



CHINA IN CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE

The Central United Front Work Leading Small Group

Institutionalising united front work

Alex Joske*

23rd July 2019[†]

Introduction

The United Front has undergone a rejuvenation in its political status and importance since General Secretary Xi Jinping initiated reforms in 2015.¹ Alongside the first-ever set of trial regulations on united front work and the Central United Front Work Conference, a Central United Front Work Leading Small Group (LSG, 中央统战工作领导小组) was created in 2015. The LSG helps realise the concept of the “Great United Front” (大统战) that characterises the United Front’s direction under Xi by increasing the party’s leadership over united front work, ensuring all relevant agencies are involved and their activities coordinated.

While the LSG should be central to understanding united front work today, it has received little attention. This paper will examine its background, activities and membership in the context of the increasing centralisation of united front work. As an important mechanism for increasing the United Front’s centralisation and coordination, the LSG helps demonstrate the breadth of agencies carrying out united front work, and indicates that their activities are likely to grow in efficiency.

Old structures; new pressures

Shortly after the LSG’s establishment was confirmed by the politburo in July 2015, the United Front Work Department’s (UFWD) drew attention to its origins.² “Lots of people think the United Front Work Leading Small Group is a new thing. Actually, you’re wrong”,³ the department stated in an article published on its WeChat account.⁴ The UFWD traces a line back from the LSG to a 1939 United Front Committee (统一战线委员会) headed by Mao Zedong, created at the same time as the UFWD’s formation.⁵

*International Cyber Policy Centre, Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI).

[†]Paper presented at the workshop “Mapping China’s footprint in the world II”, Prague, July 2019.

¹Peter Mattis & Alex Joske. “*The Third Magic Weapon: Reforming China’s United Front*”. *War on the Rocks* (24th June 2019).

²“中共中央政治局召开会议中共中央总书记习近平主持会议”。《人民日报》(31st July 2015).

³“很多人以为，统战工作领导小组是个新生事物，其实，you’re wrong。”

⁴同言。“领导小组：新闻稿里的一小段，统战工作的一大步”。统战新语 (6th Aug. 2015). (Via WeChat).

⁵“中央为什么要成立统一战线工作领导小组？”统战新语 (15th June 2016). (Via xjtxb.gov.cn).



As UFWD minister, that is, director of the department responsible for influencing and co-opting party outsiders, Yan Mingfu (centre) offered himself as a hostage to the Tiananmen Square protestors in an attempt to persuade them to disband.¹⁰

The last known united front work leading small group was established in 1986 under the leadership of Xi Jinping’s father, Xi Zhongxun 习仲勋, then a member of the Politburo and the Party Secretariat. The elder Xi’s role in united front work is not widely known today. However, Yan Mingfu 阎明复, UFWD minister at the time, recounted that “[Xi] once said he spent 70 or 80 percent of his effort and time on united front work.”⁶

A paper Yan wrote on united front work under Party Secretary Hu Yaobang 胡耀邦 includes the earliest known mention of the 1986 leading small group.⁷ Published in 2010 by party history journal *Hundred Year Tide*, it offers important insights into the united front bureaucracy, including the role played by the party’s Central Secretariat, during a transformative period in the party’s history. In 1985, according to Yan, the Central Secretariat advised the UFWD: “presently our nation is in a new historical period, so the circumstances, targets, and missions faced by united front work will also undergo great changes.”⁸ The Central Secretariat also established the core purposes of united front work as “serving the unification of the fatherland and the revitalisation of the Chinese nation (中华),” and tasked the united front system with “facing the changes of the new historical period” and “boldly expanding overseas united front work.”⁹

The deepening of opening and reform, the impending takeover of Hong Kong, and renewed ambitions to occupy Taiwan were placing greater demands on the United Front. This new era of united front work, and the “one country; two systems” policy in particular, meant that when cultivating and building relationships with non-party

⁶ 阎明复. “习仲勋与统战工作”. 中国共产党历史网 (n.d.). (Via people.com.cn). Yan also served on the Party Secretariat from 1987 until his dismissal in the aftermath of the Tiananmen massacre. See “阎明复”. 中国共产党新闻网 (n.d.).

