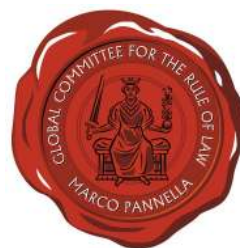




SINOPSIS

CHINA IN CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE



Hijacking the mainstream

CCP influence agencies and their operations in Italian
parliamentary and local politics

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Summary of findings and recommendations

Recent controversy on the overt alignment of some senior Italian politicians with Chinese Communist Party (CCP) talking points has attracted overdue attention, yet failed to expose the broader phenomenon behind it: the party's centrally-guided efforts to shape policy and public opinion by influencing elite figures across Italy's political spectrum, an instance of its **global influence work**.

This paper provides the first overview of the Italian activity of external **influence agencies** across the systems that compose the CCP-led apparatus, including three case studies that illustrate multi-system operations targeting Italian politics from the national to the municipal level. The CCP International Liaison Department (ILD), the Chinese Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC), the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT), as well as units in the party's **propaganda** and **united front** systems and fronts linked to **intelligence** agencies, the cases show, are key actors in efforts to coopt parliamentarians, political parties, local officials and mainstream voices in think tanks and the media.

Using politicians, lobbyists and other local intermediaries as proxies, these operations repurpose democratic institutions as instruments of CCP policy. Vague appeals to 'friendship', 'culture' and trade help enlist mainstream, often CCP-critical figures as unwitting endorsers of a discourse-engineering endeavour: the installation of propaganda memes that normalise the CCP's totalitarian rule and global expansion. Surrendering policy-making creativity to this **new common sense**, parliamentary circles have relayed propaganda whitewashing the party's human rights abuses, while local governments joined a 'Belt and Road'-themed network set up by a CCP influence agency.

The **knowledge asymmetry** between CCP influence agencies and their targets is a vulnerability these operations exploit. Unfamiliarity with influence agencies and tactics compromises the integrity of political institutions by making them easy cooption targets. Effective policy-making towards a balanced relationship with China requires knowledge of CCP influence work.

Policy-makers have tools at their disposal to address these vulnerabilities.

1. Government bodies and political parties should build a *cordon sanitaire* around the CCP's influence agencies, avoiding interactions that turn them into their instruments.
2. Senators and MPs should reclaim Parliament from totalitarian cooption, declining to endorse parliamentary 'China friendship' groups and other platforms acting as effective proxies for the ILD and other CCP influence agencies.
3. At the local level, authorities should focus exchanges with PRC counterparts on legitimate issues within their competencies, avoiding induction into propaganda initiatives pursued by CPAFFC, CCPIT and their local facilitators.
4. Bodies such as the parliamentary security and foreign affairs committees and individual legislators should investigate CCP influence operations, bringing transparency and accountability by scrutinising government exchanges with PRC counterparts and publicly disclosing their own.
5. Parliamentary bodies and political parties should use regular briefings to make up-to-date research on CCP influence available to parliamentarians and local officials.
6. A democratic consensus across the political spectrum in Italy and its allies should support an adaptation of the legislative framework to effectively counter foreign interference.



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0 Introduction: Italy's Belt-and-Road fever as a symptom of the progression of the CCP's global influence

Triggered by some leading politicians' overt alignment with Xiist policy themes, the CCP's influence in Italian politics recently gained attention in Italy's public debate. The attention was overdue. However, as this paper will show, the recent, more visible manifestations it has focused on only instantiate a deeper phenomenon. This study places the theatre of tributary submission in the context of the CCP's work to influence global policy-making and discourse. Influence operations, the task of an array of agencies led by the party centre, operate on individuals and institutions away from media scrutiny, typically by proxy. The analysis of case studies of cultivation activities in parliamentary and local politics will show that influence work is the more effective the closer its targets are to the mainstream of local political discourse. Behind the pantomime of submission and alignment, the party's influence agencies act methodically to coopt mainstream figures as endorsers and legitimisers of CCP-friendly views, incorporating their acceptance into the conventional wisdom. This paper will aim to sketch some the methods the CCP uses to elicit the performance of acts of alignment and endorsement.

Like elsewhere, the paroxysms of adulation Xi's tenure elicits in the CCP's partners awoke Italy's public debate to effects of CCP influence operations that had otherwise proceeded quietly for decades. In early 2019, a new ruling coalition that included an emergent CCP-friendly political force upgraded Italy's relationship with the PRC past the threshold of attention of Italian news reporting and commentary. The country's signature of a memorandum of understanding on Xi Jinping's "Belt and Road" Initiative (BRI, 一带一路), a symbolic act of subordination, helped catalyse an emerging awareness of the need to scrutinise interactions between Italian politics and CCP-controlled agencies. With repeated posts on his blog in support of CCP policies in Xinjiang and meetings with two successive PRC ambassadors, Beppe Grillo, the leader of the Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle), helped make some politicians' alignment with CCP propaganda the topic of wide media coverage.¹ Scrutiny of agreements between Italian and CCP-controlled media also gained traction as the CCP's external propaganda machine mobilised its assets to engineer a party-friendly narrative on the Covid-19 pandemic.² A broader sample of the CCP's foreign influence agencies' recent history of Italian operations emerged in research that notably discussed the local activities of one of the main CCP-led organs active in the cooption of foreign politicians.³

This long-overdue interest in the CCP's influence in Italy has, however, so far largely focused on its most farcical surface manifestations. As the experience elsewhere has

¹"Grillo e le visite top secret all'ambasciatore cinese, è polemica", Corriere.it, 25th Nov. 2019; "Ecco come nasce l'asse tra Grillo e i cinesi (c'entra la Casaleggio)", Linkiesta, 28th Nov. 2019; Fabio Massimo Parenti, "Il nostro silenzio sulla piaga del terrorismo in Xinjiang", Beppe Grillo blog, 13th Sept. 2019; "In Cina nessuna repressione": l'ultimo delirio del blog di Grillo", *Il Giornale* (21st Nov. 2019); Ferruccio Michelin, "Nessuna persecuzione in Xinjiang. Parola di Pechino? No, di Grillo", Formiche, 19th Nov. 2018.

²Laura Harth, "Così la macchina di propaganda cinese penetra nei media italiani", Formiche, 16th Jan. 2020; eadem, "Propaganda cinese (e ruolo della Rai). Laura Harth sollecita il Parlamento", Formiche, 9th Apr. 2020; Gabriele Carrer, "Si scrive Rai, si legge TelePechino. Se il servizio pubblico parla cinese (troppo?)", Formiche, 8th Apr. 2020.

³Lucrezia Poggetti, "China's growing political influence in Italy: a case study of Beijing's influencing tactics in Europe", *The art of deceit: How China and Russia use sharp power to subvert the West*, ed. by Andrew Foxall & John Hemmings, Henry Jackson Society, Dec. 2019.



shown, an analysis of the CCP agencies involved in exchanges with foreign decision-makers can bring to light a logic of cooption that underlies, and goes beyond, public displays of CCP alignment: influence operations are most effective when least visible. The occasionally ostentatious relay of propaganda by senior politicians masks longer-term cooption activity that operates on the fabric of democratic politics. Parliament and subnational government are key arenas for such influence work. This policy paper aims to inform such key stakeholders in both these arenas and build up democratic resilience.

Democratic legislatures are familiar loci of CCP influence. In Australia, a key actor in CCP influence operations, eventually expelled from the country, built relationships with multiple parliamentarians, notably helping a senator pay a legal bill.⁴ In New Zealand, both major parties have selected individuals with links to CCP influence agencies as MPs, giving the CCP a presence in parliament that hedged against democratic alternation.⁵ In the European Parliament, a “China friendship group” helped facilitate interactions between the CCP influence apparatus, politicians from multiple parties and countries, and further elite individuals, until the exposure of its links led to media coverage, parliamentary scrutiny, and eventually its suspension *sine die*.⁶

The less familiar subnational arena invites quieter influence work. In it, CCP proxies can benefit from welcoming attitudes among local officials far from by the scrutiny that often follows national government decisions. Localisation as an influence tactic exploits both the relative autonomy of subnational decision-making and a lack of interest from academic, media and other analysts.⁷

0.1 Systems, agencies, fronts, cooptees: The CCP’s external influence machinery and its methods

Influence on foreign societies helps the CCP advance foreign policy goals and protect and consolidate its authoritarian monopoly of power in the PRC. A dedicated apparatus embedded in party, state, army and satellite structures uses proxies and neutral-looking platforms to coopt elites abroad into alignment with the party’s external and domestic policies.

0.1.1 Engineering common sense: The goals of influence work

Compared to methods of power projection more familiar to foreign audiences, such as state-to-state diplomacy, state-linked investment, overt propaganda and military engagement, influence operations are cheap, low-risk and effective, offering both quick achievements and long-term results. The costs of the cultivation of, e.g., politicians,

⁴Alex Joske, “The party speaks for you: Foreign interference and the Chinese Communist Party’s united front system”, *ASPI Policy Brief* 32 (2020), pp. 20 sqq.

⁵Anne-Marie Brady, “Magic Weapons: China’s political influence activities under Xi Jinping”, Wilson Center, Sept. 2017, p. 18 et passim; Jichang Lulu, “United Frontlings always win”, *China Heritage* (18th Sept. 2017); idem, “New Zealand: United Frontlings bearing gifts”, Sinopsis, 16th Nov. 2018.

⁶idem, “Repurposing democracy: The European Parliament China friendship cluster”, Sinopsis, 26th Nov. 2019; “Český europoslanec na Hedvábné stezce”, Sinopsis, 17th May 2019; “Hearing of the Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation”, European Parliament Multimedia Centre, 25th Jan. 2021, 15:21:40 – 15:24:41

⁷For case studies of localised influence work in Europe, see Jichang Lulu, “Confined discourse management and the PRC’s localised interactions in the Nordics”, Sinopsis, 22nd Oct. 2018.



bureaucrats, diplomats, businesspeople, academics, think-tankers — junior and senior, current and former, from cities and towns to states and international organisations — are just those of setting up platforms, organising events and trips, maintaining personal links, occasionally offering remuneration or employment. These costs pale in comparison to those required to establish economic dominance or military coercion. The results of these operations can include information, technology transfer, propaganda by proxy and policy alignment, by enough actors across the elite of a target polity to hedge against the dynamic change inherent to open societies.

By moulding elite thinking and installing unstated assumptions in public debate, influence work makes target-country decision-making amenable to collaboration with the CCP's aggressive foreign policy and projection of oppressive power. Elite voices that endorse CCP initiatives help counter or preempt international criticism of the party's totalitarian rule, forming a global chorus of approval endorsing the marginalisation and repression of any domestic dissent. Elite collaborators incorporate CCP propaganda memes into public discourse: tributary adherence to Xi's 'Belt and Road' geopolitical scheme, which to targets means dependence or empty promises, is made to feel synonymous with integration into global trade; institutional support for global human rights is portrayed as needlessly antagonising trading partners; continental alliances are undermined to the benefit of a 'win-win' relationship with the party's benevolent centre. As propaganda memes populate 'legitimate' public debate, subordinating the national interest to Beijing's becomes the default reflex — indeed Gramscian 'common sense' ("the philosophy of the non-philosophers"), "acritically absorbed" shared assumptions and modes of thought, is the concept that framed Sinological scholarship's foundational treatment of contemporary united front work, the CCP's technique for controlling social sectors through its chosen representatives.⁸

The signing away of Italy's national interest in favour of Xi's BRI signalled the ripeness of CCP-moulded common sense. CCP propaganda idioms and talking points — the "Maritime Silk Road", "linking" BRI to EU strategy, "mutually beneficial" cooperation — adopted in official communiqués and documents, show how an ideology of submission percolates into prestigious officialese and becomes the default of policy options.⁹ Once adopted by mainstream figures, CCP memes become the propaganda of the non-propagandists.

⁸Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, ed. by Valentino Gerratana, Einaudi, 1977, Quaderno 8, §173, p. 1045; Gerry Groot, "Managing transitions: the Chinese Communist Party's united front work, minor parties and groups, hegemony and corporatism", PhD thesis, University of Adelaide, 1997, pp. 21 sqq. et passim. On the evolving meaning of 'common sense' in Gramsci's work, broader than the one used by Groot and here, see Giuseppe Cospito, "Senso comune/buon senso", *Materialismo storico* 2 (2018). On united front work, see 1.5 below; on managed corporatist representation as seen by the Grootian tradition, Ray Wang & Gerry Groot, "Who Represents? Xi Jinping's Grand United Front Work, Legitimation, Participation and Consultative Democracy", *Journal of Contemporary China* 27.112 (2018).

⁹"Memorandum d'intesa tra il Governo della Repubblica Italiana e il Governo della Repubblica Popolare Cinese sulla collaborazione nell'ambito della "Via della Seta economica" e dell' "Iniziativa per una Via della Seta marittima del 21° secolo", Governo Italiano, Mar. 2019. A draft of the latest triennial plan for strengthening cooperation between the PRC and Italy continued to use similar language (Gabriele Carrer & Laura Harth, "Addio Via della Seta? Non così in fretta. Il documento esclusivo diretto a P. Chigi", Formiche, 15th June 2021).



0.1.2 Spectra of cooption: Frenemies as influence targets

Global influence work extends to the outside world methods the CCP employs in the territory it controls.¹⁰ These mechanisms surround the party ‘vanguard’ with concentric layers of disposable subordinates, proxies, allies and circumstantially useful entities. Foreign ‘friends’ mostly inhabit the outer reaches of this extended influence apparatus.¹¹

As cooption extends away from the centre, each component of the party’s relationship with its influence targets spans a spectrum towards weaker control. A cooptee may financially depend on party-led agencies, vaguely expect future benefit, or act independently of or inadvertently contrary to their economic interest. They may directly work for CCP influence organs, unknowingly cooperate with their fronts and proxies, or align themselves with their goals thanks to indirect influence on a broader environment.

‘Frenemies’ — those least directly, often unwittingly coopted into influence operations — are more valuable tools the further a target environment is from the domain of enforcement of totalitarian control. In open societies abroad, where the party lacks the coercive power required to control media and education, the stereotypical ‘friend of China’ who faithfully relays domestic propaganda comes across as a comic mouthpiece and reaches only a fringe of public and elite opinion. On the other hand, voices generally critical of the party’s domestic rule but aligned with party narratives and policy objectives concerning a local target at a given time, can bring propaganda content into the ‘neutral’ mainstream. When such credible voices legitimise CCP proxies or partially endorse party talking points, they incorporate propaganda into the common sense assumptions of local discourse on China. Retired diplomats, consultants or state-media interviewees promoting Xi Jinping’s prose or whitewashing his genocidal policies may cater to a small, if growing, audience that needs little convincing. Yet mainstream politics, media and think tanks are far more effective propaganda proxies if they advocate for, say, Xi’s ‘Belt and Road’ scheme while expressing disagreement with one-party rule, censorship or reeducation camps.

Coopting credibly ‘neutral’ voices and mainstreaming ‘friends’ are thus equally important to influence work that aspires to shape the mainstream discourse and policy options of a target polity. The importance of the mainstream is reflected in the tactics deployed in influence operations targeting democratic societies. Rather than focus on employing mouthpieces, they seek to coopt credible elites as unwitting, loosely tethered proxies that normalise the party’s agenda and ostracise its critics as ‘extreme’.

¹⁰On this idea, see Martin Hála & Jichang Lulu, “The CCP’s model of social control goes global”, Sinopsis, 20th Dec. 2018.

¹¹On the CCP’s cultivation of foreign “friends”, see Anne-Marie Brady, *Making the foreign serve China: Managing foreigners in the People’s Republic*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, pp. 7 sqq. et passim.



0.1.3 Faux amis: Translating influence tactics into common-sense ‘diplomacy’

The methods of CCP influence work rarely fit into categories familiar from the external activity of democratic polities, which bureaucratically separate diplomacy, trade, defence and intelligence, and – in principle – delimit state functions from party politics, government from business, cooperation from hostility and the legal from the clandestine.

The very incommensurability of CCP and democratic external engagement creates a knowledge asymmetry further exploited in influence operations: targets unfamiliar with the PRC’s political system often take party-organised ‘NGOs’, ‘think tanks’, ‘dialogue’ or ‘friendship’ at face value. The use of front organisations and platforms relies on such *faux amis* to coopt foreign counterparts, framing operations as boxes for targets to check in their native officialdom: exchanges down semi-official ‘tracks’, ‘trade’ promotion, ‘conference’ tourism.¹²

‘Parliamentary diplomacy’, a common euphemism for influence operations targeting lawmakers, illustrates the *faux ami* tactic. The CCP-controlled National People’s Congress is not a ‘parliament’. Nor does cooption activity mediated by its delegates grant the foreign targets any diplomatic agency. European legislators may well believe to participate in equal exchanges with CCP-guided interlocutors, when their role in the exercise is that of targets of cultivation, recipients of tailored propaganda and legitimisers of the organs of a totalitarian political system.¹³

Asymmetric exchanges where the target conceives of the coopting agency as analogous to its lookalikes in the democratic world provide an advantageous setting for the cultivation of the mainstream of foreign élites. Targets go through the comfortable motions learnt in exchanges with democratic counterparts, unaware of the nature of party-led agencies targeting them as potential cooptees. CCP influence agencies can draw on superior knowledge of their targets, thanks to stable, dedicated bureaucracies specialised in their study. Cooption and propaganda activities, relying on party, army and state agencies’ information-gathering capabilities, can easily avoid institutional and media scrutiny, typically focused on superficial aspects of the party’s external work.

Influence operations by-pass institutional and social mechanisms meant to put foreign diplomatic bureaucracies under democratic oversight, moving much of a target country’s relationship with China to a domain where the party makes the rules.

¹²Martin Hála & Jichang Lulu, “Lost in translation: ‘Economic diplomacy’ with Chinese characteristics”, Sinopsis, 11th Mar. 2019.

¹³On a recent attempt to sell genocidal policy to Italian lawmakers under cover of ‘parliamentary diplomacy’, see Laura Harth, “Occhio! I parlamentari italiani rischiano di finire nella macchina della propaganda cinese”, Formiche, 15th Oct. 2021; eadem, “Here’s how Italian MPs risk aiding Chinese propaganda”, Formiche, 15th Oct. 2021.



0.1.4 Systems of influence: The party-led agencies behind cooption work

As with other major areas of activity in Leninist party-states, CCP influence work is not centralised in any single dedicated organ: multiple party, state and military agencies and their fronts engage in foreign influence as a variable component of their competencies, with overlapping goals, methods and targets under top-level guidance and supervision, rather than micro-managed coordination. Mapping the external influence operations of these swarms of agencies requires elucidating the larger institutional structures that tie them to the CCP's top leadership.

In today's PRC, bodies subordinate to the Politburo Standing Committee — the party's leading body, currently composed of seven members led by General Secretary Xi — coordinate **systems** of organs with related functions, making a system-based analysis most adequate for the study of multi-agency influence work.¹⁴ Recent research has used a system-based paradigm to analyse influence operations in Europe and elsewhere, as well as to describe the external activity of one of the CCP's main systems.¹⁵ General and country-focused studies of CCP influence work have shown the involvement of organs linked to multiple systems, highlighting the need for further system-based research.¹⁶

0.2 Scope of the study

This paper uses a system-based analysis to investigate interactions between Italian parliamentary groups and local politicians on one side, and CCP-linked entities on the other. Section 1 introduces the main PRC entities involved in these interactions, detailing their institutional position within the CCP-led political system and providing background on their operations abroad, in some cases adding previously unreported examples of their Italian activities. Section 2 presents two case studies on interactions between CCP-controlled agencies and Italian parliamentary groups. In section 3, an additional case study points to the extension of influence work to a less obvious, yet increasingly targeted domain: local governments. We conclude (sections 4 and 5) with summarised findings, perspectives for further research, and a set of policy recommendations.

The cases selected for this study focus on the Italian parliament as a target of CCP influence activity and stress the importance of a further target: local-level administrations. The study demonstrates the presence of entities from across the CCP-controlled political system in Italy, clarifying links to united front, propaganda, trade, foreign

¹⁴For a recent treatment of CCP organisational systems and their leadership, with references to earlier work, see Wen-Hsuan Tsai & Wang Zhou, "Integrated Fragmentation and the Role of Leading Small Groups in Chinese Politics", *The China Journal* 82 (2019). An essential account of cross-system linkages in CCP influence operations appeared in Mark Stokes & Russell Hsiao, "The People's Liberation Army General Political Department: Political Warfare with Chinese Characteristics", Project 2049, 14th Oct. 2013, pp. 31 sqq. The "systems of influence" turn of phrase we owe to Alex Joske.

