



CHINA IN CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE

Repurposing democracy

The European Parliament China Friendship Cluster

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Abstract

While the CCP's influence operations in Europe are vast and remain largely unscrutinised, some of the tactics, agencies and targets involved can be usefully summarised through case studies of organisations at the intersection of multiple aspects of such influence activity. An informal "China friendship group" in the European Parliament enjoys diverse links in China and Europe, warranting its use as such a case study. The group effectively functions as a proxy for CCP domestic and external propaganda: in China, the presentation of statements by its members helps engineer the perception of a global endorsement of the party-state's rule; abroad, it conveys support for CCP initiatives through credible voices. A systematic overview of the group and its activities is presented here for the first time, along with its links to a wider network of CCP-aligned organisations that are best analysed as constituting a cluster. The description of the cluster's interactions with its partner agencies across the CCP political-influence apparatus is accompanied by brief overviews of these agencies, highlighting their role in other aspects of influence work. In particular, the political cooption efforts reflected in the friendship group's activities overlap with those that seek to engineer a discourse landscape favourable to CCP policy. In such a China discourse environment, European decision-makers are not only exposed to local proxies faithfully transmitting CCP talking points, but also surrounded by an anodyne "neutrality" that legitimises such proxies and shields audiences from any critical scrutiny of CCP operations. A component of such discourse-engineering work relies on the cultivation of Europe's policy think tanks. Both the participation of one such think tank in interactions between group members and the CCP and the absence of study of the group and its links by Europe's leading policy research institutions illustrate aspects of the development of a CCP-friendly discourse landscape in Europe. Contrary to views of totalitarian power projection as primarily disruptive, this paper adds to a growing body of research that establishes the focus of CCP influence activity as repurposing democratic governance structures to serve as tools of extraterritorial influence, rather than destroy them.

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0 Introduction: The friendship group within CCP influence operations in Europe

Efforts to coopt foreign élites and shape discourse abroad are as important to the CCP's foreign policy as state-to-state diplomacy and other modes of international engagement familiar in non-Communist polities. These efforts rely on a range of tactics and agencies rooted in Leninist tradition, adapted to the post-Maoist integration of capitalism into the party-led system and the ongoing expansion of its global power.

Besides the political, business, academic, media and think-tank élites of individual countries, targets include multilateral institutions, notably the United Nations.⁰ In the European Parliament (EP), the activities of a **China friendship group** partnered with some of the main organs of the CCP's political influence apparatus demonstrate how entities embedded within democratic structures can help advance a central propaganda goal: engineering a perception of global support for the PRC's totalitarian political system.¹

The group's full membership seems to have never been publicly disclosed, making its claims to being the largest such group hard to verify. However, the fact that its former and current active members span the European political spectrum, as well as the high profile of its current chairman Jan Zahradil, the runner-up candidate for the EP presidency in 2019, make it a significant success for CCP influence work in Europe.

Although it remains largely unknown to its European constituency, the China friendship group often plays the role of a 'European' voice endorsing CCP policies in admiring terms, channelled through PRC propaganda organs. Such endorsements, typically taking the form of media appearances during trips to China, feature some of the group's Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) as well as its secretary-general Gai Lin, a parliament staffer who has concurrently held a minor appointment within the PRC foreign affairs system.

In addition to providing a conduit in the EP for the CCP's foreign-influence apparatus, the group and some of its members are part of a cluster of little-known organisations that act as intermediaries between the party-state and members of Europe's political, business and diplomatic élite, promoting 'exchanges' on the CCP's terms. It is this aspect of the group's activity, to the author's knowledge thus far unreported, that warrants its use as a case study on the likewise underresearched methods, agencies and targets of CCP influence work in Europe.

⁰Sinopsis & Jichang Lulu, "United Nations with Chinese characteristics: Elite capture and discourse management on a global scale", Sinopsis, 25th June 2018; Andréa Worden, "The CCP at the UN: Redefining development and rights", Sinopsis, 17th Mar. 2019; eadem, "The Human Rights Council Advisory Committee: A new tool in China's anti-human rights strategy", Sinopsis, 6th Aug. 2019.

¹The friendship group and its current chairman were discussed in "Český europoslanec na Hedvábné stezce", Sinopsis, 17th May 2019, to which the author contributed research.



0.1 Tactics, actors and targets of CCP influence operations

European decision-makers and analysts unacquainted with Chinese politics risk defaulting to familiar Western-inspired models of international relations. One symptom of such unpreparedness is the occasional disagreement between trade or diplomacy and security-focused areas of Western state structures, which may respectively stress state-level engagement with China and warn against espionage and other hostile activity. China's Leninist system, evolved from its Soviet model, engages with the world extending and adapting the tactics of control that the 'vanguard' employs within the territory it controls. These tactics indeed trace their origins to the Comintern, as do the main agencies specialised in their use. A narrow focus on trade, traditional diplomacy or intelligence fails to account for the bulk of CCP external work. Nourishing such unpreparedness in its counterparts thus becomes itself desirable: it leaves it to the CCP to choose the foreign 'partners' of much of its foreign-orientated apparatus, ignored by the target nations' policy communities.

The establishment of the friendship group illustrates the **tactics** of Leninist *foreign affairs* work:² by-passing state and EU structures, and even the EP's official PRC delegation, foreign "friends" were assembled into a CCP-entity most of whose known activity is managed by the party-state, turning elite figures of diverse political backgrounds into (conceivably unwitting) proxies of party propaganda. **United front**³ tactics permeate the PRC's engagement with such foreign groups. Those who can be coopted are rewarded with access and made to 'represent' their constituency before the CCP. Those who cannot are ostracised.⁴ **Propaganda**,⁵ naïvely understood as limited to the overt praise of the party, in fact refers to engineering a discourse landscape favourable to the advancement of party goals. Crucially, it involves managing a "neutral" space in order to normalise the party's proxies as no less legitimate than its critics; it is enhanced by the presence of "constructive" opponents legitimising propaganda platforms with acceptably critical views. The friendship group's value as effectively a propaganda proxy indeed rests on the credibility of some of its key figures as anti-Communists and the overall "neutrality" averaged from its internal political diversity.

While numerous CCP-aligned entities and platforms exist in Europe,⁶ the diversity of the China friendship group's interactions with the CCP-led system makes it a con-

²On the CCP's foreign affairs system (*xitong* 系统), cf. Anne-Marie Brady, *Making the foreign serve China: Managing foreigners in the People's Republic*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.

³Gerry Groot, "Managing transitions: the Chinese Communist Party's united front work, minor parties and groups, hegemony and corporatism", PhD thesis, University of Adelaide, 1997; idem, "The CCP's Grand United Front abroad", Sinopsis, 24th Sept. 2019; Alex Joske, forthcoming.

⁴The friendship group has been granted, e.g., access to Tibet, denied to the EP's official China delegation (a fact noted in "ICT's Vincent Metten speaks about EU Tibet policies at World Parliamentarians' Convention on Tibet", International Campaign for Tibet, 9th May 2019).

⁵Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2008; Mareike Ohlberg, "Creating a favorable international public opinion environment: External propaganda (*duiwai xuanchuan*) as a global concept with Chinese characteristics", PhD thesis, Universität Heidelberg, 2013.

⁶Didi Kirsten Tatlow, "Mapping China-in-Germany", Sinopsis, 2nd Oct. 2019; "Follow the New Silk Road: China's growing trail of think tanks and lobbyists in Europe", Corporate Europe, 8th Apr. 2019; "Comment la Chine influence Bruxelles : vers une sinisation de l'Europe ?", *Asie Pacifique News*, 7th Jan. 2019.



venient subject to demonstrate the European footprint of some major foreign influence **organs**. Unlike the typical, say, media “borrowed boat”⁷ or “Belt-and-Road” think tank⁸ linked to a specific CCP-controlled network, the friendship group maintains active “partnerships” with agencies across the party-state, evidenced in mutual visits, agreements and all-expenses-paid trips. Its most visible partners are in the CCP’s foreign affairs system, a Soviet-modelled array of entities that includes, beyond a state ministry analogous to its Western counterparts, party organs, as well as nominally “unofficial” organisations controlled by the party-state. The group is also officially a partner of united front organs, notably the United Front Work Department under the Central Committee. Its partnership with the propaganda system is manifested in its frequent interactions with state media; its founder and its secretary-general, each in his own language, celebrated it once with handwritten letters congratulating the party’s main newspaper, the *People’s Daily*. Beyond party-state structures, the group’s cooperation with private companies points to the role of the state and private business sector within China’s Leninist system.⁹ The methods and targets of PRC corporations’ activity abroad often overlap with those of agencies of the party-state.¹⁰

As politicians from across the political spectrum, the group’s current and past members are typical **targets** of CCP cooption: PRC propaganda’s presentation of them as endorsing CCP-aligned views helps engineer a perception, in China and abroad, of a growing global consensus on the legitimacy of the party’s totalitarian governance. The cluster of organisations linked to the group provides further examples of other desirable cooption targets: think-tankers, able to influence decision-making and media discourse; diplomats, just as valuable if they switch to think-tank, lobbying or consulting careers; as well as assorted lobbyists, intermediaries and staffers who can channel influence to decision-makers undetected by public scrutiny.

Cooption and discourse management, the key aspects of influence work, are not disjoint from more familiar forms of engagement, such as diplomacy and intelligence operations. State diplomacy works hand-in-hand with **localisation** work,¹¹ targeting subnational entities avoiding national-level exposure, as well as “people-to-people” interactions, through which the party-state engages with non-government targets abroad. Recent developments appear to reveal trends in the way intelligence work can

⁷Brady, *op. cit.*, ch. 7; Jichang Lulu, “China’s state media and the outsourcing of soft power”, CPI, 15th July 2015.

⁸Cf. Nadège Rolland, “Mapping the footprint of Belt and Road influence operations”, Sinopsis, 12th Aug. 2019.

⁹Brady has coined the concept of the “party-state-military-market nexus” to refer to the integration of business activity within party-led initiatives (Anne-Marie Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power*, CUP, 2017, pp. 114 sqq.).

¹⁰On the integration of business into party-state-guided activity, including influence operations, under Xi’s “Belt and Road” Initiative (BRI), cf. Nadège Rolland, *China’s Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative*, NBR, 23rd May 2017, *passim*; eadem, “Mapping the footprint...” For the cases of CEFC and Huawei, Martin Hála & Jichang Lulu, “Lost in translation: ‘Economic diplomacy’ with Chinese characteristics”, Sinopsis, 11th Mar. 2019; Filip Jirouš & Jichang Lulu, “Huawei in CEE: From ‘strategic partner’ to potential threat”, Sinopsis, 17th May 2019.

¹¹Jichang Lulu, “Confined discourse management and the PRC’s localised interactions in the Nordics”, Sinopsis, 22nd Oct. 2018.



use platforms set up through legal propaganda,¹² united front and business activity,¹³ while united front work can also provide an avenue for the party's instrumentalisation of organised crime.¹⁴ Nor are the tactics and targets of influence work carried out by civilian organs disjoint from those used by the People's Liberation Army.¹⁵

Understanding CCP influence, a prerequisite to any sound policy formulation, thus necessitates the analysis of the foreign activities of China's entire political system, rather than decontextualised aspects of the work of its more familiar agencies. Such analysis would be vitiated by an *a priori* compartmentalisation guided by, e.g., distinctions between "influence" and "interference", "benign" and "malign", or "legal" and "illegal". While relevant to target-country policy responses, such categories may not be useful in the actors' Leninist context. A narrow focus on the hostile leaves much influence work unaccounted for. Influence work as described in this study does not seek to disrupt democratic structures, but to *repurpose* them as tools facilitating the advancement of the policies of a totalitarian, expansionist régime.¹⁶

¹²The Ministry of State Security's (MSS) alleged use of the Confucius Institute (CI) network, a component of the propaganda system, as cover for recruitment would provide an example. Renmin University professor Song Xinling 宋新宁, a former director of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel CI and the Brussels Academy for China and European Studies who also taught at the Egmont Institute and the College of Europe, was banned from the Schengen space for eight years in 2019, suspected of involvement in espionage (Bruno Struys, "Waarom de Chinese directeur van het Confuciusinstituut aan de VUB ons land niet meer binnen mag", *De Morgen* [29th Oct. 2019]; Geoff Wade, "Tweet", 29th Oct. 2019; Jichang Lulu, "Tweet", 2nd Nov. 2019).

¹³For a defector's recent allegations on the overlap between intelligence and united front work abroad, cf. Nick McKenzie, Grace Tobin & Paul Sakkal, "The moment a Chinese spy decided to defect to Australia", *The Age* (23rd Nov. 2019); eadem, "Let him stay: Influential Liberal MP urges asylum for Chinese defector", *The Age* (23rd Nov. 2019); eadem, "China tried to plant its candidate in Federal Parliament, authorities believe", *Sydney Morning Herald* (24th Nov. 2019); 夏紫雲, "爆炸性新聞: 一位中共情報人員出走澳洲", 澳洲生活网, 24th Nov. 2019; Alex Joske, "Defections are messy and we may never know the full story", *Sydney Morning Herald* (25th Nov. 2019).

¹⁴Emmanuel Jourda, "Le Parti communiste chinois, le Front Uni et les triades: patriotisme, business et crime organisé", *Sociétés politiques comparées* 47 (2019). Of possible relevance is the case of Tom Zhou (周九明), who fled investigation for organised crime activity in China and was rehabilitated as a leader of united front groups in Australia (Nick McKenzie, Nick Toscano & Grace Tobin, "Crown's unsavoury business links: how Australia's casino got tied up with criminals", *The Age* [28th July 2019]).

¹⁵For a study of PLA liaison work ("political warfare") noting its links to civilian intelligence, propaganda, united front and foreign affairs work, see Mark Stokes & Russell Hsiao, "The People's Liberation Army General Political Department: Political Warfare with Chinese Characteristics", Project 2049, 14th Oct. 2013. On the role of CEFC, a company linked to a PLA platform, in elite capture in the Czech Republic, cf., e.g., Hála & Lulu, *op. cit.*

¹⁶For a presentation for a policy audience of the totalitarian continuity linking the CCP to its Soviet predecessor, cf. John Garnaut, "Engineers of the Soul: what Australia needs to know about ideology in Xi Jinping's China", via Sinocism, 2017.



0.2 Docile neutrality: Preserving knowledge asymmetry as a propaganda goal

The friendship group has received little attention beyond media stories focused on its founder and former chairman.¹⁷ Its party-state links and activities seem to have remained unreported until recently.¹⁸ Recent investigative reports have exposed aspects of the CCP's influence in Brussels, notably various coopted European organisations and the nature of their events, in at least one case mentioning the group and its secretary-general.¹⁹ However, the depth such contributions to the study of CCP influence can plumb is often limited by an insufficient use of Chinese-language sources, indispensable for understanding any China-related affairs.

The paucity of serious study of CCP influence in Europe, exemplified by the lack of interest in the friendship group, in turn illustrates the value of cooption work as a basis from which to engineer discourse, in this case to avoid scrutiny.

European research institutions and think tanks rarely conduct original research on the CCP's influence activities.²⁰ Their institutional culture often makes them natural targets for influence work. Rigorous research on controversial topics is, indeed, unlikely to flourish in an environment that incentivises all-day conferences, self-promotion, collegial flattery, VIP-selfie portraiture, bullet-point thinking and infographic *kitsch*. In it, access-hungry junket-goers thrive; so does a well-resourced totalitarian party-state to which paid trips, conferences, publications, appointments, "centres" and "networks" cost little compared to the long-term benefits brought by a docile analyst class.

What we have taken to calling the *weaponisation of mediocrity*²¹ helps bring about two desirable propaganda outcomes identified above: the ubiquity of overt party proxies and the drowning of scrutiny by a "neutral" establishment eager to avoid "polarisation" and anxious to partake in every willing benefactor's junket. PRC organs are easily seen to favour exchanges with think tanks in both categories,²² a phenomenon

¹⁷E.g., Leigh Baldwin & Peter Geoghegan, "Senior Tory revealed as Huawei cheerleader in Brussels", OpenDemocracy, 2nd May 2019. A noteworthy exception is a recent media report that refers to the group founder's cooperation with some of the organs discussed in this paper, notably his trips to China leading Friendship Group delegations, in the context of CCP influence operations in Europe (Peter Martin & Alan Crawford, "China's Influence Digs Deep Into Europe's Political Landscape", Bloomberg, 3rd Apr. 2019).

¹⁸"Český europoslanec na Hedvábné stezce".

¹⁹"Follow the New Silk Road"; "Comment la Chine influence Bruxelles".

