



CHINA IN CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE

The CCP's Grand United Front abroad

Gerry Groot*

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Introduction

It has become clear that since Xi Jinping came to power as the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) General Secretary in late 2012, that there has also been a dramatic increase in the activities of the Party's United Front Work Department (UFW) both at home and abroad. While many of these activities were already in train before 2013, Xi has proven to be much more interested and willing to actively promote as well as both raise the profile and importance of united front work: by personal endorsement; direct encouragement; and increasing institutional support, than any leader since Deng Xiaoping.¹

Xi's open support for united front work may in part be the result of both the significance of his father, Xi Zhongxun 习仲勋 as an important figure in the evolution of this work from 1940-1989.² More direct may have been his exposure to its utility when working in Fujian Province for seventeen years. With its numerous and rich Diaspora connections and position opposite Taiwan, Fujian has a special place in several areas of united front work, notably that directed at Taiwan and at Overseas Chinese. Taiwan is a key united front work target whose status and democratic political system the CCP seeks to politically isolate and delegitimise in the eyes of all Chinese as well as to isolate it diplomatically as much as possible. The goal is to one day assert direct sovereignty over Taiwan, preferably sooner rather than later. Xi also likely gained more relevant united front experience during his time in Zhejiang Province (2002-2007) when private enterprise was expanding rapidly, along with an almost concomitant rise in Christian believers. Again, both areas are important united front targets with the CCP seeking to maximise influence over them and to prevent them from becoming sources of opposition.

Although Xi originally called for a "New Era" (xin shidai 新时代) for China, implying generational change, in a united front context this formulation was perhaps too close

*Senior Lecturer in Chinese Studies, University of Adelaide.

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¹Deng (1904-1997) was active in united front work from early on and was particularly important after Mao Zedong's death in 1976 when he helped revive and harness a new Patriotic United Front towards achieving the so-called 'Four Modernisations' (四个现代化) – in agriculture, industry, defence, and science and technology.

²Xi Zhongxun's role in united front work has yet to be assessed outside of China but his son's accession resulted in the collation and publication of books about him. For his writings on united front work see, for example, 中共中央统战部, 中共中央文献研究室, 《习仲勋论统一战线》, 中央文献出版社, 北京, 2013.



to Deng Xiaoping's "New Era" or "New Period" slogan (xin shiqi 新时期). There is, though, indeed a generational shift underway. Hence the latest incarnation of this work has an altogether grander one of 'Great United Front' (大统一战线 or 大统战) as it has been termed by Li Renzhi 李仁质 of the key united front research and training body, the Central Institute of Socialism.³ That it has a new and grander name should, in itself, alert the world that something significant is happening in united front work.

Today's Great United Front has several features that distinguish it from previous periods and these mainly reflect the roles of united front work in China's domestic politics. At home, this work is used to provide nominal representation of socio-economic, religious and ethnic diversity, get feedback and expertise from these groups and to help exert control over them.⁴ In this context, the most troubling change is the shift from using this work to *accommodate* differences (e.g. based on religion and ethnicity) to now emphasising secularisation and the *assimilation* of mainstream (Han) cultural values including by forcible methods such as mass internment. These shifts have become obvious under Xi, but the amount of preparation needed means that this change must have been underway even during the time of Xi's predecessor, Hu Jintao.

This assimilationist bent is presently focussed mainly on Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in and around Xinjiang Province but has also extended to Christians elsewhere in China, albeit, until now, without the accompanying mass internment and re-education being applied to Muslims. This dramatic hardening of attitudes towards religion falls under the imperative of 'sinifying' (中国化) both Christianity and Islam as well as clamping down on commercial manifestations of Buddhism and Daoism.

This new direction is accompanied by, or is the result of, a dramatic reemphasis on ideology with Xi Jinping's own thought as 'core ideology'. Not only is this new ideology, however nebulous, being emphasised within the CCP itself; it is also being emphasised much more widely in universities and schools and in society more generally. While much of it is vague and lacks coherence, what is clear is that Xi Jinping's leadership and his visions for China, his China Dream (中国梦) of national rejuvenation (中华民族伟大复兴) are central and to be supported wholeheartedly. In addition, all measures should support and strengthen CCP dominance and Xi's leadership.

Xi's China Dream, though often vague, has at its heart a China able to match if not replace the United States as the world's superpower. This China will be economically dominant, scientifically successful, technologically advanced, militarily strong, diplomatically powerful and culturally influential around the world. It will also exert real sovereignty over a Taiwan which has so far managed to resist absorption into the People's Republic. To support these aspirations, Xi and the CCP need to prevent China

³For more on the institute system, see Gerry Groot, "Petrol stations? Political Education in China's Institutes of Socialism", *Issues & Studies* 34:5, 1998, pp. 22–51. For more on the new formulation of United Front Work and the new structure of the UFDW, see Alex Joske, "Reorganizing the United Front Work Department: New Structures for a New Era of Diaspora and Religious Affairs Work", *China Brief*, 9:9, 9 May 2019.