¹⁵Joske, *op. cit.*; Mark Stokes, "Chinese Authoritarian Influence in the United States", *Insidious Power: How China Undermines Global Democracy*, ed. by Hsu Szu-Chien & J. Michael Cole, Eastbridge, 2020; Lulu, "Repurposing democracy".

¹⁶Brady, "Magic Weapons"; Clive Hamilton & Mareike Ohlberg, *Hidden hand: exposing how the Chinese Communist Party is reshaping the world*, Hardie Grant, 2020; Ralph Weber, "Unified message, rhizomatic delivery: A preliminary analysis of PRC/CCP influence and the united front in Switzerland", Sinopsis, 18th Dec. 2020.



affairs and intelligence agencies. It does not, however, claim to be an exhaustive, or even representative, presentation of CCP influence operations in Italy, a subject requiring further research. Neither did we aim to cover the entire history of the relations between the Italian political entities under study and CCP-linked agencies, focusing instead on recent interactions of on-going relevance. The three entities in our case studies (sections 2 and 3), a few we highlight in passing (e.g., pp. 25, 57), and yet others linked to the apparatus sketched in section 1 may all reward further empirical research with policy-relevant insights on the CCP's influence operations in Italy.

This brief aims to inform policy. The influence mechanisms it describes operate outside, or at the blurred frontier of, the state-to-state arena where democratic policy-makers may expect to interact with a foreign régime. Through these operations, a totalitarian party-state repurposes as tools of its expansionist policy democratic instruments it does not tolerate in its controlled territory: plural politics, locally-accountable institutions, competing interest groups, civil society organisations.

The knowledge asymmetry between these typically locally-focused actors and party-controlled agencies with a state's resources at its disposal creates a vulnerability these operations can effectively exploit. A lack of familiarity with the party's influence operations often works to the detriment of individuals unwittingly coopted for propaganda goals – much as such goals may run counter to their overall track record, as cases in this study demonstrate. Knowledge asymmetry lets politicians get coopted into circles of useful propagandists of trains-on-time totalitarian 'goodness'. This brief seeks to help undo the knowledge asymmetry that makes plural societies vulnerable to totalitarian influence work; it is, therefore, not to be read as criticism of the individuals or organisations mentioned in the study. By exposing the nature and goals of the party-led agencies behind these operations, our research instead highlights the risks of naïve collaboration with totalitarian influence, hopefully helping stakeholders build the informed preparedness that interactions with today's China demand.

Einaudi's motto – *conoscere per deliberare*¹⁷ – could inform the construction of mechanisms that make potential targets (politicians, parties, institutions) aware of the logic of CCP influence work. The same public knowledge of these operations could subject those who choose to give their informed consent to the objectives of the CCP's influence agencies to public scrutiny and accountability.

¹⁷Luigi Einaudi, "*Conoscere per deliberare*", *Prediche inutili*, Einaudi, 1964.



1 Dramatis personae: The CCP's political influence agencies and their Italian operations

Far from being centralised in one agency, CCP influence operations in Italy involve organs across party-state structures. This section presents a sample of influence agencies, focused on the ones covered in the case studies, adding background on their position within the political system as well as their activities targeting Italy.

These agencies largely fall under four of the CCP's main systems: **foreign affairs**, **finance and economy**, **propaganda** and **united front**, in some cases with further links to civilian and military **intelligence**. The omission of other agencies should not be taken to imply they are less active overall, or absent in Italy. Systems discussed here only in passing are otherwise central to foreign influence work. The **political and legal system** includes civilian security and intelligence agencies and their fronts.¹⁸ The **People's Liberation Army (PLA)** engages in influence work with often similar targets and methods to those of civilian agencies.¹⁹ The PLA intelligence links of a PRC energy company and its sister NGO made these influence operations particularly salient in the Czech Republic and at the United Nations.²⁰ That case further illustrates how private **business** can be as effective a tool of CCP policy as those under state ownership.²¹ In particular, political influence activities conducted by party-state agencies and the international expansion of PRC (state or private) technology companies support each other, a synergy illustrated in section 3.1.3.²²

1.1 The foreign affairs system: By-passing diplomacy to influence states

Under the "total diplomacy" concept, the CCP's foreign policy apparatus attaches as much importance to influence activities outside state-to-state channels as to the traditional diplomatic activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (外交部, MFA). That ministry is only a component of a system overseen by the party's Central Foreign Affairs Work Commission (中央外事工作委员会).²³ The foreign affairs system includes party organs and state agencies such as the MFA, as well as their front organisations. Continuing a Leninist tradition whose institutionalisation began in the 1920s, "friendly contacts" managed by party cadre allow the CCP to directly cultivate foreign elites even in the absence of good diplomatic relations.

¹⁸The Italian links of an organisation linked to intelligence agencies are noted in 1.4.1.

¹⁹The classical treatment of PLA liaison work is Stokes & Hsiao, *op. cit.* See 1.4.1 for the relevant links of an entity active in Italy.

²⁰Sinopsis & Jichang Lulu, "United Nations with Chinese characteristics: Elite capture and discourse management on a global scale", Sinopsis, 25th June 2018; Martin Hála, "United Front Work by Other Means: China's 'Economic Diplomacy' in Central and Eastern Europe", *China Brief* 19.9 (9th May 2019).

²¹In a generalised sense, business acts as a further system, no less organically active in CCP influence work than party, government and PLA agencies. Anne-Marie Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power*, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 134 sqq. introduced the concept of the "party-state-military-market nexus".

²²Huawei's European activities further demonstrate these synergies. See Martin Hála & Jichang Lulu, "Huawei's Christmas battle for Central Europe", Sinopsis, 28th Dec. 2018.

²³On the Commission's recent institutional history, see Charmian Goh et al., "Unbundling systems: Foreign affairs reform in China's provinces", Sinopsis, 11th Apr. 2021, p. 2 n. 3.



1.1.1 The ILD and the New Comintern

The **International Liaison Department (ILD, 中央对外联络部)** under the Central Committee is the main party organ in charge of exchanges with foreign elites outside state-to-state diplomacy. The ILD's main targets are foreign politicians and political parties, think tanks and academics, and NGOs. The public aspect of these contacts allows the CCP to build an image as a legitimate partner of democratic political life, a domestic and external propaganda achievement beyond the capabilities of other totalitarian parties. Less visibly, the ILD's dedicated units deploy expertise on targeted domains and locales to build relationships with key foreign individuals and entities that may eventually help align discourse and policy-making with CCP goals. Notably through its relationship with foreign think tanks, the ILD helps promote the party's geopolitical projects, such as Xi's 'Belt and Road' and other regional initiatives.²⁴

ILD interactions with foreigners typically consist of the exchange of visits with entities it treats as privileged interlocutors and the organisation of international events. As the ILD's first head once put it, stressing the "political character" of the task of entertaining delegations, its goal is "to 'brainwash' foreign guests, to the extent possible washing away through our work the mistakes, distortions and lack of understanding of New China generated by the influence of Western reactionary propaganda", so as to "expand our country's international united front".²⁵ His successor, current ILD head Song Tao 宋涛, notes that CCP foreign affairs work is a "sacred duty" based on "maintaining political security" that plays "an important role in consolidating party rule".²⁶ The ILD's struggle to "constantly expand our party's international 'circle of friends', creating high-level dialogues between the CCP and the world's political parties" and other "important platforms" helps "tell the CCP's story well, arousing an international 'CCP fever' and 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era fever'" that has "raised our party's global influence", "further increasing the numbers of those who understand and support us" against the "smears and slander" of "forces with ulterior motives".²⁷ "In each country, our party has old friends, true friends", some of whose exchanges with the party are the fruits of "seeds planted in their youth"; by now, they have become "important links promoting friendly co-operation".²⁸ "one after another, numerous friendly parties and political organisations abroad have stood for us on issues such as China-US trade frictions, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet, the South China Sea and the fight against the Covid pandemic, building strong international momentum in support of our party's righteous stance".²⁹

The ILD's Italian activity goes back to the CCP's relationship with the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI) and later the PCI's Maoist splinter group. The department employed some of the first students the PRC government sent abroad to learn Italian in the 1950s, who would mediate the CCP's exchanges with

²⁴On the ILD's role in BRI-themed propaganda and cooption activities, see Nadège Rolland, "Mapping the footprint of Belt and Road influence operations", Sinopsis, 12th Aug. 2019.

²⁵刘庚寅, "王稼祥与中共中央国际活动指导委员会", 百年潮 2 (2012).

²⁶宋涛, "赓续对外工作百年辉煌 服务中华民族伟大复兴", 求是 9 (2021).

²⁷"中共中央对外联络部部长宋涛访谈实录", 中国共产党新闻网, 22nd Oct. 2019.

²⁸孟祥麟, 黄发红 & 刘歌, "服务民族复兴 促进人类进步 (2019 年度国际特别报道)", 人民日报 (25th Dec. 2019).

²⁹宋涛, *op. cit.*



Italian communists and later an expanding range of political figures.³⁰ The ILD's 8th Bureau is its main unit targeting Western European politics. Italy falls within the purview of the bureau's Southern Europe Division, in recent years led by area specialists with Italian-language skills.³¹ ILD cadre have hosted and accompanied Italian political delegations to China, representing different parties, featuring both senior and – reflecting Song Tao's "planting seeds" dictum – young politicians.³² The department also maintains exchanges with united front-linked diaspora groups in Italy.³³

Through one of its fronts, the **China NGO Network for International Exchanges (CNIE, 中国民间组织国际交流促进会)**, the ILD coordinates some of the external activities of hundreds of Chinese government-organised NGOs (GONGOs).³⁴ A focus of CNIE's activity is the installation of the CCP's concept of human rights at the Human Rights Council and other international organisations, cooperating with front entities of other CCP agencies, such as CSHRS, discussed below.³⁵ In addition to its role in multi-agency influence work at international organisations, CNIE participates in the ILD's engagement with foreign think tanks, NGOs and other influential figures through its own platforms. In Italy, the **Centro Studi sulla Cina Contemporanea (CSCC)**, led by Alberto Bradanini, a former ambassador to China,³⁶ is a member of

³⁰The career of the ILD Italian translator Xia Fanglin illustrates this history. Xia studied abroad in the 1950s, was among ILD cadres interacting with the Italian Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) in the 1970s, and continued to accompany delegations to Italy as an interpreter in the 1980s. See Feng Ye, "L'apprendimento della morfologia verbale dell'italiano L2 in studenti sinofoni nel contesto universitario cinese", PhD thesis, Università degli Studi di Firenze, 2020, p. 36; 职莉莉, "中国意大利语教学的历史", 湖北广播电视大学学报 31.12 (Dec. 2011); "张春桥同志会见并宴请意共(马列)中央代表团", 人民日报, 24th Oct. 1974; "Delegazione cinese in Palazzo Vecchio", *l'Unità* (11th May 1980).

³¹Both Zhu Qiong 朱琼, division director as of 2019, and her predecessor Zou Jianjun 邹建军 are Italian translators with party publications on Italian communism ("中联部干部来校作公务员考录宣讲", 上海外国语大学学报 561 [5th Apr. 2016]; "旅葡侨团联合欢迎中国共产党代表团访问葡萄牙", 葡华报, via 微信, 8th Sept. 2019; "旅意福建华人华侨同乡总会热烈欢迎中共友好代表团 福建省友好代表团来访意大利", 旅意福建华人华侨同乡总会, 12th Sept. 2013; "重建共产党, 实现左翼联合(意大利)", 当代世界政党文献: 2012, ed. by 于洪君, via 共产党新闻网, 党建读物出版社, 2013; 邬勇 & 邹建军, "意大利共产党人党的社会主义观及实践", 当代世界与社会主义 4 [2020]). Zou was later promoted to deputy director of the bureau ("校领导会见意大利多党议员考察团", 重庆大学, 31st Oct. 2018). He appears in that capacity in one of our case studies (section 2.2.2).

³²"意大利民主党代表团到管城区进行考察社会主义新农村建设", 郑州市外办, 3rd Sept. 2012; "意大利民主党政治家考察团来我区考察", 常德经济技术开发区, 20th Oct. 2014; "校领导会见意大利多党议员考察团".

³³"旅意福建华人华侨同乡总会热烈欢迎中共友好代表团 福建省友好代表团来访意大利"; "意大利中国和平统一促进会设宴欢迎中联部代表团", 中国新闻网, 11th Mar. 2011.

³⁴CNIE is led by ILD cadres, effectively being managed as a bureau-level unit of the department. A fuller discussion of CNIE's institutional position and international activity is given in Jichang Lulu, "The CCP International Liaison Department's role in external influence operations", forthcoming.

³⁵"中促会协调中国民间组织代表团出席联合国人权理事会第 34 次会议", 中国民间组织国际交流促进会, 29th Mar. 2017.

³⁶Bradanini has become a frequent public commentator on China, often airing views aligned with CCP propaganda talking points. He has praised the PRC's "multipolar strategy", which "favours peace and balance in the world", offering the developing world a "Beijing Consensus" that promises "welfare and progress" instead of "submission" to the US (Alberto Bradanini, "La Repubblica Popolare di Cina e l'Italia festeggiano i loro primi 50 anni", CRI, 6th Nov. 2020; on the "multilateral" branding of CCP initiatives in external propaganda, see Sinopsis & Lulu, *op. cit.*). He counts Italy among developing countries, since it has become "subordinate to the US" and "renounced its institutional and monetary sovereignty" by "investing in the chimeric perspective" of the "United States of Europe" (Alberto Bradanini, "Belt and Road. Ex Ambasciatore Bradanini: Opportunità per l'Italia, considerando limiti strutturali", *Scenari Internazionali* [1st Oct. 2019]). On Xinjiang and what he calls "Uyghur terrorism", he refrains from denying the existence of reeducation camps, while calling BBC reporting on it "manipulated", since the press's priorities "must serve the dominant American-centric oligarchies" (Claudio Landi, "La condizione degli Uiguri in Cina. Intervista ad Alberto Bradanini", Radio Radicale, 31st July 2020). Cf. Poggetti, *op. cit.*



Figure 1: Seminar on “human rights” coorganised by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and ILD front CAFIU, March 2021. Source: CCTV.

one of these platforms, the ILD-led Silk Road NGO Cooperation Network (丝绸之路沿线民间组织合作网络, SIRONET).³⁷ CCP propaganda has quoted Bradanini’s praise of Xi’s initiative, highlighting CSCC’s role in researching BRI-themed cooperation between Europe and China.³⁸

The ILD’s primary front is the **China Association for International Understanding (CAFIU, 中国国际交流协会)**, set up in the early 1980s as the ILD failed to restore its control over the foreign affairs system’s main ‘friendship’ front, the CPAFFC.³⁹ Like other fronts, CAFIU is effectively a unit of the Department, led by career ILD cadres.⁴⁰ As its then secretary-general put it in 2014, it is “an urgent duty of our country’s people-to-people external exchanges” to “constantly improve the expression of China’s discourse power”, “especially in external propaganda work”; CAFIU’s “understanding and cooperation dialogue events”, attended by “current and former political leaders as well as famous specialist scholars and representatives of international organisations and non-government organisations”, some of whom have “repeatedly visited China” and “have a certain understanding of it” while others almost entirely lack it, require “design and differentiation” and attention to foreigners’ “questions and suggestions” in order to “increase the effectiveness of our external propaganda work”.⁴¹

In Europe, CAFIU partners include the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), a political foundation affiliated with the Social Democratic Party (SPD). A 2018 CAFIU-FES event attended by CAFIU’s secretary-general and FES then-leader Kurt Beck, a former SPD chair, shows the ILD front attending to those urgent needs: the “understanding” and “cooperation” vocabulary in its title reflected CAFIU’s framing of its activities; Beck was a useful partner, indeed a “former politician” who had shown “understanding”

³⁷Lulu, *op. cit.*; “成员单位”, SIRONET, 2nd Nov. 2017; “Consiglio direttivo”.

³⁸孔歌, “白达宁: “一带一路”倡议倡导的是一种不同以往的全球治理方案”, 人民网, 9th Sept. 2019.

³⁹Lulu, “Repurposing democracy”, p. 21 n. 105; 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; 刘庚寅, “怀念王炳南会长”, 金秋 2 (2019).

⁴⁰Lulu, “The CCP International Liaison Department’s role in external influence operations”.

⁴¹“与世界对话, 先让对方听明白”, 环球时报, via 人民网, 22nd July 2014.



of CCP wishes in his day, and still wielded “discourse power” as head of one of Germany’s largest political think tanks.⁴² FES’s collaboration with CAFIU has helped expand CCP discourse power at international organisations: the Foundation coorganised a side event at the 2021 session of the UN Human Rights Council, diluting the concept of human rights to embrace a “shared future” tolerant of totalitarian human rights violations.⁴³ A China trip by politicians, think-tankers and other elite figures from the Baltic States and Romania in 2016, where CAFIU acted the highest-level hosting agency, demonstrated the Association’s role in influence operations.⁴⁴ Estonian participants were so flattered by their treatment at the hands of CCP influence agencies that upon their return they disseminated propaganda on the PRC’s willingness to “share its vision with everybody”, since “nobody is too small [...] for China”.⁴⁵

Two case studies in section 2 illustrate the growing profile of ILD-partnered groups in the Italian parliament.

1.1.2 The CPAFFC and “friendship associations”

The Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC, 中国人民对外友好协会) is the CCP foreign affairs system’s main “people’s diplomacy” agency. The central-level organ, managed by, while not administratively subordinate to, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has equivalents at lower levels of administration, typically as nameplates used by local Foreign Affairs Offices.⁴⁶ The CPAFFC plays a key role in localised influence work, targeting subnational governments and other organisations abroad, managing sister-city relationships and building regional and global local government exchange platforms. It often serves as the first or primary contact for foreign targets, organising and funding their trips to China for interactions with other CCP agencies.⁴⁷ Previous research has studied aspects of its influence activities in the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Poland, the UK, New Zealand and the US.⁴⁸ The recently suspended European Parliament China Friendship Group was initiated by its secretary-general, a PRC national serving as assistant to MEPs, whose links to the CCP have included an advisor role at the Liaoning province equivalent of the CPAFFC.⁴⁹

The traditional partners of the CPAFFC and its Mao-era predecessors are “China friendship associations” whose establishment began in the late 1950s, initially as a new stage

⁴²“艾伯特基金会主席 Kurt Beck 访问北京暨艾会北京代表处首席代表交接仪式”, FES, 11th June 2018; cf. “Beck verlangt mehr Sensibilität gegenüber China”, *Der Spiegel* (20th May 2008).

⁴³The third coorganiser was CFHRD, a human rights front of the Central Propaganda Department discussed on p. 21 above.

⁴⁴Frank Jüris, “The CCP’s influence activities in Estonia”, forthcoming.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, “Kuidas hoomata tuhat korda suuremat rahvast?”, Urve Tiidus blog, June 2016.

⁴⁶On the CPAFFC’s institutional position and history, see Lulu, “Repurposing democracy”, p. 21 n. 105, and, in more detail, *idem*, “The Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries and its role in CCP influence operations”, forthcoming. On the CCP foreign affairs system (including friendship associations) at the province level, its current relationship with united front agencies, see Goh et al., *op. cit.*

⁴⁷Lulu, “Repurposing democracy”, pp. 20 sqq.

⁴⁸Olga Lomová, Jichang Lulu & Martin Hála, “Bilateral dialogue with the PRC at both ends: Czech-Chinese ‘friendship’ extends to social credit”, 28th July 2019; Didi Kirsten Tatlow, “Mapping China-in-Germany”, *Sinopsis*, 2nd Oct. 2019; Poggetti, *op. cit.*; Weber, *op. cit.*, pp. 39 sqq.; Łukasz Sarek, “The CPAFFC as the party-state’s guardian of Polish regions’ relations with China”, *Asia Explained*, 7th Dec. 2020; Hamilton & Ohlberg, *op. cit.*, ch. 7; Brady, “Magic Weapons”, p. 34; John Dotson, “China Explores Economic Outreach to U.S. States Via United Front Entities”, *China Brief* 19.12 (26th June 2019).

⁴⁹Lulu, *op. cit.* On the Liaoning People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, see Goh et al., *op. cit.*, p. 27.



in the evolution of the Moscow-centred system of friendship societies, later expanding into the CCP's own version of the network.⁵⁰ The fate of the historical China friendship associations in different countries has diverged, often leading the CPAFFC to seek more adequate interlocutors as their main partners, notably for subnational influence operations.⁵¹

The network's Italian node, the Italy-China Association (Associazione Italia-China), was established in 1962 as the CCP froze its links with the pro-Soviet PCI to cultivate its own circles of pro-Beijing Italians.⁵² A privileged interlocutor for decades,⁵³ the association appears to have declined in the 2010s, yielding that role to various similarly-themed organisations.⁵⁴ The Italy-China Friendship Association (ICFA), led by Irene Pivetti, a former speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, later emerged as a self-identified "Italian branch" of the CPAFFC, with a notable focus on subnational-level activity.⁵⁵ In 2019, the former environment minister Corrado Clini, long noted for his engagement with the PRC, emerged as president of a restored Italy-China Association at an event at the Chinese embassy, but no CPAFFC endorsement of this renewal is yet apparent.⁵⁶ While both Pivetti and Clini have since encountered legal hurdles that may diminish their long-term sustainability as partners,⁵⁷ CPAFFC materials have contin-

⁵⁰Lulu, "The Chinese People's Association..."