⁷ 阎明复. “胡耀邦与新时期统一战线工作”. 《百年潮》12 (2010).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.

¹⁰ Image source: Diane Gatterdam. “23 Year Remembrance of Tiananmen Square –May 16th 1989, Beijing China”. *Under the Jacaranda Tree* (16th May 2012).



individuals, the united front system would have to “loosen its perspective, be comprehensive in arranging matters, and prepare a new batch of people”, the Central Secretariat wrote in April 1986.¹¹

That January, the UFWD held a forum on overseas united front work that laid out basic guidelines, emphasised the need for better coordination, and reiterated the important role united front work plays in supporting “one country; two systems”. Reflecting the breadth and challenges of the overseas united front work, the forum was attended by representatives of the following agencies:

- Propaganda Department
- Taiwan Affairs Office
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations and Trade (the predecessor to the Ministry of Commerce)
- Overseas Chinese Affairs Office
- Hong Kong and Macau Office
- State Education Commission (the predecessor to the Ministry of Education)
- State Scientific and Technological Commission (the predecessor to the Ministry of Science and Technology)
- Ministry of Public Security
- Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
- Chinese Academy of Sciences
- Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) National Unification Work Group¹²

It was amid these developments that the first known meeting of the 1986 leading small group was held in August, to discuss the upcoming 16th National United Front Work Conference.¹³ Led by Xi Zhongxun, its members reportedly included

- Yan Mingfu, UFWD minister;
- Yang Jingren 杨静仁, former UFWD minister and ethnic Hui;
- Ismail Amat 司马义·艾买提, State Ethnic Affairs Commission director and ethnic Uyghur;
- Zhou Shaozheng 周绍铮, secretary-general of the CPPCC; and
- Liao Hui 廖晖, director of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office.¹⁴

¹¹阎明复, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

¹²*idem*, “胡耀邦与新时期统一战线工作”, p. 17; “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” (27th May 1986). The CPPCC National Unification Work Group was established in September 1983 and headed by Qu Wu 屈武, a CPPCC vice chairman who became chairman of the Revolutionary KMT in 1985.

¹³阎明复, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

¹⁴“中央为什么要成立统一战线工作领导小组?”



Beyond the above information, little is known about the 1986 leading small group and whether it remained active after 1986. It is possible that it was dissolved in 1987 after Hu Yaobang was pushed out of the party's leadership.

Nonetheless, the events of 1986 show that its formation came as greater pressures drove home the need for better coordination of united front work. The 1986 Overseas United Front Work Forum brought together at least thirteen agencies. The 16th National United Front Work Conference of November and December 1986 clarified the United Front's new mission with a focus on "one country; two systems", and emphasised the need for the entire party to prioritise united front work. Finally, while many of these new pressures may have been external, the inclusion of Yang Jingren and Ismail Amat, specialists in ethnic and religious affairs work, as members of the leading small group shows it was broadly concerned with all areas of united front work.

The revitalisation of united front work

In 1995, seventeen years before he would become general secretary of the CCP, Fuzhou Party Secretary Xi Jinping published an essay on "Establishing the Concept of 'Great Overseas Chinese Affairs'" ("大侨务" 观念的确立).¹⁵ The article's publication came as the PRC was preparing for the 1997 handover of Hong Kong. Calling for overseas Chinese affairs work to better serve China's modernisation, Xi wrote: "We believe that in the new period overseas Chinese affairs work must break through [defined] areas and borders, and step beyond the scope of overseas Chinese affairs agencies, making it into an important task for the party and each level of government, so that all of society together attends to and participates in this important task."¹⁶ Xi also drew attention to the need for leaders to emphasise overseas Chinese work and increase their direction of it.

