

THE EXPANSION OF THE UNITED FRONT UNDER XI JINPING

Gerry Groot

XI JINPING'S RULE TO DATE has been characterised by, among other things, a return to the basics of Party rule as established by Mao. These include a renewed emphasis on United Front 统战 work, which Mao called one of the 'three secret weapons' 三个大法宝 (along with the armed forces and Party-building) that helped the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to power in 1949. (For an overview of the United Front, see the *China Story Yearbook 2014: Shared Destiny*, pp.128–132.) The year 2015 was the most important one since 1990 for the United Front, a collection of strategies overseen by the United Front Work Department (UFWD) 统战部 by which the Party seeks to strengthen its authority and legitimacy, especially among the more marginalised, independent, and

minority sectors of the Chinese population.

Today, these include professionals such as lawyers, business managers, and 'new capitalists'—whose co-operation is crucial for the success of China's new economic policies—as well as historic United Front targets like religious believers and ethnic minorities including Tibetans and Uyghurs. The children of China's nouveau riche are another relatively new focus along with Chinese studying overseas. Xi had previously stressed the importance of United Front work among Overseas Chinese, *huaqiao* 华侨, a category that now includes Chinese citizens living abroad (so-called 'new *huaqiao*').

The intensification of United Front efforts indicates profound concerns within the CCP about ensuring



Xi Jinping at the CCP Central Committee's Conference on United Front Work
Image: news.xinhuanet.com

that these sectors are contributing to the country's political and social stability, as well as to its public image abroad. The Party also needs to prevent such individuals or groups from becoming actively rebellious or conduits of what it considers 'polluting' Western political ideals. The latter include 'universal values', electoral democracy, and academic freedom (including the right to critique the Party's historical mistakes).

United Front work often takes the form of co-optation: by advocating for the Party's views to their circles of influence and reporting the views of their circles back to the Party, targets are rewarded with enhanced status and in some cases material advantages as well. Co-operation with the United

Front also affords some form of representation or a voice within the political system through recruitment into the advisory Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress (CPPCC), a key United Front institution, or by other means. The Party, in return, gets to tap their diverse talents for the ongoing tasks of nation-building and economic construction. Their public expressions of loyalty, moreover, helps validate the Party's claims to represent all of China.

To succeed, United Front cadres have to be able to make friends with those who are not the Party's natural allies, and interpret and translate Party policy to them in a way that can win them over. It can be a tricky balancing act with high stakes: the Party has long been wary of United Front cadres being influenced by their targets rather than the other way round. During the anti-Rightist Campaign of the 1950s, the Party deemed then UFWD head, Li Weihai 李维汉, to be politically unreliable and he became one of the movement's victims, for example. The anti-Rightist purge put a damper on United Front work for almost two decades between 1957 and Mao's death in 1976. Thirteen years later, the attempts by UFWD head Yan Mingfu 阎明复 to negotiate with

the student protestors in Tiananmen Square in 1989 led to his dismissal as well as a wider purge within the eight ‘United Front Democratic Parties’ (most of which date back to the war against the Japanese occupation, like the ‘Revolutionary Committee of the Kuomintang’).

The Party convened its first national United Front work conference in nine years from 18–20 May 2015 under the title ‘CCP Central Committee’s Conference on United Front Work’ 中央统战工作会议. The citation of the Central Committee in the title of the conference gave it status equal to other CCP central-level work conferences, a major fillip. Then, even more significantly, at the end of July, the Party announced the creation of a Leading Small Group (LSG) on United Front Work. Both the establishment of the LSG and the fact that the current head of the UFWD (since 2014) is Politburo member Sun Chunlan 孙春兰, one of the most senior women in the Party and the head of the UFWD, highlights the importance that Xi places on United Front work. The UFWD, meanwhile, has expanded over the last few years by some 40,000 new cadres. Sun’s deputy at the UFWD is Wang Zhengwei 王正伟, the head of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission.



Sun Chunlan
Source: news.sohu.com

Their personal prominence within the Party means that the Department ranks marginally ahead of both the Central Department of Organisation and that of Propaganda. United Front initiatives are now almost certainly going to be implemented more effectively at all levels of the party-state instead of haphazardly as was often the case in the past.

Yet, for all that, plus concrete measures like more generous funding of academic research on United Front topics as well as gestures such as Xi’s speeches and the establishment of the LSG, in several key areas of United Front work the Party seems to be scoring own goals, or at least making some serious missteps.