⁵¹Cf., e.g., the Czech and Polish cases, discussed in Lomová, Lulu & Hála, *op. cit.*; Lulu, *op. cit.*; Sarek, *op. cit.*

⁵²Mario Filippo Pini, *Italia e Cina, 60 anni tra passato e futuro*, L'Asino d'oro, 2011, p. 117. The association's early long-time leader, Giorgio Zucchetti, worked at Radio Peking's new Italian service, on which see n. 96 (*ibid.*, p. 116; 史克栋, "怀念'老祖'", 人民日报 [25th July 1997]; "In memoria di Giorgio Zucchetti", Associazione Italia-Cina). The association founded in 1962 was in fact a Perugia-based predecessor of the long-lived entity, set up by Zucchetti's relative Lanfranco Mencaroni while the former was still in Beijing (Pini, *op. cit.*, p. 108 n. 14; Sofia Graziani, "L'interesse politico-ideologico per la Cina di Mao sulla scia del contrasto sino-sovietico: alcune considerazioni sulla nascita dell'Associazione Italia-Cina (1962-1963)", Il Mulino, 2014, pp. 156, 168 sq.). Mencaroni's association maintained contacts with the CCP through the PRC's Berne embassy, meeting initial support followed by a more lukewarm attitude as Beijing's approach to the PCI evolved (*ibid.*, pp. 165 sqq.). By 1963, the CPAFFC's predecessor organisation distanced itself from the Perugia association's claims of being represented by Zucchetti in China (*ibid.*, pp. 167 sq.).

⁵³See, e.g., "李恩求会见并宴请意中友协代表团", 人民日报, 10th Nov. 1974; "欧洲各国对华友协举行第十届年会", 人民日报, 16th Nov. 1988.

⁵⁴The Association's last known president, Vittoria Mancini, appointed in 2006, received a CPAFFC award in 2010 ("中国驻意大利大使夫人孙国琴出席罗马中文学校春节联欢会", 驻意大利共和国大使馆, 1st Feb. 2006; "Nuovo presidente Associazione Italia-Cina", Travelnostop, 27th Sept. 2006; "中意友好贡献奖", CPAFFC). Rare public appearances afterwards suggest a lower profile. See, e.g., "罗马温州工商总会举行换届庆典 梁世侠任会长", 中国新闻网, 14th June 2012; Gaetano Mocciano, "Vittoria Mancini (pres. Associazione Italia-Cina): 'La tv ha portato il calcio nella cultura cinese. Juve, la più amata'", TuttoJuve.com, 7th Aug. 2012; Mariela Morosi, "Expo, un ponte ideale tra Roma e Pechino per promuovere gli scambi turistic", Italia a Tavola, 9th Dec. 2014. In 2010, Radio Peking's successor appeared to switch a partnership from the Italy-China Association, founded by one of the first workers of its Italian service, to the higher-profile Italy-China Foundation: its Radio Confucius Classroom in Rome unveiled the classroom's nameplate with the Association as partner in late 2009, to then sign an agreement with the Foundation to actually establish it ("Roma: scoperta la targa dell'Aula Radiofonica Confucio", CRI, 27th Oct. 2009; "Aula Radiofonica Confucio CRI-Uni-Italia", CRI, 19th Apr. 2011; cf. "Aula Radiofonica Confucio CMG(CRI) - Uni-Italia", Uni-Italia). On the Foundation, see p. 57.

⁵⁵On ICFA, see Poggetti, *op. cit.*, pp. 14 sq. Following Poggetti's work, a longer profile appeared in Toshi Yoshihara & Jack Bianchi, "Uncovering China's influence in Europe: how friendship groups coopt European elites", CSBA, 2020, pp. 15 sqq.

⁵⁶"2019 留华毕业生联谊会会在罗马举行", 驻意大利共和国大使馆, 16th Dec. 2019; Corrado Clini, "Riparte l'associazione Italia-Cina, il calcio d'inizio di Corrado Clini", Lettera43, 17th Dec. 2019. On Clini's China ties, see "Biografia", Official Website del Prof. Corrado Clini; "China Daily premia il lavoro di Corrado Clini", Affaritaliani, 20th June 2017; Fiorenza Sarzanani, "I finanziari: l'ex ministro riceveva tangenti da uffici «fantasma» a Pechino", Corriere.it, 8th Oct. 2014.

⁵⁷Giovanni Ciolina, "Mascherine importate dalla Cina, sequestrato 1,2 milioni di euro alla Pivetti", *La Stampa* (9th Sept. 2020); Manuele Bonaccorsi, "Questione di zeri", Report (Rai 3), 31st May 2021; Lorenzo



ued to refer to an entity recently collaborating with its subnational interactions as a local “friendship association”, suggesting it is now seen as a key Italian counterpart.⁵⁸ This new CPAFFC partner, the Italy China Link Association, is discussed in section 3 of this study.

Like the ILD, the CPAFFC maintains a network of fronts to support its cooption activities. Among these, the **Belt and Road Local Cooperation Committee (BRLC, “一带一路”地方合作委员会)** has achieved particular success in Italy. The BRLC is an organization jointly launched in 2017 by the Hangzhou government and the CPAFFC, whose declared goal is to boost cooperation among local governments along the Silk Road.⁵⁹ The BRLC’s secretary-general, Zhou Shu 周澍, concurrently leads the Hangzhou’s Foreign Affairs Office and previously headed Taizhou and Hangzhou’s propaganda departments.⁶⁰ Her background in the propaganda system, coupled with the strong role of the CPAFFC, makes the BRLC a project more orientated towards the promotion of the CCP’s narratives abroad than to the economic cooperation between local governments.

1.2 The economic system: Trade promotion as a by-word for political influence

Reflecting the CCP’s post-Cultural Revolution incorporation of capitalism into Leninism (“reform and opening”), external influence operations exploit foreign perceptions of PRC economic expansion to enlist business-focused voices into propaganda narratives. In some locales, ‘economic diplomacy’ has emerged as a meme summarising policies that advocate appeasement of totalitarian expansionism as a fair price to pay for trade and investment opportunities. Those very locales’ paltry record in economic relations with China points to the purpose of the meme: engineering a perception of economic benefit costs the CCP less than the concessions a balanced trade relationship would entail. The meme has achieved particular success in Italy’s mainstream public discourse over the past years, notwithstanding the growing trade deficit and lack of visible economic benefits from the 2019 agreement on BRI.⁶¹

The CCP finance and economics system, led by the Central Financial and Economic Affairs Commission (中央财经委员会), oversees agencies including the ministries of commerce and finance. Like other components of the party-state apparatus, the economic system maintains fronts through which the CCP can target foreign interest

d’Albergo, “Roma, la Corte dei conti all’ex ministro Corrado Clini: “Restituisca 64mila euro””, *La Repubblica* (22nd Apr. 2017); Francesco Salvatore, “Tangenti, ex ministro Clini condannato a 6 anni per una mazzetta da un milione di euro”, *La Repubblica* (26th Mar. 2021).

⁵⁸The CPAFFC and state media have at times used the Chinese term for friendship association (友好协会) to translate the names of foreign CPAFFC counterparts whose original-language names did not use an equivalent. Such has been the case with one of its Czech partners (Lomová, Lulu & Hála, *op. cit.*). The name of Zucchetti’s association, which contains no ‘friendship’, was frequently translated as if it did (see, e.g., “友好往来”, *人民日报*, 15th June 1979; “意中友协选出新的领导机构成员”, *人民日报*, 17th Jan. 1986. State media even used the name in 1961, before the association’s establishment, presumably referring to the China Study Centre led by former prime minister Ferruccio Parri (“陈毅外长接见意中友好协会代表团”, *人民日报*, 14th June 1961; cf. Yang Lin [杨琳], “L’influenza della delegazione culturale italiana in Cina del 1955 nelle relazioni sino-italiane”, *Monti ed Acque: uno sguardo sulla Cina* [20th Sept. 2019]).

⁵⁹“城地组织亚太区“一带一路”地方合作委员会简介”, BRLC, 10th Sept. 2019.

⁶⁰“城地组织亚太区“一带一路”地方合作委员会组织架构”, BRLC, 17th Dec. 2019; “杭州市外办主任周树会见香港客人”, 杭州网, 24th Apr. 2020.

⁶¹“Osservatorio Economico, Scheda di Sintesi: Cina”, Ministero degli Affari esteri e della Cooperazione internazionale.



groups while diluting the political nature of the exchanges. Trade promotion activities offer an ideal platform to cultivate business interests whose support for CCP-friendly policies can be particularly effective. Such trade-themed exchanges, fully managed by the PRC side, can also be welcomed by foreign governments, especially at the local level: they offer officials a shortcut to an image as facilitators of economic opportunity without the expertise and effort a national-interest based business promotion strategy would require. In extreme cases, the vocabulary of business opportunity has served to publicise policies of subordination to the CCP that simply gave target-country societies outside a circle of PRC lobbyists no economic benefit: “economic diplomacy” became a euphemism for political influence.⁶²

1.2.1 CCPIT and “China chambers of commerce”

The **China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT, 中国国际贸易促进会)**, linked, if not formally subordinate, to the Ministry of Commerce, is a trade-themed “people’s diplomacy” organ modelled on Soviet operations targeting Western business. Today, CCPIT is especially active in the cultivation of foreign businesses, subnational politics and the legal profession.⁶³ CCPIT-controlled agencies include the **China Chamber of International Commerce (CCOIC, 中国国际商会)**, whose role abroad a State Council circular once described as analogous to that of the central united front organ devoted to the cooption of business representatives in the PRC.⁶⁴ Typically, CCPIT’s main partners abroad are business associations and law firms. Among its partners in the business sector, a network of similarly structured associations stands out: often named ‘China chamber of commerce’, they gather together local businesses with interest in China and representatives of large PRC state and private companies, participate in CCPIT activities and initiatives, and often overlap with other networks linked to CCP influence agencies. CCPIT further contributes to the CCP’s drive to coopt international organisations through front entities presented as independent, such as one the PRC once tried to pass off as an NGO at the UN.⁶⁵ In Europe, the activity of CCPIT and its partners is discussed in recent studies on influence activities in Switzerland, Belgium, Poland and the European Parliament.⁶⁶

CCPIT’s presence in Italy is centred on its representative office in Milan, whose leading cadre interact with Italian officials and business representatives, often at the local level. Nationally, the agency has gained official recognition by appearing as an apolitical equivalent of Italian counterparts. The Italian Trade Agency (ICE) signed an agreement with CCPIT in 1999, aiming at “closer collaboration in promotional activities and joint programmes on fairs and exhibitions”.⁶⁷ The latest draft triennial plan for strengthening cooperation 2021-2023 between the PRC and Italy confirmed this ongoing cooperation, asserting both parties would “continue to support” the CCPIT representative office’s trade and investment promotion activities, again diluting the agency’s political influence agenda by presenting it as analogous to ICE.⁶⁸ In 2005,

⁶²Hála, *op. cit.*

⁶³On CCPIT’s Soviet roots and current roles, see Lulu, “Repurposing democracy”, pp. 24 sqq.

⁶⁴“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; cf. Gerry Groot, “Understanding the Role of Chambers of Commerce and Industry Associations in United Front Work”, *China Brief* 11 (19th June 2018).

⁶⁵Andréa Worden, “The CCP at the UN: Redefining development and rights”, Sinopsis, 17th Mar. 2019; cf. Rolland, *op. cit.*, pp. 21 sq.

⁶⁶Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 25 n. 129, 54 sqq.; Lulu, *op. cit.*, p. 26; and forthcoming Sinopsis studies.

⁶⁷Giampiero Di Santo, “Fassino chiede tutela alla Cina”, *ItaliaOggi* 055 (6th Mar. 1999).

⁶⁸Carrer & Harth, *op. cit.*



UnionCamere, the public entity that serves as an umbrella body representing chambers of commerce, signed a cooperation agreement with CCPIT.⁶⁹

CCPIT has a key partner in the Italy-China Chamber of Commerce (Camera di Commercio Italo-Cinese, CCIC),⁷⁰ a partnership witnessed by a CCPIT representative's honorary membership of the CCIC board.⁷¹ The CCIC is one of the high-level exchange bodies established in the 1970s, with Italy's diplomatic recognition of the PRC.⁷² Today, CCIC draws its leadership from the Italian manufacturing, service and legal sectors, as well as Italian representatives of major PRC companies such as Alibaba and ZTE.⁷³ It maintains partnerships with Italian business associations: the CCPIT-partnered public body UnionCamere and the Italian Chamber of Commerce in China (Camera di Commercio Italiana in Cina, 中国意大利商会), officially recognised by both states and also a CCPIT interlocutor.⁷⁴ CCIC's partnership with CCPIT is further reflected at the transnational level: CCIC's secretary-general is a vice chair of the EU-China Business Association (EUCBA, 欧盟中国贸易协会), a Belgium-based partner in turn linked to similar China chambers elsewhere.⁷⁵

A case study in section 3 illustrates CCPIT's interactions with local governments in Italy, mediated by an intermediary also partnered with the CPAFFC.

1.3 The propaganda system: Implanting the truth in everyone's head

Propaganda, understood as mass communication serving party goals, is among the central aspects of Leninist party work expanded as part of the post-Mao CCP's absorption of new ideas and technologies. Naïve views of propaganda as limited to the party's overt praise of itself ignore its most important component in adverse discourse domains – such as most abroad – where party mouthpieces lack credibility and coercive censorship tools have limited use. Beyond the fringe audience of the overt party cult, propaganda tools target the full discourse landscape to marginalise critical views and define an innocuous “neutrality” as media background noise that does not challenge party policy. Ensuring that “[the party's] truth penetrates into everyone's head”⁷⁶ is as essential as ensuring that an uninterested majority rejects scrutiny challenging the

⁶⁹ L' *Italia nell'economia internazionale: Rapporto ICE 2006-2007*, ICE, p. 510.

⁷⁰ The remainder of this paragraph incorporates unpublished research by Jan Vlček.

⁷¹ “Consiglio”, CCIC.

⁷² “意大利”, EUCBA; “周恩来、王国权会见意大利前外贸部长科隆博”, 人民日报, 22nd Nov. 1971.

⁷³ “Consiglio”.

⁷⁴ “Il nostro network”, CCIC; “Chi siamo”, UnionCamere; “La Nostra Organizzazione”, 中国意大利商会; “CCPIT Beijing”, 中国意大利商会; “Notice on the Cooperation between Italian Enterprises and Hebei Province”, 中国意大利商会, July 2020.

⁷⁵ “Representatives”, EUCBA; “Consiglio”. CCIC is also an EUCBA “platinum partner” (“Partners”, EUCBA). The partnership between CCPIT and EUCBA has included an agreement to “hold annual working meetings” and exchange visits, as well as cooperating to organise a high-level event (“CCPIT and EUCBA sign cooperation agreement”, *EUCBA Bulletin* 2 [2016], p. 14; “林红红副部长会见欧盟中国贸易协会秘书长”, CCPIT, 28th Nov. 2016; “Participants”, EU-China Business Summit; “10th EU-China Business Summit held in Brussels in June”, *EUCBA Bulletin* 1 [2015], p. 10). Examples of the overlap between CCPIT and EUCBA's networks are the Deutsch-Chinesische Wirtschaftsvereinigung (DCW, CCPIT's self-described “official German partner”) and the Austrian Chinese Business Association (ACBA) (“EUCBA”, DCW; “CCPIT”, DCW; “Austria; “Präsident der ACBA besuchte CCPIT”, ACBA, 5th Dec. 2016; “ACBA und CCPIT unterzeichnen Kooperationsabkommen”, ACBA, 26th Sept. 2018; cf. Geoff Wade, “Austria: Online economic & trade cooperation forum...”, Twitter, 29th May 2021).

⁷⁶ В.И. Ленин, “Доклад Центрального Комитета на IX Съезде РКП(б)”, *Полное собрание сочинений*, 5th ed., vol. 40, Государственное издательство политической литературы, 1974, p. 252.



party as a no less “polarised” extreme than the most florid panegyrics of the party’s leaders.⁷⁷

External propaganda (‘exoprop’, 对外宣传) is a major component of propaganda work, with dedicated agencies including foreign-language media outlets, dedicated organs under propaganda units — such as the ministries of education, and culture and tourism — and foreign outposts such as Confucius Institutes.⁷⁸

Italy has seen the propaganda system progress towards penetrating a foreign media space: perhaps most symbolically, in 2019 a mainstream news channel led by an outspoken critic of the CCP’s management of the Covid pandemic aired a propaganda documentary produced as part of Xi Jinping’s personality cult. The fact that the CCP-critical media executive was personally, publicly thanked by a deputy head of the Central Propaganda Department highlights the importance the party’s propaganda apparatus attaches to the legitimacy credibly “neutral” platforms can confer.

1.3.1 The Propaganda Department and its fronts

The increased centrality of propaganda is reflected in the size and power of the party’s propaganda apparatus, forming a bureaucratic system led at the central level by the Propaganda and Thought Work Leading Small Group, currently chaired by Politburo Standing Committee member Wang Huning 王沪宁, and coordinated by the **Propaganda Department (中央宣传部)** under the Central Committee.

The **State Council Information Office (SCIO, 国务院新闻办公室)**, ostensibly a government organ, is in fact simply a nameplate the Propaganda Department uses for some of its activities. For much of its history, SCIO was an external name used by the Office of External Propaganda (OEP, 中央对外宣传办公室) under the CCP Central Committee.⁷⁹ OEP was absorbed into the Central Propaganda Department in 2014.⁸⁰ Even after the abolition of the central OEP, in some cases analogous organs have continued to exist at the subnational level, at least in name.⁸¹ Sichuan Province offers an example: as late as 2021, the province party committee still maintained an Office of External Propaganda, with the Sichuan People’s Government Information Office (SCIO’s provincial analogue) as its state nameplate, headed by a deputy head of the province’s propaganda department.⁸²

⁷⁷On “neutrality” and a perception of “polarisation” as CCP propaganda desiderata in a contemporary European context, see Lulu, *op. cit.*, pp. 6 sq., 41.

⁷⁸On CCP propaganda, its history and institutions, see, e.g., David Shambaugh, “China’s Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy”, *The China Journal* 57 (2007); Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2007; James Farley & Matthew D. Johnson, eds., *Propaganda and Security from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping: Struggling to Defend China’s Socialist System*, Routledge, 2020. For a comprehensive treatment of CCP external propaganda, see Mareike Ohlberg, “Creating a favorable international public opinion environment: External propaganda (duiwai xuanchuan) as a global concept with Chinese characteristics”, PhD thesis, University of Heidelberg, 6th Mar. 2013. On the Confucius Institutes historical and current relationship with the CCP propaganda system, see Jichang Lulu & Filip Jirouš, “The CCP International Liaison Department’s operations in the Czech Republic”, Sinopsis, forthcoming.

⁷⁹Ohlberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 305 sqq. et passim.

⁸⁰Jichang Lulu, Filip Jirouš & Rachel Lee, “Xi’s centralisation of external propaganda: SCIO and the Central Propaganda Department”, Sinopsis, 25th Jan. 2021.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, p. 7 n. 26.

⁸²*Ibid.*, p. 7 n. 26; “解读省委十一届七次全会精神新闻发布会”, 四川省人民政府, 13th July 2020; “四川发布干部任前公示: 李晓骏拟任正厅级领导职务”, 四川日报, via 新华网, 14th Apr. 2021.



Operations conducted under the SCIO flag include the propaganda system's contribution to the global installation of the party's concept of "human rights", euphemistically understood as the rights of rulers.⁸³ CCP-controlled agencies, often misleadingly presented as NGOs to foreign audiences, use the acquiescence of foreign individuals and institutions as endorsements of the CCP's totalitarian rule, specifically its repressive policies in Tibet and Xinjiang.⁸⁴ The **China Foundation for Human Rights Development (CFHRD, 中国人权发展基金会)** is one of the Central Propaganda Department's human rights-themed front organisations.⁸⁵ CFHRD is supervised by the Central Propaganda Department.⁸⁶ Its secretary-general's previous post was at the National Propaganda Cadres Academy (全国宣传干部学院).⁸⁷ CFHRD's head, Huang Mengfu 黄孟复, is a prominent united front figure and a dual member of the CCP and one of its ancillary parties, of which his grandfather was the first chair.⁸⁸ The foundation's propaganda activities include organising human rights events and sending delegations abroad for exchanges that often go unnoticed by local media abroad. Foreign tours have taken CFHRD representatives to, e.g., the US, Egypt, the UK, Hungary, Austria, Greece, the Czech Republic and Italy.⁸⁹ CFHRD recently obtained special consultative status at the United Nations Economic and Social Council and began making interventions at the Human Rights Council as a "civil society" organisation.⁹⁰

Interactions between CCP propaganda agencies, including the Sichuan Office of External Propaganda and CFHRD, and Italian politicians and journalists are noted in section 2.2.2.