²⁰Exposing CCP influence activities in the Czech Republic has been the main focus of the Prague-based Sinopsis project since 2016 (sinopsis.cz, passim). On Germany, cf. Tatlow, *op. cit.* Study of the CCP's influence in Europe can, however, benefit from knowledge accrued elsewhere, notably in Australia and New Zealand. The first systematic study of Xi-era CCP foreign influence operations, using New Zealand as a case study, was Anne-Marie Brady, "Magic Weapons: China's political influence activities under Xi Jinping", Wilson Center, Sept. 2017. John Garnaut pioneered the investigation of the CCP's influence in Australia, eventually leading to a policy response and an emerging tradition of research and investigative journalism. Geoff Wade's *micro-blogging corpus* (2014-) amounts to the largest public database on global CCP influence and related activity, with special focus on Southeast Asia and Australasia.

²¹The term, far from being pejorative, alludes to an aspiration to the "golden mean" (Hor., *Carm.* 2.10; Jichang Lulu, "Twitter thread", 14th Feb. 2019). On the *misère des études arctiques*, a similar phenomenon affecting analysis of China and the Arctic, see idem, "Confined discourse management".

²²An overview of think-tank cooption in Europe lies beyond the scope of this footnote. The propaganda-proxy category is straightforwardly illustrated: a class of examples is furnished by BRI-themed think-tank networks (Rolland, *op. cit.*; cf. also 2.3.1); those promoting the CCP's concept of "human rights" constitute another (Worden, *op. cit.*; Jichang Lulu, "Twitter thread", 16th June 2017). The normalisation of propaganda through "neutral" platforms is a less obvious phenomenon. Its analysis might profit from an examination of the activities of the European Think-Tank Network on China, a mainstream group that includes crit-



not restricted to Europe.²³ The behaviours incentivised at European international-relations think tanks, many of which enjoy privileged access to government structures, give their countries a systematic vulnerability the PRC is effectively exploiting. The cultivation of (often early-career) think-tankers and academics, nourishing the dominance of a CCP-friendly China-expert community, overlaps with that of new generations of politicians and officials.²⁴ Media organisations willing to sell space to entities linked to the party-state further reinforce the work of cooption and propaganda organs.²⁵

As we have argued elsewhere,²⁶ the resulting *knowledge asymmetry* between European and Chinese decision makers offers the CCP advantages over its interlocutors that help make united front and propaganda work more efficient than traditional diplomatic, economic or military means to pursue foreign policy goals. The friendship group provides evidence of the CCP's effective exploitation of this asymmetry: statements by its members suggest they lack awareness of central aspects of the group's activities, while their advocacy of CCP-aligned policies is made possible by a clear lack of basic knowledge about China's politics, history and foreign relations.

ical voices alongside promoters of CCP initiatives. Populated by high-profile institutions, its membership overlaps with that of the Silk Road Think-Tank Network (SiLKS) via the Elcano Institute (Rolland, *op. cit.*; "European Think-tank Network on China", MERICS). Authors of its reports include, e.g., a think-tanker who has promoted the Belt and Road initiative through, i.a., a propaganda organ; the head of a "New Silk Road Programme", apt to echo propaganda talking points on the CCP's geopolitical initiatives; the founder of the coorganiser of a "16+1"-themed "Understanding China Contest", who once suggested the PRC should establish a network of professorships in Europe in order to "propagate China and OBOR itself" so as to eventually "shape the mind-set and ideas of future politicians" (Frans-Paul van der Putten et al., eds., *Europe and China's New Silk Roads*, 2016; Tim Nicholas Rühlig et al., eds., *Political values in Europe-China relations*, 2018; Frans-Paul van der Putten, "Opinion: The Netherlands should take active approach towards Belt and Road Initiative", CGTN, 8th Feb. 2018; "刘作奎接受澎湃新闻新闻采访谈一带一路", 澎湃新闻新闻 via CASS, 4th June 2018; Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova, "The concept of The North in Baltics' 16+1 communication", China-CEE Institute; "Understanding China 2017: An international contest for CEE university students", CEECAS, 2017; "Hungarian Scholar Tamas Matura on China-CEE cooperation", CASS, 20th July 2018; cf. 任鹏, "加强沟通交流推进'16+1'合作——访匈牙利中东欧亚洲研究中心主席马都亚", 光明日报, 25th Nov. 2015).

²³The somewhat analogous Australian discourse landscape features, e.g., an "optimistic" think tank set up with a United Front-linked donation, as well as purportedly "neutral" voices that normalise CCP-linked voices as "independent", taking local politicians on "study trips" to meet United Front and MSS-linked personages (James Leibold, "The Australia-China Relations Institute doesn't belong at UTS", *The Conversation*, 4th June 2017; "Second China Matters Study Tour", *China Matters*, Sept. 2019).

²⁴In 2013, a forum for young Central and Eastern European "leaders" organised by the CCP International Liaison Department featured politicians as well as one of the think-tankers in the ETNC group above, who praised Xi's Chinese Dream as "an important political vision" he hoped would "come true" ("*Young Political Leaders Convene*", *Beijing Review* [29th Oct. 2013]; cf. 王金雪, "中国与中东欧青年政治家论坛在京开幕", 中国共产党新闻网, 23rd Oct. 2013).

²⁵*Euractiv*, a media network focused on EU institutions, publishes CCP propaganda as "promoted content", as well as other content "supported" by the China Mission to the EU ("*Chinese ambassador asks EU for evidence that Huawei is a 'security threat'*", *Euractiv*, 19th Sept. 2019; "*The rule of law must be upheld for Hong Kong's prosperity and stability*", *Euractiv*, 25th July 2019). The European edition of *Politico*, a US media outlet that has signed a content-sharing agreement with Jack Ma's *South China Morning Post*, has published Huawei-sponsored content, including coverage of the EP election under the motto "Vote for Huawei" (Ken Hu, "Digital Estonia shows the way —as does Huawei", *Politico.eu*, 24th May 2018; Florian Eder, "POLITICO Brussels Playbook, presented by Huawei —Vote for 5G: Munich last stretch —Berlusconi's new Brussels life —Taking the PiS", *Politico.eu*, 25th May 2019; for a seemingly non-sponsored item, cf. Gai Lin, "EU must prioritise China summit", *Politico.eu*, 10th Dec. 2008). For "cooperation" relaying CCP propaganda through German mainstream media, see Hinnerk Feldwisch-Drentrup, "Chinesische Propaganda mit freundlicher Unterstützung des NDR", *Übermedien* (11th Oct. 2019).

²⁶Lulu, "Confined discourse management".



0.3 Structure of the paper

Using Chinese, European and other sources, this paper outlines the active links between the cluster of organisations built around the friendship group and some of the CCP's main tools of global political influence, with examples of the group's liaison and propaganda activities.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 1 briefly describes the friendship group's history and lists as many current and former active members as it has been possible to identify. While the group has been at least cursorily mentioned in previous work, other organisations in the "cluster" surrounding it have not; a brief analysis of their connections yields new light on the group's significance. Section 2 uses the group's partnerships to present an overview of some major PRC organs engaged in political influence in Europe. A brief description of each entity is accompanied by examples of its interactions with group MEPs. Section 3 develops the interaction with one category of the group's partners, the CCP propaganda system, through an overview of media appearances by the group's members and its secretary-general. The **final section** points to the existence of other similar entities embedded in European parliamentary structures to conclude that the CCP has demonstrated strong capabilities to repurpose intrinsic aspects of democratic governance as instruments of its own policy.

Except for the group itself, the organisations in this cluster are not described in previous literature known to the author. While several entities are seemingly discussed here for the first time, none is described in detail. Instead, aspects of the activity of the friendship cluster are used to demonstrate patterns of CCP influence. Each of these organisations, especially the lesser-known ones, deserves further study. Further research on the individual politicians and others involved in these organisations might also lead to new insights on the targets and methods of CCP propaganda and cooption work in Europe.

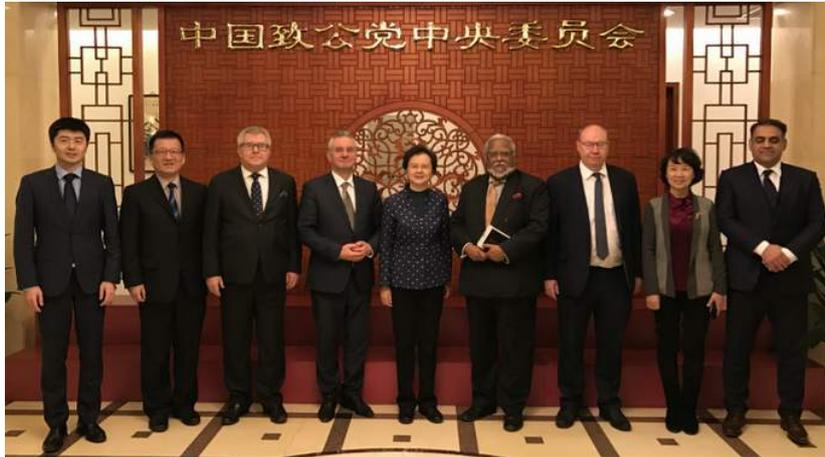
This paper makes no allegation that any individuals mentioned have engaged in illegal or otherwise improper activity. Nor does it suggest that their collaboration with the foreign influence apparatus of a totalitarian power is compatible with the interests of their constituents. The task of evaluating the activities described from political or other perspectives is left to the interested reader.



1 The friendship cluster

The friendship group's significance within CCP influence in Europe should be assessed together with that of a group of organisations linked to it. We refer to the set of these organisations as the *friendship cluster*. While the group's own membership appears to be inflated and its influence on EP politics is hardly noticeable, it is connected to a larger category of targets of CCP elite capture work, which includes serving and retired diplomats, former politicians, staffers and lobbyists.

1.1 The Friendship Group



EUCFG members including secretary-general Gai, then chairman Deva and current chairman Zahradič received by Zhi Gong Party vice chairwoman Yan Xiaopei 闫小培.²⁷

The European Parliament EU-China Friendship Group (EUCFG, 欧洲议会欧中友好小组) is an unofficial grouping of MEPs partnered with CCP organs, formed between 2005 and late 2006 on the initiative of its secretary-general, Gai Lin 盖琳.²⁸ The group was formally reestablished twice following European elections, in October 2014 and October 2019.²⁹

Friendship groups are unofficial organisations without statutes; some may not even have a public presence.³⁰ In 2018, a letter by two MEPs to EP president Tajani reportedly demanded stricter rules for friendship groups, expressing concerns over possible conflicts of interest. Basic details about many seem unknown, and some may

²⁷Image source: “闫小培会见欧洲议会欧中友好小组代表团一行”, 致公党, 22nd Nov. 2018.

²⁸In his own words, Gai proposed the idea in 2005 (“欧洲议会里的中国面孔”, CRI, 19th Oct. 2014). The group was formally established in December 2006 (“欧洲议会里的中国 80 后: 出书讲述中欧 4 年事”, 中新社 via 人民网, 30th July 2010; 张杰, “欧洲议会欧中友好小组主席: 曾当面驳斥热比娅”, 环球网 via EUCFA; “欧洲议会欧中友好小组: 欧中应加强交流”, 中国日报网, 4th Jan. 2007).

²⁹鞠辉, “欧洲议会新一届欧中友好小组成立”, 中国青年报, 11th Oct. 2014; 张朋辉, “为中欧关系增添正能量——记第九届欧洲议会欧中友好小组成立”, 人民日报, 31st Oct. 2019.

³⁰Christian D. de Fouloy, “Parliament friendship groups”, AALEP, 18th Feb. 2016.



even lack a website.³¹ The EUCFG shares a website with its sister friendship association (see 1.2 below), not updated since 2016, under the previous parliament. An earlier association website, last updated in 2013, is now offline.³²



EUCFG members in 2016.³³

1.1.1 Membership

Although the EUCFG has claimed to be the largest such grouping, with 46 or 48 MEPs,³⁴ its full membership is not even known to some Brussels insiders.³⁵ No rule seems to require MEPs to declare membership in friendship groups; a list of MEP CVs provided in response to a freedom-of-information request and published by an NGO only mentions two MEPs as members of the China Friendship Group between 2009 and 2014, thus omitting other MEPs known to have belonged to the group during that period.³⁶

While no attempt has been made to compile an exhaustive list of members, Chinese-language coverage of friendship group activities consistently features only a few participants. The claimed membership figures are thus likely inflated, unless they refer to purely formal membership.

Integrating Chinese and European-language sources yields the following list of current and past MEPs whose membership or active involvement can be documented.³⁷

³¹Nikolaj Nielsen, “MEP friendship groups offer ‘backdoor’ for pariah regimes”, EU Observer, 20th Apr. 2018; Inés Ayala Sender & David McAllister, “Friendship groups”, EU Observer (attachment to a letter to Antonio Tajani).

³²“欧中友好协会”.

³³Image source: 盖琳, “欧洲议会欧中友好小组访问北京、西藏”, EUCFA, 20th Oct. 2016.

³⁴“欧中友好协会成为欧洲议会最大小组”, EUCFA, 12th Oct. 2016; “欧盟中国联合创新中心 (EUCJIC)”, EUCJIC; 张朋辉, *op. cit.*

³⁵Brussels sources, including an MEP assistant, via Kateřina Procházková et al., pers. comms., 2019; cf. Peter Dahlin, “Tweet”, 16th Nov. 2019.

³⁶*CVs of MEPs - 7th Legislature*, Ask the EU, 2016.

³⁷For each individual, their EP political group, country and national political affiliation as listed on europarl.europa.eu pages are provided in brackets. Abbreviations: D-CN: EP delegation for relations with the PRC; ECR: European Conservatives and Reformists; ACRE: Alliance of Conservatives and Reformists in Europe; S&D: Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats; ID: Identity and Democracy; Renew: Renew Europe; ALDE: Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe; GUE-NGL: European United Left–Nordic Green Left; EFDD: Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy; EPP: European People’s Party;



- **Nirj Deva** (ECR, UK, Conservative), founder and chair until 2019, then elevated to the honorary chairmanship.³⁸
- **Jan Zahradil** (ECR, ODS, Czech Republic; 2019 ACRE *Spitzenkandidat*, ECR EP president candidate, current International Trade Committee vice chair), member appointed to succeed Deva before the election, then formally anointed.³⁹
- **Derek Vaughan** (S&D, UK, Labour), vice chair, later honorary vice chair.⁴⁰
- **István Ujhelyi** (S&D, Hungary, MSZP; D-CN member, then substitute), vice chair.⁴¹
- **Maximilian Krah** (ID, Germany, AfD), vice chair.⁴²
- **Doru-Claudian Frunzuliță** (S&D, Romania, UNPR then PSD), former vice chair.⁴³
- **Miroslav Poche** (S&D, ČSSD, Czech Republic; former D-CN member), former vice chair.⁴⁴
- **Yana Toom** (ALDE / Renew, Estonia, Centre Party), former, conceivably current member.⁴⁵
- **Liadh Ní Riada** (GUE-NGL, Ireland, Sinn Féin; former D-CN member), former member.⁴⁶
- **Claudia Țapardel** (S&D, Romania, PSD), former member.⁴⁷
- **Eleni Theocharous** Ελένη Θεοχάρους (EPP then ECR, Cyprus, Solidarity Movement (Κίνημα Αλληλεγγύη)), former member.⁴⁸
- **Geoffrey Van Orden** (ECR, UK, Conservative; former Executive Secretary of the International Military Staff at NATO Headquarters), former member.⁴⁹

ODS: Občanská demokratická strana; ČSSD: Česká strana sociálně demokratická; MSZP: Magyar Szocialista Párt; UNPR: Uniunea Națională pentru Progresul României; PSD: Partidul Social Democrat; LDD: Lijst Decker / Libertair, Direct, Democratisch; FvD: Forum voor Democratie; ÖVP: Österreichische Volkspartei; AfD: Alternative für Deutschland; CDU: Christlich Demokratische Union; SDP: Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands.

³⁸Nirj Deva, “Declaration of members’ financial interests”, European Parliament, 5th Feb. 2019; 张朋辉, *op. cit.*

³⁹“传递华人声音助力中欧民间外交欧华社团联合会代表与欧盟议员对话”, 青田网, 3rd Apr. 2019; Robert Břešťan, “Je to špiónománie, odmitá europoslanec Zahradil vazby na „vlivové agentury komunistické Číny“”, Hlídací pes, 17th Apr. 2019; 张朋辉, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰Derek Vaughan, “Declaration of members’ financial interests”, European Parliament, 25th Sept. 2013; 鞠辉, “中国酒文化走进欧洲议会”, 中青在线 via China Moutai Belgium, 28th June 2018; 张朋辉, *op. cit.*

⁴¹Procházková et al. et al., *op. cit.*; 张朋辉, *op. cit.*

⁴²Idem, “为中欧关系增添正能量——记第九届欧洲议会欧中友好小组成立”.

⁴³“中国脱贫成就亮相布鲁塞尔欧洲议会”, EUCJIC, 11th Apr. 2019.

⁴⁴“林怡副会长会见欧洲议会议员”, CPAFFC, 26th Aug. 2018; “欧洲议会议员: 当事国谈判协商才是解决之道”, 新华网, 18th July 2016.

