



What should Australia do about...

the influence of United Front work?

by Dirk van der Kley

The United Front Work Department (UFWD) of the Communist Party of China (CPC) conducts activities in Australia, which are designed to persuade Chinese-Australians to support the CPC, or at least not to be critical on issues such as Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang.¹ United Front work also tries to influence Australian politics to align with CPC objectives.

While United Front work and the CPC have failed to persuade Australian elites and have been unsuccessful in shaping the Australian public debate or federal government policy in favour of the CPC, they have silenced some people of Chinese heritage in Australia. They have also stifled voices critical of the CPC in Chinese-language media in Australia. These are actions which cause most harm to Australia's national interest and should be the focus of Australia's efforts to combat United Front work. Much of the coercion and intimidation is difficult to stop because it involves threats against the families in the People's Republic of China (PRC) of people in Australia. But some steps can be taken.

The 2018 Espionage and Foreign Interference (EFI) Act was designed to combat coercion by a foreign government. Its impact on United Front work is hard to judge. Victims of CPC coercion in this country continue to be intimidated. There is no data to show whether the level of coercion has increased or decreased. Although economic espionage is also associated with groups linked to the UFWD, that is not the focus of this brief.

As a step towards countering United Front work, Australia should create a mechanism to measure how well its counter-foreign interference policy is working. A Foreign Interference Commissioner in the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC)

should be established to track the experience of the victims of foreign interference.

What is the United Front?

Many organisations, not just the CPC's UFWD, are involved in United Front work in both Australia and the PRC. United Front activities are officially a task of all CPC party-state-military agencies, as well as a duty of every CPC member.² Thus, it is hard to know which attempts to influence and interfere are conducted in the name of United Front and which are not.³

For example, the Ministry of State Security (MSS), the PRC's civilian intelligence and security service, carries out United Front work.⁴ While the MSS does not publicly call this United Front work, it does use UFWD-linked civil society groups overseas to conduct espionage and to intimidate people critical of the CPC. Therefore, any policy response should look at CPC interference and influence efforts in their entirety.

The Central United Front Work Leading Small Group is the most powerful body in the United Front work system. It coordinates dozens of organisations involved in United Front work: at least 26 different CPC and state bodies participated in its activities in 2017.⁵

It is unclear how coordination works in practice, but the UFWD does cooperate with other PRC organisations. For example, the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) and the UFWD jointly monitor workers who have been moved from Xinjiang to Shandong as part of the PRC's program for the forced labour transfer of Uyghurs.⁶

The UFWD – a Party unit that reports directly to the Central Committee of the CPC – is charged with leading “coordination, supervision and inspection



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of United Front work”.⁷ Direct coercion is not a main function of the UFWD.

The UFWD oversees the running of community groups that are designed to co-opt elites from outside the Party. There are thousands of these groups inside and outside the PRC. In Australia, these groups could be business, media or student organisations or just general interest community groups (e.g. a dancing troupe).

...the CPC through its United Front work and other efforts has silenced some people of Chinese heritage in Australia.

These groups usually serve a legitimate function. If a businessperson in Australia wanted to do business in, say, Fujian, they could gain access to senior businesspeople and government officials in Fujian by connecting to a UFWD-linked business group. Once they join this group it would be difficult to publicly criticise the CPC or to associate with known critics.⁸ It is often people of Chinese heritage who join these groups in Australia.

Failure to influence politics

Australia need not substantially alter its approach towards political influence. In terms of Australia’s federal policy decisions, United Front work has been a dismal failure in the past few years. Almost all major policy decisions at a federal level have gone against the PRC. Media reporting has become far more critical of the PRC. For a country that is so intrinsically linked to Australia’s economic well-being, it has little policy influence.

This lack of policy influence is partly due to a backlash against the PRC’s assertive behaviour and partly due to the exposure of United Front work by Australia’s security services and civil society.

UFWD-linked groups present themselves to politicians as platforms to interact with Chinese communities in which there are fundraising opportunities. UFWD-linked individuals have allegedly been involved in corrupt activity with

Australian politicians. The case of Sam Dastyari and the current investigation into a \$100 000 cash donation to NSW Labor in late 2015 allegedly from Huang Xiangmo through proxies are highly concerning.⁹ There is also an ongoing ASIO investigation into the office of Shaoquett Moselmane (the results of which remain unknown).

Exposure of these cases has been counterproductive for the CPC. Increased media scrutiny means that it is now difficult for large donations from UFWD-linked people to escape attention. However, Australia could still make its political donation rules more transparent and align them across all jurisdictions.

Powerful groups – including university administrators, big business and state governments – do not criticise the PRC and often argue for more positive political relations with the PRC. However, those Australians who lobby for better relations with the PRC mostly do so because it is in their organisation’s interest or because they believe it is in the national interest, not because they are convinced by United Front work.

A handful of elected Australian politicians and candidates for elections have been affiliated with UFWD-linked groups. Because there is so much media attention, the risk that someone with such an affiliation would be involved in national security decisions is minimal.

Current scrutiny of politicians’ links with Beijing is already sufficient and there is little need to make a policy change.