⁴For an overview of how the CCP has institutionalised united front work in corporatist forms along with the benefits and pitfalls this entails, see Gerry Groot, "A Self-defeating Secret Weapon? The Institutional Limitations of Corporatism on United Front Work Effectiveness in 21st Century China," in Jennifer Hsu, Reza Hasmath (eds.), *The Chinese Corporatist State: Adaptation, Survival and Resistance*, Routledge, 2012, pp. 41-73; and Groot, *Managing Transitions: The Chinese Communist Party, United Front Work, Corporatism and Hegemony*, Routledge, 2014.



falling into a middle income trap, allow industry to modernise and expand scientific and technological capacity, innovate and develop new technologies, harness civilian expertise with military needs and expand exports.

To help achieve the CCP's aims and overcome any obstacles, the CCP wants to expand united front work to make maximum use of all Chinese talent, both domestic and among the Chinese Diaspora as well as from any others who might be willing to assist.

With a population of between 50-60 million ethnic Chinese living outside the PRC's borders, the CCP needs to worry about resistance to its domestic programs based abroad and to win as much moral, political and practical (technological, intelligence and economic) support from them and other sympathisers as possible. Complicating this effort is the very complexity of the Diaspora itself. It consists of any number of Chinese groups defining themselves and against others on the basis of when they or their ancestors left China, from where, which language/s they speak, religion, politics, class etc. Without going into detail, suffice it to say that those who left China after 1990 and who benefited from China's economic growth, often have very different outlooks from other, more established Overseas Chinese. Closing such gaps and building unity between these groups is a key part of united front work.

The Party's development imperatives help explain the expansion of united front work among the Diaspora as well as the societies in which they now live. In 2015 this expansion was accompanied by officially adding Chinese undergraduate and high school students studying abroad to the list of explicit united front target groups (对象).⁵ This change may have been underway since around 2000 when Jiang Zemin included those studying overseas and those who had returned from overseas study,⁶ the difference being that, prior to the 2015 codification, these latter two categories generally meant students sent overseas as sponsored students or returning ones, and often implied returning home with post-graduate qualifications from foreign universities. Today, all young Chinese studying abroad, including private fee paying students of all ages are to included in UF work as much as possible.

Because many of China's brightest students remain abroad after graduation and many of these are involved in high-level research in mathematics, science, biology, technology, computing etc., the role of united front associations like the Western Returned Scholars Association (欧美同学会) have become ever more important. While the leaders and guests of this association might speak of promoting "openness, cooperation and win-win" principles,⁷ it also wants to ensure ideological conformity among its researchers and scholars abroad as well as be able to tap them for their insights, knowledge and contacts when their expertise might be of benefit to national development and technological advancement. It is no coincidence that the leaders of the UFD, such as its current head You Quan 尤权, are keen to be associated with these organisations and to exhort even those abroad to:

⁵'Target' in this context is more benign and neutral in meaning than the translation might indicate. This change seems to have merely formalised what had increasingly been the case since around 2000.

⁶天津统一战线 [Tianjin United Front Work Department], "统战工作对象和范围的由来" [The evolution of united front targets and scope], 13 May 2015.

⁷"欧美同学会第二届国际智库论坛暨菖蒲河论坛举行韩方明出席" [2nd International Think Tank Forum of the Western Returned Scholars Association and the Changpu River Forum, attended by Han Fangming], 20 May 2019.



... thoroughly study and implement Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era and always fight side by side with the CCP. He also hoped that the overseas students inherit the glorious tradition of patriotism, strengthen the confidence of innovation and entrepreneurship, and tell a good story of China's reform and opening up. He expected the students to make positive contributions for China to become a leader in innovation, to further the reform and opening up, and to realize the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the nation.⁸

These exhortations also include working closely with foreign think tanks (国际指挥) to advance united front and CCP causes, notably, in telling "China's good story."⁹ This linking up with think tanks is worthy of much more research, but the establishment of Australia-China Relations Institute (ACRI) at the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia, would probably be seen by the UFWD as a success story. Some of the initial funding came from a businessman with serious united front credentials, Huang Xiangmo (see below) who famously claimed credit for the appointment of Bob Carr, former Australian foreign minister, as the Institute's first head.¹¹

United front work and the CCP's creeping extraterritoriality

Connections such as those with high-level scholars and businesspeople can provide the UFWD with significant contacts and insights into many parts of societies abroad, Diaspora and others alike. This is important because the UFWD's brief also extends to helping protect the CCP from its enemies. These issues and groups include groups long recognised as threats, such as the so-called 'five poisons' (五毒) which have long been targets of the CCP's security apparatus and united front efforts to undermine and neutralise, Uyghurs and Tibetans accused of being separatists, Falun Gong followers, democracy advocates and proponents of formal Taiwanese independence.