The same ideas Xi expressed in that 1995 essay have been at the heart of united front reforms that he has overseen since 2015. At the May 2015 Central United Front Work Conference—the first time the conference had been upgraded from national-level status—Xi stated that "united front work is the whole party's work—it must be emphasised by the whole party and carried out by everyone together."¹⁷

While party leaders have complained about the need for greater leadership of the United Front and cadres' reluctance to carry out united front work since as early as 1950, Xi has backed up his words more so than any other party leader.¹⁸ At a July 2015 meeting that apparently focused on Tibet, the politburo approved the establishment of a Central United Work Leading Small Group. The new LSG's "primary duties are to carry out research on the status of the United Front's implementation of the Central Committee's major decisions and major directives, policies, policies and regulations; to direct each region, each agency and each work unit's party committee's (or party organisation's) implementation of the Central Committee's major directives, policies, policies and regulations on the United Front; to supervise and inspect the implementation of the Central Committee's major directives, policies, policies and regulations

¹⁵ 习近平. " '大侨务' 观念的确立". 《战略与管理》2 (1995).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁷ "习近平: 巩固发展最广泛的爱国统一战线". 新华网 (21st May 2015). (Via zytzb.gov.cn).

¹⁸ 杨佑均. "【征文·周恩来与统一战线】统战宣传不重要? 67年前周总理这样说!". 统战新语 (23rd Jan. 2018). (Via tibet.cn).



on the United Front and so on.”¹⁹ The first-ever trial regulations on united front work were also released in August.²⁰

贵阳小新表情包第一季



As CCP general secretary, Xi Jinping has emphasised the United Front, drawing particular attention to united front work on overseas students, young businesspersons, and new media professionals. The Guiyang City UFWD took this into its own hands through the creation of a mascot representing new social strata individuals, Xiao Xin 小新 or 'Little New'.²¹

The central purpose of these reforms, including the establishment of the LSG, has been to increase central leadership of united front work. According to the UFWD, “setting up the Central United Front Work Leading Small Group is an important strategic measure for strengthening the party’s leadership of united front work and straightening out united front work leadership mechanisms.”²² As part of this push, the LSG is designed to “research the overall situation of united front work from above”, allowing the party to improve coordination and division of united front work across the bureaucracy and ensure its implementation.²³ As Tsai and Wang wrote in their 2019 study of leading small groups, “leading small groups play an important role in coordinating bureaucratic departments with divergent interests and limiting their scope for bargaining.”²⁴

The “Great United Front” (大统战) is the underlying conceptual framework for these reforms and the new era of united front work. The concept is not new and has been

¹⁹“中共中央政治局召开会议中共中央总书记习近平主持会议”。

²⁰“中共中央印发《中国共产党统一战线工作条例（试行）》”（22nd Sept. 2015）。

²¹Image source: “什么，贵阳小新表情包第一季上线了！”。贵阳统战部（21st June 2019）。

²²“中央为什么要成立统一战线工作领导小组？”

²³姚茂臣。“独家：中央设统战工作领导小组内幕”。中国西藏网（28th Oct. 2016）。

²⁴Wen-Hsuan Tsai & Wang Zhou. “Integrated Fragmentation and the Role of Leading Small Groups in Chinese Politics”. *The China Journal* 82 (2019), p. 4.



promoted since at least the 1990s. However, a UFWD theorist has described it as “the most distinctive defining characteristic of the era of Xi Jinping’s thought on the United Front.”²⁵ Like the “Great Overseas Chinese Affairs” concept advocated by Xi as a middle-aged municipal party secretary, the Great United Front calls for united front work to be carried out with a stronger strategic perspective, increased leadership and coordination, and greater involvement from the entire party to help realise the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation.²⁶ “The leadership of party committees over united front work must be maintained, with UFWDs taking the lead and coordinating, and relevant parties each taking up their responsibilities in the Great United Front Work Arrangement”, Xi Jinping pronounced at the 2015 united front meeting.²⁷

The Central United Front Work Leading Small Group

Unlike the little-publicised 1986 leading small group, today’s body attracted substantial media coverage between 2015 and 2017. As documented below, it probably involves more agencies and has carried out far more work than the 1986 group.