⁴⁵盖琳, *op. cit.*; Yana Toom, “Deklaratsioon parlamendiliikmete osalemise kohta kutse alusel kolmandate isikute korraldatud üritustel”, European Parliament, 8th Sept. 2016. On Toom’s views on BRI and the “apolitical” character of Chinese projects, “Яна Тоом — о том, как в программе Соловьева обсудили новую инициативу Китая”, Yana Toom, 14th May 2017; Воскресный вечер с Владимиром Соловьевым от 14.05.17, Россия 24, Youtube, 25:10 - 27:30.

⁴⁶盖琳, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷“Declaration of Members’ attendance pursuant to an invitation at events organised by third parties”, European Parliament, 20th Jan. 2015.

⁴⁸盖琳, *op. cit.*

⁴⁹Ibid.; “Memorandum from Geoffrey Van Orden MEP”, UK Parliament, 30th Oct. 2007.



While isolated mentions of other MEPs point to their possible nominal membership in the friendship group, we have found no evidence of their participation in the group's activities. **Derk Jan Eppink** (ECR, Belgium, LDD; former D-CN substitute) appears to have been featured as a “member” on the old website of the friendship association; it is unclear if that implied he was a member of the group.⁵⁰ A 2014 *People's Daily* story on the friendship group refers in approving terms to a China-themed exhibition Eppink organised in 2011 at the EP, without stating he was a member.⁵¹ Other state-media reports from the period feature favourable coverage of Eppink as a “China hand”, noting his study of “the Chinese language and China's history and culture”.⁵² **Slavi Binev** (non-attached then EFDD, Bulgaria, various) was a member of an “Intergroup for Friendship with China” at some point between 2009 and 2014.⁵³ A Sri Lankan media report on the 2006 launch of the group claims **Hans-Gert Pöttering** (EPP, Germany, CDU; then about to become EP president) “expressed interest” in joining and that **Othmar Karas** (EPP, Austria, ÖVP; later EP vice president) attended the event.⁵⁴ **Jo Leinen** (S&D, Germany, SDP; former D-CN chair) and **Hans-Olaf Henkel** (ECR, Germany, AfD until 2015; former D-CN substitute) attended the 2014 relaunch.⁵⁵



The group relaunched. October 2014.⁵⁶

According to a parliamentary source, some MEPs were counted as group members solely because they had attended the 2014 reception to relaunch the group; out of about a dozen attendees, at least some were not aware of the nature of the group.⁵⁷ The statement is consistent with the relatively small documented active membership and suggests most of the 46 or 48 members might have been simply shanghaied into the group, without such nominal membership being considered of any consequence.

⁵⁰“欧中友好协会”.

⁵¹“深化中欧合作 增进互利共赢”, 人民日报, 21st Mar. 2014.

⁵²“I like China!” “I know that pandas come from Sichuan, a south-western province. Its capital is Chengdu, a very big city” (张杰, “我是你们的朋友”——专访欧洲议会议员 **Derk Jan Eppink**”, 人民网, 19th Feb. 2014). Eppink became an MEP again in 2019 (ECR, Netherlands, FvD) but is not mentioned as a friendship group member in the sources consulted.

⁵³*CVs of MEPs - 7th Legislature*, p. 65.

⁵⁴Sunil C. Perera, “European Parliament launches the EU-China Friendship Group”, *The Island Online* (13th Jan. 2007).

⁵⁵鞠辉, “欧洲议会新一届欧中友好小组成立”.

⁵⁶Image source: “欧洲议会组建新一届欧中友好小组议员来自 20 国跨越 7 党派”, 中新社, via 欧洲时报, 9th Oct. 2014.

⁵⁷Didi Kirsten Tatlow, notes from interview with EP source, pers. comm., 2019.



The group's key figure is its initiator and secretary-general, Gai Lin. Despite his key role, he has received little media attention.⁵⁸



Secretary-general Gai and EUCFA chairman Vaughan toast with Maotai in June 2018.⁵⁹

Gai's contact with EP politics began in 2004, when Deva took a liking to him after witnessing his drunken antics in a Brussels bar. Gai was then a student.⁶⁰ One year later, Deva made him his assistant.⁶¹ According to Gai's own account, he came up with the idea of setting up the China Friendship Group after discovering some MEPs were "anti-Chinese" because they "did not understand China". Since there were Tibet and Taiwan friendship groups, one could just as well be set up for China.⁶² Gai went on to assist other MEPs,⁶³ at least five according to one source.⁶⁴ He is currently Zahradil's assistant.⁶⁵ Gai's assistant role has seemingly directly influenced the content of EP debate on China: in 2009, Deva's rhetorical questions following a speech by the Uyghur activist Rebiya Kadeer, reproduced by PRC propaganda organs, were reportedly formulated on Gai's advice.⁶⁶

⁵⁸For an exception, see "Comment la Chine influence Bruxelles".

⁵⁹Image source: 鞠辉, "中国酒文化走进欧洲议会".

⁶⁰"欧洲议会里的中国面孔".

⁶¹"欧洲议会里的中国 80 后: 出书讲述中欧 4 年事".

⁶²"欧洲议会里的中国面孔".

⁶³"欧洲议会欧中友好小组", EUCFA.

⁶⁴Diplomatic source, via Kateřina Procházková, pers. comm., 2019.

⁶⁵Břešťan, *op. cit.*; "Asistenti", European Parliament.

⁶⁶Qu Bing (曲兵), "European Parliament's New Powers and the Implications for China", *GR: EEN Working Paper* 11 (2011); "热比娅在欧洲议会鼓吹“疆独”遭批驳", 新华网, 2nd Sept. 2009; "Separatist speech falls flat in Europe", *China Daily* (3rd Sept. 2009).



1.2 The Friendship Association

The China Friendship Group has a sister organisation, the **European Parliament EU-China Friendship Association (EUCFA, 欧洲议会欧中友好协会)**. Its last known chair is **Derek Vaughan**. **Daniel Hannan**, a former British Conservative MEP, was described as its deputy president in an earlier source. Its administrative staff has included Hannan's then-advisor **James Holland** and overlapped with that of the friendship group. Deva and Gai have held honorary posts.⁶⁷

According to a blog seemingly created by the association and active in 2011,⁶⁸

The EUCFA draws on an active network of several hundred collaborators across the EU and China, including European Institutions, Chinese Administration, as well as leading NGOs and think-tanks. Our network comprises a rich cross-section of disciplines and sectors, officials and civil society players, policy makers and policy shapers, scholars and diplomats, entrepreneurs and journalists from many nationalities.



Members on display on the EUCFA's old site: Eppink, Deva, Vaughan and Gai (not displayed).⁶⁹

The association's two websites were seemingly shared with the group.⁷⁰ A Youtube channel active in 2011 contains videos of English-language interviews and debates hosted by Gai, with MEP assistants and association staff as guests.⁷¹

⁶⁷“About”, EUCFA; “Bicheng Bill Zhang”, Facebook; “国际关系学院欧中友好协会讲座暨欧洲留学论坛成功举办”, UIBE, 28th Nov. 2013; “Twitter bio”, James Holland; [钟发东], “陕西省妇联与欧中友好协建立战略合作女企业家看好欧洲市场”, Sina Blog, 26th Nov. 2012.

⁶⁸“About”.

⁶⁹Image source: “欧中友好协会”.

⁷⁰“欧中友好协会”; “政府组织”, EUCFA, 15th Oct. 2016.

⁷¹EUCFA, Youtube.



1.3 The Joint Innovation Centre

A further organisation linked to the friendship group is the **EU-China Joint Innovation Centre (EUCJIC, 欧盟中国联合创新中心)**. It describes itself as a Belgian NGO established by the EUCFG, retired Belgian diplomat Patrick Nijs and other unnamed entities.⁷²



Patrick Nijs in November 2019.⁷³

Nijs, in his own words, “opted for early retirement when posted as Ambassador to China” and turned his focus to the “most challenging issue of the forthcoming years and decades”: “the integration of the world into China, and the integration of China into the world”.⁷⁴ Media sources have continued to describe Nijs as an honorary ambassador for life.⁷⁵

Even before quitting the diplomatic service, Nijs had begun to assume the role of a friendly foreign voice in CCP propaganda materials. PRC state-media profiles eulogised Nijs and his wife.⁷⁶ Once retired and elevated to an honorary post, Nijs began more overtly echoing propaganda talking points. While China’s development since

⁷²“欧盟中国联合创新中心 (EUCJIC)”.

⁷³Image source: 杨奔非, “比利时前驻华大使帕特里克·奈斯: 在成都, 非常适合拥抱全球合作”, 每日经济新闻, 14th Nov. 2019.

⁷⁴“EU-China Joint Innovation –A New Example of International Innovation Cooperation”, Patrick-Nijs.org, 25th Oct. 2018.

⁷⁵“Patrick Nijs”, Academia.edu; Frédéric Rohart, “Il y a vraiment un problème dans notre façon d’attirer les investissements chinois”, *L’Écho* (7th Apr. 2013); 余蕊均 & 程晓玲, ““一带一路” 商协会对话与合作年会今日在蓉开幕”, 每日经济新闻, 14th Nov. 2019.

⁷⁶A *China Daily* panegyric noted his ability to “look at [Chinese] calligraphy and get into its meaning”, even though he did not speak the language after more than a decade in China (Mike Peters, “A diplomat of character”, *China Daily* [4th June 2011]). One year later, the same publication noted he could “converse in standard Chinese with taxi drivers” in Beijing (Zhao Yanrong, “The art of understanding”, *China Daily* [4th May 2012]). Nijs traces his interest in China back to his university years and the Maoist sympathies common in the years around 1968 (“Les solutions viendront de la Chine”, *Le Quotidien du Peuple en ligne*, 8th July 2013). An account of a visit to a company says Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping were once Nijs’s



the 1980s is “unique in human history”,⁷⁷ “under the leadership of Chairman Xi Jinping, the CCP and the Chinese government dare to confront challenges”.⁷⁸ As a “global facilitator”, he has been received a number of corporate appointments, notably as a non-executive director of Nagelmackers Bank after its acquisition by Anbang 安邦 Group.⁷⁹



Gai, Nijs and Vaughan received by Zhi Gong Party vice chairwoman Yan Xiaopei.⁸⁰

The active link between the friendship group and EUCJIC is illustrated by the case of the EU Diplomat Towns (欧盟外交官小镇) project, initiated by EUCJIC.⁸¹ The “diplomat towns” are described as tourist resorts in China for EU diplomats. In November 2017, Nijs, Gai and Vaughan, as well as seemingly also Toom⁸² attended a ceremony

idols (“比利时驻华大使奈斯莅临净道喜迎“一带一路”国际合作高峰论坛召开！”，北京净道科技有限公司, 5th Dec. 2018). Special attention was devoted to his wife Gu Jing 顾菁 (Murata Kosei), whom he met in Japan before deciding to move to China. Although Gu was born in China to a Japanese mother, media reports stress her “Chineseness” (张卫华, “比利时大使夫人眼中的武汉”, 湖北日报 via 人民网, 29th June 2012; 李星, “大使夫人顾菁: 整个欧洲都是我的舞台”, TA 生活家; “新任比利时驻华大使的中国情缘”, 中国访谈, 2009).

⁷⁷“Les solutions viendront de la Chine”.

⁷⁸“中国通过改革开放探索出了一条独特的发展道路” (风从东方来——国际人士亲历中国改革开放), 人民日报, 16th Oct. 2018.

⁷⁹“Patrick Nijs”; cf. “Anbang Insurance Group koopt Delta Lloyd Bank België”, Bank Nagelmackers, 22nd July 2015; Pieter Suy, “Belgische banken lonken naar klanten Nagelmackers”, *De Tijd* (6th June 2019); “独家: 安邦集团掌门人吴小晖被带走”, 财经 via 中国禁闻网, 13th June 2017; Michael Forsythe & Alexandra Stevenson, “China Detains Chairman of Anbang, Which Sought Ties With Jared Kushner”, *The New York Times* (13th June 2017); “A Chinese Mystery: Who Owns a Firm on a Global Shopping Spree?”, *The New York Times* (1st Sept. 2016); “China Regulator Seizes Anbang, Chairman Faces Fraud Prosecution”, Bloomberg, 22nd Feb. 2018.

⁸⁰Image source: “闫小培副主席会见欧洲议会议员沃恩一行”, 广州致公党, 29th Aug. 2018.

⁸¹The presence of EUCJIC deputy director Peter Huang (Huang Chun 黄淳) at a meeting between EUCFG member Poche and CPAFFC officials in 2018 provides further evidence of overlap between the activities of the two organisations (“欧洲议会议员: 当事国谈判协商才是解决之道”; cf. “By yourself you go faster, together you go further”, PatrickNijs.org).

⁸²The transcription used for the name of one of the European attendees in one account of the event seems to refer to Toom, but she does not appear in the accompanying pictures (李德金, “揭开中欧“一带一路”友好合作的新篇章欧盟外交官小镇落地中国云南”, 中国报业, 3rd Nov. 2017).



to announce the location of the first such Diplomat Town, in Xishuangbanna 西双版纳, Yunnan. Vaughan conveyed the friendship group's "full support" for "an important cooperation project along the Belt and Road".⁸³ One "Count d'Ursel", likely the Belgian entrepreneur Thibault d'Ursel, "an active board member of the Club of Rome EU chapter", also attended.⁸⁴



Vaughan and Nijs at the unveiling of a Diplomat Town project.⁸⁵

1.4 The Commission

Nijs is also the top-ranked European cadre at the **Europe-China Culture and Economy Commission** or **Europe-China Commission (EUCNC, 欧盟中国经济文化委员会)**, a GONGO registered in Belgium with addresses in Beijing, Henan and Chongqing, under the "guidance" of PRC state organs, notably the **Ministry of Public Security (MPS)**.⁸⁶ EUCNC leaders organise or participate in business, academic and cultural events, often promoting Xi's "Belt and Road" initiative.⁸⁷ EUCNC is chaired by **Xie Jianzhong 谢建中**, a member of the board of the **WRSA Entrepreneur Alliance (WRSAEA, 欧美同学会企业家联谊会)**.⁸⁸ The Alliance is affiliated with the **Western Returned Scholars Association (WRSA, 欧盟同学会)**, a united front organisation that notably liaises with Chinese students and scholars abroad.⁸⁹

⁸³"欧盟外交官小镇落地中国云南将为促进中欧各领域合作搭建平台", CRI, 3rd Nov. 2017; 李德金, *op. cit.* Four such towns are planned to be built by 2020, including, besides the one in Yunnan, one in Zheng'an 正安 County, Zunyi, Guizhou ("遵义·正安欧盟外交官小镇 PPP 项目咨询服务采购公告", 中国政府采购网, 17th Jan. 2018; "正安欧盟外交官小镇为什么令人如此期待?", 微正安 via Sohu, 12th June 2018).

⁸⁴李德金, *op. cit.*; cf. "Companies vs Climate Change: The B2B climate solutions event", 2018.

⁸⁵Image source: 李德金, *op. cit.*

⁸⁶"欧盟中国委员会", EUCNC; "欧盟中国委员会重庆代表处成立将设国际金融科技创新中心", 重庆日报 via 凤凰网, 20th Dec. 2018; 王延辉, "欧盟中国经济文化委员会代表处落户河南系全国首个", 大河网 via 中国日报 (2nd Aug. 2017); "Registered Foreign NGO Representative Offices Interactive Map and Filterable Table", China File. On the MPS's role in influence activities abroad, cf. Geoff Wade, "The China Association for Friendship 中国友谊促进会: Its nature and roles", Sinopsis, forthcoming.

⁸⁷"深圳市一带一路投资促进会陈炫昊主席受邀率团出席秒个房颠覆传统 B2C 订房模式启动资本引擎开启全球扩张仪式", 一带一路全球网, 29th Jan. 2019; "意大利-中国国际合作圆桌论坛在京举行", 创新网 via Sohu, 13th Sept. 2017; "40 years of cooperation between Portugal and China", Instituto Diplomático; "Italy and China: The relations between the two countries according to «One Belt One Road»", Università Cattolica, 2017.

⁸⁸"访欧盟中国经济文化委员会秘书长兼欧盟中国基金管理委员会主席谢建中", 开封网, 26th Oct. 2016; "理事会", WRSAEA.

⁸⁹"本会简介", WRSAEA; "中国共产党统一战线工作条例(试行)", 人民网, 23rd Sept. 2015, cf. Jichang Lulu, "Antipodica", 26th Feb. 2018; Joske, forthcoming.