However, the CCP's fears go much further and include those Chinese who adhere to any liberal values. This was laid out clearly in the 2013 *Document 9*, which lists as enemies those promoting western constitutional democracy, universal values, civil society, neo-liberalism, independent and objective media and journalism, historical nihilism (critical accounts of CCP history), or questioning the post-Mao opening up and reform or the CCP's form of socialism. To combat these pernicious forces, the Party has to strengthen ideological leadership, control the media and manage the ideological struggle effectively.¹² The influence of this document is already apparent in the discussion above but continues to have a profound influence on Party-state activities everywhere.

Today the CCP also worries about potential threats. The problem for foreign governments is that these changes are not distinct but overlapping and in some circum-

⁸“欧美同学会年会暨海归创新创业广州峰会召开” [Annual Conference of Western Returned Scholars Association in Guangzhou], *People's Daily*, 30 November 2018; translation from *China Scope*.

⁹2nd International Think Tank Forum..., *op. cit.*

¹⁰ACRI.

¹¹Nick McKenzie and Chris Uhlman, "A man of many dimensions': the big Chinese donor now in Canberra's sights", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 February 2019.

¹²*Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation*, 8 November 2013.



stances, not too difficult to imagine, can coalesce and result in unwanted and possibly hostile CCP activities within their own boundaries or against their (ethnic Chinese, Uyghur or Tibetan) nationals. As repression in Xinjiang and Tibet intensifies, the Party is on the lookout for any outbreaks of support in the Diasporas. Making the world safe for achieving the China Dream therefore requires ever more attention to threats and ways to neutralise them. This ‘mission creep’ has been reflected in recent codifications and made explicit in law.

China’s 2015 *National Security Law* makes it clear in its Article 1 that it is about safeguarding the “people’s democratic dictatorship and the socialist system”, as well as achieving “the great rejuvenation” promised in Xi’s China Dream. Article 2 is particularly important because of its definition of national security as:

a status in which the regime, sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity, welfare of the people, sustainable economic and social development, and other major interests of the state are relatively not faced with any danger and not threatened internally or externally and the capability to maintain a sustained security status.¹³

Article 3 goes even further in clarifying the scope of this security when it states:

All national security work shall adhere to the overall national security view, regard people’s security as the tenet, regard political security as the fundamental, regard economic security as the basis, regard military, *cultural, and social security* [emphasis added] as the safeguard, and by promoting international security, maintain national security in all fields, build a national security system, and walk a path of national security with Chinese characteristics.¹⁴

This law then codifies and legalises elements that the Party has long seen as important, such as cultural security (文化安全), because, as a communist party, the CCP has always seen culture and its control and shaping as integral to revolutionary success.¹⁵

Perhaps even more importantly, as Peter Mattis has pointed out, this new code has considerable significance because it reshapes the definition of threats to security to include potential ones.¹⁶ Together with the law’s almost all-encompassing scope, this shift in emphases is likely to lead to more pre-emptive actions by the CCP and its agents. It also has implications for the UFWD, as this broad scope helps justify a wider range of united front work abroad as well as at home.

As a result of these changes and mission creep, the last few years have seen a growing number of incidents in which PRC authorities have abrogated to themselves the right to detain, arrest and/or kidnap ethnic Chinese at home and abroad. While not

¹³For an outline in English see “*National Security Law of the People’s Republic of China (2015) [Effective]*”, Ministry of Defence, 3 March 2017.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵In 2014 Xi had raised cultural security at a conference on national security, and in September 2019 this was used to again raise the importance of this issue to the Party. Zhou Fengmin 周逢梅 and Shao Xiaowen 邵小文, “习近平对维护国家文化安全的战略思考” [Xi Jinping’s Strategic Thinking on Safeguarding National Cultural Security], 《党的文献》 1, 2019 (via cwzg.cn).

¹⁶Tasha Wibawa, “China’s national security and the ‘three warfares’: How Beijing decides who or what to target,” Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), 26 February 2019.



Image source: Zhou and Shao, *op. cit.*

new, Chen Yonglin 陈用林, who defected from the PRC mission in Australia in 2005, described the kidnapping of the son of a provincial official.¹⁷

In more recent times Chinese have been kidnapped from Thailand and Hong Kong only to later appear in Chinese jails.¹⁸ Taiwanese nationals have been deported from third countries to China after Chinese authorities had demanded their extradition on suspicion of involvement in crimes such as fraud. One of the most well-known recent cases of this creeping extraterritorial, extrajudicial adventurism was the case of the Hong Kong booksellers spirited across borders and into China for publishing books which CCP leaders regarded as unacceptable.¹⁹

The case of Yang Hengjun 杨恒均, a Chinese Australian writer who was detained in China in January 2019, is yet another case of arbitrary detentions by PRC authorities. Despite high level protestations from Australia, official access to Yang has been minimal. It was only in August that he was officially charged for espionage. China Foreign Ministry rejected Australian claims on Yang's behalf and told Australia to stop interfering in China's internal affairs.²⁰

In numerous other cases, former PRC nationals with foreign citizenship have found that their status as nominal foreigners has simply been ignored by Chinese officials or their attempts to avail themselves of consular services rejected. Diplomats have very often been refused any access to such citizens and their claims to be able to represent these citizens rejected or simply ignored.