In 2016, the LSG inspected united front work over a period of seven months, divided into two phases. First, between March and July, local agencies evaluated their own activities.²⁸ Then, between August and October, representatives from 28 different agencies, not all of which are represented in the LSG itself, formed 14 inspection groups, and travelled across China. These groups wrote reports and case studies, delivering feedback and recommendations to work units they had inspected.



*The LSG’s 8th inspection group led by UFWD vice minister Sita hearing reports on united front work during a tour of Guizhou province in 2016.*²⁹

²⁵冯海波. “十八大以来习近平对统一战线理论的丰富和发展”. 光明网 (8th Oct. 2017).

²⁶“关于‘大统战’的几点思考”. 中央社会主义学院 (n.d.).

²⁷“习近平：巩固发展最广泛的爱国统一战线”. 新华 (20th May 2015).

²⁸“河南省委统战部工作领导小组第三次会议召开”. 人民政协网 (10th Oct. 2017).

²⁹Image source: “中央统一战线工作领导小组第八调研检查组赴黔调研检查”. 贵州统一战线网 (12th Sept. 2016). (Via zytzb.gov.cn).



The scale of the LSG's activities was immense. According to an article published by the UFWD, "looking at the entire undertaking, the number of agencies, the greatness of scope, the seriousness of work, and the abundance of results reached by the inspections have rarely been seen in the history of the United Front, effectively advancing the implementation of the Central Committee's directives and policies on the United Front."³⁰ The inspection tours touched on all areas of united front work, visiting nearly all regions of China. Most appeared to examine united front work in general. However, three focused on universities, central agencies (中央部委) and companies, respectively.³¹ Documented in tables 1 and 2, known participants in inspection groups came from at least 16 organisations, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the CCP General Office, the National Development and Reform Commission, and the Organisation Department.

Table 1: 2016 inspection groups

Group number	Group leader	Position	Other participants
1	Sun Chunlan 孙春兰 ³²	UFWD minister, LSG deputy leader	Unknown
2	Zhang Qingli 张庆黎 ³³	CPPCC secretary-general	Su Bo 苏波, UFWD Discipline Inspection Group (驻中央统战部纪检监察组) leader ³⁴ Gu Boping 顾伯平, CPPCC committee member and distinguished cultural scholar at the Taihe Institute (太和智库) ³⁵ Tong Guangcheng 仝广成, CPPCC deputy party secretary ³⁶
3	Wu Yuliang 吴 玉良 ³⁷	Organisation Department deputy director (部务委员) and director of the National Grassroots Office (全国 基层办)	Unknown
4	Lu Wei 鲁伟 ³⁸	Propaganda Department vice minister, director of the Cyberspace Administration of China	Unknown
5	Zhang Yijiong 张裔炯 ³⁹	UFWD senior vice minister	Unknown

³⁰“新年过后，我们需要和统战往事干杯！”。统战新语 (3rd Jan. 2017). (Via zytzb.gov.cn).

³¹“中央统战工作领导小组亮相，调研检查透露了哪些信息？”。北京青年报 (10th Oct. 2016). (Via Xinhua).

³²Ibid.

³³方芳。“中央统战工作领导小组第二检查组来京调研检查郭金龙张庆黎吉林座谈”。中国共产党新闻网 (27th Aug. 2016).

³⁴“中央统一战线工作领导小组第二调研检查组听取河北省委专题汇报”。《河北日报》(9th Sept. 2016). (Via people.com.cn).

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶方芳, *op. cit.*

³⁷“中央统战工作领导小组亮相，调研检查透露了哪些信息？”。

³⁸“中央统一战线工作领导小组第四调研检查组赴福建调研”。福建日报 (22nd Sept. 2016). (Via zytzb.gov.cn).

³⁹“张裔炯率中央统一战线工作领导小组第五调研检查组赴晋调研检查”。山西日报 (12th Sept. 2016). (Via zytzb.gov.cn).