EUCNC's Beijing address in the Qijiayuan Diplomatic Compound (欧盟中国经济文化委员会) has also been used by the **Club des châtelains chinois de France**, a castle-themed company led by Nathalie Geslin-Yu. EUCNC is listed as coorganiser of one of the Club's events.⁹⁰



Logo of the Club des châtelains chinois de France.⁹¹

This “private business and culture club” offers its “influence network” to “Chinese leaders who wish to develop their business networks in France and are sensitive to the French cultural heritage”.⁹² An event echoing the CCP’s messaging on “green development”, organised by the Club des Châtelains and the Bal de Paris, was promoted on the EUCNC website. The event “aim[ed] to demonstrate Chinese economic development policy of insisting on respecting the ecological environment and pa[id] tribute to Chinese grand initiative of introducing nature into the city center”. The “honor committee” featured various aristocrats and “environmental protection champions”.⁹³

⁹⁰“2016年6月17日—24日城堡, 狩猎, 马术”, Club des châtelains, 2016.

⁹¹Image source: *ibid*.

⁹²“Le comité exécutif”, Club des châtelains; “Notre histoire”, Club des châtelains; “Elbeuf déjà sous l’œil de la Chine !”, Le Journal d’Elbeuf via Actu.fr, 28th Nov. 2018; “Rejoindre le Club”, Club des châtelains.

⁹³“GreenChina” The 18th Paris Ball Invitation”, EUCNC.



2 The friendship cluster's links to the CCP's political influence machine

The friendship group and association count among their official “partners” some of the CCP's main agencies engaged in political influence abroad. The partnerships listed on their website include three of the four CCP central departments: International Liaison, United Front Work and Organisation.⁹⁴ The propaganda system, supervised by the Central Propaganda Department, is also represented, through a partnership with the *People's Daily* and Xinhua news agency.⁹⁵ In addition to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “people's diplomacy” organisations are also listed. One of them plays a central role in the group's interactions with the party-state, at times offering all-expenses-paid trips to China for Group MEPs. Other partners include party-state organs at different levels of administration, universities, as well as private and state-owned companies, notably one in the defence industry.⁹⁶ A few of these partnerships (e.g., the one with the United Front Work Department) are omitted in the English-language version of the website.⁹⁷

While some of these partnerships may only be nominal, others have been active in the last few years. As this section and the next demonstrate, exchanges with party-controlled agencies constitute a major activity of the friendship group, indeed the only significant one it has been possible to identify.

⁹⁴The Organisation Department is responsible for *nomenklatura* appointments. Its partnership with the friendship group and association might be related to the organisation of training activities in Europe for Chinese officials. On cadre training abroad, cf., e.g., 王苗苗, “官员出国培训掀热潮高价学真经?”, 人民网, 31st July 2006; 汪东亚 & 于艳, “内地官员海外培训全记录”, 凤凰周刊, 8th Sept. 2011; 朱珉廷, “官员海外培训: 学了什么?”, 解放日报 via 人民网, 25th Nov. 2013; Hong Liu & Ting-Yan Wang, “China and the “Singapore Model”: Perspectives from Mid-level Cadres and Implications for Transnational Knowledge Transfer”, *The China Quarterly* (Dec. 2018); David Shambaugh, “Training China's Political Elite: The Party School System”, *The China Quarterly* 196 (Dec. 2008); 陈力川, “中国公务员培训制度的研究报告”, Institut de Recherche et Débat sur la Gouvernance; Chen Lichuan, “Étude transversale sur les formations de fonctionnaires en Chine”, Institut de Recherche et Débat sur la Gouvernance; “2016 省委组织部德国培训班”, 江苏汇鸿国际集团, 17th May 2016.

⁹⁵On the CCP propaganda system, cf. Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship*.

⁹⁶On China Great Wall Industry Corporation (CGWIC, 中国长城工业集团有限公司), the PRC's commercial satellite and space launch services, under US sanctions in the 1990s and then again between 2004 and 2008 for allegedly proliferating missile technology to Iran, cf. “China and Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction and Missiles: Policy Issues”, Shirley A. Kan, 26th May 2011, pp. 20, 60, 68 sqq.; Mark A. Stokes & Dean Cheng, “China's Evolving Space Capabilities: Implications for U.S. Interests”, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 26th Apr. 2012, pp. 17 sqq.; Christopher Balding, “ZTE's Ties to China's Military-Industrial Complex Run Deep”, *Foreign Policy* (19th July 2018).

⁹⁷The following are the partnerships listed on the EUCFG/EUCFA website, last updated in 2017 (entities marked with an asterisk are also mentioned in the English version). (Later mergers and other changes involving these entities are not indicated.) CCP Organisation Department; CCP International Liaison Department*; CCP United Front Work Department; Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (national* and Liaoning); Overseas Chinese Affairs Office*; Sichuan Overseas Exchange Association; Shanghai People's Congress Foreign Affairs Committee; Ministry of Foreign Affairs*; China Mission to the EU*; Sichuan Foreign Affairs Office; Xi'an Tourism Bureau; Xinhua*; *People's Daily*; Central New Film Group*; State Council Development Research Council*; Ministry of Commerce*; Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*; Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (national*, Liaoning and Chongqing); China Council for the Promotion of International Trade*; China Chamber of International Commerce*; China Public Diplomacy Association; China Institute for Research and Development; Zhaoqing Association for Science and Technology*; Liaoning Pacific Economic Cooperation Council; Xi'an Fanyi University*; Xi'an Peihua University; University of International Business and Economics*; China Great Wall Industry Corporation*; Beijing Electronics Holding Co., Ltd.*; HNA Group*; Grand China Air* (“政府组织”; “友好团体”, EUCFA; “企业代表”, EUCFA; “Government”, EUCFA, 2nd Mar. 2017; “Association”, EUCFA, 3rd Mar. 2017; “Enterprise”, EUCFA).



The organs with which the friendship group collaborates engage in political influence operations on a European and global scale. This section focuses on four of these agencies, illustrating the group's activities with examples of exchanges drawn from mostly Chinese-language sources, in each case accompanied by a brief sketch of the agency's institutional position and main roles. These sketches summarise the relevant sections of a longer treatment provided in a separate piece.⁹⁸

The group's collaboration with the propaganda system has been singled out for a more detailed overview in section 3.

2.1 CPAFFC: All-expenses-paid *družba*



EUPFG delegation at the CPAFFC, November 2018.⁹⁹

Among the group's partners across the PRC political system, the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC, 中国人民对外友好协会) is particularly prominent in two respects. Firstly, the group's secretary-general holds a province-level appointment with the Association. Secondly, the Association has covered travel expenses for some of the group's members.

CPAFFC will cover all the relevant expenses for your delegation during your visit in China

Sincerely,

Song Jingwu
Vice President

The Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries

A typical CPAFFC invitation letter, in this case to Deva ahead of the EUPFG November 2018 trip.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸Jichang Lulu & Sinopsis, "The CCP's influence in the Czech Republic", Sinopsis, forthcoming.

⁹⁹Image source: "宋敬武副会长会见欧洲议会欧中友好小组代表团", CPAFFC, 20th Nov. 2018.

¹⁰⁰Image source: CPAFFC, "Invitation", EP, 25th Oct. 2018.



2.1.1 Friendship from Stalin to Xi

The CPAFFC is the main “people’s diplomacy” organisation within the CCP foreign-affairs system.¹⁰¹ It has been used as a tool to advance CCP policy by-passing state channels since its Soviet-modelled origins.¹⁰² Today, it primarily targets foreign sub-national governments, political figures and NGOs. Although its official status as a “people’s organisation” (人民团体) might mislead some into associating it with civil society groups elsewhere,¹⁰³ the CPAFFC is an organ of the party-state, led by a “princeling”, staffed by foreign-affairs cadre¹⁰⁴ and managed (*daiguan* 代管) by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁰⁵ People’s diplomacy (民间外交), as a component of

¹⁰¹This section is a summary of the corresponding one in Lulu & Sinopsis, *op. cit.*, whither the reader is referred for full references. On the CCP foreign affairs system and its history, as well as that of the CPAFFC, its predecessors, and other people’s organisations, see Brady, *Making the foreign serve China*, *passim*.

¹⁰²The post-Soviet Russian state claims a continuity between the people’s diplomacy system that inspired the Chinese one and contemporary organisations, notably *Rosstrudnichestvo* (Россотрудничество, “Краткая Историческая справка: ВОКС – ССОД – РАМСИР – Росзарубежцентр – Россотрудничество”, *Литературные известия* [2010]; Lulu & Sinopsis, *op. cit.*).

¹⁰³CPAFFC-linked “friendship associations” abroad sometimes use the term “NGO”, with various qualifications, to refer to the Chinese association (“中国人民对外友好协会来访”, Czech-Slovak Chinese Chamber; “Návštěva „The Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries“, Czech-Slovak Chinese Chamber, 2018; Duncan France, “Youxie – The Chinese Govt. dept. that arranges friendly relationships with other countries”, New Zealand China Friendship Society, 8th May 2014). The deceptive use of foreign unfamiliarity with its nature is evidenced in the CPAFFC’s “NGO general consultative status” with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), part of a broader CCP strategy to use GONGOS (government-organised NGOs) to pursue its political agenda at the UN (“E/C.2/2014/2/Add.3”, UN ECOSOC, 7th Nov. 2013; “Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries”, ESANGO; cf. Worden, “The CCP at the UN: Redefining development and rights”). Worden (*pers. comm.*, 2019) has suggested accounting for the party’s (in addition to the state’s) role in Chinese GONGOS with the alternative abbreviation PONGO (previously used in a different context in Patricia M. Thornton, “The Advance of the Party: Transformation or Takeover of Urban Grassroots Society?”, *The China Quarterly* 213 (Mar. 2013)).

¹⁰⁴The CPAFFC’s party secretary and chairwoman, Li Xiaolin 李小林, is the daughter of party elder Li Xiannian 李先念 and wife of retired PLA Air Force general Liu Yazhou (cf. “李先念同志生平”, 中国共产党新闻网; “刘亚洲上将: 我空军再次面临紧急关头”, 中国军网, 6th June 2014; “66岁刘亚洲上将跑了一场马拉松”, 上观新闻, 4th July 2018). The children of two other CCP grandees, Chen Yi 陈毅 and Chen Yun 陈云, have also held CPAFFC posts. Previous CPAFFC chairs include former vice ministers of foreign affairs and five diplomats involved in negotiations with the US before and after the American recognition of the PRC, including the first three ambassadors. The careers of CPAFFC cadre typically include diplomatic posts (Lulu & Sinopsis, *op. cit.*).

¹⁰⁵This *daiguan* relationship, whereby one organ manages another not officially subordinate to it, was stated in a 1981 State Council General Office circular, reportedly in response to the ILD’s attempts to restore its historical power over the CPAFFC’s predecessors, and has been restated in later documents (“国务院办公厅关于中国人民对外友好协会的体制和领导关系的通知”, via 东莞市外办, 17th Oct. 1981; 吴兴唐, “乔石: 我在中联部打下了很好的基础对它永远感恩”, 中国新闻周刊 20 [2012], via 凤凰网; “国务院办公厅关于印发外交部职能配置、内设机构和人员编制方案的通知”, 国办发 [1994] 2号, 4th Jan. 2094). Former CPAFFC vice chairman Liu Gengyin 刘庚寅 has referred to the 1981 circular as amounting to a declaration that the CPAFFC is directly under the State Council, a view also found, e.g., in an account of a 2017 visit to an Ulaanbaatar foundation established by the Bank of China (刘庚寅, “怀念王炳南会长”, 金秋 2 (2019); “中国人民对外友好协会林怡副会长到访基金会”, 中蒙文化教育暨社会发展基金会, 13th Oct. 2017; on the Chinese-Mongolian Culture and Education Foundation (中蒙文化教育基金会, Монгол-Хятадын хэл соёл боловсролын сан), cf. Jichang Lulu, “PRC religious policy and relations with Buddhism in Mongolia under Xi Jinping”, unpublished manuscript, July 2018; idem, “Global Religion and the United Front: The Case of Mongolia”, *China Brief* 12 (10th July 2018); “2014年10月15日, 中蒙文化教育基金会举行捐赠仪式”, 中蒙文化教育暨社会发展基金会, 1st Jan. 2015; Б. Баясах, “Bank of China: Монголын зах зээл дэх байр суурь”, *News.mn*, 16th June 2015). In the case of such mass organisations as the CPAFFC, the MFA’s *daiguan* role must mean “political and thought leadership” and guidance on policy and working principles, rather than management of day-to-day activities (“中共中央办公厅、国务院办公厅关于《21个群众团体机构改革意见》”, 中办发 [2000]31号, via 四川法学网, 2000). At lower levels of administration, however, the integration between friendship associations and foreign affairs offices is often stronger, with more explicit guidance roles for the local foreign affairs commission (Lulu & Sinopsis, *op. cit.*).



the CCP's "total diplomacy" (总体外交), is guided by party-state policy.¹⁰⁶ Far from autonomous, the "unofficial diplomacy" practised by such organs as the CPAFFC is official diplomacy's "assistant": according to an old adage, "the private / unofficial advances first, using the unofficial to promote the official" (民间先行, 以民促官).¹⁰⁷ The association indeed helps promote CCP policy goals, such as Xi's "Belt and Road" geopolitical initiative or the CCP "One-China Principle".¹⁰⁸

The CPAFFC's predecessors, in a broad sense, include most of the main people's organisations established during the first years of the PRC, as part of two Moscow-centred networks: Soviet friendship associations and the Soviet-sponsored peace movement. In a strict sense, the direct predecessor is officially considered to be the Chinese People's Association for Foreign Culture (CPAFC, 中国人民对外文化协会), established in 1954 and initially under the leadership of a committee led by the head of the CCP International Liaison Department. The association, by then under today's name, was gradually reestablished beginning in 1969.¹⁰⁹

The CPAFFC handles sister-city ("friendship-city") programmes on behalf of the PRC government and organises various sub-national level forums as one of the channels through which the CCP foreign-affairs system interacts with local governments, bypassing the exposure and scrutiny risk incurred in state-level relations.¹¹⁰ The political character the CCP attributes to sister-city arrangements has been made explicit in the case of Prague. The city's 2016 sisterhood agreement with Beijing devoted one of its clauses to the PRC's territorial ambitions over Taiwan, a concession portrayed at the time as conducive to such benefits as the loan of a panda to the Prague zoo.¹¹¹ The next administration's wish to renegotiate the deal to remove a clause irrelevant to city-level exchanges was met with a PRC boycott of exchanges with entities with 'Prague' in their name, such as the Prague Philharmonic Choir.¹¹² Prague's sisterhood with Beijing was eventually terminated, followed by negotiations to upgrade its partnership with Taipei.¹¹³

The CPAFFC's work with subnational and non-government entities abroad creates channels for the CCP's political influence. The Arbeitsgemeinschaft Deutscher China-Gesellschaften (ADCG), the main German node of the CPAFFC's global network, has been noted for its links to German politics, notably through former MP Johannes Pflug.¹¹⁴ In the Czech Republic, the CPAFFC's main counterpart has been led by key

¹⁰⁶陈昊苏, "民间外交论", CPAFFC, 2004; Brady, *op. cit.*, pp. 199 sqq.; 焦莹, "习近平会见全国友协第十届全国理事会会议与会代表", 中广网, 15th May 2012; 王楚光, "我们的朋友遍天下——评介新中国民间外交开拓者楚图南先生", CPAFFC, 2008.

¹⁰⁷陈昊苏, *op. cit.*; 刘庚寅, "王稼祥与中共中央国际活动指导委员会", 百年潮, 2012.

¹⁰⁸"宋敬武委员: 讲好中国故事, 向世界推广"一带一路"合作共赢的发展理念", CRI, 6th Mar. 2019; "李小林会长会见巴拿马国民大会主席阿夫雷戈", CPAFFC, 20th June 2019.

¹⁰⁹For details, cf. Lulu & Sinopsis, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁰Brady, *op. cit.*, p. 8; John Dotson, "China Explores Economic Outreach to U.S. States Via United Front Entities", *China Brief* (26th June 2019); Lulu & Sinopsis, *op. cit.* Sister-city relations can be used to "expand China's economic agenda separate to a given nation's foreign policy" (Brady, "Magic Weapons", pp. 9 sq.).

¹¹¹"Praha chce z dohody s Pekingem odstranit deklarace o politice jedné Číny", *Novinky.cz*, 14th Jan. 2019; "Praha podepíše sesterskou smlouvu s Pekingem. Uzná v ní jednotu Číny", *IDnes.cz*, 25th Feb. 2016; Vladimír Klímsa, "Praha podepíše dohodu s Pekingem. Je to mezinárodní hanba, kritizuje Kalousek", *Česká televize*, 25th Feb. 2016; Martin Hála, "Peking Praze: Tady nám to podškrábni...", *Hospodářské noviny*, 26th Feb. 2016; Sinopsis, "Panda na špicí čínské diplomacie", *Hlídací pes*, 3rd May 2017.

¹¹²"Čína ruší kvůli výrokům primátora Hřiba vystoupení umělců spjatých s Prahou", *IDnes.cz*, 28th Apr. 2019.