The flipside of this use of extraterritoriality to find and arrest the allegedly corrupt and criminal and the extrapolation of sovereignty to all ethnic Chinese (and other ethnicities when circumstances require) carries with it the potential need to step in and protect such groups or individuals when these are in under significant threat. The anti-Chinese riots in Indonesia in 1998, for example, precipitated much criticism of the CCP

¹⁷David Mark, "Chen gives kidnapping details", ABC, 22 June 2015.

¹⁸For a fuller account, see Zach Dorfman, "The Disappeared: China's global kidnapping campaign has gone on for years. It may now be reaching in US borders", *Foreign Policy*, 29 March 2018.

¹⁹Dorfman, *op. cit.*

²⁰Kirsty Needham and Fergus Hunter, "'Stop interfering': China hits back at Australia over imprisoned Australian writer", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 August 2019.



leadership by outraged citizens for not protecting fraternal Chinese abroad. Beijing's mass rescue of Chinese in Libya in 2011 was, however, much admired. Dramatic improvements in naval and related military capacity has made such rescues much more possible and, indeed, there have been many more since, not all as well known as the Libyan example.²¹ More importantly, today, the *National Security Law* can be invoked to even more readily justify rescuing others in similar circumstances.

The CCP's expansion of united front work abroad

United front work among those Chinese who were already abroad before the CCP came to power in 1949 was important almost from the Party's earliest days. From them the Party sought funds, moral and political support, new recruits and to combat the influence of the Nationalist Party (the Guomindang 国民党 or KMT). In the post-Mao Zedong era (1976-) of economic reform, united front work to access advanced scientific, and technological and investment was very successful in tapping into Overseas Chinese networks and contributed substantially to the success of the reforms and the development of China's industrial and commercial base as well as revitalising the higher-education sector.²²

Post-1978 also saw a new wave of Chinese emigrants going abroad and settling far from home, or simply not returning after completing their studies at foreign institutions, particularly universities and research institutions. Initial CCP fears of a significant 'brain-drain' were gradually replaced by a recognition that those remaining abroad constituted an invaluable entry point to higher levels of knowledge, scientific and technological expertise and, eventually, political influence as these 'new emigrants' (新移民) settled, gained citizenship and were in a position to vote or stand for office. The PRC backgrounds of these new migrants mean that they had different ideas, aspirations and attitudes which set them apart, at least in degree, from those more established Diaspora communities that were long established.

A key turning point in CCP attitudes was in 1989, when the Party's violent suppression of student demonstrations throughout China in June, most notably in Beijing, aroused fierce resentment amongst both the students and their supporters among Chinese abroad and in Hong Kong and Taiwan. This was accompanied by a loss of CCP legitimacy and support overseas. Moreover, many student leaders were also successfully smuggled out of the country by Triad criminal gangs. This situation led to a serious appraisal and refocusing of united front work to rebuild ties abroad on the one hand, and to come to a mutually beneficial understanding with at least some of the Triads on the other.²³ Still, in some ways, this new focus can be seen as merely building on changes initiated in 1986 when the CCP Central Committee and the UFWD committed to expanding work abroad and in light of the negotiations for the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty, promoting the idea of One Country - Two Systems (一国两制) as a united front work framework to allow this.²⁴

²¹ "Backgrounder: China's major overseas evacuations in recent years", *China Daily*, 30 March 2015.

²² For the most comprehensive recent study of united front policies directed at Overseas Chinese, see James Jiann Hua To, *Qiaowu: Extra-Territorial Policies for the Overseas Chinese*, Brill, 2014.

²³ See the work of Emmanuel Jourda, "Le Parti communiste chinois, le Front Uni et les triades: patriotisme, business et crime organisé", *Sociétés politiques comparées*, 47, January-April 2019.

²⁴ 中共中央办公厅转发中央统战部《关于海外统战工作座谈会情况的报告》的通知, 27 May 1986, in 新时期统一战线文献选编 (续编), via 共产党新闻网.



These tasks were made considerably easier by the rapid revival of the economy and the resultant boom in opportunities to do business, undertake research or ride on the China wave. In the thirty years since Tian'anmen, many once-radical CCP critics abroad have made their peace with the Party and are very sympathetic to Xi's vision of national rejuvenation. Moreover, the developing trade war with the United States under President Trump plays well to common Chinese notions of national victimhood and humiliation at the hands of foreign powers. The so-called "Hundred years of national humiliation" (百年国耻) narrative, long popular among some intellectuals, was developed into a full-blown "patriotic education campaign" (爱国主义教育运动) in the wake of Tian'anmen and is now the CCP's longest running and arguably most successful political campaign ever. This campaign helps account for CCP support amongst the Chinese Diaspora(s) and the general failure of exposure to the messy realities of democratic regimes to convert more Chinese to the rabid democracy activists it once feared. The great wave of Chinese students who went abroad from the 1990s onwards have also by and large been successfully 'inoculated' against liberal values.