Table 1: 2016 inspection groups

Group number	Group leader	Position	Other participants
11	Du Yubo 杜玉波	Ministry of Education vice minister, deputy party secretary	Ren Yunhui 任允辉, UFWD Cadre Bureau deputy bureau chief ⁴⁹ Feng Gang 冯刚, Ministry of Education Ideological and Political Work Division director Pan Yongjun 潘永君, Ministry of Education Development Planning Division University Organisation and Professional Work Office deputy director Unnamed Organisation Department official Unnamed SEAC official Li Li 李莉, UFWD Cadre Bureau chief ⁵⁰
12	Xu Fushun 徐福顺	State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission deputy director	Gao Huajian 高化键, CCP General Office Unnamed CCP General Office Secretarial Department official ⁵¹ Wang Yongqing 王永庆, UFWD 6th Bureau (non-party intellectuals) chief Xu Yuning 徐宇栋, SASAC Masses Work Bureau (Party Committee UFWD) deputy chief Song Wenyan 宋文艳, All-China Women's Federation International Liaison Department deputy director Unnamed SARA official
13	Wang Zuo'an 王作安	SARA director	Hua Yanlong 华彦龙, UFWD Tibet Bureau deputy bureau chief Han Song 韩松, SARA Policy and Regulations Department director Liu Xiangling 刘香玲, OCAO Policy and Regulations Department deputy director
14	Zhou Bo 周波	Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office deputy director	Unknown

In 2017, the LSG carried out a second round of inspections focused on religious affairs work.⁵² The need for eight dedicated inspection groups on religion supports the idea that the party was having difficulty ensuring the implementation of relevant policies. Their findings and advice on religious affairs work are unknown. Nonetheless, these inspection tours coincided with the tightening controls on religion and ethnic groups on full display in Xinjiang, but present across China. It is therefore likely that the LSG played a role in implementing and devising a more restrictive and hardline approach to united front work.

⁴⁹“中央统一战线工作领导小组第十一调研检查组莅校调研检查”。西安交通大学 (7th Sept. 2016).

⁵⁰“中央统一战线工作领导小组第十一调研检查组来我校调研检查”。清华大学 (Sept. 2016).

⁵¹“集团召开贯彻落实中央关于统一战线一系列重大决策部署情况专题汇报会”。光大集团 (8th Nov. 2016).

⁵²刘亚辉。“中央统战部来豫调研检查宗教工作”。《河南日报》(7th June 2017).



There is also evidence of growing links between the united front system and China's security services, centred around religious affairs. In June 2017, the 7th inspection group received briefings on religious affairs work from the Qingdao State Security Bureau and Public Security Bureau.⁵³ Ahead of the two sessions in March 2019, a senior official from the UFWD's Xinjiang Bureau led an inspection tour by the Ministry of Public Security National Counter-Terrorism Office.⁵⁴ Investigative journalists at Bitter Winter have uncovered evidence of the UFWD and the Ministry of Public Security jointly running campaigns against supposed foreign influence on religion.⁵⁵ In some localities, such as Beijing's Xicheng District, the secretary of the Political and Legal Affairs Commission, which oversees the security apparatus, is also hatted as UFWD head.⁵⁶

Tellingly, Shi Jun, who became a UFWD vice minister in August 2018, previously served as a vice minister in the Ministry of Public Security.⁵⁷ Earlier in his career, he worked in the powerful Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission that oversees China's security apparatus. While governing an ethnic Tibetan and Qiang prefecture in Sichuan a decade ago, he oversaw a crackdown on Tibetan Buddhists that led to numerous self-immolations.⁵⁸ This year, it was revealed that Shi heads the Office of the Central Coordinating Small Group on Xinjiang Work, indicating that he plays a core role in setting policy on Xinjiang and its expansive network of concentration camps.⁵⁹

Table 2: 2017 inspection groups

Group number	Group leader	Position	Other participants
1	Zhang Yijiong 张裔炯 ⁶⁰	UFWD senior vice minister	Unknown
2	Unknown		Unknown
3	Bate'er 巴特尔 ⁶¹	UFWD vice minister, SEAC director and party secretary, CPPCC vice chairman	Unknown
4	Sita 斯塔 ⁶²	Office of the Central Coordination Group for Tibet Affairs deputy director	Unknown

⁵³杨晓星, "推动宗教工作取得新成效", 青岛日报 (8th June 2017).