7 November 2015: Presidents Ma Ying-jeou and Xi Jinping meet in Singapore, it is the first such meeting since 1949

Source: setn.com

The Taiwan example

Taiwan, for example, has long been a major target of United Front work and perhaps the best known. The Party wants the government of Taiwan, which calls itself the Republic of China (ROC), to formally accept the sovereignty of the People's Republic of China (PRC). This would allow it to complete the CCP's self-declared 'sacred' task of unification that was partly achieved when Hong Kong and Macau returned to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 and 1999 respectively.

On 7 November 2015, Xi held a surprise meeting in Singapore with Taiwan President Ma Ying-jeou 马英九, the head of the Nationalist Party 国民党 (GMD or KMT), the Communist Party's historical enemy and rival. It was the first such meeting since 1949 and one that state media, including China's CCTV, declared would go down in history. Xi called Taiwan and China

'a family whose blood is thicker than water' and he and Ma agreed to establish a hotline to facilitate communication in times of crisis.

Already, the Party offers 'Taiwan compatriots' 台湾同胞 preferential treatment as tourists, students, and investors and it welcomes back old soldiers who once fought against it in the civil war of 1945–1949 and beyond. It attempts to bind Taiwan ever closer through trade and to encourage Taiwanese to see themselves as part of a greater China. Like the KMT, the CCP is increasingly worried about the development of distinct Taiwanese identity (as opposed to a 'Chinese' identity) based on an explicit rejection of mainland China. Yet the meeting itself, organised in secret and sprung on an unsuspecting public, may have simply intensified mistrust of the Mainland, the KMT and United

Front work among the people of Taiwan. Not long after that the people of Taiwan voted out the KMT and replaced Ma with a president who is far less enthusiastic about cross-Strait ties. (See Forum ‘Purifying the Body Politic in Taiwan’, pp.252–260.)

Reaching out, pressing in

Tibet is another key target of United Front work. The Party understands that its treatment of Tibetans, Uyghurs, Mongolians, and religious believers generally is of great interest to many foreign opinion makers, foreign governments, and international organisations concerned about human rights. Its crackdown on Tibetan critics of Chinese rule, restrictions on the use of Tibetan language, the intense surveillance of monasteries, and continued denigration of the Dalai Lama (in December, the Party even accused him of being an Islamic State sympathiser) have both hardened Tibetan resistance within China and alarmed Tibet’s supporters overseas.

Many Tibetans and their supporters overseas were infuriated when a key Tibetan cadre within the UFWD declared in 2015 that the (atheist) Party—and not a committee of High Lamas, as is the historical custom—

would determine the next reincarnation of the Dalai Lama once the current Tibetan leader-in-exile passes away.

As this example illustrates, once a religious or ethnic community leader begins promoting the Party’s views, the community may trust them less, and once they lose the trust of their communities, they lose their utility as agents of influence or informants. They risk being regarded as sell-outs or ignored altogether. The UFWD has trouble selecting allies who can continue to exert influence in their own realm, be it religious, digital, economic or political, *after* they begin to do its work.

In Xinjiang, meanwhile, inter-ethnic tensions continue to simmer, with continued protests by Muslim Uyghurs against Chinese rule, including several deadly attacks on Han Chinese civilians and police. The Party-state is keen to frame this unrest as part of an international Islamic terrorist problem rather than the consequence of its own repressive internal policies. In 2014, the government introduced a policy that provides cash bonuses to Uyghurs who marry ethnic Chinese. This is not exactly popular among a group that fears for the future of its culture and

中国纪检监察报 要闻摘要

□ 中共中央政治理论工作会议、分析研究当前经济形势和经济社会发展工作、中共中央总书记习近平主持会议

习近平在同知识分子劳动模范青年代表座谈时强调 紧跟时代肩负使命锐意进取 为共同理想和目标团结奋斗

习近平代表党中央向全国广大知识分子广大劳动群众广大青年致以“五一”国际劳动节和“五四”青年节祝贺



“来白微信的”“下乡请柬”

共产党员绝不能信仰宗教

“来白微信的”“下乡请柬”

共产党员绝不能信仰宗教

“来白微信的”“下乡请柬”

共产党员绝不能信仰宗教

The newsletter of the Party's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection states that 'Party members are absolutely not allowed to hold religious beliefs' (article bottom left) Source: csr.mos.gov.cn

identity as well as its ownership of its traditional land. In January 2015, the city of Urumqi proscribed the burka; the year before, men with large beards were kept off public transportation at the time of a provincial sporting event. United Front work to promote ethnic integration is clearly under pressure here as well.