The wave of business emigrants of the last two decades seeking new opportunities or a better lifestyle and cleaner environment for their children also often have few reasons to be hostile to the CCP but many reasons to stay close to it. The dramatic expansion in the numbers of Chinese abroad also includes past and present CCP and Communist Youth League (中国共产主义青年团) members and agents, diplomats, Chinese businesses of all sorts, as well PRC organisations like Xinhua News Agency. All have roles in facilitating united front work. This includes promoting and winning support for the CCP's key goals (for example, the Belt and Road Initiative BRI), neutralising potential critics and delegitimising dissent while working to exert ever increasing influence over the Chinese communities it seeks to claim as its own. This work also includes using rights inherent in democratic civil societies to push claims over the extent of China's borders such as those in the South China Seas and claims of sovereignty over Taiwan. A key element of this work is to establish and normalise the PRC's 'voice' abroad, promoting what the Party calls 'discourse or discursive power' (话语权). To do so, the UFWD has taken advantage of its institutional advantages to seek ever more control over as many aspects of Diaspora life as it can. In doing so it has been more aided by technological changes and the rise of social media than hindered, notably by the dominance of Chinese-language social media by apps such as WeChat, which are firmly under state influence at home and which are extending PRC norms and censorship externally.²⁵

The domination of Chinese-language media abroad

To ensure its voice is heard and others are muted or silenced, the CCP has supported Beijing friendly media figures to rapidly extend control over Chinese language print and related Internet media abroad. Older owners from Hong Kong, South East Asia or Taiwan have either sold out to new Mainland-aligned owners or suffered as a result of state-supported competition. The past multiplicity of voices and opinions has become

²⁵Bang Xiao, "On WeChat, I'll stay a silent observer and nothing more", ABC News, 31 October 2018; Emily Feng, "China Intercepts WeChat Texts From U.S. And Abroad, Researcher Says", NPR, 29 August 2019.



dominated by ones which even use PRC copy. This has often left Falun Gong-related outlets as among the few dissenting Chinese voices. Although Xi Jinping has stressed telling a good China story, the initial push to increase the CCP's voice abroad came with Hu Jintao's emphasis on promoting Chinese soft power, partly in response to complaints that China's voice (话语权) was largely missing, suppressed by the West. With the then looming 2008 Olympics as added incentive, billions began to be spent on external propaganda and expansion of CCP controlled radio, television and other media as part of a new Grand Overseas Propaganda Campaign that includes both Chinese and local language capacities. As a result, CCP controlled or CCP-aligned media increasingly dominates the Overseas Chinese space in particular.²⁶

Although some media groups, like News Corp and public broadcasters like the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) have increased Chinese-language output in response to growing migrant numbers, they have faced major problems being accepted and have to-date not been able to compete effectively with WeChat and other such non-traditional news sources. Critics, notably PRC defector Cheng Yonglin, have also attacked key staffing arrangements at places like the ABC, claiming they had effectively employed previously PRC trusted staff to work and employ likeminded staff.

In contrast, in Australia, Beijing-aligned media owners have been able to not only build significant media empires, they have also been welcomed and feted by Australian politicians keen to access their media to in turn influence potential voters. In one example of how this has played out, writer Zhu Minshen 祝敏申 reported how he was unable to find Australian outlets for his articles in the early 1990s until a friendly Chinese businessman took over a local Chinese paper in late 1996 and provided him with an outlet for his work.²⁷ Zhu himself has since become a successful businessman through his Top Education Institute, and an increasingly influential in Australian politics, particularly as a "prolific and well connected donor" to both major parties.²⁸

Taking over the old and creating the new: Proliferating Chinese interest associations

Writing in 2003, Zhu talks of new Chinese migrants (新移民) to contrast those post-1978 and particularly post-1990 Chinese migrants from the PRC with older, more established Overseas Chinese who had more complex origins and who may have migrated multiple times. In places like Australia, the older established groups often had a complex multiplicity of organisations to cater for their needs and interests and these had had time to become integrated in existing civil-society structures. However, as

²⁶See Larry Diamond and Orville Schell, *China's Influence & American Interests: promoting constructive vigilance*, Hoover Institution Press Publication no.702, 2019, ch. 6. Although this concentrates on the United States, similar patterns have been repeated around the world where every media is in private hands. See also Wanning Sun, *Chinese-Language Media in Australia: Developments, Challenges and Opportunities*, Australia-China Relations Institute (ACRI), 2016.

²⁷Zhu Minshen 祝敏申, "澳大利亚新移民的成长和华文报业的发展" [The establishment and development of Australia's New Migrant Chinese language press], 中国新闻网 via sina.com.cn, 8 August 2003.