⁵⁴"国家反恐办督导组到济南检查指导全国"两会"安保工作", 济南反恐 (11th Mar. 2019).

⁵⁵"Chinese Ministry of State Security Takes Over the Campaign Against Bitter Winter", *Bitter Winter* (3rd Aug. 2018).

⁵⁶"西城区委领导班子", 人民网 (n.d.).

⁵⁷"侍俊", 中央统战部 (n.d.).

⁵⁸"港媒曝光侍俊调任中共统战部内情: 与藏人自焚有关", 多维新闻 (1st Oct. 2018); 孫嘉業, "中國評論: 公安高官紛跨界", 明報 (2nd Oct. 2018).

⁵⁹林晖, "牢牢把握总目标推动新疆大局持续向好", 新疆日报 (26th Mar. 2019).

⁶⁰"中央统一战线工作领导小组第一调研检查组在京调研检查宗教工作", 北京统战 (5th July 2017). (Via zytzb.gov.cn).

⁶¹"中央统一战线工作领导小组到山西调研检查宗教工作", 山西日报 (22nd June 2017). (Via zytzb.gov.cn).

⁶²"中央调研检查组在鄂调研检查宗教工作", 巴林右旗统战部 (15th June 2017).



Table 2: 2017 inspection groups

Group number	Group leader	Position	Other participants
5	Liu Dawei 刘大为 ⁶³	Ministry of Education assistant to the minister and party group member	Zhang Jianmin 章建敏, UFWD Research Office deputy director ⁶⁴
6	Li Changping 李昌平 ⁶⁵	SEAC deputy director	Unnamed officials from the UFWD, SARA and the Ministry of Civil Affairs ⁶⁶
7	Yang Zhijin 杨志今 ⁶⁷	Ministry of Culture vice minister and deputy party secretary	Unknown
8	Wang Zuo'an 王作安 ⁶⁸	SARA director	Ma Jin 马劲, SARA Islam Department director Han Song 韩松, SARA Policy and Legislation Department director

Articles published by the United Front Work Department imply that the inspection groups were led by members of the LSG or representatives of agencies in the LSG.⁶⁹ This is supported by the fact that all six confirmed members of the LSG or its office led inspection groups. Based on this, it is possible to create a speculative membership list consisting of a leader in the Politburo Standing Committee, a deputy leader, an office director and deputy director, and inspection group leaders and representatives of other major united front agencies as members.

Table 3: Membership list of the Central United Front Work Leading Small Group (2015-2017)
Asterisks indicate speculative members

Position in LSG	Name	Primary positions
Leader	Yu Zhengsheng 俞正声 * or Xi Jinping 习近平 * ⁷⁰	Politburo Standing Committee member or CCP general secretary
Deputy leader	Sun Chunlan 孙春兰 ⁷¹	UFWD minister, Politburo member
Office director	Zhang Yijiong 张裔炯 * or Sun Chunlan ⁷²	UFWD senior vice minister

⁶³“中央统战工作领导小组第五调研组到我校调研”. 中山大学 (14th June 2017). (Via sina.com.cn).

⁶⁴“中央宗教工作专项调研组来中国人民大学检查指导工作”. 中国人民大学 (18th June 2017).

⁶⁵“中央统一战线工作领导小组第六调研检查组来汴调研检查”. 开封市网 (8th June 2017).

⁶⁶“中央统一战线工作领导小组调研检查组第六组对福建、河南、四川贯彻落实中央关于宗教工作重大决策部署情况进行调研检查”. 国家民委 (16th June 2017).

⁶⁷“中央统战工作领导小组第七调研检查组赴青岛调研”. 青岛日报 (8th June 2017). (Via zytzb.gov.cn).

⁶⁸“中央统战工作领导小组第八调研检查组到甘肃调研”. 甘肃日报 (21st June 2017). (Via rmzxb.com.cn).

⁶⁹“中央统战工作领导小组召开统战工作调研检查专题会孙春兰出席并讲话”. 广西统一战线 (21st Oct. 2016).