¹¹³Prokop Vodrážka, "Místo Pekingu smlouva se vzpurným ostrovem. Tchaj-pej kývla na užší partnerství s Prahou", *Deník N* (12th Nov. 2019).

¹¹⁴Tatlow, "Mapping China-in-Germany".



political and corporate lobbyists involved in the country's CCP-friendly policy turn after 2014, and has even been appointed to run a "Centre for Belt-and-Road Cooperation" at the Ministry of Trade and Industry.¹¹⁵

2.1.2 The Friendship Group and the CPAFFC

In addition to his secretary-general post in Europe, Gai has received an appointment as a member of the 'overseas council' of the Liaoning province PAFFC.¹¹⁶ Although the post may not carry specific responsibilities, the overlap amounts to evidence of the direct connection between the group and the CCP's foreign affairs system.



Secretary-general Gai receives the English version of a Xi Jinping book from Liaoning People's Association for Friendship for Foreign Countries secretary-general Sun Delan 孙德兰 in 2015. Said Association bestowed an appointment on him during that visit.¹¹⁷

CPAFFC has organised China visits by friendship group delegations, often covering the visitors' travel expenses. In August 2016, a Friendship Group delegation that included Gai, Deva, Frunzuličá, Van Orden, Theocharous, Ní Riada and Toom visited Beijing and Tibet.¹¹⁸ A CPAFFC invitation promised the Association would "cover all the relevant expenses for 5 days for the official delegation", with a programme that offered, besides meetings with senior party and state officials, visits to tourist attractions.¹¹⁹ Group MEPs met, among others, Champa Phuntsog རྩམས་པ་ལྷན་རྒྱུ་ལྷན་པོ་ 向巴平措, then vice chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, who was the chairman of the Tibet Autonomous Region at the time of the 2008 Lhasa uprising.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵Olga Lomová, Jichang Lulu & Martin Hála, "Bilateral dialogue with the PRC at both ends: Czech-Chinese 'friendship' extends to social credit", 28th July 2019; Lulu & Sinopsis, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁶"岳福洪会长率省友协友好代表团出访比利时、德国", 辽宁友协, 16th July 2015.

¹¹⁷Image source: *ibid.*

¹¹⁸盖琳, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁹Toom, *op. cit.*

¹²⁰"向巴平措会见欧洲议会欧中友好小组代表团", 中国新闻网, 23rd Aug. 2016.



The Tibet trip was neither the first nor the last time the CPAFFC funded Group MEPs' China trips. Expenses for at least some members were covered, e.g., in 2015¹²¹ as well as in November 2018.¹²² Not all members have been consistently transparent about the PRC's largesse: Deva only declared expenses incurred during a 2014 China trip had been covered after he received a warning for having failed to do so.¹²³

Group members, in their capacities as such, have also been received by the CPAFFC on other occasions: e.g., Poche, then Group vice chairman, met CPAFFC vice chairman Lin Yi 林怡 in August 2018.¹²⁴

2.2 CCPIT: Commerce and people's diplomacy

While less active, the cluster's partnership with CCPIT is mentioned here on account of that organ's key, if underresearched, role in political influence activity.

2.2.1 International trade and cooption work

The China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT, 中国国际贸易促进委员会)¹²⁵ emerged to deal with the trade component of the young PRC's relations with the non-Communist world.¹²⁶ A trade-orientated "people's diplomacy" organ, the CCPIT is presented abroad as being formally outside party-state structures,¹²⁷ but is functionally related to the finance and economics system, linked to the Ministry of Commerce.¹²⁸ The CCPIT's activities are carried out on behalf of the government and under its guidance.¹²⁹ From its beginnings, the political aspect of trade as conducted by the CCPIT has been explicit.¹³⁰ A 1990 State Council General Office circular presented the newly formed CCPIT as charged with "external" work under a form of "division of labour" between chambers of commerce in China and abroad,

¹²¹"Declarations of Members' attendance pursuant to an invitation at events organised by third parties", European Parliament, 21st Jan. 2015.

¹²²Martin & Crawford, *op. cit.* After his participation in the latter trip was made public, Zahrnil stated that he had covered his own expenses (Břešťan, *op. cit.*).

¹²³Baldwin & Geoghegan, *op. cit.*

¹²⁴"林怡副会长会见欧洲议会议员".

¹²⁵Originally translated as 'Committee' (Joan Robinson, *Reports from China, 1953-76*, Anglo-Chinese Educational Institute, 1977, p. 7; "The United Front in Communist China: A technique for controlling, mobilizing, and utilizing non-Communist masses", CIA, May 1957, p. 63; Wen Liang, "China's Foreign Trade: Its Growth and Some Basic Principles", *Peking Review* 38 [22nd Sept. 1959]).

¹²⁶Brady, *Making the foreign serve China*, p. 90.

¹²⁷One of the CCPIT's most senior figures in its early years, the noted economist Ji Chaoding 冀朝鼎, was only after his death officially recognised to have been a CCP member since 1935 ("参与设计国民党财政方案的中共地下党员冀朝鼎", 人民政协报, via 中国共产党新闻网, 17th Sept. 2009; "中国国际贸易促进委员会的成立", 商务部). In a contemporary example of successful deception, the CCPIT is listed as an NGO among the accredited observers to the World Intellectual Property Organisation ("Accredited Observers", WIPO).

¹²⁸The current CCPIT chair and party secretary, Gao Yan 高燕, was vice minister of commerce until her appointment; the vice-ministerial post was held concurrently with a CCPIT vice chairmanship ("中国贸促会迎来一名老领导: 商务部副部长高燕", 澎湃新闻, 7th Sept. 2018; "高燕", 贸促会). Her predecessor Jiang Zengwei 姜增伟 had likewise been vice minister of commerce ("会长、党组书记姜增伟", 贸促会). Jiang was preceded by Wan Jifei 万季飞, son of party elder Wan Li 万里 ("万季飞", 政协).

¹²⁹"中国国际贸易促进委员会章程", 贸促会, 1st Feb. 2015.

¹³⁰Kenneth Wang, "Foreign Trade Policy and Apparatus of the People's Republic of China", *Law and Contemporary Problems* (1973); David Shambaugh, "The Soviet Influence on China's Worldview", *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 27 (1992).



with the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce (ACFIC), a component of the united front system, limited to an “internal” role.¹³¹

Like other people’s diplomacy organs, the CCPIT played a role in the young PRC’s relations with the capitalist world in the absence of formal diplomatic relations.¹³² It began, like the CPAFFC, as the Chinese reflection of a Soviet geopolitical initiative. In April 1952, the Moscow Economic Conference, initiated by the Soviet-controlled World Peace Council, called for the establishment of a Committee for the Promotion of International Trade (CPIT).¹³³ CCPIT was established one month later by the Chinese delegates to the conference.¹³⁴ In June, the PRC asked the Soviet All-Union Chamber of Commerce to organise an exhibition in China with goals including “the Chinese people’s even deeper acquaintance with the great successes of the economic construction of the Soviet Union” as well as accelerating the CCPIT’s development.¹³⁵ While the Soviet-initiated CPIT, later known as the International Committee for the Promotion of Trade, was shut down in 1957,¹³⁶ the Chinese version evolved into an important people’s diplomacy organ and eventually acquired its own network of partner entities abroad. In recent times, it has gained access to “bourgeois” networks of chambers of commerce, likely an unattainable achievement for its Soviet parent. CCPIT also controls the **China Chamber of International Commerce (CCOIC, 中国国际商会)**, the Chinese partner of the International Chamber of Commerce and its World Chambers Federation.¹³⁷

In addition to its traditional tasks organising, e.g., trade fairs, CCPIT’s trade portfolio and ostensibly unofficial status have made it useful for ‘localised’ work as well.¹³⁸ The role of CCPIT-linked organisations in contacts at the subnational level, notably promoting Xi’s ‘Belt and Road’ geopolitical initiative, has been documented in Australia,

¹³¹“国务院办公厅关于不要擅自组建总商会和使用总商会名称问题的通知”，国办函〔1990〕72号，4th Nov. 1990. On the activity of chambers of commerce as part of united front work, cf. Gerry Groot, “Understanding the Role of Chambers of Commerce and Industry Associations in United Front Work”, *China Brief* 11 (19th June 2018). On CCPIT and international united front thinking, 中国国际贸易促进委员会, “贸易先行 以民促官——周恩来指导贸促会对外工作的思想和实践”, in 周恩来百周年纪念论文集, via 人民网; “The United Front in Communist China”; Martin Hála & Jichang Lulu, “The CCP’s model of social control goes global”, Sinopsis, 20th Dec. 2018.

¹³²“历史沿革”, 贸促会, 13th Aug. 2015. On the CCPIT’s role in exchanges from Japan, beginning in the early years of the People’s Republic, cf. Casper Wits, “The Japan hands: China’s people’s diplomacy towards Japan, 1949-1972”, PhD thesis, Doshisha University, Nov. 2015, pp. 46 sqq., 80; for its participation in talks in the 1970s, as both countries discussed establishing diplomatic relations, Yoshihide Soeya [添谷芳秀], “US-Japan-China Relations And The Opening To China: The 1970s”, National Security Archive, U.S.-Japan Project Working Paper No. 5, 1996.

¹³³М.А. Липкин, “Московское экономическое совещание 1952 г.: тактический маневр или новая стратегическая линия СССР?”, *Вестник РУДН. Серия История России* 2 (2010); “411.042 - Internationaal Comité ter Bevordering van de Handel”, BVD, via Stichting Argus, July 1957; Alec Cairncross, “The Moscow economic conference”, *Soviet Studies* 2 (1952).

¹³⁴“中国国际贸易促进委员会的成立”, Gene T. Hsiao, *The Foreign Trade of China: Policy, Law, and Practice*, ANU Press, 1977, pp. 88 sqq.

¹³⁵“Nota МИД КНР в посольство СССР в КНР”, via Исторические Материалы, 23rd June 1952.

¹³⁶“411.042 - Internationaal Comité ter Bevordering van de Handel”.

¹³⁷“中国国际商会章程”, 中国国际商会, 13th July 2018; “国际商会简介”, 贸促会, 13th July 2014; cf. “ICC and China Chamber of International Commerce sign agreement to intensify cooperation”, ICC, 30th Apr. 2012; Rolland, *op. cit.*

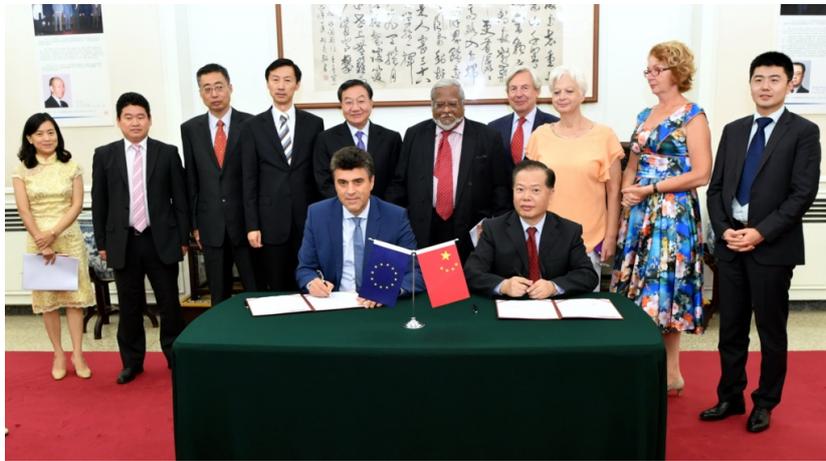
¹³⁸On localisation, see Lulu, “Confined discourse management”.



New Zealand¹³⁹ and the United States.¹⁴⁰ A transnational version of CCPIT's network of partner chambers also exists as a GONGO for which China has sought consultative status at the UN: the Silk Road Chamber of International Commerce (SRCIC, 丝绸之路国际总商会), whose chairman has been a CCOIC vice chairman.¹⁴¹

2.2.2 The Friendship Association and the CCPIT

The EP Friendship cluster's stated "partnership" with the CCPIT has also been active.



CCOIC-EUCFA agreement, 2016.¹⁴²

In 2016, during a meeting with CCPIT officials led by chairman and party secretary Jiang Zengwei 姜增伟, Frunzulică signed a memorandum of understanding on "cooperation" between the Friendship Association and the China Chamber of International Commerce.¹⁴³

¹³⁹The involvement of a CCPIT-supported organisation in the Australian state of Victoria's recent accession to Xi's "Belt and Road", which the federal government has declined to join, gives the organisation part of the credit for that success of localisation work (Geoff Wade, "Tweet", 4th Nov. 2018; Clive Hamilton, "Andrews government fails to see strategic risks in Chinese investment", *The Age* [7th Nov. 2018]). For more on CCPIT partners in Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere, cf. Geoff Wade, "Tweets".

¹⁴⁰The China General Chamber of Commerce-USA (CGCC) has been involved in localisation work, notably a "U.S.-China Governors Collaboration Summit" in partnership with the CPAFFC (Dotson, *op. cit.*). CGCC names "CCPIT US" (likely the CCPIT's local representative office) among its "member companies and partners" (*2018 annual report and 2019 strategic plan*, CGCC, p. 44). An example of this partnership is the CCPIT's presence among the CGCC leadership: Zhao Zhenge 赵振格, head of the CCPIT representative office, is a CGCC executive board director; Chen Dawei 陈大伟 of the CCPIT Sino-America Business Information Center (中国贸促会华美商务信息中心) sits on the CGCC Los Angeles board (*2018 annual report*, CGCC LA, p. 6; cf. "洛杉矶中资企业协会会员名册", 中国驻洛杉矶总领事馆). Other examples are provided by various joint events involving the CGCC and the CCPIT ("CGCC and AmCham Shanghai Co-Hosted Reception in Washington D.C.", CGCC, 21st Sept. 2016; "美国中国总商会与中国贸促会在纽约举行研讨会", CGCC, 17th Oct. 2019).

¹⁴¹Worden, *op. cit.*; Rolland, *op. cit.*

¹⁴²Image source: "姜增伟会长会见欧洲议会欧中友好小组德瓦主席代表团", CCPIT, 23rd Aug. 2016.

¹⁴³*Ibid.*



2.3 ILD: A New Comintern for the New Era

Interactions between the cluster’s members and the CCP’s main political-party liaison organ provide examples of two central aspects of influence operations in Europe: efforts to include the entire political spectrum, notably the right, into an informal network endorsing its policies, and attempts to coopt foreign think tanks.

2.3.1 Liaison work and its expansion into discourse engineering

The **International Liaison Department (ILD, 中央对外联络部)** is one of the four main departments under the CCP Central Committee.¹⁴⁴ Although the ILD was established in its current form in 1951 in order to alleviate the burden of the United Front Work Department, which had taken over responsibility for external liaison work in 1948, the CCP had predecessors for it going back to the early years of the Comintern.¹⁴⁵ The ILD, like analogous organs of other Leninist parties, once mostly conducted diplomacy with fellow Communist régimes as well as relations with Communist parties in non-Communist states.¹⁴⁶ Its purview has since been expanded to embrace the full global political spectrum, becoming the centre of an informal “New Comintern” that includes an increasing number of ‘bourgeois’ parties and individual politicians.¹⁴⁷

The ILD conducts “Party-to-party” contacts that normalise the CCP as a peer for foreign audiences, profiting from their interlocutors’ lack of familiarity with the Chinese political system and the distinction between party and state organs. At the same time, Party-to-party work presents the Chinese public with an image of a global consensus that recognises the adequacy of the CCP’s political model. Most easily observed as mutual visits, these contacts culminate in some cases in international meetings where global politicians are portrayed as endorsing the CCP and its leadership. Examples have included the 2017 “Meeting of Political Parties from China and CEE” in Bucharest,¹⁴⁸ a rehearsal of sorts for the global Beijing “dialogue” in December, during and after which various foreign politicians endorsed aspects of CCP policy, from Xi’s

¹⁴⁴This subsection summarises the corresponding one in Lulu & Sinopsis, *op. cit.* On the ILD, cf. David Shambaugh, “China’s ‘Quiet Diplomacy’: The International Department of the Chinese Communist Party”, *China: An International Journal* 1 (Mar. 2007); “Vstane nová Kominternu”, Sinopsis, 10th Dec. 2017; Martin Hála, “Tichý host na čínském gala”, Sinopsis, 21st Nov. 2016; David Gitter & Julia Bowie, “The Chinese Communist Party International Department: Advancing ‘One China’ Behind the Scenes”, *Global Taiwan Brief* 1 (21st Sept. 2016); David Gitter, “The CCP Plants the China Dream Abroad”, *The Diplomat*, 11th Dec. 2017; Martin Hála & Jichang Lulu, “A new Comintern for the New Era: The CCP International Department from Bucharest to Reykjavík”, Sinopsis, 16th Aug. 2018; Julia G. Bowie, “International liaison work for the new era: Generating global consensus?”, *Party Watch Annual Report 2018*, ed. by David Gitter & Julia G. Bowie, Center for Advanced China Research, 18th Oct. 2018; Rolland, *op. cit.*

¹⁴⁵Shambaugh, *op. cit.*; “1951 年的这一天，中共中央对外联络部成立”，中国共产党新闻网, 24th Sept. 2019.