United Front work requires candid advice and objective knowledge of the people and situations it is attempting to influence. Yet the Party-state under Xi is increasingly forcing all analysis and pronouncement to conform to ide-

ological and policy needs. In November 2015, the Party sacked the editor of the *Xinjiang Daily*, Zhao Xinwei 赵新慰, and expelled him from the Party for 'improperly' discussing government policy. The former editor's 'words and deeds' had gone against government attempts to rein in religious extremism and terrorism, the official China News Service Agency reported.

Under former president Hu Jintao (2002–2012), the Chinese government seemingly tolerated a greater degree of religious freedom, particularly among Chinese Christians. Tolerance was

believed beneficial to social stability and charity work. Xi, however, appears far more concerned about the potential of Christians to form an anti-Communist fifth column (as some Chinese analysts believe happened in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe). In May, the newsletter of the Party's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection warned that religious beliefs among Party members were becoming a matter of 'serious concern', reminding members that communism 'begins with atheism' and that participation in 'illegal' religious activities could lead to expulsion. There has been a widespread crackdown on 'unofficial' Christianity that harks back to Maoist policies of the 1950s.

But the campaign of removing crosses and demolishing unofficial churches across Zhejiang Province and most notably in Wenzhou (part of the struggle against 'foreign influence'), proved so unpopular that in 2015, even leaders of the officially-sanctioned churches have criticised it. If the point of United Front work is to foster a connection and even identification with the Party among groups and individuals the Party regards as at best problematic and at worst outright hostile, this can be seen as a major fail for the United Front.



Removing crosses from churches in Zhejiang
Photo: Courtesy of China Aid

The United Front abroad

Since the late seventies and early eighties, when Chinese people began studying overseas in increasing numbers, the Party-state has closely monitored their behaviour and speech, especially those who have gone abroad with government support. Embassies and consulates foster close connections with students via Chinese student associations and sponsored activities.

A number of these students end up emigrating. The post-1978 generations of mainland immigrants to countries like Australia, the US, and



Chinese students abroad
Photo: marketingtochina.com

the UK are distinct from other *huaqiao* who may have left before 1949 or were born elsewhere. Older generations of Chinese immigrants tended to form tight social and business communities through associations based on language, provincial (or hometown) origins as well as politics. Historically, these associations were extremely valuable to the UFWD, whether in assessing the attitudes of *huaqiao* to the Party's policies and actions, courting their support or mobilising them against the Party's critics.

The new generations of *huaqiao* do not tend to associate or even socialise in the same way. The UFWD assumes that these newer *huaqiao* share a 'common sense' of understanding of the world shaped by decades of CCP thought work 思想工作. Given that many of these new immigrants are successful in business, academia, and even government in their new homes, the CCP is eager for their practical and moral support. It is equally keen to prevent them from falling under the

influence of what it calls anti-China or anti-Communist groups or elements. These include the Falun Gong, human rights organisations, and Chinese democracy activists, as well as advocates of Tibetan and Xinjiang independence. Late in 2015, Reuters reported that the UFWD has been supporting the anti-Dalai Lama Dorje Shugden Movement, whose members protest appearances by the Dalai Lama around the world.

In the UFWD's favour, the passage of time erases or at least softens memories of events such as the violent suppression of students in Beijing in June 1989. The Mainland's economic boom and its rising global status has also helped the Party establish, maintain, and deepen links with overseas Chinese by appealing to their 'Chineseness' and bonds to their 'motherland' 祖国, literally 'ancestral' country. The Chinese government supports the teaching of the Chinese language in schools overseas, including special 'Chinese' schools and promotes the official version of Chinese culture and

history via its network of Confucius Institutes. It sponsors initiatives by which young people of Chinese descent can ‘return’ to study in China. While it also offers scholarships and so on to non-Chinese, its main targets are overwhelmingly ethnic Chinese.