⁸³This paragraph incorporates unpublished research by Roman Leuchter and Filip Jirouš.

⁸⁴Andréa 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.

⁸⁵CFHRD's activities overlap with those of the China Society for Human Rights Studies (CSHRS, 中国人权研究会), a front of the Propaganda Department's Human Rights Affairs Bureau, formerly of the OEP's 7th Bureau (Ohlberg, *op. cit.*, p. 460; Lulu, Jirouš & Lee, *op. cit.*; Worden, *op. cit.*; Titus C. Chen, "A flamboyant mandarin in a declining liberal order: China's revisionist agenda in global human rights institutions", SSRN, 12th June 2019; Geoffrey Roberts, "One Chinese GONGO's War against Global Human Rights", China Change, 1st May 2020). CSHRS has received funding through CFHRD ("中国人权研究会简介", 中国人权网, 17th June 2014). CFHRD and CSHRS often coorganise events ("中国人权发展基金会", 中国人权网, 10th Sept. 2018; "坚定不移追求中国人权梦 推动国际人权事业健康发展", 外交部, 17th Sept. 2014; "黄孟复在'2018·北京人权论坛'开幕式上的致辞", 国务院新闻办公室, 18th Sept. 2018).

⁸⁶"中国人权发展基金会章程", 中国人权发展基金会.

⁸⁷"中国人权发展基金会与光明网签署战略合作协议", 中国人权发展基金会, 17th Mar. 2021; "中国人权发展基金会副理事长兼秘书长 门立军", 中国人权发展基金会; cf. "第六期市(地、州、盟)党委宣传部副部长培训班举办", 全国宣传干部学院, 26th Apr. 2019; "学院简介", 全国宣传干部学院, 20th May 2014.

⁸⁸"2019年度工作报告", 中国人权发展基金会, p. 9; "学院举办'文华图书室'开幕暨揭幕仪", 北京培黎职业学院, 15th Mar. 2021; "中国人权发展基金会第三届理事会第一次会议在京召开", 新华社, via 中国政府网, 23rd Dec. 2016; "黄孟复当选中国人权发展基金会理事长", 中国新闻网, via Sina, 18th Jan. 2008; "黄孟复", 中国政府网, 11th Mar. 2013. On Huang's grandfather Huang Yanpei 黄炎培 and his role at the National Construction Association, see "黄炎培同志简历", 中国民主建国会, 14th Aug. 2008; Groot, "Managing transitions", pp. 100 sq.

⁸⁹"第九届中美司法与人权研讨会在纽约举行", 人民网, 31st Oct. 2019; "U.S.-China Track II Dialogue on the Rule of Law & Human Rights", National Committee on United States-China Relations; "中国人权发展基金会代表团访问埃及", 中国新闻网, 23rd Nov. 2019; 桂涛, "中国人权发展基金会代表团访问英国", via 中国人权发展基金会, 29th Sept. 2017; 袁亮, "中国人权发展基金会代表团访问匈牙利", 新华, via 中国政府网, 18th July 2019; 于涛, "中国人权发展基金会代表团访问奥地利", 人民日报, 21st July 2019; "2018年", 中国人权研究会, 12th Feb. 2018; 王义, "中国人权发展基金会代表团访问捷克", via 中国人权发展基金会, 27th Sept. 2017.

⁹⁰"Report of the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations on its 2020 regular session", UN Economic and Social Council, E/2020/32 (Part I), 7th Feb. 2020; "Human Rights Council Holds Separate General Debates on Human Rights Bodies and Mechanisms and on the Universal Periodic Review", UN Human Rights, 18th Mar. 2021.



1.3.2 Media organs and “borrowed boats”

A key propaganda organ’s successful insertion of CCP narratives into mainstream Italian media, in collaboration with non-CCP aligned local voices, illustrates how a poor understanding of the CCP propaganda system among its foreign interlocutors allows it to acquire the legitimacy and credibility it needs to shape “middle-ground” perceptions of China.

China Media Group (CMG, 中央广播电视总台), led by a deputy head of the Propaganda Department, is a propaganda unit set up in 2018 to absorb three previously separate domestic and foreign broadcasters.⁹¹ CMG’s mission is to “propagate the party’s theory and line, principles and policies, tell China’s story well, and promote the development of the party and state’s cause”.⁹²

CMG’s external propaganda units’ furtherance of this mission includes propagating CCP-aligned statements by prestigious figures, so as to build a perception of an international endorsement of the regime. The International Olympic Committee’s president’s recent “exclusive” comments to CMG, in which he “spoke highly of Xi”, provide an example, meant to counter opposition to Beijing hosting the games with praise of “Chinese dynamism, determination and efficiency”.⁹³

CMG’s pursuit of its mission has achieved notable success in Italy. In 2019, CMG signed agreements with three major Italian mainstream media groups: the public radio and television broadcaster RAI, its private competitor Mediaset, and Class Editori, a private media conglomerate that publishes newspapers and magazines and owns television stations.⁹⁴ During Xi Jinping’s 2019 visit to Italy, these three groups launched a “Week of Chinese TV”, broadcasting curated CMG content, including the Italian-language version of *The Literary Citations of Xi Jinping* (平“语”近人——习近平总书记用典), produced by CMG and the Central Propaganda Department.⁹⁵

One of the broadcasters now subsumed under CMG is **China Radio International (CRI, 中国国际广播电台)**.⁹⁶ CRI has had mixed success in its attempts to build a

⁹¹“中共中央印发《深化党和国家机构改革方案》”, 新华, via gov.cn, 21st Mar. 2018; “慎海雄: 惟有信任才能合作 惟有合作才会共赢”, CCTV, via 人民网, 3rd Feb. 2021.

⁹²“国家事业单位登记管理局公告”, 国家事业单位登记管理局, 26th Dec. 2019. The mission statement is composed of common tropes in contemporary CCP propaganda language. The first two phrases occur, e.g., in Xi’s speech at the first National Propaganda and Through Work Conference of his tenure (“习近平: 胸怀大局把握大势着眼大事 努力把宣传思想工作做得更好”, 人民日报, via 中国共产党新闻网, 21st Aug. 2013).

⁹³“Beijing 2022 one year to go: IOC chief hails prospects for successful Winter Olympics”, CGTN, 4th Feb. 2021. See Andréa Worden, “Xi’s China dream versus the Olympic dream: Beijing 2022 and the CCP’s ‘mutually beneficial’ relationship with the IOC president”, Sinopsis, 7th July 2021.

⁹⁴Poggetti, *op. cit.*, p. 17; “中央广播电视总台与意大利克拉斯传媒集团签署合作谅解备忘录”, CCTV.com, Via news.qq, 26th June 2019; ““中国电视周”在意大利举行”, CMG, via 搜狐, 23rd Mar. 2019; “Firmato MoU con China Media Group”, RAI, 22nd Mar. 2019; Harth, “Cosi la macchina di propaganda cinese penetra nei media italiani”; Michelin, *op. cit.*

⁹⁵““中国电视周”在意大利举行”; “In corso in Italia la Settimana della TV Cinese”, CRI, 23rd Mar. 2019; 沈忠浩, “《平“语”近人——习近平喜欢的典故》(意大利语版)开播上线”, 新华, via gov.cn, 22nd Mar. 2019; “Italia: lanciata la versione in lingua italiana di “Citazioni letterarie di Xi Jinping””, RadioWe, 21st Mar. 2019 (on RadioWe, see 孙运之, “用本土化方式让所在国人们倾听中国声音”, 温州都市报 (2nd Nov. 2018); 周大正 & 舒展波, “温商意大利打造融媒矩阵 17 家电台全天候开播”, 温州网, via 浙江在线, 26th Mar. 2019). On the *Citations* propaganda documentary, see “人民网评: 从“平“语”近人”中读懂总书记深沉情怀”, 人民网, via 央视网, 9th Oct. 2018; 黄小希, “守正道 创新局——党的十九大以来宣传思想文化工作述评”, 人民日报, 6th Jan. 2019.

⁹⁶CRI traces its origins to the CCP’s first foreign-language broadcasts from its base in Yan’an, a weekly programme in Japanese read by Hara Kiyoko 原清子 (also known as Hara Kiyoshi (Yuan Qingzhi) 原清



Figure 2: Still from TGCOM24's airing of the Italian version of a documentary coproduced by the Central Propaganda Department. Source: CRI.

global network of ostensibly independent, foreign-language affiliates, using a tactic known as “borrowing a boat to go out to sea” (借船出海), with some collapsing after the exposure of their state links.⁹⁷

Thanks to its recent cooperation with major media organisations, CRI has ‘borrowed’ its way into the Italian mainstream, after decades of activity largely limited to its own Italian-language output. The Italian service of what was then known as Radio Peking began in 1960, cooperating with the PCI until the ideological split between the parties.⁹⁸ The early months of the Covid-19 pandemic saw a breakthrough in CRI’s ability to shape Italian perceptions of China, with RAI and Mediaset TV programmes featuring frequent reports on the situation in China by CRI journalists.⁹⁹ The collaboration with Mediaset, publicly praised by the Propaganda Department cadre responsible for CMG, crucially legitimised CCP narratives in a “middle-ground” position: the Mediaset channel’s director, personally thanked by the propaganda cadre, has been an

志). See 水谷尚子, 「反日」以前: 中国对日工作者たちの回想, 文藝春秋, 2006, pp. 36, 41 sqq.; “《我与中国国际广播电台》知识竞赛系列之一”, CRI, 26th May 2006; 梅村卓, “抗日・内戦期中国共産党のラジオ放送”, アジア研究 (Jan. 2008); 趙新利, “日中戦争期における中国共産党の対日プロパガンダ戦術・戦略”, PhD thesis, 早稲田大学, 2010, p. 192; Çağdaş Üngör, “Reaching the distant comrade: Chinese communist propaganda abroad (1949-1976)”, PhD thesis, Binghamton University, 2009, p. 44.

⁹⁷Jichang Lulu, “China’s state media and the outsourcing of soft power”, University of Nottingham China Policy Institute blog, 15th July 2015; Koh Gui Qing & John Shiffman, “Beijing’s covert radio network airs China-friendly news across Washington, and the world”, Reuters, 2nd Nov. 2015; “Police suspect tax fraud by China-linked Tampere media firm”, YLE, 28th Oct. 2019; Alex Joske et al., “The influence environment: A survey of Chinese-language media in Australia”, *ASPI Policy Brief* 42 (2020), pp. 55 sqq.

⁹⁸“意大利语广播”, CRI; Folco Buonamici, “Radio e televisione in Cina”, *Cina 7* (1963); Pini, *op. cit.*, pp. 94 sqq., 116. For recent comments and activities of Gabriella Bonino, who worked for CRI’s Italian service between 1989 and 2015, see “当代女“马可·波罗”唐云眼中的温州和海上丝绸之路”, 世界温州人云社区, via 浙江在线, 22nd Mar. 2019; “温州连线意大利都灵共话友好城市交流合作”, 温州市外办, 13th Apr. 2021; “Gabriella Bonino: la Via della Seta e la Cina odierna”, *Ticino Today*, 10th Mar. 2016.

⁹⁹“意大利主流媒体连线总台记者 关注中国疫情防控措施”, CCTV, 10th Feb. 2020; cf. “Andrea De Pascale Profile”, LinkedIn, 14th May 2020. Liu Pai 刘湃, a CRI/CMG journalist fluent in Italian, began a series of Covid-themed appearances on Mediaset’s 24-hour news channel in early 2020 (刘湃 李骄阳, “意大利高等教育日”论坛在北京举行”, 人民网, 26th Oct. 2015; “Coronavirus, il giornalista Liu Pai a Tgcom24: “La Cina è fuori dal tunnel””, TGCOM 24, 13th Mar. 2020).



outspoken critic of CCP policies, in particular on the pandemic.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, the website of *Il Giornale*, a national newspaper known for its critical stance towards the CCP, hosts contributions by CINITALIA, a bilingual publication curated by CRI.¹⁰¹

CMG's role in efforts to insert CCP propaganda in mainstream Italian media is discussed in a case study below (p. 40).

1.4 Intelligence agencies and fronts

Foreign affairs, propaganda, trade and united front organs conduct influence operations with shallow or no cover. Organs in these systems can themselves provide cover for the influence work of intelligence agencies. The extent to which the cooption activities of agencies outside security and military structures in fact mediate intelligence operations requires further study. Enough examples of CCP intelligence use of united front groups, propaganda organs such as Confucius Institutes, and other influence agencies are known to indicate that serving as intelligence cover is among their core functions.¹⁰²

The CCP's main intelligence agencies maintain their own front organisations for cooption activities. These include civilian security organs, part of the CCP's political and legal system, as well as PLA units. The **Ministry of State Security (MSS, 国家安全部)**, the main civilian intelligence organ, uses units such as the China International Cultural Exchange Center (CICEC, 中国国际文化交流中心) and the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR, 中国现代国际关系研究院) to interact with foreign targets, notably including European international relations think tanks.¹⁰³ The **Ministry of Public Security (MPS, 公安部)**, primarily responsible for domestic law enforcement – notably 'political security protection' – has retained intelligence roles including activities abroad even after the establishment of the MSS. MPS external exchange fronts include the China Association for Friendship (CAFF, 中国友谊促进会), known to have cultivated Italian contacts.¹⁰⁴ Among military intelligence agencies, the PLA Political Work Department's **Liaison Bureau (PWD/LB, 政治工作部联络局)** developed high-profile foreigner cooption through the use of a cluster of interlinked fronts, with the non-profit arm of the private energy company CEFC involved in the successful cultivation of officials and other public figures at the United Nations and in several states.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰“Coronavirus, Mediaset ringrazia CMG per la lettera di solidarietà”, CRI, 3rd Mar. 2020; “Il presidente del China Media Group a Mediaset e Tgcom24: “Grazie per il vostro lavoro e per il supporto””, TgCOM24, 2nd Mar. 2020; “意大利 TgCOM24 电视台就新型冠状病毒肺炎疫情连线总台记者”, CRI, via 搜狐, 23rd Jan. 2020; “意大利多家主流媒体与总台合作报道 聚焦中国抗击新冠病毒肺炎疫情”, Radio Italia Cina, 5th Feb. 2020; “Covid, Liguria: “Fuga del virus da un laboratorio in Cina? Lo dissi per primo e nessuno diede importanza””, TgCOM 24, 31st Mar. 2021.

¹⁰¹“Capire la Cina: l'interpretazione delle citazioni letterarie di Xi Jinping”, *CINITALIA* (1st Mar. 2021), via *Il Giornale*.

¹⁰²Joske, *op. cit.*, pp. 14 sqq.; “The PLA and CCP influence abroad: Business, intelligence, crime and interference enmeshed”, Sinopsis, interview with Alex Joske, 6th Dec. 2019.

¹⁰³On CICEC, see Stokes & Hsiao, *op. cit.*, p. 79 n. 259; Joske, *op. cit.*, p. 15. On CICIR, “Profile of MSS-Affiliated PRC Foreign Policy Think Tank CICIR”, Open Source Center, 25th Aug. 2011; Peter Mattis & Matthew Brazil, *Chinese Communist Espionage: An Intelligence Primer*, Naval Institute Press, 2019, ch. 1. On the MSS's involvement in multiagency think-tank cooption operations, Lulu & Jirouš, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁴Geoff Wade & Jichang Lulu, “The China Association for Friendship (中国友谊促进会) and its links with the Ministry of Public Security”, forthcoming.

¹⁰⁵Stokes & Hsiao, *op. cit.*, pp. 26 sqq.; Sinopsis & Lulu, *op. cit.*; Hála, *op. cit.*; Eugenio Cau, “Perché quando la Cina parla di business in realtà ha mire molto politiche”, *Il Foglio* (14th Mar. 2019).



The remainder of this section introduces two culture-themed organisations involved in exchanges with Italy to illustrate the connections between CCP intelligence and front groups outside their administrative aegis. While formally affiliated with the CCP propaganda system, the organisations enjoy leadership links to civilian and military intelligence agencies.

1.4.1 Two GONGOs and their intelligence links

The Chinese Culture Promotion Society (CCPS, 中华文化促进会), currently supervised by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, illustrates the personnel overlap between systems often observed in front organisations.¹⁰⁶ These personal links may facilitate communication in activities involving other agencies and allow fronts to serve as vehicles for the work of different organs, offering external affiliations to their personnel. CCPS's inaugural chair was Ye Xuanping 叶选平, a son of Marshal Ye Jiyang 叶剑英 and brother of Ye Xuanning 叶选宁, a leading figure in the PLA's political warfare platforms in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁰⁷ Xu Jialu 许嘉璐, a prominent academic who has held appointments in some of those platforms and others linked to united front, propaganda and both military and civilian intelligence, remains CCPS's honorary chair.¹⁰⁸ CCPS's legal representative Wang Shi 王石, is also a deputy president of CNIE, an ILD front.¹⁰⁹ CCPS has an affiliated organisation in Switzerland, led by the president of a tourism federation in turn linked to local united front associations and international CCP-led tourism alliances.¹¹⁰

CCPS's exchanges with Italian legislators are discussed on p. 38.

CCPS's links to civilian intelligence include its connections to the Association for Yan Huang Culture of China (AYHCC, 中华炎黄文化研究会), also supervised by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.¹¹¹ AYHCC's executive deputy chair is Gao Yichen

¹⁰⁶The CCP's subordination of culture and tourism to propaganda most visibly manifests itself in the fact that the ministry is led by a deputy head of the Propaganda Department. CCPS oversees a network of subnational-level societies, some openly acknowledging the guiding role of the local propaganda department (Weber, *op. cit.*, p. 38 n. 219). CCPS's links beyond the propaganda system, including to the PLA and possibly the MSS, are suggested in Stokes, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁷“继承发扬中华文化精萃 中华民族文化促进会在京成立”, 人民日报, 1st Mar. 1992; “中华文化促进会创立 25 周年 王石的贡献”, 凤凰周刊, 5th Aug. 2017; cf. Stokes & Hsiao, *op. cit.*, p. 70 n. 194. Ye Xuanping was at the highest point of his political power as Guangdong governor before the time of the establishment of CCPS, when he had become CPPCC vice chairman (“叶选平简历”, 大公网, 18th Sept. 2019; cf. “叶选平同志遗体在广州火化”, 新华网, 23rd Sept. 2019). On Ye Xuanning, one of the first leaders of the predecessor of today's PLA PWD/LB, see Stokes & Hsiao, *op. cit.*, pp. 11 sq. et passim. CCPS's original name referred to the culture of the 'Chinese nation' (*Zhonghua minzu*), a construct meant to comprise all ethnic groups in China (“中华文化促进会创立 25 周年 王石的贡献”; cf. “中华人民共和国民政部社会团体变更登记公告 (第 29 号)”, 民政部, 17th Jan. 2004; 宫苏艺, “中华文化促进会召开会员代表大会”, 光明日报, 7th May 2009; pace Stokes & Hsiao, *op. cit.*, p. 61 n. 130). The new name was in use by the time of the society's 3rd congress (宫苏艺, *op. cit.*).

¹⁰⁸“领导人”, CCPS, 19th Sept. 2019; cf. Stokes & Hsiao, *op. cit.*, pp. 23, 25 sq.; “许嘉璐”, 北京师范大学. Xu's affiliations have notably included the non-profit arm of CEFC, an energy company linked to military intelligence and formerly active in influence operations in multiple countries and at the UN (Sinopsis & Lulu, *op. cit.*; Hála, *op. cit.*; Cau, *op. cit.*).

¹⁰⁹“主席: 王石”, CCPS, 21st Sept. 2019; “社会组织查询平台信息公示报告”, 社会组织查询平台, 28th Jan. 2021.

¹¹⁰Weber, *op. cit.*, pp. 18, 38.

¹¹¹“中华炎黄文化研究会章程”, 炎黄网. CCPS's honorary chair, Xu Jialu, chairs AYHCC (罗欣, “第八届中部六省炎黄文化论坛在株开幕”, 株洲日报, 27th Nov. 2020). Both entities belong to an alliance of organisations partnered with a Beijing Normal University institute Xu leads (“研究院简介”, 北京师范大学人文宗教高等研究院). CCPS and AYHCC share local affiliates and have jointly overseen activities (“中华炎黄文化研究会关于会员单位审核情况公告 (2020 年 4 月 10 日)”, 中华炎黄文化研究会, 15th Apr.