¹⁴⁶Besides the CCP/ILD, surviving Leninist international departments include the International Department (국제부國際部) under the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea. For recent exchanges involving WPK ID head Ri Su-yong 李洙堉, cf., e.g., “조선로동당중앙위원회국제부가중국예술단을위하여환영연회마련”, *로동신문*, via *우리민족끼리*, 14th Apr. 2018; “宋涛同朝鲜劳动党中央副委员长李洙堉会谈”, ILD, Nov. 2017; “조선로동당중앙위원회국제부가중국예술단을위하여환영연회마련”. For its extinct European analogues cf., e.g., Wanda Jarzabek, “Partia a polityka zagraniczna PRL. Uwagi na temat powiązań między Wydziałem Zagranicznym KC PZPR, MSZ i innymi podmiotami”, *PZPR jako machina władzy*, ed. by Dariusz Stola & Krzysztof Persak, 2012.

¹⁴⁷Cf., e.g., meetings with representatives of major Icelandic parties in Hála & Lulu, *op. cit.*

¹⁴⁸Martin Hála, “Česko-čínská družba jako tichá pošta”, Sinopsis, 17th July 2017.



“full and rigorous governance” of the party to his Xinjiang network of concentration camps being a “domestic matter”.¹⁴⁹

Beyond party politics, the ILD seeks political influence through the cultivation of think tanks and academics, allowing it to engineer a favourable discourse landscape surrounding foreign decision-makers, marginalise critical scrutiny and prevent the emergence of undesirable policy responses. The ILD’s in-house think tank, the China Center for Contemporary World Studies (CCCWS, 中联部当代世界研究中心), plays a central role in the creation and management of CCP-friendly think-tank and academic networks, notably the Silk Road Think-Tank Alliance (SRTA, 一带一路 [国际] 智库合作联盟).¹⁵⁰ While the ILD is overtly involved in some aspects of CCP think-tank cooption work, it also cooperates with a variety of organisations more palatable to foreign partners, such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS, 中国社会科学院).¹⁵¹ CASS leads, in particular, the China-CEEC Think Tank Network (中国—中东欧国家智库交流与合作网络, also known as “17 [formerly 16] + 1 Think-Tank Network”). That network’s link to the ILD-led SRTA, corresponding to the Central and Eastern Europe-aimed initiative’s¹⁵² subordination to BRI, was in evidence when its secretary-general Huang Ping 黄平 spoke about promoting BRI against Western “demonisation” at a 2018 SRTA event presided over by an ILD deputy head.¹⁵³

The friendship group’s chairman’s country provides examples of both the ILD’s political and think-tank cooption work. The department has been active in interactions with the Czech political élite since the country’s recent “turn to China”. The contacts with the small Czech Communist Party (Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy), on whose support the current government depends, can be seen as a continuation of the CCP’s relationship with the once-ruling Czechoslovak Communist Party,¹⁵⁴ the ILD has also interacted with more mainstream figures, including, in a case that attracted media coverage, Radek Vondráček,¹⁵⁵ the speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, as well as the conservative Zahradil (see 2.3.2).

In addition to Party-to-party work, the ILD also aims think-tank and academic cooption activities at Czech targets. Two examples attracted media attention in October and November 2019, amid the wave of scrutiny of PRC links of Czech academic institutions triggered by an attempt by PPF, a corporation linked to the Czech post-2014 policy U-turn towards China,¹⁵⁶ to become Charles University’s “main partner” through a modest donation.¹⁵⁷

¹⁴⁹Hála & Lulu, *op. cit.*; Jichang Lulu, “New Zealand: United Frontlings bearing gifts”, Sinopsis, 16th Nov. 2018.

¹⁵⁰Rolland, *op. cit.*

¹⁵¹*Ibid.*

¹⁵²On that initiative, cf. Hála & Lulu, “Lost in translation”.

¹⁵³“黄平秘书长应邀出席“一带一路”智库合作联盟理事会第三次会议暨专题研讨会”, 中国中东欧国家智库交流与合作网络.

¹⁵⁴Lulu & Sinopsis, *op. cit.*

¹⁵⁵Olga Lomová, “Komunistická strana Číny si přeje posilovat spolupráci s hnutím ANO 2011”, *Deník Referendum* (10th Nov. 2019); Barbora Zpěváčková, “Hnutí ANO chce s námi posílit kontakty, hlásá Komunistická strana Číny”, *Novinky*, 15th Nov. 2019.

¹⁵⁶Martin Hála, “United Front Work by Other Means: China’s “Economic Diplomacy” in Central and Eastern Europe”, *China Brief* 9 (19th May 2019).

¹⁵⁷“Home Credit se stal „hlavním partnerem Univerzity Karlovy””, *A2larm* (7th Oct. 2019); “Home Credit zruší smlouvu s Univerzitou Karlovou”, *Novinky*, 10th Oct. 2019; Jichang Lulu, “Twitter thread”, 28th Oct. 2019; Rob Schmitz, “China’s Influence in the Czech Republic”, NPR, 31st Oct. 2019.



A “Czech-Chinese Centre” (Česko-čínské centrum) at the university, led by Miloš Balabán, a security specialist linked to the Czech Social-Democratic Party (Česká strana sociálně demokratická, ČSSD) without known China expertise, had multiple activities, notably at least some of its conferences, covertly funded by the PRC embassy through a company set up by Balabán and his colleagues.¹⁵⁸ The Centre, and Balabán himself, were known for propagating pro-CCP views.¹⁵⁹ While embassy funding was made available only surreptitiously, the ILD had an overt role in the Centre’s activities: through its CCCWS think tank, it co-organised the first of its conferences, with CCCWS director Jin Xin 金鑫 as the featured speaker.¹⁶⁰ “Partners” of the conferences included Huawei and a PPF subsidiary.¹⁶¹ Although Balabán and some of his associates left the university during the ensuing scandal and the centre itself was closed,¹⁶² prominent participants in its activities remain involved in shaping Czech and European discourse on China, as either pro-CCP or usefully “neutral” voices.¹⁶³

Exchanges at a higher level, but of less consequence, took place between the ILD and Charles University in 2017. Luděk Podola, a businessman who was at the time a “consultant” with the university’s technology-transfer centre, met ILD deputy head Guo Yezhou 郭业洲 in his capacity as “China advisor to the rector of Charles University” and discussed cooperation between the university and SRTA.¹⁶⁴ The rector later refused to clarify whether Podola had been his “China advisor”, but admitted to having

¹⁵⁸Lukáš Valášek & Jan Horák, “Konference, které pořádá rektor UK Zima, platila skrytě statisíci čínská ambasáda”, Aktuálně.cz, 25th Oct. 2019.

¹⁵⁹Balabán’s cycle of security conferences had been openly criticised by Czech counterintelligence as early as 2014 (“Výroční zpráva Bezpečnostní informační služby za rok 2013”, BIS, 2014, p. 10). In 2016, Balabán was one of the speakers at a seminar in the Czech Chamber of Deputies promoting Xi Jinping’s book (“Semínář” Zkušenosti pro řízení a rozvoj státu”, Poslanecká sněmovna, 2016; Martin Hála, “Vymývání mozků po čínsku”, *Hospodářské noviny* [29th Mar. 2016]). His congratulations to the CCP’s 19th Congress were noted by the *People’s Daily* (“外国领导人、政党和组织祝贺中共十九大召开”, 人民日报 [20th Oct. 2017]). His views have been quoted by CCP domestic and external propaganda organs on multiple occasions (任鹏, “人民的生活质量是中国共产党的核心关切——捷克学者关注中共十九大”, 光明日报 [31st Oct. 2017]; “Writings of Xi popular at book fair”, *China Daily* [26th Aug. 2017]; 胡泽曦 et al., “中国的发展故事为各国树立了典范——国际人士积极评价习近平主席在庆祝中华人民共和国成立 70 周年招待会上的重要讲话”, 人民日报 [1st Oct. 2019]).

¹⁶⁰“Iniciativa Pás a Stezka: Výzvy, příležitosti a priority pro Čínu, Evropu a Česko”, Česko-čínské centrum, conference programme, 2016.

¹⁶¹“Iniciativa Pás a Stezka”; “40 let reform: od otevření se světuknovým hedvábným stezkám”, Česko-čínské centrum, conference programme, 2018.

¹⁶²Lukáš Valášek, “Rektor UK reaguje na skandál s čínskými penězi. Ruší Česko-čínské centrum”, Aktuálně.cz, 13th Nov. 2019.

¹⁶³Despite Balabán’s known profile and lack of relevant expertise, Charles University rector Tomáš Zima established the centre, appointed Balabán at its helm and opened three of its conferences together with Balabán and the PRC ambassador. The conferences also featured, e.g., Kerry Brown, director of the Lau China Institute at King’s College, London noted for recent contributions for CCP propaganda outlets; Marek Hrubec, a Charles University sociologist who taught a course promoting CCP talking points together with Balabán; and Ivana Karásková, an analyst at a Czech think tank and the founder of the “Chinfluence” project, which comments on CEE views on China and whose views on Xi’s Belt and Road were once quoted alongside Balabán’s by a propaganda organ (“Iniciativa Pás a Stezka: Výzvy, příležitosti a priority pro Čínu, Evropu a Česko”, Česko-čínské centrum; “Společné zájmy EU, Česka a Číny v měnícím se světě: Globální vládnutí — bezpečnost — věda — technologie”, Česko-čínské centrum, conference programme, 2017; “40 let reform: od otevření se světuknovým hedvábným stezkám”; “Výzvy digitální budoucnosti: 4. výroční konference Česko-čínského centra UK”, Česko-čínské centrum, conference programme, 2019; Kaloň, “Dopis z Číny: Pás a stezka do bažin”, Sinopsis, 21st Oct. 2016; “Pás a stezka místo kritického myšlení”, Sinopsis, 29th Apr. 2018; “Přes čáru: Snaží se čínští komunisté zničit svobodnou diskusi na našich univerzitách?”, Český rozhlas, 16th May 2018).

¹⁶⁴Hála, “United Front Work by Other Means: China’s “Economic Diplomacy” in Central and Eastern Europe”; “郭业洲会见捷克查理大学校长中国事务顾问鲁杰克·波多拉”, ILD, 4th Sept. 2017.



consulted with him; he does not appear to have ever held an official position as advisor to the rector.¹⁶⁵

The ILD's activities in the Czech Republic prompted the country's Security Information Service (Bezpečnostní informační služba, BIS), a counterintelligence agency, to publicly warn against them, noting that the ILD's remit includes intelligence work besides foreign relations.¹⁶⁶

2.3.2 The Friendship Group and the ILD

EUCFG members have maintained exchanges with the ILD. Deva-led delegations met with ILD officials in Beijing in 2016 and 2017.¹⁶⁷

Although not made in a friendship group capacity, a Zahradil-led visit to China illustrates the ILD's successful party-to-Party work at the EU level, even when aimed towards the right of the political spectrum. Zahradil's comments, as well as the presence of two leaders of his European party's think tank, illustrate the synergy between these two aspects of the ILD's influence activities.

In April 2017, Zahradil travelled to Shanghai and Beijing with a delegation of ACRE MEPs.¹⁶⁸ The delegation included Polish MEPs Tomasz Poręba and Kosma Złotowski, both from the conservative PiS (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) party, and Naweed Khan, executive director of ACRE's New Direction think-tank. Poręba is New Direction's president. Multiple connections exist between New Direction and the friendship cluster: Zahradil and Hannan are board members; Poręba's predecessor was Van Orden. Poręba's participation in the CCP's activities contrasts with his criticism of its persecution of Christians.¹⁶⁹



Zahradil leads delegation to a meeting with the ILD.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁵Zdislava Pokorná, "Čínské vazby rektora UK Zimy: Jeho poradce se scházel s lidmi, které BIS označuje za rozvědku", Seznam zprávy, 16th Oct. 2019; Jichang Lulu, "Twitter thread", 30th Oct. 2019.

¹⁶⁶"Výroční zpráva Bezpečnostní informační služby za rok 2015", BIS, 2016, p. 9.

¹⁶⁷"郑晓松会见欧洲议会欧中友好小组代表团", ILD, 23rd Aug. 2016; "王亚军会见欧洲议会欧中友好小组代表团", ILD, 31st Oct. 2017.

¹⁶⁸"沈蓓莉会见中东欧国家欧洲议员代表团", ILD, 19th Apr. 2017. Although led by Zahradil, the 2017 visit did not involve the friendship group. Interviewed by Czech media, Zahradil has insisted expenses were not covered by "China" (Břešfan, *op. cit.*).

¹⁶⁹"Poręba: Jeśli Unia Europejska nie upomni się o prawa prześladowanych chrześcijan, całkowicie straci swoją wiarygodność", ECR Group via TomaszPoręba.pl, 11th Oct. 2013; "Wystąpienie Tomasa Poręby w debacie PE na temat sytuacji w Chinach", TomaszPoręba.pl, 15th July 2009.



In Beijing, part of the Zahradil-led delegation¹⁷¹ was received by Shen Beili 沈蓓莉, then assistant head of the ILD and chair of its general office.¹⁷² According to the official account, Zahradil “expressed a willingness to actively participate in the construction of the ‘Belt and Road’ and ‘16 + 1 cooperation’” and “strengthen exchanges with the Chinese side including between parliaments, political parties and think tanks”.¹⁷³ ILD cadre had accompanied the delegation the previous day in Shanghai, where they visited Shanghai University and were received by a vice chair of the Shanghai People’s Congress.¹⁷⁴ At Shanghai University, where topics of discussion indeed included think-tank cooperation, Zahradil, Poreba, Zlotowski and Khan were also accompanied by the vice director of the Party Guest Division (党宾处) of the Shanghai Foreign Affairs Office. In contrast to the State Guest Division (国宾处), the one for party guests entertains visitors invited by CCP organs, notably the ILD and its related “people’s organisations”.¹⁷⁵ These official accounts of the ACRE visit thus suggest Zahradil, think-tank executive Khan and the Polish MEPs were in China as guests of the CCP.

2.4 The united front system

In addition to the CCP United Front Work Department, partners of the friendship group’s exchanges include another two components of the PRC united front system: CCP-controlled diaspora organisations and one of the PRC’s Communist-guided minor political parties.

2.4.1 The United Front returns to Europe

The Leninist concept of the united front refers to external forces coopted by a Communist party in order to achieve political goals. Since its initial formulation at the 3rd Congress of the Comintern in 1921,¹⁷⁶ its evolving implementations have gone from tactical alliances (e.g., the French and Spanish Popular Fronts) to the absorption of

¹⁷⁰Image source: “沈蓓莉会见中东欧国家欧洲议员代表团”.

¹⁷¹*ibid.* A person resembling Zlotowski appears in a picture of the meeting.

¹⁷²Shen has since become the MFA’s Commissioner in Macau (“沈蓓莉特派员简历”, 外交部驻澳门特别行政区特派员公署, 14th Sept. 2018).

¹⁷³“沈蓓莉会见中东欧国家欧洲议员代表团”.

¹⁷⁴“中东欧国家欧洲议员代表团访问上海大学”, 上海大学; “吴汉民副主任会见中东欧国家欧洲议员代表团一行”, 上海市人大, 18th Apr. 2017.