⁷⁰Yu Zhengsheng was the Politburo Standing Committee member responsible for united front work and chairman of the CPPCC. Both Xi Jinping and Yu are likely leaders of the leading small group given their seniority and involvement in united front work.

⁷¹“中央统战工作领导小组召开统战工作调研检查专题会孙春兰出席并讲话”.

⁷²Zhang Yijiong is a likely candidate for director of the Office of the LSG. He has been heavily involved in the LSG, leading inspection groups in both 2016 and 2017. As the UFWD's senior vice minister, he outranks the office's deputy director, UFWD Vice Minister Ran Wanxiang.



Table 3: Membership list of the Central United Front Work Leading Small Group (2015-2017)
Asterisks indicate speculative members

Position in LSG	Name	Primary positions
Deputy office director	Ran Wanxiang 冉万祥 ⁷³	UFWD vice minister
Member	Xu Fushun 徐福顺 ⁷⁴	State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission deputy director
Member	Wang Zuo'an 王作安 ⁷⁵	SARA director
Member	Bate'er 巴特尔 ⁷⁶	UFWD vice minister, SEAC director, CPPCC vice chair
Member	Zhou Bo 周波 ⁷⁷	Hong Kong and Macau Office deputy director
Member	Zhang Qingli 张庆黎 *	CPPCC secretary-general and vice chair
Member	Wu Yuliang 吴玉良 *	Organisation Department deputy director and director of the National Grassroots Office
Member	Lu Wei 鲁炜 *	Propaganda Department vice minister and Cyberspace Administration of China director
Member	Du Yubo 杜玉波 *	Ministry of Education vice minister, deputy party secretary
Member	Yang Zhijin 杨志今 *	Ministry of Culture vice minister
Member	Unknown*	Overseas Chinese Affairs Office representative ⁷⁸
Member	Unknown*	Taiwan Affairs Office representative

Other departments that might have been represented in the LSG include the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of State Security, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the International Liaison Department, and the National Development and Reform Commission.

Since the 2017 tours, the LSG has not been mentioned in official media. However, major reforms of the united front system in 2018 suggest that the LSG still exists. Furthermore, as Tsai and Wang note, leading small groups can play an important role in the promotion of senior officials.⁷⁹ So it is likely that the LSG's inspection tours played a role in personnel changes associated with the UFWD's absorption of OCAO and SARA in 2018, such as the promotion of Xu Yousheng 许又声 to OCAO director. You Quan, now UFWD minister, met with an LSG inspection tour while he was party secretary of Fujian and leader of the province's united front work leading small group.⁸⁰

⁷³“冉万祥率中央统战工作领导小组第九调研组赴山东调研检查”。山东省委统战部 (2nd Sept. 2016). (Via zytzb.gov.cn).

⁷⁴“徐福顺率中央统战工作第 12 调研组到神华调研”。国务院国资委 (29th Aug. 2016).

⁷⁵岳怀让。“国家宗教局局长王作安已担任中央统一战线工作领导小组成员”。澎湃新闻 (10th Sept. 2016).

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷廖冠华。“快看！“柳州经验”获中央统一战线工作领导小组肯定”。柳州日报 (11th Sept. 2016).

⁷⁸While not represented among the inspection group leaders, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office and Taiwan Affairs Office are heavily engaged in united front work and have therefore likely to have representation in the LSG. Some provincial Taiwan Affairs Offices are run by the UFWD: “中央统一战线工作领导小组第八调研组检查组来黔调研检查”。贵州统一战线网 (11th Sept. 2016).

⁷⁹Tsai & Zhou, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁸⁰“中央统战工作领导小组第四调研组赴福建调研”；何海铭。“中央统一战线工作领导小组调研检查反馈问题整改工作部署会召开”。福建日报 (16th Nov. 2016).