高以忱, a former vice minister of state security.¹¹² Both Gao and another deputy chair, Gu Boping 顾伯平, have held posts in the system of 610 Offices, set up to combat heterodox religious groups and recently absorbed by the MPS.¹¹³ AYHCC has an affiliate in Florence (意大利中华炎黄文化研究会, Associazione di Ricerca Culturale Italo-Cinese Yan Huang), which described in state media as “the first Yan Huang culture research association abroad”.¹¹⁴ The Florence entity has organised cultural activities “hoping to actively connect with the Chinese government’s ‘Chinese culture going-out’ strategy” (referring CCP culture-themed propaganda) and participated in mask donations during the COVID crisis.¹¹⁵

The 2016 inauguration of AYHCC’s Florence affiliate was attended by an AYHCC leader and local personages including Carlo Capria, a former government official more recently associated with an organisation mediating local-level interactions with CCP influence agencies, discussed in section 3.1.¹¹⁶

1.5 The united front system

In the Leninist tradition, “united front” tactics are policies that seek to coopt extra-party forces into broad temporary alliances led by the communist vanguard, as tools for the latter’s takeover, consolidation and permanent monopoly of state power. A united front conceptually differs from coalitions and other power-sharing arrangements in democratic politics in the impermeable distinction between the communist party at its core, able to lead a diverse alliance without compromising its internal ideological purity, and the coopted allies in its orbit, whose role must remain ancillary. Through the Comintern, the Soviets adapted versions of the united front concept to Moscow’s evolving goals and national conditions. The CCP’s own establishment and induction into cooperation with the KMT was itself an aspect of the Comintern’s united front policy. In Stalin’s post-war implementation of the concept in the Soviet-led communist bloc in Eastern Europe and Asia, non-communist forces embedded into fronts served as tools for the transition into one-party regimes, surviving afterwards in vestigial forms. The CCP, whose leadership since Mao has credited united front with being one of the “magic weapons” that allowed the party to obtain and maintain

2020; “中华文化（西华）论坛在西华县举行”, Root in Henan, 23rd Nov. 2018; cf. 王勇生, “黄帝文化国际论坛圆满闭幕”, 央广网, 14th Apr. 2021).

¹¹² 罗欣, *op. cit.*; “胡晓刚赴京拜会中华炎黄文化研究会”, 高平市人民政府, 10th Apr. 2021.

¹¹³ 胡婷 et al., “高以忱：做客校友讲坛解读优秀传统文化 对话黑大俄语人指导对俄办学工作”, 黑龙江大学, 22nd Nov. 2018; “胡晓刚赴京拜会中华炎黄文化研究会”; “顾伯平辞去云南省政协副主席职务”, 中国经济网, 23rd Jan. 2014. Gu is possibly related to a senior cadre with the MPS Political Security Protection Bureau (Filip Jirouš & Jichang Lulu, “The Ministry of Public Security and Chekist political protection”, forthcoming).

¹¹⁴ “海外首个中华炎黄文化研究会在意大利成立”, 海外网, 20th June 2016.

¹¹⁵ “意大利炎黄文化艺术团成立”, 环球时报, via 意大利中华炎黄文化研究会, 3rd Jan. 2017; “Mille maschere al Santa Maria Annunziata dall’Associazione generale dei cinesi a Firenze”, News dalle Pubbliche Amministrazioni della Città Metropolitana di Firenze, 7th Apr. 2020. In its original sense, ‘going out’ (走出去) is a Hu-era term used in party-state initiatives supporting the international expansion of PRC businesses. On ‘Chinese culture going-out’ as a descriptor for the use of culture for external propaganda purposes, cf. Xi’s remarks at a recent Politburo study session, calling for “straightening out the system of internal and external propaganda, creating a group of internationally influential media, actively promoting Chinese culture going-out, effectively developing international public-opinion guidance and public-opinion struggle” (“习近平在中共中央政治局第三十次集体学习时强调 加强和改进国际传播工作 展示真实立体全面的中国”, 新华, 1st June 2021).

¹¹⁶ “本会概况”, 意大利中华炎黄文化研究会; “海外首个中华炎黄文化研究会在意大利成立”; “COMUNICATO STAMPA: Cerimonia Inaugurale dell’Associazione di Ricerca Culturale Italo-Cinese Yan-Huang...”, Dong & Partners Law Firm/ 中欧国际律师事务所, via Facebook, 18th June 2016.



state power, renewed the concept to manage the extra-party constituencies that built China's economy under "reform and opening", the Deng Xiaoping era's incorporation of capitalism into Leninism.

1.5.1 The UFWD

Today's united front system, further consolidated and institutionalised under Xi, comprises an array of agencies, led from the party centre by a leading small group chaired by a Politburo Standing Committee member and coordinated by the **United Front Work Department (中央统一战线统战部, UFWD)** under the Central Committee.¹¹⁷ Through these agencies and their partner entities abroad, the CCP targets for cooption leading members of sectors whose cooperation is required for the stability and expansion of party power: business, science and technology, ethnic minorities, Overseas Chinese. Agencies directly controlled by the UFWD include the **State Ethnic Affairs Commission (SEAC, 国家民族事务委员会)**, previously, as its name still reflects, a government organ.¹¹⁸ The UFWD also controls multiple formally non-state organisations, such as the **China Soong Ching Ling Foundation (SCLF, 宋庆龄基金会)**, which, especially abroad, allow the CCP to present some of its cooption and propaganda activities as apolitical and independently initiated.¹¹⁹ SCLF has an Italian affiliate, initiated in 2004 and officially established in 2008.¹²⁰ The SCLF has used its purported non-state status for image operations, such as a mask donation to Rome's city council.¹²¹ A vice president of the Italian chapter was a Democratic Party candidate in the October 2021 elections for the Rome city council.¹²²

Italian contacts with the SEAC are mentioned on p. 33 below. The case study in section 3 notes a SCLF appointment bestowed on an Italian political consultant.

1.5.2 The CPPCC

The **Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC, 中国人民政治协商会议)**, an assembly of party-selected leading members of various constituencies, is the top-ranked united front agency and plays a key role as a nexus between the CCP centre and non-party personages aligned with party policy in China and abroad.¹²³ Its chair, currently Wang Yang 汪洋, is the Politburo Standing Committee member who leads the united front system. The national CPPCC and its local-level committees provide a public forum for the party's interactions with leaders of its favoured diaspora organisations, often rewarded with invitations to attend conference meet-

¹¹⁷ Alex Joske, "The Central United Front Work Leading Small Group: Institutionalising united front work", Synopsis, 23rd July 2019; idem, "Reorganizing the United Front Work Department: New Structures for a New Era of Diaspora and Religious Affairs Work", *China Brief* 19.9 (9th May 2019); idem, "The party speaks for you".

¹¹⁸ Idem, "Reorganizing..."

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹²⁰ 杨双双, "爱心无国界: 传承宋庆龄精神", 今日中国, 7th June 2021.

¹²¹ "No Distinction Amid Virus": Italian Soong Ching Ling Foundation Donates 25,000 Medical Masks to City Council of Rome", People's Government of Yangpu District, 1st July 2020.

¹²² "La comunità cinese con Gualtieri, Lin: "Integrazione volano per rilancio economia locale"", Nova News, 28th Sept. 2021.

¹²³ On the CPPCC's history, see Groot, *op. cit.*, 161 sqq. et passim. On its current composition and its role in foreign influence activities, Peter Mattis, "The Center of Chinese Influence: the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference", *Insidious Power: How China Undermines Global Democracy*, ed. by Hsu Szu-Chien & J. Michael Cole, Eastbridge, 2020.



ings and other appointments.¹²⁴ Leaders of Italian diaspora organisations have been among such “specially invited” members of the CPPCC and its province and city-level counterparts.¹²⁵

Section 2 shows how the CPPCC has acted as an interlocutor of CCP-friendly parliament groups. As noted above (p. 8), ‘parliamentary diplomacy’ can serve as cover for influence operations involving foreign legislators and CCP agencies with little in common with parliaments.

1.5.3 “Reunification” shops and coopted diaspora groups

The UFWD-controlled **China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification (CCPPNR, 中国和平统一促进会)** is led by the CPPCC chair, with the UFWD head as executive vice chair and a UFWD deputy head as secretary-general.¹²⁶ The CCPPNR controls a network of similarly named local affiliates abroad, which in turn seek, with varying degrees of success, to act as umbrella groups representing CCP-coopted diaspora groups in their geographic constituency.¹²⁷ The CCPPNR’s English name is itself propagandistic: by “reunification”, it refers to the CCP’s goal of annexing Taiwan, which the PRC never controlled.¹²⁸

The Italian Council for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China (意大利中国和平统一促进会) was set up in 2000 and reestablished in 2011, at a ceremony attended by PRC diplomats that received congratulatory notes from the UFWD and other party-state organs.¹²⁹ The Italian council’s events, usually featuring CCP-aligned ideological slogans, are often attended by PRC diplomatic representatives.¹³⁰ Its current head, the businessman Zheng Xianjie 郑贤杰, is a former chair of the Prato Overseas Chinese Friendship Association (普拉托华侨华人联谊会, Associazione di amicizia dei cinesi di Prato), one of the main diaspora organisations under the “guidance” of PRC diplomatic staff and a participant in CCPPNR-organised activities supporting CCP policies.¹³¹ According to Zheng, the Italian organisation “is one

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*; Joske, “The party speaks for you”, p. 26; Filip Jirouš, “The Chinese United Front in the Czech Republic: Methods, goals and organizational structure”, MA thesis, Charles University, 2020, pp. 66, 81, 85, 110 sq.

¹²⁵ “10 名浙江籍侨领列席全国政协会议 关注海外华裔”, 中国侨网, 12th Mar. 2015; “王增理会长等旅意侨领光荣当选温州市政协第十届海外特邀委员”, 意大利普拉托华商会, 4th Apr. 2015; “意大利闽籍华侨建言福建进出口产业: 简化程序“走出去””, 中国新闻网; “意大利青田侨领林伟雄出席辽宁省政协会议”, 青田网, 16th Jan. 2020; “政协第十届温州市委员会第五次会议港澳海外(特邀)委员座谈会”, 温州侨联, 2nd Mar. 2016.

¹²⁶ “本会介绍”, CCPPNR.

¹²⁷ John Dotson, “The United Front Work Department Goes Global: The Worldwide Expansion of the Council for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China”, *China Brief* 19.9 (9th May 2019). On CCPPNR affiliates in Europe, Oceania and North America, see Brady, “Magic Weapons”, pp. 16 sqq.; Joske, *op. cit.*, pp. 21 sqq.; John 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* 18.2 (13th Feb. 2018); Pär Nyrén, “Kinnesiska kommunistpartiets enhetsfront och dess verksamhet i Sverige”, *Frivärld*, 29th May 2010, pp. 6 sqq.; Jirouš, *op. cit.*, pp. 59 sqq.; Weber, *op. cit.*, pp. 16 sqq.

¹²⁸ Gerry Groot, “The CCP’s Grand United Front abroad”, *Sinopsis*, 24th Sept. 2019, p. 12.

¹²⁹ “意大利中国和平统一促进会”, 中国和平统一促进会; “意大利中国和平统一促进会罗马成立 刘光华任会长”, 中国新闻网, 21st Feb. 2011. This paragraph incorporates unpublished research by Filip Jirouš.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*; “意大利中国和平统一促进会第二届换届庆典大会在米兰举行”, 中华人民共和国驻米兰总领事馆, 2nd July 2014; “意大利中国和平统一促进会举行新春团拜会暨崔音副总领事到任欢迎晚宴”, 欧华头条 via 中国和平统一促进会, 18th Feb. 2019; “意大利中国和平统一促进会举行换届庆典”, 中国新闻网, via 中国和平统一促进会, 28th July 2017.

¹³¹ “意大利普拉托华人华侨联谊会举办庆祝成立 20 周年暨换届庆典”, 意大利侨网, via 温州市外办, 30th Oct. 2017; “海外统促会代表人士坚定拥护《反分裂国家法》促进祖国统一”, 中国



of the world's earliest peaceful reunification councils, enjoying broad influence".¹³² In his words, the CCP's "reunification" goal is an "unstoppable historical trend".¹³³ The Italian council's previous chair, Liu Guanghua 刘光华, is a member of the Zhi Gong Party, and a deputy chair of a province-level counterpart of the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (ACFROC, 中华全国归国华侨联合会), a key CCP-controlled united front agency.¹³⁴ Abrogating to represent the Chinese community, the council often acts as a CCP proxy in Italian political life, notably protesting the Dalai Lama's visits: in 2016, with a public demonstrations in Milan, and the next year at a meeting with a Democratic Party representative in Rome.¹³⁵ In 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the council led by Zheng was among the organisations participating in the distribution of medical supplies to the Chinese community, an activity organised on behalf of a UFWD-controlled agency in China and the Florence consulate.¹³⁶

Section 3.1.2 discusses the interactions between Italian united front groups and consultants involved in influence operations at the local level in Italy.

和平统一促进会, 1st June 2020; cf. Giulia Lucisano, "Come cambiano i produttori, ma non cambia la produzione. L'imprenditoria cinese nel distretto tessile di Prato", MA thesis, Università Ca'Foscari Venezia, 2013, pp. 66 sq., 87.

¹³² "意大利中国和平统一促进会举行新春团拜会暨崔音副总领事到任欢迎晚宴".

¹³³ "意大利和统会会长郑贤杰: 祖国和平统一是历史潮流 势不可挡", 欧华联合时报, 18th Oct. 2018.

¹³⁴ "意大利侨领刘光华: 从洗盘子到当老板 靠苦心耕耘", 中国侨网, 23rd Sept. 2020; "党员刘光华参与主办全球华侨华人促进中国和平统一大会", 中国致公党温州市委员会, 25th July 2017. On the ACFROC, see James Jiann Hua To, "Hand-in-Hand, Heart-to-Heart: Qiaowu and the Overseas Chinese", PhD thesis, University of Canterbury, 2009, pp. 64 sq. et passim; Joske, *op. cit.*, p. 7 et passim.

¹³⁵ "意大利统促会抗议米兰给达赖"荣誉市民"称号", CCPPNR, 21st Oct. 2016; "Milano, cittadinanza al Dalai Lama - L'ira dei cinesi: «Siamo feriti»", Corriere.it, 19th Oct. 2016; "旅意华人向执政党抗议达赖窜访", 欧洲时报, via CCPPNR, 19th Sept. 2017.

¹³⁶ "与子同袍, 大爱无疆, 旅意福建华侨华人同乡总会受托向普拉托乡亲分发健康包", 欧华头条, via 微信, 22nd Apr. 2020. On the agency, the China Overseas Friendship Association (中华海外联谊会), see Joske, *op. cit.*, p. 44 n. 95 et passim.



2 Making friends and coopting frenemies: Parliament as an arena of influence work

Democratic legislatures, an obvious target of influence activity, challenge the CCP's Leninist habits: a tight circle of reliable "friends" may lack visibility and weight, while official parliamentary committees, with plural membership and transparency requirements, are less desirable counterparts for influence operations. Cultivating such a tightly aligned core and surrounding it with further layers of more mainstream, constructively critical legitimisers is the task of the CCP International Liaison Department (ILD, introduced in section 1.1.1). Platforms through which "friends" promote CCP-favourable policies and views are reinforced by the support of "frenemies" who lend them their respectability, a reinforcement rendered only more credible when it comes from known critics of aspects of party policy. Xi Jinping's recent restatement of external propaganda policy at a Politburo study session this June serves as a reminder of the importance of "friends" in CCP influence: calling for expanding "a circle of friends in international public opinion" by "helping the foreign masses [...] understand why the CCP is capable", "why socialism with Chinese characteristics is good".¹³⁷

In this section, two case studies on the recent history of CCP influence in Parliament sketch the ILD and other organs' efforts to gain a friendly mainstream partner group. From an entity whose most visible role was that of a receiver of Tibet-themed propaganda, the ILD switched to a new, more active platform, led by figures with senior parliamentary roles. Crucially, the new group kept a vocally CCP-aligned core while gaining legitimacy through the participation of some sceptics, helping totalitarian propaganda cross the respectability threshold.

2.1 The Parliamentary Italy-China Friendship Association: Telling the Tibet story well

Friendship groups as a tool of CCP influence work in Italy precede the Xi era. The **Italy-China Parliamentary Friendship Association** (Associazione parlamentare di Amicizia Italia-Cina), sometimes also referred to as the **Friends of China Association** (Associazione Amici della Cina), already active in the Hu Jintao years, continued to organise trips as of 2019, although by then it appeared to have lost significance.

The Friendship Association's principal PRC partner appears to be the CCP International Liaison Department (ILD), the party's main foreign affairs organ focused on cultivating foreign politicians and political parties. United front organs have been the Friends' other key interlocutors, with its delegations often being received by leading CPPCC figures.

Propaganda on the CCP's policy towards Tibetans and other ethnic minorities seems to have been the key focus of its interactions with the Friends: their delegations have often been taken to Tibetan areas, on occasion offering quotes presented by state media as a useful foreign endorsement of the party's treatment of Tibetans.

The association's failure to develop into a consistent relayer of propaganda beyond this single issue might conceivably explain the ILD's more recent focus on a more effective parliamentary group. The loss of key active members in successive elections may have further weakened the group's capabilities.

¹³⁷“习近平在中共中央政治局第三十次集体学习时...”



Figure 3: Maria Rizzotti on CCTV, March 2020. Source: CCTV.

2.1.1 The Friends' recent leadership

The Friendship Association reshuffles its members with the election of each new legislature.¹³⁸ Since it does not maintain an updated website on its activities and membership, such information can only be gleaned by comparing various Italian and Chinese-language sources. Such evidence suggests that Vinicio Peluffo (Democratic Party) was the Association's president between 2013 and 2018, when he left the Chamber of Deputies.¹³⁹ Peluffo was succeeded by Maria Rizzotti (Forza Italia), referred to as president since 2018, when Peluffo became its secretary.¹⁴⁰ Rizzotti received wide coverage by Chinese state media in March 2020 for her praise of the PRC's handling of the Covid-19 outbreak.¹⁴¹

Rizzotti is absent in reporting on both of the Association's 2019 delegations, to Beijing and Tibet. These were led instead by Mauro Maria Marino (Italia Viva), at the time was vice chair the Senate's Budget Committee.¹⁴²

No mention of the Marino-led trips could be found in Italian-language sources. While the Chinese article does not specify Marino's role in the Association, his ties to it may go back to 2013, when he was photographed together with Peluffo, Rizzotti and the then PRC ambassador to Italy, Li Ruiyu 李瑞宇.¹⁴³

¹³⁸“Il mio intervento alla Farnesina alla presentazione della guida sul diritto del lavoro in Italia per investitori cinesi”, viniopeluffo.it, 24th Jan. 2018.

¹³⁹“CPC praised by foreign parties over sharing China's anti-virus experience”, Xinhua, 18th Mar. 2020; “Hong Kong-Cina 2019, a novembre la missione di commercialisti e imprese”, *Corriere della Sera*, 21st Oct. 2019.

¹⁴⁰“驻意大利大使李瑞宇会见议会“中国之友”协会代表”, 驻意大利共和国大使馆, 20th Sept. 2018.

¹⁴¹“外国政党政要高度评价中方积极开展国际抗疫合作”, Xinhua, 17th Mar. 2020; “外国政党回信了”, ILD, via Sina, 17th Mar. 2020; “CPC praised by foreign parties over sharing China's anti-virus experience”.

¹⁴²“自治区领导与意大利议会“中国之友”协会考察团座谈白玛旺堆讲话”, 西藏日报, 4th Aug. 2019; “郭业洲会见意大利议会“中国之友”协会考察团”, 30th July 2019; “Scheda di attività di Mauro Maria Marino”, Senato della Repubblica.

¹⁴³“驻意大利大使李瑞宇会见意大利议会“中国之友”协会代表”, MFA, 13th Mar. 2015. Another notable member of the Association is Marina Berlinghieri (Democratic Party): she took part in the trip to Yunnan in 2016 and attended the meeting with the ILD in 2019 (“Italia-Cina: Amici della Cina, Yunnan accesso a Sud-est asiatico”, *Agi*, 9th Nov. 2016; “郭业洲会见意大利议会“中国之友”协会考察团”). Berlinghieri's contacts with China appear to go beyond her involvement in the Friends' trips. According to



Figure 4: Mauro Maria Marino (third from right) and an Italian delegation posing with ILD's Deputy Head Guo Yezhou, July 2019. Source: [ILD](#).

