

Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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> Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR's [Refworld](#) website. Please note that some RIRs have attachments which are not electronically accessible. To obtain a PDF copy of an RIR attachment please email Basesdedonnees.DatabaseUnit@irb-cisr.gc.ca.

22 September 2015

CHN105049.E

China: Information on electronic/biometric passports, including security features, Radio Frequency ID (RFID) technology and wireless tracking capacity; exit procedures at international airports, including e-passport verification, security checkpoints, and the use of facial recognition technology (2013-2014)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Issuance of China's Biometric Passports (e-passports)

According to the identity document-checking service operated by Keesing Reference Systems, China's national passport with "contactless chip" was first issued in February 2012 (Keesing n.d.). Sources report that China began issuing biometric passports nationwide in May 2012 [1] (Xinhua 4 May 2012; China 20 Aug. 2013). The passports are issued by the Ministry of Public Security (ibid.). According to *China Daily*, an English-language daily newspaper based in Beijing, "[s]tarting May 15 [2012], new applicants will get e-passports after storing thumb fingerprints and signatures" (9 May 2012). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an official at the Embassy of China in Ottawa indicated that as of January 2015, all new passports issued by China are biometric e-passports, and non-biometric passports are no longer issued (China 18 Feb. 2015). According to sources, old non-biometric passports can still be used for travel, if they are still valid (ibid.; *China Daily* 9 May 2012).

2. Security Features of China's Biometric Passport

The Chinese government states that China's e-passports are "developed in compliance with international standards" (China 20 Aug. 2013). Similarly, in a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, the Deputy Director of Aviation Security and Facilitation for the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) [2] explained that countries that are party to the UN Convention on Civil Aviation [which includes China (UN n.d.b)] must comply with ICAO standards on biometric passports, but can elect not to, in which case they are to specifically inform ICAO that they are not in compliance with the standards (ibid. 25 Mar. 2015). ICAO has no indication that China is not in compliance with ICAO standards for e-passports (ibid.).

Sources indicate that the e-passport electronic chip stores the holder's name, photograph, fingerprints (ibid.; Xinhua 4 May 2012) and date of birth (ibid.). According to Xinhua News Agency, additional anti-counterfeiting properties of the passport include "special printing ink, laser signs, holographic film and digital signatures" (ibid.). *China Daily* reports that the passport has 48 pages and that each page has an "anti-forgery label" (*China Daily* 9 May 2012). *China Daily* reports that the electronic chip is located on the last page of the passport (ibid.). Meanwhile, Keesing Reference Systems notes that the chip, which is contactless, is located on the back cover (Keesing n.d.).

For detailed information on the characteristics and additional security features of the Chinese biometric passport, see Response to Information Request CHN104415.

2.1 RFID Technology and Wireless Tracking Capability

According to *China Daily*, reporting on the launch of the e-passport, "only police and customs authorities will be able to access information on the chip" (9 May 2012). According to Xinhua News Agency,

[t]he chip of the ordinary e-passport has adopted the high safety smart card that meets relevant standards of the International Civil Aviation Organization, and the data of the chip is protected by high-safety asymmetric encryption technology. The finger print information can be read and recovered only by China's passport issuing department and border inspection department with special decoding equipment. Other organizations of China or foreign countries are not able to read or recover it. (17 May 2012)

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an official at the Canadian Embassy in Beijing indicated that

[t]he RFID technology used in China requires the passport to be tapped or swiped through a system. None of the [Canadian officials consulted] believe that systems are in place to remotely track/read/scan a passport chip. (Canada 15 Jan. 2015)

Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The ICAO Deputy Director explained that the character, construction, and functioning of the security features of biometric passports is "a matter of state discretion taking into account the relevant international provisions" and was not in a position to provide detailed information on these aspects of China's passports (UN 25 Mar. 2015).

Further information on the functioning of the RFID technology in Chinese passports could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3. Exit Procedures at Chinese International Airports

3.1 Presentation and Scanning of Passports upon Entry into the Airport and upon Departure

According to the Canadian embassy official, upon a person's physical entry into an airport in China to take a flight, "[t]here is no need to present a passport," regardless of the means of transport used for entering the airport (Canada 8 Dec. 2014). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The Canadian embassy official stated that upon departure, a person may be requested to produce their passport four times in the airport:

1. upon check-in at the airline check-in counter, by airline staff;
2. when passing through security into the secure transit area, by airport security staff;
3. at departure immigration, by immigration officers; and
4. at the boarding gate when boarding the aircraft, by airline staff (ibid.).

The embassy official also indicated that the passport is scanned at two of these times: at the airline check-in counter and at the immigration departure counter (ibid.). The source mentioned that the passenger's airline ticket is scanned when entering the "secure transit area" and at the airline boarding gate (ibid.).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a representative of Air Canada who works in the area of airline facilitation indicated that

[u]pon check-in, the person's passport is scanned ... the machine-readable zone (MRZ) of the passport contains the advanced passenger information (API), which is gathered by the airline. Passengers leaving China must pass through exit immigration control points where passengers are seen by Chinese immigration agents prior to approaching the boarding gate. (Air Canada 30 Jan. 2015)

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an assistant director responsible for aviation security and facilitation at the International Air Transport Association (IATA) [3] indicated that, to the best of the source's knowledge, the departure procedure at airports in China seems to involve three steps: 1) check-in; 2) immigration; and 3) security (IATA 29 Mar. 2015). To the best of the source's knowledge,

[a]t all three locations, passengers are required to show their passports. Usually, at check-in, [Advanced Passenger Information System, APIS] info are input, manually or through [the] passport [machine-readable zone, MRZ by scanning]; at immigration by physical inspection, and at security checkpoint by matching passport info with boarding card for verification, either using barcode readers on boarding pass or just a visual check (with a stamp on boarding pass). (ibid.)