²⁸Fergus Hunter, "Minshen Zhu: is this Australia's most connected Chinese political donor?", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 September 2016.



the more recent PRC migrants had time to settle in and also integrate a bit more, the older Chinese associations were vulnerable to takeovers by the latest arrivals, ones with often very different attitudes and experiences.

Alternatively, many new associations have been created by the most recent arrivals to take advantage of the absence of restrictions, indeed sometimes the incentives to create community associations to avail such communities of government funding and support as well as the possibilities of using these organisations for gaining other forms of political leverage. Thus we have seen older established benevolent welfare associations, for example, lose their established management committees and leading figures to newcomers who then use the cover and heritage of the associations to begin overt political actions, such as making submissions to parliamentary committees on behalf of their ostensible constituents.²⁹

To cater more specifically for more recent arrivals we have seen a proliferation of home-town associations which allow for both the recognition of regional differences within China, to provide opportunities to bestow prestige on selected individuals with positions such as Honorary Chairpersons, and to create an impression in the mind of the broader public of greater numbers and hence influence. Back in China, such initiatives are credited to the local UFWDs who can claim them as reflecting their work, which in many cases they probably are.

This multiplicity of ostensible community and related groups provides invaluable platforms or opportunities (平台) for the promotion of united front goals and CCP friendly figures in local communities.

Related to this flowering of associations is also a proliferation of business and industry-related special-interest groupings. In some places, older mixed associations of businesspeople have been joined by new ones, sometimes explicitly endorsed by PRC diplomats, that are almost or exclusively Chinese in membership. This serves to both increase the appearance of diversity while splitting and weakening the original groups and giving PRC officials, such as UFWD cadres, more oversight, insight and hence potential influence over the local situation.

Because of its ideology and history, the CCP is also very sensitive to the role of culture and cultural figures in politics. Today there is also a clear strand of united front work dedicated specifically to using the connection between culture and politics to promote Party aims. One manifestation of this is a profusion of cultural troupes, organisations for artists and writers and performance groups. While Chinese art and performance are seen as helping promote Chinese soft power, writers have a special place as influencers of ideology. Those writers who can develop audiences among the Diasporas and to wider audiences are particularly prized. Becoming recognised by associations such as those ostensibly representing Overseas Chinese Writers not only confers status, it also provides many opportunities for visits to China and elsewhere as reward.

²⁹ Although subsequently strongly denied, the Chinese Australian Services Society submission seems to fit this pattern. See the media report here “[End US alliance and pivot to China, says Overseas Chinese society](#)”, *The Australian*, 17 April 2018. Original submission: *Submission in Response to the Call for Public Submission on Foreign Policy White Paper*



PRC alternatives to dissident voices

One aspect of the UFWD's proliferation of associations abroad that has largely been missed by local observers is the creation of organisations which can be used to neutralise specific groups of critics or at least act as counterweights should the need arise. One example of this might be South Australia's Xinjiang Association (南澳新疆联合会).³⁰ The existence of this body would not necessarily be remarkable in light of the above, but Adelaide in South Australia is also home to Australia's largest concentration of Uyghurs from Xinjiang, many if not most of whom (but by no means all) would not normally associate with ethnic Chinese from the PRC because they support autonomy for Xinjiang and might prefer "East Turkestan" as a name for the region. The difference in naming alone highlights the key differences between one group aligned mainly with Han Chinese and is supported by the local PRC consulate, and the other which would be an object of deep concern by CCP authorities.

In early 2019, in celebration of South Australia's Harmony Day, it was the consulate-supported association which got to participate in the Harmony Day parade and not local Uyghurs, many of whom are likely to be very worried about the mass incarceration of their compatriots and even family members. The Association's participation was enthusiastically endorsed by a new local member of parliament, the representative for the seat of Cheltenham. Intentionally or otherwise, it was a small but telling example of how effective, even at this relatively petty level, the politics of both neutralisation and endorsement can work.³¹

The rise and rise of Councils for the Peaceful Unification of China

While the competition between media supportive if not loyal to the PRC and other elements supportive of democracy or Taiwan has generally been won by the PRC loyalists, this has not been enough to always render Taiwanese voices and Taiwan advocates mute.

To assist in their neutralisation, the UFWD has actively developed and promoted a worldwide network of 'Councils for the Peaceful Unification of China' which come under the umbrella of the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Unification (全球华侨华人促进中国和平统一大会). The Australian chapter came to unwanted local media attention because it was headed by real estate mogul Huang Xiangmo 黄向墨, himself a focus of claims he was trying to influence domestic Australian politics regarding China's maritime boundaries, which resulted in the resignation-in-disgrace of a senator of the national parliament. Huang was subsequently refused Australian citizenship and has since settled in Hong Kong.³²

³⁰Its closeness to the PRC of the was underlined when in late 2018 it was endorsed by the Chinese consulate in Adelaide for its "inclusiveness, diversity, strong cohesiveness and active involvement for community solidarity". "Acting Consul-General Yuncai Mei attended the 9th anniversary of SA Xinjiang Association", Consulate-General of the People's Republic of China in Adelaide, 28 November 2018.