Emphasis on and centralisation of united front work is also expanding at the local level. More and more provincial united front work departments are run by party Standing Committee members, in line with the recommendations of the 2015 trial regulations.⁸¹ While some localities had established united front work leading small groups before 2015, their number has also grown.⁸² More state-owned enterprises, research institutes and universities have set up leading small groups.⁸³



United front work is a way for the party to co-opt people as diverse as the colours of the rainbow. In this image, the party forms the centre around which the rainbow of the United Front is drawn.⁸⁴

Conclusion

Efforts to centralise united front work have continued beyond the flurry of attention on united front work in 2015. In 2018, the Central Committee announced that the UFWD would now exercise “unified management” (统一管理) of religious and overseas Chinese affairs work, subsuming OCAO and SARA. This decision also “resolved the issue of overlapping responsibilities between the UFWD, OCAO and MFA” by placing the UFWD at the helm of overseas Chinese affairs work.⁸⁵ At the same time, the department was given “unified leadership” (统一领导) of SEAC, which in the past had been under far greater control from the UFWD than OCAO and SARA. With only one exception, SEAC has been directed by a member of the UFWD leadership since 1978.⁸⁶

⁸¹陈磊.“统战部长为何‘入常’”。上观新闻 (24th Sept. 2015); “中共中央印发《中国共产党统一战线工作条例(试行)》”。

⁸²张家然。“多省份陆续成立统一战线工作领导小组，构建大统战工作格局”。澎湃新闻 (24th Sept. 2015)。

⁸³“陈旭主持召开清华大学统一战线工作领导小组会议”。清华大学 (Aug. 2016); “中国科学院统一战线工作领导小组办公室”。中国科学院 (n.d.); “公司召开 2018 年统战工作座谈会”。国家电网 (n.d.)。

⁸⁴Drawing by Jiao Haiyang 焦海洋。Source: “习近平中央统战工作会议重要讲话的 8 个创新性亮点”。光明网 (8th June 2015). (Via sohu.com)。

⁸⁵曲翔宇 & 刘慧。“感受机构改革后基层侨务工作的变与不变”。人民网 (19th Oct. 2018)。

⁸⁶“中共中央印发《深化党和国家机构改革方案》”。新华 (21st Mar. 2018). (Via gov.cn)。



Since 2015, the UFWD itself has undergone some of the largest reorganisations in its history.⁸⁷ In 2016, it established the New Social Strata Work Bureau targeting young urban professionals, including employees of foreign companies. In 2017, it established the Xinjiang Work Bureau, which is probably doubles as the Office of the Central Coordinating Small Group for Xinjiang Work. After it was placed in charge of OCAO and SARA, a total of four new bureaus were established on their basis. The cadre bureau, responsible for training united front cadres, may have been downgraded at the same time.

These developments have given UFWDs at all levels of government clearer authority to coordinate united front work carried out by other agencies such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This suggests that a distinction between “united front tactics”–activities in the spirit of united front work but without involvement from the united front system, and “united front work”–efforts to control and co-opt party outsiders under the coordination of the united front system, would be a valuable one. Furthermore, the LSG is a useful demonstration of how united front work involves many agencies beyond UFWDs and other core united front bodies. At least 28 state and party agencies participated in the LSG’s activities, and it is likely that around a dozen of them are members of the LSG.

Finally, it will be important for future work to assess the growth and extent of this united front system to determine where CCP influence activities are being coordinated by the UFWD. For example, the precise relationship between Ministry of State Security operations and united front work is still unclear. Many governments are coming to recognise united front work as an important source of CCP influence and interference, and a greater understanding of the united front system would buttress their efforts to counter foreign interference.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Gerry Groot for feedback on a draft of this paper. Any mistakes, however, are Jichang Lulu’s.

Alex Joske is an analyst at the International Cyber Policy Centre, Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI).

Sinopsis is a collaborative project between the Institute of East Asian Studies at Charles University in Prague and the non-profit AcaMedia Institute. The **Oriental Institute** of the **Czech Academy of Sciences (CAS)**, a public research institution, co-organised the 2019 *Sinopsis* workshop with financial support from CAS Strategy AV21.

⁸⁷Alex Joske. “Reorganizing the United Front Work Department: New Structures for a New Era of Diaspora and Religious Affairs Work”. *China Brief* 19.9 (9th May 2019).