Coercion and co-optation

1) UFWD-linked groups

United Front work has had some success in Chinese communities in Australia. The UFWD has co-opted or created dozens of groups that it tries to position as representative of Chinese communities in Australia.¹⁰ Most people join these groups because it is in their personal interest, not because they are agents of the CPC.

The UFWD can then mobilise these community groups against Chinese groups or individuals who criticise the CPC. On numerous occasions, such



as Li Keqiang's 2017 visit to Australia and the pro-Hong Kong protests in Australia in 2019, UFWD-linked groups have organised pro-PRC rallies that sometimes turned violent. The participants attend voluntarily, although they may have minor costs covered by the group or the PRC government.¹¹

Independently of these groups, PRC nationalists sometimes act without direct guidance. For example, a Chinese-language teacher in Australia was labelled unpatriotic (to the PRC) by other Chinese language teachers when the teacher asked how best to approach a class discussion about human rights in the PRC.¹²

2) Intimidation and coercion

Beyond the harassment by mobilised groups and nationalists, the MPS and the MSS directly intimidate people in Australia. Some people have been followed or at least perceive that they are being followed. PRC security agents can threaten the financial assets or PRC-based family of people in Australia who speak against the CPC. A dissident showed the author messages from an MPS agent received the day after he attended a Tiananmen memorial in Australia. The message said that his actions would have an impact on his family. He later showed the author screenshots of his parents' frozen bank account.

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People who face this intimidation rarely report it to authorities. In 2019, the author interviewed over 30 people who claimed to be victims of CPC intimidation. Only three had reported it to authorities. The most-stated reason for this was a belief that the Australian government could not protect the victim's family in the PRC. This is a valid concern and there is little that the Australian government can do about it. Moreover, others felt that reporting would not change anything.

Increased reporting of crimes will not necessarily lead to convictions under the EFI Act since the

burden of proof is high. But it would identify individuals who need protection.

The willingness of victims to speak to the author but not authorities is telling. Civil society needs to play a greater role to increase transparency and understanding of the scale of foreign interference. Security concerns mean that the National Counter Foreign Interference Coordinator in Home Affairs cannot publicise much of its work, which makes it ill-suited to increasing transparency on interference. A Foreign Interference Commissioner in the AHRC could do this.

3) Chinese-language media

The UFWD and the CPC try to stifle Chinese-language media critical of the PRC in Australia and to boost voices supportive of the CPC. Two of the largest Chinese-language media groups in Australia have links to the UFWD. Pacific Media Group is partially owned by China News Service, which is run by the UFWD.¹³ Austar Media Group is owned by Tommy Jiang who, for example, attended a China Overseas Friendship Association meeting in 2019 that included a visit from President Xi Jinping.¹⁴

Independent Chinese-language media in Australia relies on sponsors who themselves operate in the PRC - sponsors who have been told by PRC Consulate officials to stop buying ads in media outlets that are overly critical of the CPC.¹⁵

WeChat is the most popular app for consuming Chinese-language news in Australia.¹⁶ WeChat media accounts need to be registered in the PRC and politically sensitive content (as deemed by the CPC) can be removed, even in Australia.

The PRC government should be allowed to run its news services in Australia, both those owned by the UFWD and others - this is normal in a democracy. However, they should be clearly identified as foreign government-owned entities to provide transparency. Numerous social media platforms do this voluntarily but it should be formally legislated. This should apply to government-owned news providers from all countries, such as Al Jazeera from Qatar.

Recommendations

- Australia needs a Foreign Interference Commissioner in the Australian Human Rights Commission. This role would largely focus on quantifying the problem for the public. To increase transparency about the scale of interference, the commissioner should produce an independent, data-based annual report on the state of foreign interference in Australia.
- Australia should reduce barriers for victims to report foreign interference in Australia by:
 - Providing an encrypted portal for victims to report foreign interference. The national security hotline is currently an unencrypted line.
 - Establishing a team of community liaison officers in Home Affairs to deal specifically with groups targeted by foreign governments. Currently, community liaison officers from Home Affairs and the state police cover a
- broad set of issues, among which foreign interference is only a minor component. Those same liaison officers also handle relations with UFDW groups and the PRC Embassy, which can accidentally engender mistrust.
- Real time disclosure of political donations should be introduced across federal, state and territory levels of government. Political donation rules should be aligned across all jurisdictions.
- Australian philanthropic organisations should provide resources for more journalism to be undertaken by diaspora communities in Australia, including those targeted by foreign governments.
- Media organisations owned by foreign governments and operating in Australia should have to identify government-ownership in their content.



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China Matters welcomes your ideas and involvement.

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This policy brief is published in the interests of advancing a mature discussion on how Australia in its relationship with the PRC should manage challenging issues such as United Front work. Our goal is to inform government and relevant business, educational and nongovernmental sectors on this and other critical policy issues.

China Matters is grateful to seven anonymous reviewers who commented on a draft text which did not identify the author. We welcome alternative views and recommendations, and will publish them on our website. Please send them to ideas@chinamatters.org.au

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