³¹The incident was discussed on [Twitter](#).

³²Dan Conifer and Stephanie Borys, "Australia denies citizenship to Chinese political donor Huang Xiangmo and strips his permanent residency", ABC, 6 April 2019.



These associations have numerous uses. In the Australian case, the national association became a key body through which united front activities could be organised and actions of other related and sympathetic groups coordinated. Key examples of these functions in action include mass rallies in Canberra and Sydney in support of Beijing's holding of the Olympics and confronting Falun Gong supporters and advocates of Tibetan autonomy in 2008 and rallies in Sydney to protest the Hague decision against China in the case on maritime boundaries with the Philippines in 2016.

Another subtle success of these organisations has been in shifting the terms of debate about the status of Taiwan. The mere fact of translations into other languages emphasising the notion of “re”-unification helps cement in the minds of the uninformed that Taiwan was indeed once part of PRC China and hence reunification, even on the CCP's terms, is justifiable.

Influencing religious believers

As recent efforts within China have made clear, the CCP and its UFWD have become increasingly concerned about the potential dangers to themselves from individuals and groups deriving strength and moral succour from their religious beliefs, be they Muslims, Christians or even Daoists. There is also concern about the success of Taiwanese Buddhist groups around the world, and the lasting influence of many Daoist-related beliefs among the older Overseas Chinese and Taiwanese.

In the case of Buddhists, the CCP is able to support groups which are prepared to align with its goals by supplying priests and monks and other forms of backing if necessary. The monks and priests sent from China have all been approved and trained under supervision of the UFWD via the Religious Affairs Bureau. These appointments are unlikely to contradict Beijing on any issues and, moreover, can be tapped to provide information on local congregations at any time.

In 2018 the UFWD supported a visit to Australia of a delegation of senior Buddhist figures to formalise the establishment of a national Australia-China Buddhist Council (澳中佛教总会), potentially taking its influence to another level.³³

While Daoism has had little resonance in Australia, the potential for it to do so exists. What is known is that the UFWD has become very active in supporting Daoist deities popular in Taiwan, notably Mazu 妈祖, as a way of bypassing state bodies and appealing directly to believers there and elsewhere. Mazu has even been repackaged as “Guardian Goddess of the Maritime Silk Road”,³⁴ bringing her religious importance in line with PRC geopolitical goals. What we might expect to see in places like Australia is more overt support for otherwise long-neglected temples and joss houses linked to the Hongmen 洪门 so-called Chinese Freemason tradition and chapters which have also become an increasingly prominent part of united front work among overseas Chinese. These in turn are often linked to the Zhigong Dang (致公党), one of China's eight so-called democratic parties (民主党派) as the link with Hongmen chapters as

³³“Press Conference of the Australia China Buddhist Council Limited held on March 28, 2018”, Australia-China Buddhist Council Limited, 28 March 2018. It should be noted that Huang Xiangmo was a “Founding Honorary President” of the Council. See “About ACBC”.

³⁴Hong Yaobin, “Mazu: Guardian Goddess of the Maritime Silk Road”, CGTN, 14 May 2019.



well as with their dark underbelly, secret society triads. In some instances, religion, crime and CCP political aims can coalesce nicely.

The CCP is also very concerned about the rising interest in Christianity among its citizens. Many dissidents or simply social activists have found Christianity to be of considerable emotional support and this has in turn contributed to the increasingly harsh suppression of even the state-sponsored Three-Self and Catholic churches. While it would seem that CCP influence in Christian groups would be very difficult, if possible at all, Clive Hamilton has chronicled precisely such influence in Canberra, Australia's capital and centre of diplomatic affairs with one Chinese church praising Xi Jinping in its newsletter.³⁵ In this light, the 24 April 2019 meeting between the Archbishop of Canterbury and UFWD head You Quan, linked to a so-called "golden era" in United Kingdom-China relations, takes on other meanings. The bishop was meeting You even as Christians around China were being persecuted and their churches closed. The UFWD's claims about the CCP upholding religious freedom etc. might have rung hollow but, for a Chinese audience, You was nevertheless receiving an implicit endorsement of Party policies and claims.³⁶

Chinese students (university and high-school) abroad

In 2015, the CCP held a crucial national summit on united front work that raised both the profile of united front work within China and its status and was addressed several times by Xi Jinping himself. Xi also established a United Front Work Leading Small Group (领导小组) to guide such work. Among the many important decisions of the conference was the announcement that Chinese students abroad, hitherto the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, were henceforth also a designated target of united front work. The younger Chinese leave the PRC, the greater the likelihood that they might take on the values of the societies they find themselves in, rather than those propagated by the CCP. Having the UFWD keep a closer eye on them, in addition to the MoE, should increase the chances that they will pick up any trends in ideological deviation while allowing more resources be spent on reaffirming their PRC ties, such as by sponsoring them to visit China and undertake patriotic education.