The IATA Assistant Director further explained that the "general concept" of departure procedures at airports in China is the same, but noted that each airport varies in its procedure (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2014* indicates that Chinese authorities "exercised exit control for departing passengers at airports and other border crossings and utilized this exit control to deny foreign travel to some dissidents and persons employed in sensitive government posts" (US 25 June 2015, 42). According to the 2015 Human Rights Watch report on China, *One Passport, Two Systems: China's Restrictions on Foreign Travel by Tibetans and Others*, ordinary passports are "in theory available to all citizens who apply, aside from defendants in a pending criminal case or those who are considered a 'threat to state security'" (July 2015, 9).

3.2 Queuing for Exit Controls

According to the Canadian embassy official, "a person may choose their own lanes" when queuing for exit controls; however, "when volumes are high, there are airport staff who direct people to various lanes in order to manage foot traffic" (Canada 8 Dec. 2014). Further information on queues at airports in China could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3.3 Use of Facial Recognition Technology

Sources report the use of facial recognition technology for staff at Beijing Capital International Airport (*China Daily* 18 Sept. 2009; Canada 8 Dec. 2014). A 2009 article by *China Daily* indicates that as of September 2009, Beijing Capital International Airport has used facial recognition systems to "stop people from pretending to be airport staff and sneaking into restricted areas" (18 Sept. 2009). Similarly, the Canadian embassy official indicated that Beijing international airport has a facial recognition system "used by airport staff passing between the secure transit and public sections of the terminal," as well as by "flight crew departing Beijing, using the same queue as airport staff" (Canada 8 Dec. 2014).

According to the Canadian embassy official, facial recognition technology is also used at Guangzhou International Airport:

[w]hen passengers [pass] through [the] immigration counter, they [are] photographed by a mini-camera to record each passenger's face. Facial recognition technology is applied to the images; however, it is unclear as to the total scope of the database against which the images are assessed. (ibid.)

More generally, concerning practices at main Chinese international airports, the same source explained that

Chinese border officials do not take photographs of passengers upon international departure at every airport in China. In Beijing, photographs were taken in the past, but are not being taken now. If photographs are being taken (e.g., Guangzhou), they would be taken at China Immigration Inspection departure counters at airports. The only facial recognition procedure applied is a comparison between the photo on the travel document and the passenger's face. (ibid. 30 Jan. 2015)

For further information on exit controls and security measures at airports for Chinese citizens travelling overseas, including procedures at checkpoints and the use of computerized identity verification, as well as the sharing of information among officials at airports (from 2011 to February 2014), see Response to Information Request CHN104761.

4. Fraud and Corruption Related to Exit Control Procedures

Information on fraud and corruption related to exit control procedures at Chinese international airports was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

In a March 2014 article, the *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, an English-language newspaper based in Hong Kong, reports on the use of fraudulent travel documents at Chinese airports (*SCMP* 11 Mar. 2014). The article notes the following examples:

- A Chinese travel agent specializing in booking international flights was quoted as saying that "in some cases we don't have the passport number of the passenger and we just make one up. [Some] airports usually verify the name only and not the passport number" (ibid.).

- In 2013, a woman used another person's identity to apply for a passport and exit-entry permit for Hong Kong and Macau and travelled between Macau and Zhuhai 8 times prior to being caught (ibid.).
- In 2010, airport ground staff in Hong Kong allowed a Fujian man who wore a disguise to board a Canada-bound flight; "an investigation found that a man arrived at Hong Kong airport using genuine travel documents and later met members of a gang that included airport staff in the restricted zone to get fake documents and a boarding pass" (ibid.).

Corroborating information for these incidents could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] The ordinary e-passport was launched in May 2012 (China 18 Feb. 2015; *China Daily* 9 May 2012). Other types of e-passports include the diplomatic service e-passport, which was issued as of July 2011; the Hong Kong e-passport and travel document, which was issued as of 2007; and the Macau e-passport and travel document, which was issued as of September 2009 (China 18 Feb. 2015).

[2] The ICAO is a UN specialized agency created under the Convention on International Civil Aviation that works with member countries and global aviation organizations to develop international civil aviation Standards and Recommended Practices (SARPs) (UN n.d.a). The ICAO establishes and maintains the technical standards for machine-readable travel documents (ibid. 25 Mar. 2015).

[3] The IATA is an airline industry trade association that comprises 250 member airlines in 60 countries [including 13 airlines in China and 4 in Hong Kong (IATA n.d.b)] and that works to "promote safe, reliable, secure, and economical air travel" (ibid. n.d.a).

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Air Transportation Association of Canada; Biometrics Institute; Canada – Canada Border Services Agency's Integrated Advanced Passenger Information Initiative, Citizenship and Immigration Canada; Center for Identity, University of Texas, Austin; China – Consulate-General in Toronto, delegation to International Civil Aviation Organization; China Institute, University of Alberta; China Southern Airlines; Hainan Airlines; Hong Kong – Civil Aviation Department; Hong Kong International Airport; National Airlines Council of Canada; professor, School of Information Technology and Engineering, University of Ottawa; professor, University of Cambridge, professor of political science, University of Ottawa.

Internet sites, including: Beijing Review; Biometrics Institute; Center for Identity, University of Texas, Austin; China – Beijing Capital International Airport, China News Service, Civil Aviation Administration of China, Embassy in Washington, DC, Guangdong Airport Authority, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Public Security, Shanghai Airport Authority; China Aviation; China Civil Aviation Report; *China Today*; eoi.net; Factiva; Freedom House; *Global Times*; Hong Kong International Airport; *People's Daily*; United Nations – Refworld.

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