2.1.2 The Friends' friends: The ILD and the united front system

The Association's main counterpart appears to be the ILD, which in at least some cases has acted as the organiser of its China visits. Another high-level interlocutor has been the CPPCC, with some of its leaders receiving the Italian delegations during these trips. Contacts with a united front agency with responsibilities for ethnic policy highlight the Friends' importance as a recipient of propaganda on Tibet.

For at least two of the Friends' China visits, in 2009 and 2015, PRC state sources indicate that it was the ILD or its front CAFIU that invited the Italian guests to China, which may conceivably have been the case for other trips by the Association as well.¹⁴⁴ Reports on these visits over the years point to the PRC side being usually represented by an ILD deputy head. A report on the earliest meeting of which we could find evidence, in 2008, mentions then ILD deputy head Zhang Zhijun 张志军 among the party-state cadres involved, also including deputy ministers and members of the National

Italian media, Berlinghieri played an important role in getting a donation of Covid-19 testing equipment from China to a hospital of Brescia in March 2020 ("[Coronavirus a Brescia: maxi donazione di materiale sanitario dalla Cina](#)", *Corriere.it*, 5th Apr. 2020; "[Marina Berlinghieri: La mia vita di deputata](#)", *La mia camera con vista*, 2nd Sept. 2020; "[“火眼”核心设备发往意大利! 猛犸基金会联合华大基因、凤凰卫视全球抗疫进行时](#)", *BGI*, 29th Apr. 2020). The equipment was provided by Beijing Genomics Institute Group (华大集团, BGI), which has already gained attention due to its increasing global footprint and its activities in China. A BGI subsidiary was involved in building genetic databases in China, in partnership with provincial public security bureaus (Emile Dirks & James Leibold, "[Genomic surveillance: Inside China's DNA dragnet](#)", *ASPI Policy Brief* 34 [2020]). In a sign of the suspicions raised by BGI activities, in July 2020 the US state of California rejected BGI supplies of Covid-19 testing equipment, out of concerns about giving China access to sensitive patient data (Jeanne Whalen & Elizabeth Dwoskin, "[California rejected Chinese company's push to help with coronavirus testing. Was that the right move?](#)", *The Washington Post* [2nd July 2020]). On BGI activities and partnerships abroad, including discussion of DNA database cooperation, see Rolland, *op. cit.*, p. 13; Yves Moreau, "[Crack down on genomic surveillance](#)", *Nature* (3rd Dec. 2019).

¹⁴⁴“意大利议会“中国之友”协会访藏代表团新闻发布会在参议院举行”, 驻意大利共和国大使馆, 2nd Dec. 2015; “意大利“中国之友”协会会员: 我们看到了真实的西藏”, 国际在线, via CCTV, 18th Aug. 2009. On CAFIU and its relationship to the ILD, see 1.1.1.



People's Congress.¹⁴⁵ In 2015, the Association's meetings involved its then president Vinicio Peluffo and ILD deputy head Guo Yezhou 郭业洲.¹⁴⁶

While the ILD appears to have been the Friends' main interlocutor and the organiser of its China trips, these Italian delegations also typically met leading cadres (usually a deputy chair) of the CPPCC. This was the case in 2010 and 2012, when the Association's then president Erminio Quartiani (Democratic Party) met with CPPCC deputy chairs (Li Jinhua 李金华 in 2010, Sun Jiazheng 孙家正 in 2012).¹⁴⁷ Even when visiting Tibet, the delegation met a deputy chairman of the autonomous region's People's Political Consultative Conference.¹⁴⁸ In 2019, the meetings involved both the CPPCC's chair – the CCP's top united front cadre – and one of its vice chairs.¹⁴⁹

The PRC hosts' view of the Association as an audience for showcasing the party's ethnic minority policy, evidenced in the Tibet visits discussed below, further manifested itself as an encounter with a key united front ethnic affairs agency less prominent in international exchanges. During the Association's 2013 visit, the ILD arranged a meeting with Li Xiaoman 李小满, then a member of the party group of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission (SEAC).¹⁵⁰ The SEAC was at the time still a government organ, to be directly absorbed by the UFD in 2018. According to a state-media account of the meeting, Li introduced to the guests the SEAC's main organs and scientific development projects aimed at improving life in ethnic minority areas.¹⁵¹

2.1.3 Friendship at work: promoting “the new Tibet”

The Friends' visible activities consist of over a decade's worth of seemingly yearly meetings with PRC officials. Tibet is a key focus of the CCP's use of the Association: its Italian delegations have been taken to Tibetan areas, explicitly asked to relay party propaganda on its rule of Tibet, and, if state-media accounts are to be believed, responded positively to that request.

The Association's frequent trips to China often included visits to Tibet, a region that is often off-limits to foreign dignitaries and media.¹⁵² Evidence is available for Association visits to Tibet from as early as 2008, continuing until at least 2019.¹⁵³ In addition

¹⁴⁵“Documentazione per l'attività internazionale 48”, Servizio rapporti internazionali, Camera dei deputati, 31st Mar. 2008.

¹⁴⁶“郭业洲会见意大利议会“中国之友”协会主席佩鲁弗一行”, 共产党新闻网, 26th Mar. 2015; “郭业洲副部长”, ILD.

¹⁴⁷“李金华在京会见意大利议会中国之友协会代表团”, 新华, via gov.cn, 23rd Aug. 2010; “孙家正会见意大利客人”, 新华, via CPPCC, 29th Aug. 2012; cf. “孙家正”, 新华, via gov.cn, 11th Mar. 2013; “李金华”, 共产党新闻网; “全国政协副主席李金华来到株洲考察”, Hunan.gov.cn, 24th Feb. 2013.

¹⁴⁸“意大利议会“中国之友”协会将访藏”, 国际在线, via CCPIT, 2nd Dec. 2015.

¹⁴⁹“郭业洲会见意大利议会“中国之友”协会考察团”; “夏宝龙会见意大利议会“中国之友”协会考察团”, 人民政协报, 31st July 2019.

¹⁵⁰“李小满会见意大利议会“中国之友”协会主席一行”, SEAC, via 环球网, 8th July 2013.

¹⁵¹Ibid.

¹⁵²The Tibet access granted to the Association resembles that enjoyed by CCP-aligned groups elsewhere, notably the now suspended European Parliament China Friendship Group (Lulu, “Repurposing democracy”, pp. 23, 35).

¹⁵³“Documentazione per l'attività internazionale 48”; “意大利议会“中国之友”协会访藏代表团...”; “新杂·单增曲扎会见意大利议会“中国之友”协会代表团一行”, 中国西藏新闻网, via knews.cc, 11th July 2015; “自治区领导与意大利议会“中国之友”协会...”



to Beijing and the Tibetan Autonomous Region, the Friends also visited Tibetan areas in Yunnan province, as well as Inner Mongolia.¹⁵⁴

PRC reporting on these visits quotes Italian delegations' praise for the PRC government's respect for Tibetan culture.¹⁵⁵ State-media accounts of a 2019 visit led by Marino provide an example. Coverage of a meeting quoted the city party secretary's request to Marino "not to offer a platform to any 'Tibetan independence' splittist events" or allow "the 14th Dalai Lama or the Dalai clique to scurry to visit Italy" or arrange interactions between them and Italian officials. The secretary hoped the Association delegation would "introduce the real, developing new Tibet to persons from various sectors in Italy and Europe".¹⁵⁶ The stories quote Marino as praising the TAR's "achievements" in areas such as "management of ethnic and religious affairs" and stating he would "do the utmost to propagandise Tibet's situation to various sectors in Italy".¹⁵⁷

2.2 The Institute for Chinese Culture: Expanding the party's 'circle of friends'

The **Institute for Chinese Culture (Istituto per la Cultura Cinese, ICC)**, established in 2016 and first publicly presented in 2017, emerged as a more ambitious cooption and propaganda project than the older parliamentary Friends. Not only did the new Institute enjoy stronger backing in the CCP's foreign influence machine, including the ILD's top leadership and key organs in the party's propaganda system: as a propaganda platform with vague goals and a neutral-sounding 'cultural' theme, it achieved legitimacy beyond the usual circle of CCP-aligned figures to earn the endorsement of senior, mainstream and even CCP-critical actors in Italian politics and media.

Unlike the above described Friendship Association, the Institute for Chinese Culture had a public website in Italian. ICC's website appears to have been taken offline soon after an early draft of this paper was circulated for review. At the time of writing, no official announcements could be found on the discontinuation of the Institute, while an on-going arts exhibition celebrating the sister-city relationship between Bari and Guangzhou referred to ICC's support.¹⁵⁸

2.2.1 ICC and Italian politics: A foothold in the mainstream

The success of ICC's progress towards the mainstream relies on its networking ability among influential politicians, with the PRC embassy's endorsement further lending it an official appearance.

The Institute was established in 2016 on the joint initiative of then Senator Alessandro Maran (Democratic Party) and the PRC embassy, under the government of

¹⁵⁴“意大利议会“中国之友”协会代表团访华行程圆满结束(图)”, CRI, via 搜狐, 7th July 2017; “Italia-Cina: Amici della Cina, Yunnan accesso a Sud-est asiatico”; “刀林荫会见意大利客人”, 云南省人大, 3rd July 2017; “意大利议会“中国之友”协会议员代表团来访内蒙古”, 内蒙古新闻网, 1st Sept. 2012.

¹⁵⁵“意大利议会“中国之友”协会访藏代表团...”

¹⁵⁶“自治区领导与意大利议会“中国之友”协会考察团座谈”, 拉萨日报, 4th Aug. 2019. A Tibetan-language version omits the mentions of the Dalai Lama (“ཡང་མ་དབང་འདུས་ནས་དབྱིན་ལེ་ལྷོ་ཁོལ་ལའང་གི་རྒྱལ་ཁབ་ཞིབ་ཚགས་ཡ་དང་བརྒྱལ་ས་མི་ལ་གནང་།”, རྫོང་རྒྱུ་མ་འཕྲིན་བླ, 5th Aug. 2019).

¹⁵⁷“自治区领导与意大利议会...” ; “ཡང་མ་དབང་འདུས་ནས་...”

¹⁵⁸“Axis of Time: domani l'inaugurazione della mostra collettiva di artisti cinesi apre gli eventi in programma per il 35° anniversario del gemellaggio Bari-Canton”, Comune di Bari, 28th Oct. 2021.



Matteo Renzi (then Democratic Party, now Italia Viva). Its statute furthermore expressly provides for the *ex officio* participation of representatives of both the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Chinese Embassy in the meetings of its leading bodies.¹⁵⁹

ICC's successive leaders have included key parliamentary figures, presiding over a membership that an ICC claim puts above a tenth of that of the combined houses of Parliament.

The institute's first president, Alessandro Maran, was succeeded by Vito Petrocelli (Five Star Movement), chair of the Senate's Foreign Affairs Committee.¹⁶⁰ The next president, appointed in 2019, was Ettore Rosato (Italia Viva), a deputy president of the Chamber of Deputies.¹⁶¹ The PRC ambassador received Rosato on the day of his appointment to congratulate him.¹⁶² The bestowal of such an appointment with the PRC ambassador's public blessing, making the holder of a senior parliamentary office the leader of an entity mediating exchanges with major CCP influence agencies, came at a critical moment for the party's propaganda efforts in Italy, a mere two weeks after the PRC embassy's public rebuke to parliamentarians who had participated in a Senate hearing with the Hong Kong pro-democracy activist Joshua Wong (黃之鋒) attracted condemnations from politicians and the "disappointment" of Italy's foreign ministry.¹⁶³ The embassy's "hope" that "the relevant persons" in Italian politics would "commit themselves to actions contributing to friendship and cooperation", rather than "the opposite", thus appeared to be fulfilled.¹⁶⁴

In 2020, an ICC press release claimed that since 2016 it could "boast the enrollment of over 100 parliamentarians between the Chamber of Deputies and Senate".¹⁶⁵ ICC does not publish a full list of its members, making such claims hard to verify.¹⁶⁶ However, as shown below, available information on ICC's events and China trips does point to its capacity to garner significant and often relatively diverse participation across most of the political spectrum.¹⁶⁷ The blurred line between ICC and official PRC embassy events, potentially inducing a confusion between diplomatic and propaganda activities, may contribute to ICC's success attracting political representatives.

¹⁵⁹"Statuto", ICC, 26th Jan. 2021, Art. 3.

¹⁶⁰"Nuovi Organi Sociali", ICC, 12th Dec. 2019; "Il Presidente della 3a Commissione Senato...", ICC, via Facebook, 10th Aug. 2018; "Istituto per la Cultura Cinese presenta in Senato il volume "Governare la Cina" di Xi Jinping", ICC, 20th Sept. 2017.

¹⁶¹"Presidenza", ICC; "Ufficio di Presidenza", Camera dei deputati, 26th Jan. 2021; "Il Presidente della 3a Commissione Senato..."

¹⁶²"Nuovi Organi Sociali".

¹⁶³"Hong Kong, La libertà di tutti. La posizione dell'Italia sui diritti umani", Radio Radicale, 28th Nov. 2019; "Il portavoce dell'Ambasciata Cinese in Italia chiarisce la posizione in merito alla videoconferenza di Joshua Wong con alcuni politici italiani", Ambasciata della Repubblica Popolare Cinese in Italia, 29th Nov. 2019; Fabio Greco, "Inaccettabile ingerenza". La Farnesina replica all'attacco cinese su Joshua Wong", Agi, 29th Nov. 2019.

¹⁶⁴"Il portavoce dell'Ambasciata Cinese in Italia chiarisce la posizione in merito alla videoconferenza di Joshua Wong con alcuni politici italiani".

¹⁶⁵"50 anni di relazioni diplomatiche Italia-Cina: traguardi e prospettive", ICC, 24th Nov. 2020.

¹⁶⁶A now effectively defunct CCP-linked group in the European Parliament's claim of a membership approaching 50 MEPs appeared to be exaggerated: hardly more than a dozen MEPs have been shown to be actively involved, with others possibly listed as members solely on account of having attended an event (Lulu, *op. cit.*, pp. 10 sqq.; cf. Peter Teffer, "China houdt maar weinig vrienden over in het Europees Parlement", Follow the Money, 7th Apr. 2021).

¹⁶⁷On a particularly large ICC-led delegation, see n. 178 below.

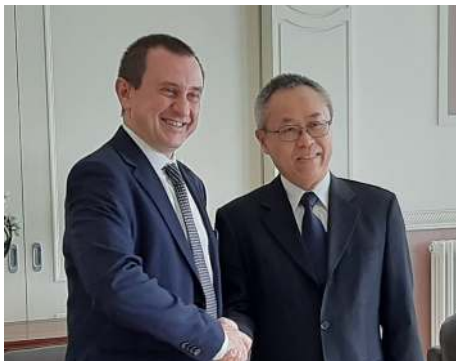


Figure 5: Ambassador Li Junhua congratulates Vice-President of the Chamber of Deputies Ettore Rosato on his recent nomination as ICC president, two weeks after the same ambassador reproached a cross-party group of Italian legislators for partaking in a video-conference with Joshua Wong. Source: ICC.

A frequent presence in ICC activities is Davide Antonio Ambroselli, who serves in the Senate legislative office for the Italia Viva party. Ambroselli is ICC's last known deputy president and director.¹⁶⁸ His attendance at multiple meetings with PRC partners going back to 2017 suggests a possible organisational role.¹⁶⁹

Other appointments at the Institute indicate connections at the international level, as well as an overlap with other PRC-linked networks. ICC's scientific committee is led by Stefania Giannini, minister of education, universities and research during the Renzi administration, later appointed as UNESCO's top education official.¹⁷⁰ Its "regional ambassadors" include Mauro Marino, a senator associated with the Parliamentary Association of Italy-China Friendship.¹⁷¹

The attendance of senior politicians at ICC events points to the institute's clout beyond its membership.

The ICC's April 2017 launch event, held at the Senate, was attended by the then president of the Senate, Pietro Grasso (then Democratic Party (2013-17), now with Liberi e Uguali), and a former president of the Chamber of Deputies, Senator Pier Ferdinando Casini (Centristi per l'Europa).¹⁷² Grasso's interest in Chinese-Italian relations preceded the launch: two years earlier, following a meeting with PRC premier Li Keqiang during a visit that saw him lecture the Central Party School on "political ethics", he had stated his aim to relaunch relations between Italy and China and "promote

¹⁶⁸ "Presidenza". On his LinkedIn profile, Ambroselli presents himself as ICC's founder ("Davide Antonio Ambroselli", LinkedIn, 26th Jan. 2021).

¹⁶⁹ "Istituto per la Cultura Cinese riceve delegazione di Pechino", ICC, 21st Sept. 2017; "Italia-Cina: delegazione Parlamentare in Cina, mai stata più grande (ANSA Notiziario Nazionale)", ICC, 8th Nov. 2018.

¹⁷⁰ "Comitato Scientifico", ICC; "Assistant Director-General for Education", UNESCO; cf. "L'ex rettore dell'Università per stranieri di Perugia, Stefania Giannini, condannata per danno erariale", *Il Foglietto della Ricerca* (28th Apr. 2016); "Spese UniStranieri, ex ministro Giannini condannata dalla Corte dei Conti", *Il Messaggero* (13th Nov. 2018).

¹⁷¹ "Ambasciatori", ICC, 14th July 2020. On Marino, cf. p. 31..

¹⁷² Eugenio Buzzetti & Alessandra Spalletta, "Grasso: la settimana cinese dell'uomo ammirato a Pechino", *Agi*, 14th Dec. 2015; "Conferenza stampa di presentazione dell'Istituto per la Cultura Cinese: "Italia-Cina. La nuova via della seta": Intervento del Presidente del Senato, Pietro Grasso", Senato della Repubblica, 5th Apr. 2017.



new synergies in strategic sectors”.¹⁷³ A further CCP-friendly development under Grasso’s presidency came months after ICC’s launch, when a leading Uyghur activist was denied entry to the Senate and detained by anti-terrorism police when scheduled to address a joint press conference with a senator.¹⁷⁴

ICC’s mobilisation capabilities were demonstrated again in 2017, when it organised the presentation of the Italian translation of Xi Jinping’s book *On the Governance of China*, a role bestowed on selected CCP-aligned entities elsewhere.¹⁷⁵ The event secured the attendance of Grasso (who delivered the opening speech), as well as of the then deputy president of the Chamber (current deputy minister of Foreign Affairs) Marina Sereni (Democratic Party), Francesco Rutelli (former mayor of Rome) and Italy’s then ambassador to China, Ettore Sequi (later head of cabinet to foreign minister Luigi Di Maio, in 2021 appointed secretary general of the ministry, still under Di Maio).¹⁷⁶ As ambassador, Sequi would later attend a meeting with ILD leaders in Beijing, as part of a visiting delegation led by ICC’s then president, Vito Petrocchi.¹⁷⁷

With extensive high-level connections and a claim to a broad membership, ICC can aspire to function as a “middle-ground” feature at bilateral events, sharing platforms with personalities who might otherwise steer away from CCP-led initiatives or be overtly critical of the PRC’s policies and human rights record. The continuous participation of the PRC ambassador in ICC events further appears to contribute to blurring the lines between what may be perceived as a bilateral event according to traditional Western standards.

2.2.2 ICC’s partners: The ILD and the propaganda system

ICC’s closest partners are in the CCP foreign affairs and propaganda systems, with the ILD acting as the organiser of its most high-profile exchanges in China. The Institute also appears to be in a strategic partnership with a GONGO with links extending to military and civilian intelligence. Beyond its own direct exchanges with these agen-

¹⁷³Buzzetti & Spalletta, *op. cit.*; Eugenio Buzzetti, “*Lectio magistralis Pietro Grasso, etica politica contro corruzione*”, *Agi*, 7th Dec. 2015; idem, “*Grasso incontra premier Li a Zhongnanhai: Rilanciare i rapporti Italia-Cina con nuove sinergie*”, *Agi*, 12th Dec. 2015.

¹⁷⁴“*Uyghur leader detained in Italy to please China*”, *AsiaNews*, 28th July 2017; “*SOS Stato di Diritto. Emergenza Uiguri*”, *RadioRadicale*, 26th July 2017. Dolkun Isa (a German citizen), president of the World Uyghur Congress, was detained for four hours when he was to participate in a press conference with Senator Luigi Compagna on the mass internment campaign underway in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. On the following day, even after his release, he was again denied entry to the premises (Michele Lembo, “*Il fermo di Polizia di Dolkun Isa, Segretario generale del Congresso Mondiale Uiguro: intervista a Luigi Manconi*”, *Radio Radicale*, 26th July 2017; Claudio Landi, “*Questione uigura e caso Dolkun Isa: interviste di Claudio Landi al sen. Luigi Compagna, a Laura Harth e a Dolkun Isa*”, *Radio Radicale*, 17th July 2017).