Colonising Overseas Chinese history?

Ownership of historical narratives is a key part of shaping CCP ideology. The CCP's reshaping of its story post-1989, from one stressing the success of the socialist revolution and the social revolution to one of preventing the repeat of national humiliation at the hands of foreigners, is one key example of this.³⁷ It is therefore of some concern that Australian-Chinese figures closely associated with united front work have also become increasingly involved in supporting research and commemoration of various aspects of Chinese-Australian history. In 2017, for example, Huang Xiangmo and

³⁵ Clive Hamilton, *Silent Invasion: China's influence in Australia*, Hardie Grant Books, 2018, p. 243.

³⁶ United Front Work Department of the CPC Central Committee, "尤权会见英国圣公会坎特伯雷大主教贾斯廷·韦尔比" [You Quan meets Anglican Church Archbishop Justin Welby], 25 April 2019.

³⁷ Zheng Wang, *Never Forget the National Humiliation: historical memory in Chinese politics and foreign relations*, Columbia University Press, 2012.



the Council for the Peaceful Unification of China took a prominent role in making an offering before a plaque commemorating both the 42nd anniversary of Australia's Anti-racial discrimination law, *and* to those Chinese who had died during Australia's gold rush of the 19th century.³⁸ One of the participants at this commemoration, the Australian Chinese Workers Association, had also published a book on anti-Chinese discrimination in 2016, in China.³⁹ In 2018, Huang was chair of the organising committee of the two hundredth anniversary of Chinese in Australia Gala Festival in Sydney's town hall. In his speech, Huang highlighted Australia's White Australia policy and the 1975 Anti-racial discrimination laws.⁴⁰

The potential issue for Australia in light of the united front connections of Huang and others involved in these sorts of commemorations is that recently arrived, in historical terms, migrants have become deeply involved in Australian historical issues. Moreover, this has played out in ambiguous ways that both link dark aspects of Australia's past with official CCP tropes about national humiliation of China and 'the Chinese'. Given the deeply political nature of history and historiography as practised by the CCP, there is a possibility that the CCP may appropriate elements of Australian history for its own purposes. Australian Chinese, for their part, run the danger of having their history interpreted as Beijing sees fit. Perhaps more importantly in the short term, this close association by Huang allows the most recent and China-aligned groups to act and claim that they represent all Australian Chinese, both at home and in China. History, in this case, becomes another platform for CCP ideological work and pretensions of speaking on behalf all Chinese everywhere.

Conclusion and implications

This overview is far from complete and represents but tentative steps in outlining the extent and depth of CCP united front work abroad using Australia as case study. There is much more that could and should be done to tease out the growing influence of this work and how it might influence local politics and relations with the PRC. The links between united front figures and groups and local non-Chinese figures, politicians for example, have not been discussed here. This is despite the increasing salience of this issue, notably in Australia where Huang Xiangmo's alleged actions continue to reverberate in the state of New South Wales and its Independent Commission Against Corruption now implicating key factions of the state's Labor Party.⁴¹ Jonathan Manthorpe has also outlined similar issues in Canada.⁴² Similar problems and activities undoubtedly exist around the world and Anne-Marie Brady has been

³⁸“澳洲华人各界举行纪念淘金潮华人死难者集体公祭活动” [Australian Chinese hold a collective commemoration of the Chinese victims of the gold rush], *Sing Tao Daily*, 1 November 2017.

³⁹澳大利亚华人总工会 [Australian Chinese Workers Association] (ed.), *澳洲排华政策的历史终结: 公祭十九世纪排华骚乱中的死难者* [The end of the history of the anti-Chinese policy in Australia: in commemoration of the victims of the Anti-Chinese riots in the 19th century], Heilongjiang People's Press, 2016.

⁴⁰全國省長齊發賀信罕見展現全澳共識澳洲各界紀念華人來澳 200 週年 [Governors from the entire country send a congratulatory message, in a rare all-Australian consensus: various sectors in Australia commemorate the 200th anniversary of the Chinese in Australia], *Sing Tao Daily*, 20 May 2018.

⁴¹Christopher Knaus, “Former NSW Labor boss seen with \$100,000 cash in Aldi bag after meeting banned donor, ICAC inquiry told”, *The Guardian*, 26 August 2019.

⁴²Jonathan Manthorpe, *Claws of the Panda: Beijing's campaign of influence and intimidation in Canada*, Cormorant Books, 2019.



doing much to raise awareness of this and united front work in general, in her *Magic Weapons* paper.⁴³

This paper then provides some insight and examples which may help others identify and analyse how united front work might be playing out in their region, country or city. Given the extent and growth of this work, there is much more to be investigated and written up.

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Gerry Groot is Senior Lecturer in Chinese Studies at the University of Adelaide, Australia.

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⁴³Anne-Marie Brady, “*Magic Weapons: China’s political influence activities under Xi Jinping*”, Wilson Center, 18 September 2017.