¹⁷⁵The Party Guest Division “is responsible for receiving visits of foreign guests invited by departments and units including the CCP International Liaison Department, the Chinese Association For International Understanding [CAFIU, 中国国际交流协会], the Chinese People’s Association for Peace and Disarmament [CPAPD, 中国人民争取和平与裁军协会] and the Central Party School” (“党宾处”, 上海市外办, 27th Sept. 2012; cf. “国宾处”, 上海市外办, 27th Sept. 2012). On CAFIU and CPAPD’s links to the ILD, cf. Lulu & Sinopsis, *op. cit.*

¹⁷⁶Theses on the “workers’ united front” (единый рабочий фронт) were adopted by the Executive Committee of the Comintern in 1921 on Zinoviev’s initiative (*Коммунистический интернационал в документах. Решения, тезисы, воззвания конгрессов Коминтерна и Пленумов ИККИ. 1919-1932*, Партийное издательство, 1933, p. 303). The concept, based on Bolshevik and Western European precedent, had been discussed at the Third Congress earlier that year. Lenin’s tract attacking “infantile” leftists who would not participate in “bourgeois” parliaments did not mention any literal fronts, but, according to Zinoviev, it already contained “the entire united front policy” (В.И. Ленин, “Детская болезнь ‘левизны’ в коммунизме”, *Полное собрание сочинений*, 5th ed., vol. 41, Государственное издательство политической литературы, 1981; John Riddell, “The origins of the united front policy”, *International Socialism* 130 [2011]).



once democratic parties and other non-Communist organisations into the post-War National Fronts in Eastern Europe and United Fronts in East Asia.¹⁷⁷

Since its takeover of the Chinese state, the main targets of the CCP's united front work have included those typical under other Leninist systems, such as religion, former political allies and ethnic minorities, as well as business, especially vital for the party's control over society since the beginning of its large-scale adoption of capitalism within Leninism ("reform and opening-up").¹⁷⁸ Hong Kong and Macau, both as European colonies and during their progressive absorption into the CCP's Leninist system, as well as Taiwan, a country the PRC seeks to annex, are further realms of united front work.¹⁷⁹ CCP united front work also includes the cooption of people of Chinese descent abroad, developing an "Overseas Chinese affairs" (*Qiaowu* 侨务) system that has achieved influence and control over vast numbers of Overseas Chinese associations throughout the world.¹⁸⁰ From its traditionally domestic and diasporic focus, the PRC united front system has evolved capabilities that allow it to influence mainstream politics abroad. CCP-linked diaspora organisations and politically active or otherwise influential foreign citizens or residents can serve as proxies for CCP influence in foreign politics. This mechanism has so far been best studied in Australia and New Zealand, countries with significant ethnic Chinese populations,¹⁸¹ but is also being documented in Europe.¹⁸²

The importance of the targets of CCP united front work for its rule of today's PRC is reflected in the institutional position of the United Front within the political system. An increasingly powerful and centralised united front system under Xi similarly highlights the centrality of the control of extra-party forces to the consolidation of totalitarianism in his New Era.¹⁸³ The institutional anchoring of the united front system was reinforced in 2015 with the establishment of a leading small group, likely headed by the system's most senior cadre, the chair of the Chinese People's Political Con-

¹⁷⁷On National Fronts in Eastern Europe, cf., e.g., Karel Kaplan, *Národní fronta 1948–1960*, Academia, 2012; Paweł Skorut, *Front Jedności Narodu: Od narodzin idei do upadku politycznego pozoru*, 2015. Leninist United Front systems also exist in the other surviving East Asian Communist régimes. On recent exchanges between their officials, see "조국통일민주주의전선중앙위원회대표단이중국인민정치협상회의전국위원회주석을만났다", 로동신문, via 우리민족끼리, 30th June 2019; John Dotson, "The United Front Work Department Assumes a Diplomatic Role", *China Brief* (26th Sept. 2019); "中国、朝鲜、越南、老挝统一战线组织专题研讨会侧记", 人民政协报, 5th Sept. 2019.

¹⁷⁸On business and united front work, see Groot, *op. cit.* On the CCP United Front and its history, idem, "Managing transitions".

¹⁷⁹On Hong Kong, cf. Sonny Shiu-Hing Lo, Steven Chung-Fun Hung & Jeff Hai-Chi Loo, *China's New United Front Work in Hong Kong: China's New United Front Work in Hong Kong*, Palgrave, 2019; Christine Loh, *Underground Front: The Chinese Communist Party in Hong Kong*, 2nd ed., Hong Kong University Press, 2019.

¹⁸⁰James Jiann Hua To, "Hand-in-Hand, Heart-to-Heart: Qiaowu and the Overseas Chinese", PhD thesis, University of Canterbury, 2009.

¹⁸¹Brady, "Magic Weapons"; Lulu, "United Frontlings bearing gifts"; Clive Hamilton & Alex Joske, "United Front activities in Australia", submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security, 2018; Wai Ling Yeung & Clive Hamilton, "How Beijing is Shaping Politics in Western Australia", *China Brief* 9 (9th May 2019).

¹⁸²Sinopsis & Jichang Lulu, "My Name is Wu. James Wu.", Sinopsis, 19th June 2018; Tatlow, *op. cit.*; Lulu & Sinopsis, *op. cit.*

¹⁸³For a systematic overview of the CCP united front system, see Joske, *op. cit.* On the evolution of the UFD under Xi, Gerry Groot, "The Expansion of the United Front Under Xi Jinping", *The China Story* (2015); idem, "The Rise and Rise of the United Front Work Department under Xi", *China Brief* 7 (24th Apr. 2018); Alex Joske, "Reorganizing the United Front Work Department: New Structures for a New Era of Diaspora and Religious Affairs Work", *China Brief* 9 (9th May 2019).



sultative Conference (CPPCC).¹⁸⁴ The united front system, coordinated at the central level by the United Front Work Department (UFWD, 统一战线工作部) under the Central Committee, includes multiple party, state and other agencies linked to the party's influence activities abroad. The PRC United Front includes CCP-led “democratic parties and groups” (民主党派), whose history and roles are somewhat parallel to those of the vestigial non-Communist parties of Communist-era Eastern Europe; out of these eight ancillary parties, the **Zhi Gong Party** (致公党), which mainly recruits elite returned Overseas Chinese as its members, stands out for its links to foreign political influence.¹⁸⁵ Among organs tasked with coopting the Chinese diaspora, the **China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification** (CCPPNR, 中国和平统一促进会)¹⁸⁶ and its satellite councils overseas,¹⁸⁷ is particularly prominent: its branches abroad typically serve as a peak national bodies presiding over those **hometown associations** and other organisations over which the CCP exerts significant influence, themselves susceptible to instrumentalisation as proxies for political influence.¹⁸⁸

2.4.2 The Friendship Group and united front organisations

During the CPAFFC-organised (and funded) friendship group visit to Beijing and Tibet, MEPs led by Deva were received at the UFWD by one of its deputy heads, Sitar སིཌར་ སྐུ་མཚན་¹⁸⁹ The exchanges covered ethnic and religious issues as well as Tibet.¹⁹⁰

Gai, Zahradil and Vaughan hosted UF-linked Overseas Chinese associations in Brussels in April 2019. The group was led by the European Federation of Chinese Organisations (EFCO, 欧洲华侨华人社团联合会), an umbrella group endorsed by party-state

¹⁸⁴Idem, “The Central United Front Work Leading Small Group: Institutionalising united front work”, Synopsis, 23rd July 2019.

¹⁸⁵One of the main CCP-aligned voices in New Zealand politics, the Labour MP Raymond Huo (Huo Jianqiang 霍建强), has openly praised the Zhi Gong Party and met with its senior cadre (Jichang Lulu, “United Frontlings Always Win” [2017], in Geremie Barmé, “The Battle Behind the Front”, China Heritage; Brady, *op. cit.*; Jichang Lulu, “Twitter thread”, 24th Apr. 2019). Further parliamentary seats were discussed by New Zealand politicians at a dinner with a prominent CCP-linked donor, the businessman Zhang Yikun 张乙坤; Zhang, who has also held meetings with Zhi Gong cadre, has had, among other United Front posts, a seat on the Hainan committee of another of the ancillary parties, the Chinese Association for Promoting Democracy (中国民主促进会) (idem, “United Frontlings bearing gifts”).

¹⁸⁶As Groot has noted, this translation is itself an act of propaganda. The word “Reunification”, rendering 统一 *tongyi* (‘unification’), refers to the PRC’s declared goal of annexing Taiwan, an independent country whose territory the CCP has never controlled (Groot, “The CCP’s Grand United Front abroad”).

¹⁸⁷John Dotson, “The United Front Work Department in Action Abroad: A Profile of The Council for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China”, *China Brief* 2 (13th Feb. 2018); idem, “The United Front Work Department Goes Global: The Worldwide Expansion of the Council for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China”, *China Brief* (9th May 2019); Mark Eades, “China’s ‘United Front’ Seeks to Undermine U.S. Support for Taiwan”, *International Policy Digest* (11th Sept. 2017); Groot, *op. cit.*

¹⁸⁸A key role in the CCP’s influence in Australia was played by Huang Xiangmo 黄向墨 (previously known as Huang Changran 黄畅然), who invested millions in political donations (some of them allegedly illegal) as well as to establish the CCP-“optimistic” Australia-China Relations Institute at University of Technology Sydney (Michaela Whitbourn & Tom Rabe, “Donations ‘a price paid for influence’, former NSW Labor boss admits at ICAC”, *Sydney Morning Herald* [11th Oct. 2019]; Grant Wyeth, “Why Did Australia Push Out a Chinese Communist Party-Linked Billionaire?”, *The Diplomat*, 9th Feb. 2019; cf. Leibold, *op. cit.*).

¹⁸⁹On Sitar (also romanised Sita, based on the Chinese transcription of the name), cf. Joske, *op. cit.*; Jichang Lulu, “Twitter thread”, 25th July 2019; idem, “The United Front represents your meaning: Tibetan neologisms, New Social Strata emojis and the Sagorean Section”, *Language Log*, 29th July 2019.

¹⁹⁰盖琳, *op. cit.*



organs,¹⁹¹ and notably included representatives from the Austrian and Italian chapters of the China Council for the Promotion of National Reunification.¹⁹²



EUCFG delegation granted an audience by UFWF vice head Sitar in 2016.¹⁹³

Unbeknownst perhaps to most Europeans, the friendship group has explicitly made one of the CCP-ancillary parties also a contact partner of European parliamentary politics. In August 2018, Vaughan told Zhi Gong Party vice chairwoman Yan Xiaopei 闫小培 in Guangzhou he “hoped to strengthen contacts with the Zhi Gong Party, creating a mechanism for exchanging visits”.¹⁹⁴ Visits did indeed follow: Gai, in his capacity as secretary-general of the group, met the Liaoning committee in September,¹⁹⁵ and Chairwoman Yan in October,¹⁹⁶ a larger delegation, including Deva, Vaughan and Zahradil, visited the Zhi Gong Central Committee in November.¹⁹⁷



Gai, Zahradil and Vaughan meet united front-linked organisations in Brussels. April 2019.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹¹ 张卓辉, “欧洲华侨华人社团联合会第十八届大会在瑞典首都隆重召开”, 侨务工作研究, 2014.

¹⁹² “传递华人声音助力中欧民间外交欧华社团联合会代表与欧盟议员对话”.

¹⁹³ Image source: 盖琳, *op. cit.*

¹⁹⁴ “闫小培副主席会见欧洲议会议员沃恩一行”.

¹⁹⁵ “李展超与欧洲议会欧中友好小组秘书长盖琳就长期交流合作开展友好会谈”, 辽宁致公党, 6th Sept. 2018.

¹⁹⁶ “闫小培会见欧洲议会欧中友好小组秘书长盖琳”, 致公党, 20th Oct. 2018.

¹⁹⁷ “闫小培会见欧洲议会欧中友好小组代表团一行”.

¹⁹⁸ Image source: “传递华人声音助力中欧民间外交欧华社团联合会代表与欧盟议员对话”.



3 The Friendship Group as a propaganda proxy

The friendship group's partnership with the propaganda system best matches its main public activity: in China, representing Europe within a global pro-CCP consensus; abroad, relaying CCP talking points through European voices. This section outlines the group's propaganda work through a summary of media appearances by its leaders, before demonstrating its close alignment with CCP propaganda goals, down to the repetition of its revisionist historical narrative.

3.1 “Undoubtedly superior”: The Group's praise of the CCP

One of the official partners of the friendship group and association is a key propaganda organ, the *People's Daily*. In 2018, as secretary-general of the friendship group, Gai congratulated the paper on its 70 years of “propagating the CCP's theory and policies, making the world understand China”.¹⁹⁹ Deva, writing in English, arrived at a similar formulation: the paper “covers so comprehensively the information and the views of the Chinese Communist Party, helping the world to understand China and the Chinese leadership”.²⁰⁰

A CCP official has been clear about the friendship group's contribution to the Party's propaganda work. During the 2016 visit, Ju Jianhua 巨建华, then vice chairman of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) People's Congress and deputy party secretary of its Foreign Affairs Office,²⁰¹ called the Friendship Group “an important force for understanding and cooperation with China within the European Parliament” which had “contributed to an objective presentation of China”, adding that the TAR Party Committee and government “greatly valued exchanges with foreign parliaments and groups” in order to “increase the world's understanding of Tibet”.²⁰²

Frequent media appearances by the friendship group's leaders help explain the cadre's satisfaction. Gai Lin, in his capacity as the friendship group's secretary-general, has routinely provided domestic propaganda with the European side of a purported global endorsement of the CCP policy *du jour*. While Zahradil, when confronted with evidence of Gai's propaganda activity, dismissed it as his “private statements”, Gai is typically quoted by state media in his capacity as secretary-general.

Gai has praised Xi's “Four Comprehensives” (四个全面);²⁰³ the fourth Comprehensive (“comprehensively govern the Party in a strict manner”, 全面从严治党), on the occasion of the 6th Plenary Session of the 18th CCP Central Committee;²⁰⁴ Xi's “Com-

¹⁹⁹“欧洲议会欧中友好小组秘书长盖琳祝贺《人民日报》创刊 70 周年”，人民网，28th June 2018.

²⁰⁰“欧洲议会欧中友好小组主席德瓦祝贺《人民日报》创刊 70 周年”，人民网，28th June 2018.

²⁰¹Ju became Party secretary of the TAR Foreign Affairs office later that year (“格桑任西藏自治区外事侨务办公室主任巨建华不再担任”，中国经济网，2nd Dec. 2016). On the friendship group's meeting with another senior Tibetan official, Champa Phuntsog, see 2.1.2.

²⁰²“欧洲议会欧中友好小组代表团赴藏访问”，西藏日报 via 西藏人大，28th Aug. 2016.

²⁰³“国际人士高度评价习近平提出的“四个全面”战略布局”，CCP News, 26th Feb. 2015. The “Four Comprehensives” (or the “Four-Pronged Comprehensive Strategy”) are: comprehensively build a moderately well-off society, comprehensively deepen reform, comprehensively advance rule by law and comprehensively govern the Party in a strict manner (“习近平总书记在江苏考察工作：希望大家日子都过得殷实”，央视网，14th Dec. 2014; cf. “中央文献重要术语译文发布（2015 年第一期）”，中共中央编译局，27th Apr. 2015).

²⁰⁴“综述：国际社会认为中共从严治党意志坚决意义重大”，新华网，28th Oct. 2016; “国际社会热评十八届六中全会”，光明日报，3rd Nov. 2016.



munity of Shared Future for Humankind” (人类命运共同体),²⁰⁵ and the ILD’s “dialogue” with foreign political parties.²⁰⁶

The friendship group’s secretary-general has repeatedly relayed the CCP’s view on the superiority of the political system it leads, as a model for parties in Europe and elsewhere to follow. He has praised the CCP as “a party that turns ideals into reality”.²⁰⁷ He once stated that the CCP’s “strict Party governance” and anti-corruption campaign “not only match the needs of China’s development, but will also exert a positive influence on other global economies”.²⁰⁸ (The campaign Gai was endorsing involves extra-judicial detention and torture, according to former detainee accounts.²⁰⁹) Commenting on Xi Jinping’s report to the 19th Party Congress, Gai noted that Xi’s repeated stress on his global “Community” concept had “widely resonated with various sectors in Europe”.²¹⁰ Comparing China’s success in poverty alleviation with recessions or slow growth in many Western countries, Gai stated that “the CCP’s concept of party and state governance is undoubtedly superior and worthy of study by political parties in other countries”.²¹¹

The secretary-general has also helped propagate the CCP’s views in the name of the friendship group through English-language media. In 2008, he chided MEPs for receiving the Dalai Lama, through the European edition of the US news website *Politico*.²¹² In 2018, through the European edition of the *China Daily*, he congratulated Central and Eastern European countries on their “cooperation” with China, while warning that “challenges still remain[ed] on the road to building a community of shared future with China”.²¹³

Friendship group MEPs have likewise endorsed CCP policy for both Chinese and European audiences. In at least one case, Deva reportedly expressed views consonant with CCP propaganda at an EP session following Gai’s advice.²¹⁴ If correct, the report, whose author is affiliated with a think tank linked to the Ministry of State Security, points to Gai’s active role in influencing parliamentary discourse to the benefit of the CCP.

In 2019, Deva told Western journalists he could not “think of one big mistake” China has made in the last fifteen years, thus implicitly endorsing, e.g., the ethnic-based internment of likely over a million people in concentration camps.²¹⁵ In 2007, shortly after discussing Xinjiang with a PRC diplomat in Brussels, Deva sent a letter to fellow MEPs where he expressed his hope that they would “not give any support” to such

²⁰⁵“华侨华人关注十九大：中国发展惠泽世界”，中国侨网，22nd Oct. 2017; cf. Nadège Rolland, “Beijing’s Vision for a Reshaped International Order”, *China Brief* 3 (26th Feb. 2018).

²⁰⁶鞠辉，“欧洲议会欧中友好小组秘书长盖琳：中国共产党与世界政党高层对话意义重大”，*Zhongqing zaixian*; cf. Hála & Lulu, “A new Comintern for the New Era: The CCP International Department from Bucharest to Reykjavik”.