¹⁷⁵A seminar on the book was held in the Czech Parliament in 2016, addressed by a senior CCP external propaganda official and some of the party’s key partners in the country: the leader of the local Communist Party and academics associated with the PRC embassy and the first Confucius Institute in the country (“*Seminář „Zkušenosti pro řízení a rozvoj státu*”, *Poslanecká sněmovna*, 21st Mar. 2016; Lukáš Zádrapa, “*Čínská bezpečnostní slepá skvrna, aneb jak se spolu sešli marxisti, konzervativci, ekonomové a oportunisti*”, *Sinopsis*, 20th Apr. 2016; Lulu & Jirouš, *op. cit.*).

¹⁷⁶“*Istituto per la Cultura Cinese presenta in Senato...*”; “*Farnesina: Di Maio nomina l’amb. Ettore Francesco Sequi suo capo di gabinetto, è l’attuale diplomatico a Pechino*”, *Giornale Diplomatico*, 6th Sept. 2019; “*Comunicato Stampa del Consiglio dei Ministri n. 18*”, *Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri*, 12th May 2021; “*Marina Sereni*”, *Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale*; “*SERENI Marina (membro tecnico del Governo)*”, *Camera dei deputati*.

¹⁷⁷See section 2.2.2 below.



cies, ICC has at times played an intermediary role in their exchanges with other Italian political and media bodies.

ICC's dual status as counterpart and intermediary is apparent in its relationship with the CCP International Liaison Department. Although it had already been sending delegations to China since its establishment, it was a 2018 high-profile encounter with the ILD that made ICC lay claim to "the biggest [Italian] parliamentary delegation" to ever visit China, led by its then president Petrocelli.¹⁷⁸ In Beijing, the ICC delegation met the ILD's head Song Tao 宋涛, deputy head Qian Hongshan 钱洪山, as well as Zou Jianjun, an Italian-speaking deputy bureau chief.¹⁷⁹ In addition to receiving the delegation in Beijing, the ILD arranged for it to visit Xiamen and Chongqing, in cooperation with the local foreign affairs offices.¹⁸⁰ Besides these ILD-arranged meetings in China, ICC's claim to having invited an ILD deputy head to Italy where he met former PM Massimo D'Alema, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, and Five Star and Democratic Party figures, points to an aim to position itself as a privileged intermediary in ILD exchanges with Italian politics.¹⁸¹

ICC's partnership with the CCP propaganda system manifested itself in the China trips it coorganised with state media and a province-level propaganda agency.¹⁸² ICC also republishes articles from China Radio International's bilingual magazine *Cin-italia*.¹⁸³ ICC has interacted with the leader of a Central Propaganda Department front dedicated to the global defence of the CCP's human-rights policies. In September 2017, ICC and the then vice-president of the Senate, Rosa Maria Di Giorgi (Democratic Party) met Huang Mengfu, the chairman of the Chinese Foundation for Human Rights Development (CFHRD).¹⁸⁴ The meeting again pointed to ICC's intermediary role: Huang's visit also included talks with the D'Alema-led Italiani Europei foundation, as well as the International Affairs Institute (Istituto Affari Internazionali, IAI), an influential think tank whose director has served as special advisor to Josep Borrell, the EU's top foreign policy official, and his predecessor Federica Mogherini.¹⁸⁵

ICC also maintains exchanges with the Chinese Culture Promotion Society (CCPS), a GONGO formally supervised by a propaganda system unit but with links extending

¹⁷⁸"Italia-China..." While the claim resists verification without a full list of members, a picture on the ICC website shows what appears to be a 19-strong delegation. On ICC's previous China trips, see "Nuova missione dell'Istituto per la Cultura Cinese in Cina", ICC, 13th June 2017.

¹⁷⁹"宋涛会见意大利多党议员考察团", ILD, 29th Oct. 2018; "钱洪山会见意大利多党议员考察团", ILD, 27th Oct. 2018; "Italia-China..." On Zou Jianjun, see n. 31 above.

¹⁸⁰"参访交流: 意大利外宾参访鼓浪屿社区书院", 启福社会工作服务, via 微信, 3rd Nov. 2018; "意大利多党议员考察团来渝访问", 重庆外事, via 微信, 2nd Nov. 2018. On the Chongqing FAO, see Goh et al., *op. cit.*, p. 17.

¹⁸¹According to ICC's website, Qian Hongshan was invited to Italy by the ICC in late November 2018, soon after the ICC visit to Beijing ("Incontro tra il Vice Ministro Qian Hongshan 钱洪山 ed il Sottosegretario agli Esteri Picchi", ICC, 30th Nov. 2018). In addition to D'Alema, Qian's visit included meetings with Guglielmo Picchi (Northern League), deputy minister of foreign affairs, Patuanelli (Five Star Movement, between 2019 and 2021 minister of economic development, then for agriculture) and Matteo Orfini (Democratic Party) (*ibid.*; "PICCHI Guglielmo - LEGA", Camera dei deputati; "Ministro Stefano Patuanelli", Ministero dello Sviluppo Economico, 26th Jan. 2021; "钱洪山率中共代表团访问意大利", 新华, via 深圳新闻网, 20th Nov. 2018). PRC state media accounts of the meetings do not, however, confirm ICC's involvement (*ibid.*).

¹⁸²See section 2.2.3 below.

¹⁸³Tony Chike Iwobi, "Anche l'Italia è una terra di mezzo", via ICC (15th May 2019); "Palazzo Giustiniani: cerimonia di presentazione della rivista CINITALIA", CRI. On CRI and its Italian media partnerships, see p. 22.

¹⁸⁴"中国人权发展基金会代表团访问意大利", 新华, 23rd July 2017; "Istituto per la Cultura Cinese riceve..." On CFHRD, see p. 21 above.

¹⁸⁵"中国人权发展基金会代表团访问意大利"; "Nathalie Tocci", IAI.

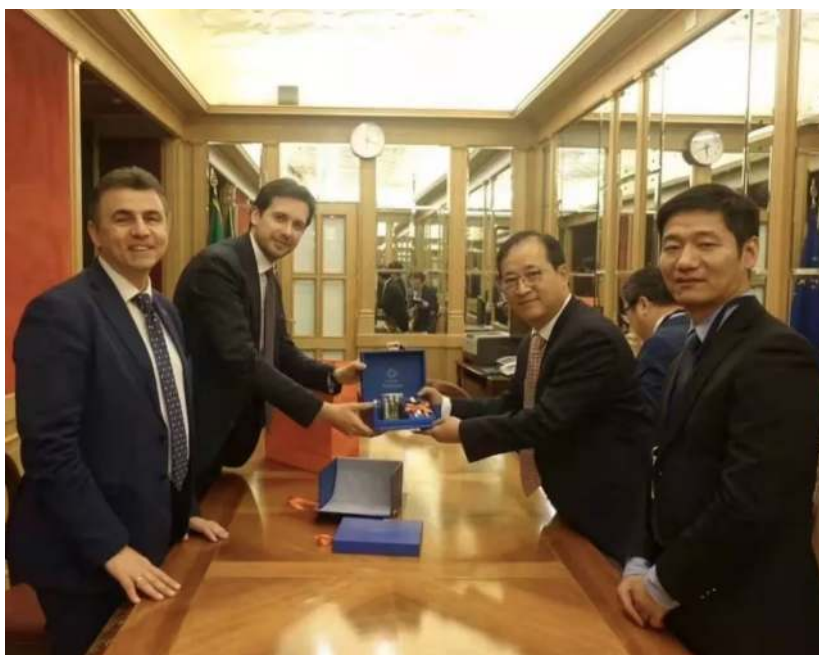


Figure 6: Manuel Vescovi and Davide Antonio Ambroselli pose with CCPS Vice President Guo Jie, December 2019. Source: [安仁智库 via WeChat](#).

to foreign affairs and intelligence.¹⁸⁶ An account of a 2019 meeting between CCPS's vice president Guo Jie 郭杰, ICC president Ambroselli and Senator Manuel Vescovi (Northern League), refers to a ICC-CCPS "strategic partnership" dating to 2018 and ICC's "hope" that CCPS would "provide more assistance" for trade and cultural activities.¹⁸⁷

2.2.3 More politics than culture: ICC's propaganda work

Although the institute's name might appear to suggest a cultural initiative, its leadership, counterparts in China and activities show its political character.¹⁸⁸ Rather than promote cultural exchanges, in practice ICC serves as a platform through which its partners in the CCP political influence and external propaganda apparatus can reach an audience in Italy's political elite and, through mainstream media, potentially the general public.

ICC's membership and its contacts with the ILD, a party agency primarily targeting foreign politicians, display this political, rather than cultural, profile. The institute's network of "ambassadors" in charge of different regions of Italy illustrate the likely political, rather than cultural, considerations underlying appointments: it appears to mostly consist of politicians and businesspeople with no visible links to Chinese cul-

¹⁸⁶On CCPS, see section 1.4.1.

¹⁸⁷郭杰, "意大利文化之旅 (一)", 安仁智库, via 微信, 25th Dec. 2019.

¹⁸⁸ICC's statute remains vague on its goals: "The purpose of the Association is to support and promote dialogue and mutual knowledge between the People's Republic of China and Italy — also in its capacity as a member of the European Union — by encouraging the study and the deepening of matters of common interest to both countries, also through collaboration with international institutions, public and private bodies and organisations with similar purposes" ("Statuto").



ture. ICC's participation in academic partnerships appears too modest to alter this picture, being seemingly limited to a claimed role in agreements between PRC universities and two counterparts in Frosinone province near Rome, including Ambroselli's alma mater.¹⁸⁹ Nor does ICC's partnership with CCPS, a front organisation with political, intelligence and military links, indicate more than a nominal focus on culture. On the other hand, ICC exhibits continuity between the local partners of the CCP's main influence agencies, with the presence in its network of at least one politician associated with the older parliamentary friendship association.¹⁹⁰

It is the CCP's propaganda narratives, rather than Chinese culture, that ICC receives and relays. The institute's 2017 interaction with a Propaganda Department "human rights" front was indeed in line with the propaganda system's goals: in his talks with Italian politicians, the visiting cadre referred to the PRC's "great human rights achievements", "especially in the last five years", i.e., the period since Xi's accession to power, featuring the deployment of his genocidal policies towards Uyghurs.¹⁹¹ ICC's website itself helps communicate the CCP's narrative on human rights, publishing and linking to articles by academics that feature some of its motifs, such as the success of the Chinese model or the disappearance of poverty in China.¹⁹²

The ICC's extensive political network in Italy provides a platform to amplify this transmission, with high-profile events promoting Xi Jinping's oeuvre, themes of his tenure, and the relationship with the communist state in general. The ceremony for the public launch of the ICC in 2017 was held under the motto "Italy-China, the new Silk Road", alluding to Xi's geopolitical initiative, a pillar of CCP propaganda abroad.¹⁹³ The same year, the ICC-organised presentation of Xi's book was attended of its president and other high-level figures.¹⁹⁴ ICC's role in a 2020 conference call to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Italy's recognition of the PRC, misrepresented as the start of diplomatic relations between Italy and China (in fact dating to imperial times), supports another tenet of CCP propaganda: the identification of China as a country with the totalitarian party-state.¹⁹⁵

Beyond such elite-focused activity, ICC supports the CCP propaganda system's efforts to reach the general public through mainstream Italian media. The available evidence shows that ICC was directly involved in organising a China trip by Italian journalists in 2018.¹⁹⁶ The trip included journalists from public broadcaster RAI and three

¹⁸⁹ "Chongqing-Cassino. Presentato il primo protocollo patrocinato dall'Istituto per la Cultura Cinese", ICC, 11th May 2017; "All'Accademia di Belle Arti di Frosinone 160 studenti in arrivo dalla Cina grazie all'Istituto per la Cultura Cinese", ICC, 28th July 2017.

¹⁹⁰ See n. 171 above.

¹⁹¹ 桂涛, "中国人权发展基金会代表团访问意大利、捷克和英国", 新华, via CFHRD, 29th Sept. 2017; "Istituto per la Cultura Cinese riceve..."

¹⁹² Francesco Grillo, "La fine della lunga rincorsa e Lezioni Cinesi", ICC, 18th Dec. 2019; "L'anno del bufalo. La Cina e noi. Stronature", Diritto Cinese, 18th Mar. 2021. The "Diritto Cinese" (Chinese Law) website is linked to from the ICC website.

¹⁹³ "Conferenza stampa di presentazione dell'Istituto per la Cultura Cinese: "Italia-Cina. La nuova via della seta": Intervento del Presidente del Senato, Pietro Grasso".

¹⁹⁴ On the book presentation, see p. 37 above.

¹⁹⁵ On the conference call, see p. 43.

¹⁹⁶ An article on the trip on ICC's website was posted in August 2018, but refers to the event as having taken place in 2017 ("Delegazione giornalisti italiani nel Sichuan", ICC, 28th Aug. 2018). This appears to be a mistake, as all other available sources report that the trip took place in June 2018 (see next footnote).



Figure 7: ICC event to present Xi Jinping’s book, September 2017. Source: ICC.

major newspapers, *La Repubblica*, *Corriere della Sera* and *Il Giornale*.¹⁹⁷ The declared goal of the initiative was to “explore new opportunities for cooperation between Italy and China”.¹⁹⁸ The identity of ICC’s partners points to the propagandistic nature of such cooperation: together with ICC and the PRC embassy in Italy, the project was organised by China Media Group, its subordinate unit CRI, and the Sichuan party committee’s Office of External Propaganda, using its government nameplate.¹⁹⁹ While it is difficult to assess whether these interactions have had any significant impact on Italian media coverage of China, they have helped cement the CCP propaganda system’s position as an acceptable partner of mainstream — including public — media in Italy.

2.2.4 Critics as legitimisers: Mainstreaming propaganda

With a nominal “cultural” theme and the neutral-sounding goal of developing and strengthening relations with China,²⁰⁰ the well-connected ICC has allowed its partners in the CCP’s foreign influence apparatus to reach a larger pool of interlocutors in politics and media than lesser CCP-aligned groups. The explicit alignment with CCP narratives by senior politicians closely involved with ICC, an evident propaganda success, is matched by a less obvious one: the endorsement of the platform as a legitimate

¹⁹⁷ 陈依文, “中意媒体四川行在蓉启动 外国记者点赞四川公安”, 中国警察网, 25th June 2018; “Villaggio Huopu: i giornalisti italiani apprezzano i risultati di riduzione della povertà”, CRI, 19th July 2018; 袁婧, “中意媒体四川行: 没想到中欧班列上的意大利“常客”是它”, 四川在线, 21st June 2018.

¹⁹⁸ “Delegazione giornalisti italiani nel Sichuan”.

¹⁹⁹ Liu is visible in a picture in 陈依文, *op. cit.* On these propaganda organs, see sections 1.3.1, 1.3.2. Liu Pai, an Italian-speaking CRI journalist, accompanied the delegation (cf. n. 99).

²⁰⁰ “Alessandro Maran, Occorre infittire le relazioni Italia-Cina”, ICC, 6th Apr. 2017.



interlocutor by mainstream entities that are neutral, ambivalent or openly critical towards aspects of CCP policy. Thanks to that endorsement, the platform can aspire to a “middle-ground” position, legitimising CCP narratives by making them as respectable as, say, the defence of human rights.

ICC’s core offers examples of discourse in overt alignment with CCP propaganda goals. An example of an outcome fully meeting the CCP’s goals is the already cited case of Petrocelli. In a recent interview with *La Repubblica*, former ICC president Petrocelli, still chairing the Senate’s Foreign Affairs Committee, questioned reports on ethnic persecution in Xinjiang.²⁰¹ He also stated he hoped to organise a visit to Xinjiang by Italian politicians, suggesting he would expect the kind of access to the autonomous region the CCP only offers to those willing to openly deny the existence of its genocidal policies.²⁰² The day after the Italian interview appeared, Petrocelli was “commend[ed]” at the PRC MFA regular press conference “for his courage to speak up for objectivity, truth and justice”.²⁰³ On the same day, a Xinjiang propaganda official cited Petrocelli’s statements in his concluding remarks at one of a series of press conferences CCP authorities have been holding in an effort to counter the increasing international scrutiny of its human rights record in the region.²⁰⁴

Other politicians associated with ICC may refrain from such overt alignment, while still endorsing CCP narratives. A Northern League senator who has participated in ICC exchanges with CCP influence agencies, Manuel Vescovi, was among those condemning Petrocelli’s remarks on Xinjiang, demanding that he “resign from his post [as Chairman of the Senate’s Foreign Affairs Committee] if [he] th[ought] he c[ould] happily flatter a totalitarian regime”.²⁰⁵ Despite his recent condemnation of Petrocelli’s remarks, Vescovi attended a video call in April 2020 on the signature of an agreement involving CCPIT’s Shandong province equivalent.²⁰⁶ The aim of that agreement was to set up a “Health Silk Road” to connect Chinese suppliers of medical equipment to Italian small and medium enterprises. While this project may have led to positive outcomes, the so-called “Health Silk Road” is still a component of Xi’s Belt and Road Initiative, hence of CCP propaganda adapted to Covid-era diplomacy. The launch of

²⁰¹ Concetto Vecchio, “M5s, Petrocelli: ‘To filocinese. Vorrei il Movimento di Conte vicino alle idee di Grillo’”, *La Repubblica* (17th June 2021).

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ “2021年6月18日外交部发言人赵立坚主持例行记者会”, MFA, 18th June 2021; “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s Regular Press Conference on June 18, 2021”, MFA, 18th June 2021. Praise of Petrocelli quickly spread through propaganda organs. See, e.g., 张素, “意大利官员称不认为新疆存在‘种族灭绝’ 中方: 赞赏发出客观真实正义之声”, CNS, 18th June 2021.

²⁰⁴ “新疆维吾尔自治区第43场涉疆问题新闻发布会实录(在京举行)”, 天山网, 19th June 2021; “The 11th Press Conference by Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region on Xinjiang-related Issues in Beijing”, Tianshannet, 20th June 2021. Xu Guixiang 徐贵相, who delivered these remarks, is a deputy head of the XUAR Party Committee’s Propaganda Department and XUAR government spokesman (范凌志, 刘欣 & 杨若愚, “新疆维吾尔自治区人民政府新闻发言人徐贵相接受环球时报专访: 美西方打‘新疆牌’遏制中国, 必败!”, 环球时报, 11th Aug. 2021). On government spokespeople and information offices and their position within the CCP propaganda system, see p. 20.

²⁰⁵ Concetto Vecchio, “M5S, Petrocelli filocinese fa arrabbiare Lega e Pd: ‘Parole inaccettabili’”, *La Repubblica*, 17th June 2021. Vescovi was identified on the ICC website as its “ambassador” for Tuscany (“Ambasciatori”). He took part in ICC’s meeting with a CCPS leader in 2019 (郭杰, *op. cit.*). Vescovi appears in pictures of the ICC delegation that met ILD leaders in 2018 and met ILD deputy head Qian Hongshan during his Italy visit later that month (“Italia-China...”; “Incontro tra il Vice Ministro Qian Hongshan 钱洪山 ed il Sottosegretario agli Esteri Picchi”, ICC, 30th Nov. 2018).

²⁰⁶ “Nasce la Via della Salute tra Cina e Italia grazie a Conflavoro PMI”, Conflavoro PMI.



the Health Silk Road strengthens BRI-themed propaganda while providing a tool to control the narrative on the pandemic, painting the PRC in a positive light.²⁰⁷

Moreover, unlike less successful influence platforms, ICC has reached enough respectability to attract the participation of figures far from this propagandistic core, or even critical of it. Such criticism lends ICC an aura of neutrality that obscures its nature as a partner of key CCP influence agencies. The case of Piero Fassino (Democratic Party), the chair of the Chamber of Deputies' Foreign Affairs Committee, illustrates the role critics can play in such legitimisation. Fassino, an influential legislator openly critical of the CCP's human-rights track record who has publicly confronted the PRC ambassador on their human rights violations, also attended the 50th anniversary event involving ICC.²⁰⁸ In November 2021, Fassino participated in the Italian leg of a series of online events titled "Xinjiang is a wonderful land", organised by the Xinjiang government and PRC embassies. In Italy, the event had Petrocelli as Italian organiser, with the participation of a Xinjiang vice chair, the PRC ambassador, other Five Star Movement members, as well as so-called former "trainees" of detention camps.²⁰⁹ Heeding warnings that the event was set up to serve CCP denialist propaganda of its Xinjiang policies,²¹⁰ the event had been taken out of the Committee's official agenda and denounced by politicians from several parties. Fassino still chose to attend, later telling Italian media that during the event he had expressed his stance that "no success in economic development can legitimise the grave human rights violations" the committee had previously condemned.²¹¹ While a statement to that effect may have been awkwardly received at the event, predictably none of it made it to the extensive coverage of the event by CCP propaganda in Chinese and foreign languages.²¹² Xinhua used Petrocelli and Fassino's presence to state the event had been "jointly held" with "the foreign affairs committees" of both houses of Parliament, "showcasing development and prosperity" in Xinjiang.²¹³ Whatever might have been actually said at the closed-door event, the message reaching global audiences through the official read-out spread by CCP media was that Petrocelli and Fassino, as presidents of their respective committees, "both recognized the achievements of the region and China in recent years" and "expressed the wish that understanding and cooperation would be further strengthened via such exchanges."²¹⁴ By acceding to participate in a denialist propaganda exercise, a CCP-sceptical voice had been used to legitimise and mainstream totalitarian platforms and narratives, while drowning the explicit criticism and refusal to partake of the majority of committee members.