Mainland media and financial interests, sometimes with overt state backing, exercise increasing influence over overseas Chinese-language media including newspapers, electronic, and digital media. Here the difference between propaganda and United Front work blurs but the aim remains the same—to deliver the Party’s intended message in as many ways and as palatably as possible. The point is to cultivate sympathy for the Party’s policies and enhance its legitimacy in constituencies that already have obtained foreign citizenship or intend to do so. This is also useful for the United Front’s domestic objectives, for official media in China itself often rebroadcasts or republishes reports from such overseas media as proof of support for the Party’s policies abroad; the ‘fact’ of their originating outside official Chinese media enhances their credibility. This tendency for direct influence by Beijing over local Chinese-language media is particularly apparent in Australia and New Zealand.

Media and organisations under the control of, or heavily influenced by the Mainland may also profile or praise prominent members of the *huaqiao* community for loyalty to their homeland. This can, however, backfire, as happened in the case of Michael Chan, Ontario’s Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and International Trade. Chan was born in Guangzhou, the son of a KMT official. He immigrated to Canada at the age of eighteen. Since the 1980s, he has made over seventy visits to China and has spoken to Chinese media (Xinhua) about how, although ‘strictly speaking’ he was Canadian, he has never forgotten his roots.

Then, in 2015, the *Globe and Mail* reported that in 2010, Canadian intelligence suspected Chan of being under the ‘undue influence’ of the Chinese government. Chan has strenuously denied this, as has Canada’s intelligence service. He launched a lawsuit against



Michael Chan
Image: thestar.com



PLA Headquarters in Hong Kong on Earth Day

Image: hongkong.coconuts.co

the paper. But after a Chinese language newspaper, *The Chinese Canadian Post*, ran an article critical of Chan, the editor-in-chief, Helen Wang, was told by her boss to run more pro-Chan articles. The newspaper's proprietor has close links to both the ruling Liberal Party and the Chinese consulate. Wang insisted on telling both sides of the story and was eventually sacked. And thus what could have been a good United Front story—Chan's success as a Canadian politician with close and sentimental links to China, became a rolling disaster in PR terms.

Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, the UFWD is based in part at the Liaison Office of the Central People's Government in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. It works with Hong Kong Communists, many of whom have been underground since the 1960s, as well as

wealthy capitalists and selected public figures. But the rise of Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement in late 2014 and the near total failure of United Front-related individuals and organisations to sway popular sentiment reflected a major weakness of the UFWD's Hong Kong strategy: its reliance on people whom the younger generation and significant portions of the rest of the population do not respect as leaders. In particular, the cosiness between mainland interests and Hong Kong capitalists, especially in the area of real estate and housing, has become a long-standing source of discontent.

The Party equally failed to impress the student protesters with its appeals to the public good and the importance of maintaining order, especially after it was widely reported that the Party had activated its (United Front-forged) connections with criminal triads to get the gangsters to try to intimidate the protestors through

violence. Deng Xiaoping sanctioned such connections in 1984 when he said that some triads were ‘patriotic’. Many Hong Kong academics also believe that United Front cadres have been behind attacks on pro-democracy nominees for key leadership positions within the universities.

Challenges ahead

United Front work can no longer rely on the social status and *guanxi* 关系 (relationships) of the kinds of people it has relied on in the past, at home and abroad, to influence wider public opinion. As Chinese society grows more complex, it becomes harder to find people who can effectively represent both their communities and the interests of the Party. The moment the UFWD wins over someone they deem to be representative within a particular circle, the person loses that quality in the eyes of their community. This has much to do with a crisis of trust engendered by such endemic problems as corruption and nepotism within the Party.

Digital technology and the Internet present other challenges. In his speech of 20 May 2015, Xi said that the United Front would appeal to domestic Internet celebrities to help the government ‘purify’ the Internet of



United Work Front App
Source: Danwei

political rumours, pornography, dissident views, and so on. The UFWD has even released its own news app. But it’s clear that the CCP and UFWD struggle to influence popular opinion in the digital world.

Online or off, the fact is that in an increasingly market-dominated economy the state is no longer the great provider. Chinese society is more sophisticated, complex, and reliant on individual effort than in Mao’s day. A less passive population may well prefer to choose its own representatives. The 40,000 new cadres have their work cut out.

This text is taken from *China Story Yearbook 2015: Pollution*,
edited by Gloria Davies, Jeremy Goldkorn and Luigi Tomba,
published 2016 by ANU Press, The Australian National
University, Canberra, Australia.