²⁰⁷“综述：国际社会认为中共从严治党意志坚决意义重大”。

²⁰⁸“国际社会热评十八届六中全会”。

²⁰⁹“Special Measures”: *Detention and Torture in the Chinese Communist Party’s Shuanggui System*, Human Rights Watch, 6th Dec. 2016.

²¹⁰“华侨华人关注十九大：中国发展惠泽世界”。

²¹¹“综述：海外人士高度评价习近平在中国共产党与世界政党高层对话会上的讲话”，新华网，2nd Dec. 2017.

²¹²Gai, *op. cit.*

²¹³Idem, “CEECs’ cooperation contrasts with European turmoil”, *China Daily* (13th Apr. 2018).

²¹⁴Qu, *op. cit.*

²¹⁵Martin & Crawford, *op. cit.*



organisations as the World Uyghur Congress.²¹⁶ Chinese official reports abound with Deva's statements of support for the CCP-led political system. While admitting it was the first time he interacted with one of the CCP's ancillary parties, Deva said when meeting Zhi Gong Party officials that he was "deeply impressed with China's system of multi-party cooperation".²¹⁷

Zahradil sent his congratulations to the 19th CCP Congress in October 2017.²¹⁸ Deva's successor as EUCFG chairman has repeatedly expressed his support for Xi's "Belt and Road" and "16 + 1" (now "17 + 1") initiatives.²¹⁹ The official account of a meeting with the ILD quotes him on the initiatives' potential to "strengthen exchanges with the Chinese side between parliaments, political parties and think-tanks"; he is a board member of his European party's think tank, whose president and executive director were with him on that trip.²²⁰

The propaganda value of the friendship group's activities is enhanced by the fact that some of its senior members are outspoken anti-Communists. Endorsements of CCP policy by, e.g., European post-Communists are predictable, and of little use beyond a relatively small constituency.²²¹ Conservative support carries more weight: it suggests Xiist Communism has the ability to convince people like Deva, who has used "Marxist-Leninist" as an insult,²²² or Zahradil, who has criticised European "double standards" when condemning the extreme right while seeing Communists as "good guys with good ideas".²²³ Domestic audiences are not, however, shown the Friendship group's traces of anti-Communism: instead, its secretary-general Gai has praised the CCP for being endowed with "Marx's spirit of unremitting struggle for ideals", which helps it "build a better world" together with the peoples of other nations.²²⁴

The group's messaging is similarly bifurcated on Russia's role in the CCP's geopolitical strategies. Zahradil's advocacy of Xi's "Belt and Road" and "16 + 1" initiatives includes the contention that they serve as a "counterbalance for Russian ambitions".²²⁵ Gai, quoted by state media, appreciates the potential of linking BRI and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (Шанхайская организация сотрудничества, 上海合作组织), a regional economic and security platform led by Russia and China.²²⁶

In 2016, Poche, identified as a Czech MEP and group member, was quoted after a Xinhua Brussels interview with remarks endorsing the PRC's defiance of the Hague Tribunal ruling against its expansionist ambitions in the South China Sea. According to the Xinhua account, Poche called the ruling "one-sided and arbitrary" and stated

²¹⁶ "European Parliament Debates Human Rights in China", UNPO, 24th Jan. 2007.

²¹⁷ "闫小培会见欧洲议会欧中友好小组代表团一行".

²¹⁸ "一些国家和政党领导人致电或致函热烈祝贺习近平当选中共中央总书记", 人民日报, 26th Oct. 2017.

²¹⁹ Jan Zahradil, "Facebook post", 5th Oct. 2018.

²²⁰ "沈蓓莉会见中东欧国家欧洲议员代表团"; cf. 2.3.2.

²²¹ Such endorsements are common. For an example involving Gregor Gysi, cf. Hála & Lulu, *op. cit.*

²²² Baldwin & Geoghegan, *op. cit.*

²²³ Ahto Lobjakas, "EU: Deputies Make Effort To Equate Communist Symbols With Nazi Ones", RFERL, 3rd Feb. 2005.

²²⁴ "综述：将马克思主义基本原理同中国具体实际相结合是中国取得成功的关键——国际社会积极评价习近平总书记在纪念马克思诞辰200周年大会上的重要讲话", 新华, 5th May 2018.

²²⁵ Adéla Denková et al., "The Belt and Road Initiative: V4's Chinese dilemma", Visegrad Info, 10th Apr. 2018.

²²⁶ "维护地区稳定 促进共同发展——国际社会积极评价习主席在上合组织成员国元首理事会第十五次会议上的重要讲话", 人民日报, 11th July 2015.



China and the Philippines could only solve the problem bilaterally, the format preferred by the more powerful country.²²⁷

3.2 “Messenger of friendship and peace”: CCP pseudo-history in Strasbourg

An incident in which the friendship group unquestioningly promoted CCP revisionist history establishes its members’ lack of China knowledge, which contrasts with the CCP’s skilful use of actors across the European political landscape. This warrants a categorisation of some public activities of the friendship group case as examples of the CCP’s exploitation of knowledge asymmetry.

In 2019, the friendship group co-organised a photo exhibition on the Ming admiral Zheng He 郑和 (1371 – ca. 1434) in Strasbourg, promoting the CCP’s falsification of history to support its global propaganda. Echoing the CCP’s narrative on the purportedly peaceful nature of China’s imperial expansion, Deva told Chinese media he intended to show that, decades before Columbus’ voyages, “the Chinese had already begun friendly foreign exchanges without any colonial ambitions”.²²⁸ The exhibition, Deva said, was meant to “make Europe understand China’s peaceful development road”,²²⁹ a term borrowed from the CCP’s official vocabulary.²³⁰



Zahradil looking at things.²³¹

Zahradil also attended. A state-media account quoted his intention to take the exhibition to Prague, drawing parallels between Zheng He’s purported status as a “messenger of peace and friendship” and Xi’s “Belt and Road” initiative: “China’s past and present provide us with ideas and inspiration on such issues as the building of a peaceful environment for international trade.”²³²

The revisionist narrative Deva and Zahradil helped promote to European audiences ignores the historical record of China’s imperial expansion during the relevant period, the Ming and Qing dynasties. Far from “peaceful”, the Qing conquest of Central Asia

²²⁷“欧洲议会议员：当事国谈判协商才是解决之道”。

²²⁸“中欧友好小组主席：中欧安全领域合作潜力巨大”，澎湃新闻，25th Apr. 2019.

²²⁹“让欧洲了解中国的和平发展道路”，SCIO, 22nd Jan. 2019.

²³⁰“中国的和平发展道路”，SCIO, Dec. 2005.

²³¹Image source: 刘军，“欧洲议会大厦里开讲“郑和故事”，光明日报，18th Jan. 2019.

²³²“让欧洲了解中国的和平发展道路”。



involved the extermination of hundreds of thousands of Zunghars,²³³ whose polity occupied part of the territory of today's Xinjiang, where the CCP now oversees a system of ethnic internment camps. The presentation of Chinese imperialism as just and benevolent, a trope adopted by the CCP, is in fact an old tradition, extending back to the Ming dynasty which Deva and Zahradil are now quoted as seeing as a model for international relations. Working with Ming sources, Wade has compared Chinese "civilisational rhetoric" to the *mission civilisatrice* invoked by European colonialists.²³⁴ Zheng He's voyages followed the Ming invasion and colonisation of Yunnan (from ca. 1380) and the temporary occupation of Đại Việt 大越 (1406 - 1428), in today's northern Vietnam.²³⁵ Zheng He was one of several eunuchs dispatched by the Yongle emperor on military expeditions, which included maritime voyages to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean as well as land missions to the newly-conquered southern territories. Using Ming historical annals and other sources, Wade has identified multiple instances of use of actual or threatened violence by Zheng He's expeditions, inflicting deaths and bringing to submission various polities under a maritime *pax Ming*. While, unlike the land campaigns, the Ming maritime expeditions did not succeed in establishing lasting political and economic control of territories, they were part of a colonial endeavour comparable in intent and methods to later ones by European powers.²³⁶ If, as the propaganda narrative endorsed by Deva and Zahradil suggests, Xi's geopolitical initiatives draw "inspiration" from China's historical expansionism, they might feature the military interventions employed by the PRC's predecessor polities,²³⁷ already seen in its occupation and militarisation of much of the South China Sea.

Zheng He-themed revisionist propaganda is not a Xiist innovation, nor is the "inspiration" trope repeated in Strasbourg. In 2003, Hu Jintao said in a speech to the Australian parliament that Ming fleets had reached Australia "in the 1420s", leading to "centuries" of Chinese settlement "in what they called Southern Land".²³⁸ In 2016, during a Sydney port call by a PLA ship named after the admiral, a Chinese diplomat claimed that the Chinese Navy's intentions were aimed at the preservation of peace, as were the earlier voyages of Zheng He.²³⁹ Nor is the friendship group the first foreign entity to echo such distortions of history. *1421*, a pseudo-historical best-seller written by a retired British naval officer and supported by fabricated evidence,²⁴⁰ while derided by experts, was offered a platform by PRC entities, including state media.²⁴¹

The organisation of an event promoting alternative Ming history is far enough removed from European politics to justify the assumption that its motivation was purely propagandistic, only construable as beneficial to the CCP. Since the results of academic research clearly contradict the CCP's narrative, persons passably acquainted

²³³Peter C. Perdue, "China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia", 285 et passim.

²³⁴Geoff Wade, "Civilizational Rhetoric and the Obfuscation of Power Politics", *Sacred Mandates: Asian International Relations since Chinggis Khan*, ed. by Timothy Brook, Michael van Walt van Praag & Miek Boltjes, University of Chicago Press, 2018.

²³⁵Idem, "The Zheng He Voyages: A Reassessment", Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, Oct. 2004.

²³⁶Ibid.

²³⁷Tansen Sen, "Silk Road Diplomacy – Twists, Turns and Distorted History", Yale Global, 23rd Sept. 2014.

²³⁸"Full text: Hu's speech", *Sydney Morning Herald* (24th Oct. 2003).

²³⁹John Fitzgerald, "Handing the initiative to China", *Inside Story* (19th Jan. 2017); 李蕊蕊, "访澳中国海军训练舰 '郑和' 号举办甲板招待会", 今日澳洲, 25th Nov. 2016.

²⁴⁰Geoff Wade, "The 'Liu/Menzies' World Map: A Critique", *e-Perimtron* (2007).

²⁴¹"Junk History", ABC, 31st July 2006; 樊树志, "中国走向海洋不做世界殖民强国——纪念郑和下西洋 600 周年", 人民网, 11th July 2005; "1421 年中国发现世界? 加拿大发现郑和基地", 人民网, 25th May 2005.



with Chinese history could have been expected to refrain from participating in such an exercise. The friendship group members' willingness to endorse a totalitarian régime's politicised retelling of history may be contrasted with the understanding of European ideology and politics reflected in the CCP-led system's target-tailored propaganda and influence operations. The Strasbourg Zheng He exhibition thus shows CCP propaganda goals being aided by the party's superior knowledge of its foreign counterparts.

4 Conclusion: Weaponising mediocrity to repurpose democracy

As this paper has established, the friendship cluster's exchanges with its "partners" in the CCP-led system reflect PRC propaganda and policy objectives. Each of the partners covered above is fundamentally Leninist. Their analogues are found in other current and historical authoritarian systems: examples from the Soviet Union, Communist Eastern Europe and North Korea were given above. In particular, these agencies are not similar to government organs, political parties, state or private media outlets or civil-society organisations in democratic systems. Interactions with them are not, therefore, part of diplomacy, cultural cooperation or trade promotion, and differ from normal exchanges with ministries, local governments or universities. These interactions and their propaganda presentation make the friendship cluster a perhaps unwitting instrument of the CCP's global influence operations.

Due to the diversity of the cluster's interactions, the spread of its partners across the CCP-led system and the representation of categories within Europe's élite represented in the network of entities linked to the group, this study has been able to demonstrate some of the main methods, actors and targets of the CCP's larger influence activities in Europe. It has not, however, exhausted its narrower subject matter. Only a sample of the group's activities has been presented. The full membership and personnel of the cluster's component entities remains unknown. Furthermore, the friendship group is not the only CCP-aligned entity involving MEPs: e.g., István Ujhely, recently made a vice chairman of the group, is one of the initiators of the Europe-China One Belt One Road Culture and Tourism Development Committee (欧中“一带一路”文化旅游发展委员会).²⁴² Dedicated studies of CCP-friendly groups in national parliaments could likewise contribute to understanding of CCP influence within European political structures.

Statements by European participants in these interactions show a lack of knowledge of China that the CCP has developed techniques to exploit. Such self-confident ignorance contrasts with a general familiarity with the politics, language and culture of European countries, the US and, in some cases, Russia. The resulting knowledge asymmetry between China's foreign affairs apparatus and its interlocutors facilitates the CCP's work to coopt foreign élites as tools assisting its foreign policy. This situation, advantageous to the CCP, could change if influential think tanks and other entities advising policy-makers and training officials and diplomats devoted resources to rigorous research on the CCP's influence operations, studying the PRC political system and its power projection abroad through the vast amount of available documentation,

²⁴²“欧中“一带一路”文化旅游发展委员会举行周年庆典”, 光明日报, via 新华网, 9th Dec. 2016; ““一带一路”欧中文化旅游委员会成立仪式”, CCC Brussels, 27th Apr. 2016.



without fear of offending government patrons, donors, media houses or academic elders and betters. Such a change does not seem imminent: major European think tanks have instead become targets of CCP influence work. They are systematically vulnerable to the CCP's efforts to weaponise mediocrity, offering "access" and visibility to incentivise behaviours that contribute to the construction of a favourable discourse landscape.²⁴³ Desirable outcomes of propaganda work include not only faithful proxies, but also a docile, intellectually lazy "neutral" field that abhors "polarisation" and treats the output of state propaganda as a legitimate side of a "debate". The participation of a European think tank in the group's members interaction with a CCP organ leading these efforts and the members' own statements show the overlap between political and think-tank influence work.

The embedding of entities within the EP to aid the CCP's propaganda efforts instantiates the more general repurposing of democratic structures as tools of totalitarian politics. Although the friendship group's actual membership, likely far lower than claimed, may not amount to a significant force in parliament votes, it plays a significant role in propaganda. Frequent media appearances by its members, as well as its secretary-general, representing the group can help create a perception among Chinese audiences that "Europe" endorses the CCP's policies. Abroad, the support members of the group offer to aspects of PRC policy gives CCP propaganda a foreign, "neutral" face, especially when it comes from Conservatives or anti-Communists, as well as occasional critics of aspects of PRC policy. Thus laundered, propaganda messaging is more convincing than when conveyed through recognisable apologists.

More generally, the work of the CCP's influence machine with foreign officials, politicians and political parties is gradually achieving the transformation of democratic political systems into components of its global mechanisms of control. In Macau and Hong Kong, jurisdictions it is in the process of absorbing, and Taiwan, a country it intends to annex, the CCP actively disrupts existing democratic structures and prevents the democratisation of hybrid bodies, aiming to degrade them into *de facto* components of its united front system.²⁴⁴ It does not, however, primarily disrupt European democracies; elite capture allows the CCP to repurpose political, economic, academic and media structures of Western states as its tools.²⁴⁵ Although the methods and dedicated agencies of CCP power projection are uniquely Leninist, the idea of rule by proxy is far from novel: an understanding of its efficiency compared to other modes of domination has informed earlier imperialistic endeavours.

Élite capture delegates discourse management and Party policy implementation to foreign leaders, a phenomenon once compared to the way such parasitic fungi as *Ophiocordyceps sinensis* (虫草, བཟང་ལྗང་འབྲུག་ལྗང་ལྗང་) may alter a host's behaviour to facilitate further transmission.²⁴⁶ Although the friendship organisations studied here hold little sway on their own within European politics, their alignment with CCP goals constitutes a symptom of the success of the party-state's attempts to alter the functioning of democratic structures to project its influence beyond the territory it controls.

²⁴³For another factor hindering rigorous scrutiny of totalitarian influence operations in Europe, cf. Didi Kirsten Tatlow, "Kultureller Relativismus und Machtvergessenheit: Kritische Anmerkungen zur deutschen China-Debatte", *Liberale Moderne*, 13th Nov. 2018; eadem, "Mapping China-in-Germany".

²⁴⁴On Taiwan's experience, cf., e.g., Ketty W. Chen & J. Michael Cole, "CCP and proxy disinformation: Means, practices, and impact on democracies", *Sinopsis*, 26th July 2019.

²⁴⁵Lulu, "United Frontlings bearing gifts".

²⁴⁶Rolland, pers. comm., 2018; Yanfang Sheng, Peng Feng & Chengshu Wang, "Fungi That Infect Insects: Altering Host Behavior and Beyond", *PLoS Pathogens* 11.8 (2015).



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