task Force surrounded the house and broke through the front door. They threw a stun grenade to disorient the residents, then pushed their way inside.

At the sound of the grenade going off, two men jumped from a second-floor window. The first was Jevaughn Myers, one of the original kidnappers; the other was a 37-year-old whose role in the kidnapping remains unclear. Both were subdued by police stationed in the backyard.

FOR 13 DAYS, JIN WAS CHAINED AND BLINDFOLDED IN A CRAMPED BEDROOM WITH BARRICADED WINDOWS



TERRIFIED AND CONFUSED, JIN BELIEVED THE KIDNAPPERS WOULD EVENTUALLY KILL HIM

BEDROOM COURTESY OF THE ONTARIO SUPERIOR COURT; JIN BY THE TPS

An officer headed up to the third floor and kicked open the door to the room where Jin was held. Using bolt cutters, he broke the chains that held Jin down and helped him onto a nearby stool. When he removed the blindfold, Jin could barely open his eyes. He started sobbing uncontrollably. It was the first sunlight he'd seen in 13 days.

As they drove away from the house, Jin told Kerr he'd been certain he was going to die. At the station, he was brought to the meeting room where his parents were waiting. Weeping, Jin rushed to his family, the broken chains still dangling from his arms.

THE REST of the dominoes fell swiftly. The morning after the Marengo raid, police pulled Zang over in North York and arrested him. In his Jeep, they found Jin's driver's licence and a receipt from a McDonald's close to the Grenville apartment, dated to the wee hours of January 21, when the kidnapping was underway. The cops found Chan at his girlfriend's house and arrested him too.

Last fall, Zang stood trial alongside two of the co-accused. The jury was presented with a barrage of evidence—cellphone records, WeChat logs, forensic analyses and surveillance footage—all of it backed by testimony from the Crown's star witness: Ian Chan, who was cooperating, likely in the hopes of getting a reduced sentence. The evidence was overwhelming, and on October 21, the jury convicted Zang for kidnapping and forcibly drugging Jin.

Four months later, at his sentencing hearing, Zang sat in the box, his head buried in his hands. Nobody spoke to him. Zang's lawyer, Laura Villani, told a sympathetic story about her client. She revealed that Zang, too, had been an international student. He'd left China for Canada to study business operations at Centennial College and to get as far away as possible from his physically abusive father. The rest of the story was achingly familiar. Like hundreds of thousands of his peers, Zang had struggled to find employment and had settled, ultimately, for a poorly paid job at a photography lab, where he worked the night shift. He was perpetually exhausted, and in 2015, he fell asleep at the wheel and crashed his car. A resulting head injury led him to make mistakes at work, and he was eventually fired. It was only then, Villani claimed, that he'd turned to crime as a means of making money.

The trial judge, Sean Dunphy, wasn't persuaded by Zang's defence. On March 6, he gave Zang a 20-year sentence. As justification, he cited the premeditated and vicious nature of the kidnapping. "In my view," he wrote, "Mr. Zang's role as mastermind of this carefully planned crime warrants an exemplary sentence at or near the top of the range." (The two kidnappers, Matthews and Myers, got 15 and 10 years, respectively. At press time, Chan was still awaiting sentencing.)

In many ways, Zang was caught up in the same system that had victimized Jin and so many of his peers. That system is built atop our educational institutions but is only tangentially related to education itself. And despite recent government interventions, the problem is unlikely to significantly improve. More than one million international students will come to Canada over the next five years. Many will face joblessness, poverty, subpar housing and punishing work conditions. Criminals will continue to prey on them.

The most poignant moment in Zang's sentencing hearing came when Erin Pancer, the Crown prosecutor, read out Jin's victim-impact statement. In the document, Jin explains how the trauma of the kidnapping changed his life. Since 2020, he has been afraid of strangers and unable to concentrate on school work. "There was also a time where I was afraid to sleep alone at home," Jin wrote, "and I had to sleep with the light on, sometimes waking up with nightmares." He'd left his home and family in search of higher education in Canada but was met instead with violence and terror. Eventually, Jin packed up his Grenville Street apartment and boarded a plane back to China. He didn't stick around to finish his degree. ■