Progress of a similar nature is on display in the party's external propaganda apparatus' ICC-mediated outreach to mainstream Italian media. Reporting and commentary pub-

²⁰⁷Jacob Mardell, "China's "Health Silk Road": Adapting the BRI to a pandemic-era world", *Merics*, 25th Nov. 2020.

²⁰⁸"Presidenza italiana G20, audizione ambasciatore Cina", Camera dei deputati, 24th Mar. 2021; "I 50 anni delle relazioni diplomatiche tra l'Italia e la Repubblica Popolare Cinese", pierofassino.it, 1st Dec. 2020; Carmelo Caruso, "Una vicenda dai contorni inquietanti. La Cina risponde". *Parla Fassino*, *Il Foglio*, 16th Sept. 2020.

²⁰⁹"Organizzato in Italia il simposio online "Xinjiang è una terra meravigliosa", *CRI*, 10th Nov. 2021.

²¹⁰Harth, "Occhio!"

²¹¹Francesco Bechis, "From Xinjiang with love. Se la propaganda cinese sbarca a Roma", *Formiche*, 10th Nov. 2021.

²¹²"新疆维吾尔自治区人民政府与中国驻意大利大使馆联合举办"新疆是个好地方"视频交流会", *中国日报网*, 10th Nov. 2021; "新疆是个好地方"视频交流会在意大利举行", *中国新闻网*, 10th Nov. 2021; "新疆是个好地方"视频交流会在意大利举行", *人民网*, 10th Nov. 2021.

²¹³"Xinjiang residents tell stories of regional development, prosperity", *CCTV*, 10th Nov. 2021.

²¹⁴*Ibid.*



lished by some of the outlets involved in these exchanges often strongly differs from the coverage the CCP would prefer.²¹⁵ Suppressing such non-compliant content, or even effectively countering it with enough propaganda-aligned alternatives, remains beyond the CCP's capabilities in areas not controlled by the party's repressive apparatus. Absent an ability to directly manage content, however, the propaganda system can still influence the mainstream through exchanges that gradually legitimise it as a partner of key opinion-shaping entities in the target country. A perception of mainstreamness is as important for domestic as for external propaganda purposes: by participating in a Sichuan propaganda tour,²¹⁶ Italian journalists helped state media cement the unquestionability of the party's repressive machine with what it predictably construed as a foreign endorsement of its largest arm, the Ministry of Public Security (MPS). A story on the visit on an MPS-managed news outlet described the Italian media delegation's police-themed tour of Han and Tibetan areas, in cooperation with the Propaganda Division of the the province's analogue of the ministry: "wherever they went, the Italian journalists praised Sichuan public security work".²¹⁷

²¹⁵Cf., e.g., "A Wuhan fatte sparire le vere origini del Covid", *Il Giornale* (25th June 2021); "Argomenti: Xinjiang", *La Repubblica*.

²¹⁶See p. 40 above.

²¹⁷陈依文, *op. cit.*



3 CCP influence at the subnational level

Below the exposure accorded to national politics, the CCP's cultivation of local-level stakeholders allows it to insulate interactions from media and other scrutiny. At the subnational level, the asymmetric levels of understanding of the political and economic realities between the CCP's dedicated organs and foreign officials' knowledge of each others' political and economic realities is even higher, a disparity that lets the CCP exploit the expectations of often unquestioning interlocutors. The importance of localised cooption work, previously studied in the Nordics and elsewhere,²¹⁸ is equally relevant to the CCP's influence work in Italy. Previous research has brought attention to the Italian presence of the CPAFFC, the primary local-focused influence organ in the CCP foreign affairs system: a key CPAFFC Italian partner, the Italy-China Friendship Association led by the lobbyist and former politician Irene Pivetti, was active as early as 2013.²¹⁹

Pivetti's association is not, however, the only CPAFFC partner in Italy. Since the mid-2010s, a new entity has emerged as a key partner of both the CPAFFC and CCPIT's exchanges with local governments in Italy.

3.1 The Italy-China Link Association: A CPAFFC/CCPIT subnational facilitator

The case of a recent recipient of the "friendship association" mantle illustrates the economics of cooption work: at a negligible cost, CCP influence agencies can sate the appetite for prestigious-sounding titles and invitations common among lesser actors in the lobbying and consulting industry, turning them into tools to convince local politicians and officials to join propaganda initiatives they may hope will result in increased trade or investment. In the mid-2010s, CCPIT and the CPAFFC developed a relationship with a consultant with political contacts concentrated in one of Italy's regions, offering her symbolic perks that outranked her prominence in Italian political networks: most notably, an invitation to attend a CPAFFC anniversary event, addressed by Xi Jinping himself. This relationship grew into a new entity, whose core purpose appears to be to facilitate these CCP-controlled organs' exchanges with local governments within the network of the consultant and her partners. These exchanges fit a pattern familiar from localised influence work elsewhere: local authorities accede to participate in propaganda initiatives, typically invoking Xi's signature geopolitical scheme, while obtaining no tangible benefits for their regions.

3.1.1 A network of consultants' potential for localised influence work

The **Italy-China Link Association (ICLA)** was established in 2017 by a consultant with contacts in the local-level public sector and the attendant consulting industry. Before ICLA's establishment, as a vehicle of CPAFFC and CCPIT subnational interaction, the consultant and her network This network's access to local government circles created a potential that CPAFFC and CCPIT were exploiting by the mid-2010s. Against this background, ICLA's establishment appears as the crystallisation of these influence agencies' relationship with a consultant network into a dedicated intermediary entity.

²¹⁸Lulu, "Confined discourse management and the PRC's localised interactions in the Nordics".

²¹⁹Poggetti, *op. cit.*



According to its website, the association “connects I[talian excellencies] & C[hinese excellencies]” to create “an interdisciplinary network” devoted to “win-win projects in Italy and China”.²²⁰ Its statutes summarise its scope of activity as the development of “relations of friendship and exchange” between such “excellencies”, encompassing culture, education, research, business and other areas.²²¹

ICLA’s founder and president is Maria Moreni, described in online profiles as a “[c]onsultant [ac]credited to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers” and a “parliamentary consultant”.²²² More than a decade before ICLA’s establishment, Moreni founded and presided over the non-profit association Physeon, whose stated goal was to promote the internationalisation of Italian companies, “gather[ing] together the world of Research and Innovation of Excellence in all domains”.²²³ Physeon’s official website is no longer online and the association, still active in 2017, might no longer be operating. However, ICLA appears to have inherited aspects of Physeon’s role, if not entirely replaced it, given that it shares some of its partners and declared aims.

Already in her Physeon days, Moreni possessed a network of contacts with subnational governments.²²⁴ Although mostly concentrated in Lombardy and, in particular, her home province of Brescia, the geographical reach of Moreni’s network was supplemented by her further partnerships, extending to Veneto and Sicily.²²⁵

The presence of a long-term associate of Moreni, who often joins her at events involving PRC and Italian entities, gives the endeavour government links, as well as further overlap with CCP-linked activities. Carlo Capria is ICLA’s co-president and was already involved with Physeon, of which he was a co-founder and later honorary president, among other roles.²²⁶ He previously held positions at the PM Office, the Ministry of Economic Development and its predecessor agency, with responsibilities including supporting the internationalisation of small and medium-sized enterprises.²²⁷ Capria was, in his own right, a familiar face to CCP-linked entities as early as 2016.²²⁸

ICLA also features other figures engaged in China-themed consulting. Jim Zheng (Zheng Jinjiang 郑金江), ICLA’s vice president, also established the Padua-based OpenGate China, another association promoting Italy-China exchanges, together with Marco Toson, a consultant associated with Ukrainian interests.²²⁹ As in Capria’s case, Zheng’s own contacts with CCP-linked entities predate ICLA’s establishment.²³⁰

Moreni’s network is further linked to CCP influence through its overlap with the activities of Michele De Gasperis, a consultant who founded and leads an “OBOR In-

²²⁰“ICLA Italy - China Link Association”, ICLA.

²²¹“Atto costitutivo”, ICLA, 13th Sept. 2017.

²²²“Maria Moreni”, LinkedIn; “Maria Moreni”, Comunicazione italiana.

²²³“Chi siamo”, Physeon; “Moreni (LinkedIn)”; “Moreni (Comunicazione italiana)”; “Associazione Physeon Presentazione & Happy Expo 2015”, Physeon, via SlideShare, 18th May 2015.

²²⁴“Partners”, Physeon.

²²⁵See section 3.1.3.

²²⁶“ICLA Italy - China Link Association”; “Associazione Physeon Presentazione & Happy Expo 2015”; “Organigramma”, Physeon; “Comitato Scientifico PERMANENTE”, Physeon; “Carlo Capria”, AEREC.

²²⁷“CV Carlo Capria”, Ministero dello Sviluppo Economico, 8th Jan. 2018; “Carlo Capria”, Comunicazione italiana; “Ruolo del personale non dirigenziale della Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri e del Dipartimento della Protezione Civile”, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 1st Jan. 2018; “Carlo Capria”.

²²⁸See section 3.1.2.

²²⁹“Associazione OpenGate China”, OpenGate China, 24th June 2021; “Marco Toson”, LinkedIn.

²³⁰See section 3.1.2.



Figure 8: From left: Maria Moreni, Marco Toson and Michele De Gasperis attending the China-Italy Local Government Cooperation Dialogue, November 2019. Source: CNS.

stitute” and has claimed an earlier affiliation linked to the CCP National Development and Reform Commission.²³¹

3.1.2 ICLA as a CPAFFC and CCPIT intermediary

Years before the rise of ICLA, Moreni was emerging as an intermediary facilitating the CPAFFC and CCPIT’s contacts with local stakeholders. ICLA’s establishment suggests a specialisation in this facilitation activity, in turn recognised by the CCP-led agencies with rewards matching the traditional role of a node in the “friendship association” network, such as an appointment at a supranational front entity and a friendship award.

The CPAFFC publicly made Moreni a partner soon after the establishment of another friendship association, whose secretary-general may have ushered her into her intermediary role. Moreni received an open endorsement from the CPAFFC in 2014, when she was invited to attend a ceremony to mark the Association’s 60th anniversary. Her fellow attendees at the event, addressed by Xi Jinping and covered on the CCTV evening news, point to the significance of the invitation: they included Romano Prodi, formerly Italy’s PM and president of the European Commission, and high-profile CPAFFC friends such as Gianfranco Terenzi, former captain regent of San Marino, Jaroslav Tvrdík, the CEFC, then CITIC-employed face of the pro-Beijing lobby in the Czech Republic, and former US president Richard Nixon’s grandson Christopher Nixon Cox.²³² Moreni’s public emergence as a CPAFFC partner coincided with inter-

²³¹Poggetti, *op. cit.*, p. 15; “Michele De Gasperis”, LinkedIn, 11th June 2021; “Michele De Gasperis — Marketing —Relazioni istituzionali e internazionali”, Degasperis.org, Feb. 2020.

²³²“新闻联播”, CCTV, 15th May 2014. On Terenzi, see “San Marino, muore investito da un suo camion Gianfranco Terenzi, imprenditore ed ex Capitano Reggente”, Chiamamicittà; Luca Salvatori, “Terenzi politico, imprenditore e grande amico della Cina”, Rtv San Marino, 20th May 2020; “La visita dei Capitani Reggenti in Cina - Febbraio 1988”, Associazione San Marino Cina; “宋敬武副会长率团访问意大利和圣马力诺”, CPAFFC, 31st Oct. 2017; on Tvrdík, Hála & Lulu, “Lost in translation: ‘Economic diplomacy’ with



(a) Moreni, attending a speech by Xi Jinping at the CPAFFC's 60th anniversary, shown in the opening segment of the main state television Source: *Confederazione Italiana Federazioni Autonome*, May 2014. Source: *CCTV*. (b) Moreni (left) with ICFA's Wang Yan 王岩 at the CPAFFC anniversary event, May 2014. Source: *CCTV*. *Autonome*.

Figure 9: Identification of Moreni at the CPAFFC anniversary event.

actions between her and the Italy-China Friendship Association (ICFA), established a year early under the CPAFFC's auspices.²³³ ICFA's secretary-general Wang Yan 王岩 was with Moreni at the 2014 CPAFFC anniversary event.²³⁴ A month later, Physeon coorganised an ICFA visit to Sicily, for meetings with city mayors and business representatives.²³⁵ Later that year, Moreni met CPAFFC officials as part of an ICFA delegation.²³⁶ Moreni soon became a CPAFFC intermediary in her own right. In 2016, still a year before ICLA's establishment, she was received by CPAFFC vice president Song Jingwu 宋敬武 in her capacity as Physeon's leader.²³⁷ By 2017, CPAFFC officials were meeting Italian local administrators at events organised by or otherwise involving Moreni.²³⁸ Song's 2017 Italy trip cemented ICLA's new position as a privileged CPAFFC partner: Song bestowed on Moreni a "friendship" award received seven years earlier by the president of the Italy-China Association, historically the CPAFFC's main Italian partner.²³⁹ Moreni's role involves a further appointment within CPAFFC's network: according to its website, ICLA is a "co-founder" of the CPAFFC-initiated Belt and Road Local Cooperation Committee (BRLC),²⁴⁰ with Moreni as co-president and

Chinese characteristics", pp. 15 sqq.; Lomová, Lulu & Hála, *op. cit.*; on Nixon Cox and the Richard Nixon Foundation, "Speech by Mr. Christopher Nixon Cox", CPAFFC, 15th May 2014; "谢元副会长会见美国尼克松基金会代表团", CPAFFC, 19th Jan. 2016; "李小林会长会见美国尼克松基金会主要负责人", CPAFFC, 24th May 2019.

²³³Yoshihara & Bianchi, *op. cit.*, p. 26. On ICFA, see p. 16.

²³⁴"新闻联播", 2:23; "Associazione Physeon Presentazione & Happy Expo 2015", p. 6. Cf. "Rapporti commerciali Italia-Cina: delegazione ICFA in Sicilia in missione di sviluppo", Confederazione Italiana Federazioni Autonome, 18th June 2014.

²³⁵*Ibid.*

²³⁶"Visita a Cpaffc", ICFA, 8th July 2014.

²³⁷"宋敬武副会长会见意大利飞赛隆友好协会主席玛莉亚·莫莱尼", CPAFFC, 30th Mar. 2016.

²³⁸See section 3.1.3.

²³⁹"宋敬武副会长率团访问意大利和圣马力诺". Cf. note 54.

²⁴⁰See section 1.1.2.



Figure 10: Moreni (first from right) and CCPIT Italian chief representative Zhang Gang 张钢 visit Ortona in Abruzzo for meetings with port officials and industry association leaders, November 2016. Source: ICLA via Youtube.

Italy coordinator.²⁴¹ As will be shown below,²⁴² ICLA has succeeded in recruiting Italian provincial and municipal governments into BRLC.

CCPIT's relationship with Moreni also precedes the establishment of ICLA. Physeon was a coorganiser of a CCPIT networking event in Lombardia in 2015.²⁴³ In 2016, Moreni, as Physeon president, accompanied CCPIT's chief representative in Italy on visits to Abruzzo and Puglia.²⁴⁴ A press release on one of these visits noted that Moreni had "for years serve[d] as a reference point for promoting CCPIT/CCOIC activities with Italian public and private entities".²⁴⁵ Moreni's role accompanying CCPIT's Italian representatives on local visits continued in 2018, in her new capacity as ICLA's president.²⁴⁶ CCPIT's accounts of these exchanges appear to reflect Moreni's rising importance as a facilitator of its subnational interactions: while in 2016 the Council's website omitted mentioning her or Physeon in readouts of visits she attended, in 2021 it reported on a meeting with her, translating ICLA's name with the time-honoured "friendship association" formula.²⁴⁷

²⁴¹"Investimenti e turismo, la Provincia di Brescia incontra la Cina", Brescia2.it, 25th Oct. 2018; "Co-operazione istituzionale governi locali cinesi e governi locali italiani", ICLA; "List of Presidents, Honorary President, Co-Presidents, Executive President and Secretary-General of BRLC", BRLC, 17th Dec. 2019 De Gasperis' OBOR Institute lists among its partners the CPAFFC, with which it has signed a cooperation agreement, as well as BRLC ("第二届中意地方政府合作对话会在蓉启幕", 中国新闻网, 28th Nov. 2019; "Partners", Istituto Italiano OBOR, 11th June 2021).

²⁴²Section 3.1.3.

²⁴³"Associazione imprese cinesi in Italia -Italy Networking Day", Camera di Commercio Italo Cinese. Note also Moreni-led entities' coorganising role in an e-commerce promotion project with, among others, CCPIT and Huawei, and involving Capria ("Verbale del Senato Accademico", Università degli Studi di Bari Aldo Moro, 23rd Feb. 2016, p. 29).

²⁴⁴Laura Federicis, "Comunicazione alla Stampa - Visita in Abruzzo di ZHANG GANG, Delegato Generale del Consiglio Cinese per la promozione del Commercio Internazionale", Confindustria Chieti Pescara, 10th Nov. 2016; "驻意大利代表处见奥尔多纳市长", CCPIT, 10th Nov. 2016; "Puglia meet China CCPIT -Physeon", ICLA Italychinalink, via Youtube, 18th Nov. 2016; "Confindustria Lecce incontra la delegazione cinese guidata dal dott. Zhang Wang [sic], responsabile per l'Italia del China Council for Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT) e della China Chamber of International Commerce (CCOIC)", Confindustria Lecce, 16th Nov. 2016.

²⁴⁵Ibid.

²⁴⁶See section 3.1.3.

²⁴⁷"驻意大利代表处会见意中友好协会主席", CCPIT, 20th Jan. 2021.



Beyond her active role as a local CPAFFC and CCPIT intermediary, Moreni appears to have ties also to the united front system, as she is one of the deputy presidents of the Italian chapter of the Soong Ching Ling Foundation (SCLF), a UFWD-controlled organisation.²⁴⁸ Moreni has also posted a photograph showing her with Zhuang Rongwen 庄荣文, a leading CCP propaganda cadre.²⁴⁹ No further evidence of contacts between Moreni and Zhuang's work units is immediately available, suggesting they might be limited to that 'selfie'.²⁵⁰

Moreni's partners at ICLA somewhat make up for her lack of diversified links in the CCP influence apparatus beyond the CPAFFC and CCPIT.

In 2016, Carlo Capria, the then Physeon, later ICLA-affiliated official, was invited to attend the inauguration of the Italian affiliate of the Association for Yan Huang Culture of China (AYHCC), a front entity supervised by the PRC's Ministry of Culture and Tourism and linked to intelligence agencies through its top leadership.²⁵¹ In 2019, the *Global Times* and Xinhua praised Capria's efforts to boost ties between Italian and Chinese companies and his support for the BRI.²⁵²

In 2015, Zheng Jinjiang, later appointed ICLA vice president, became a vice president of the newly established Italian Chinese Youth Federation (意大利华侨华人青年联合会), whose establishment ceremony Moreni attended as Capria's representative.²⁵³ At the event, Zheng and a fellow vice president read congratulatory messages from united front agencies at the central and subnational levels.²⁵⁴ The organisation is further linked to transnational united front networks: the leader of the Brussels-based European Chinese Youth Federation (欧洲华侨华人青年联合总会), who has himself

²⁴⁸ "Moreni (LinkedIn)"; 杨双双, *op. cit.* On the SCLF, see p. 27.

²⁴⁹ Maria Moreni, "Zhuang Rongwen Vice Minister of the Publicity Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) thanks Maria Moreni", LinkedIn, 18th June 2018. Zhuang's main position was, already then, deputy head of the CCP Central Propaganda Department. Moreni's use of a mis-translation commonly used for foreign consumption reflects her lack of familiarity with the PRC's political system. Zhuang's responsibilities in the propaganda system include a concurrent appointment as director of the Office of the CCP's Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission (中央网络安全和信息化委员会办公室) ("庄荣文任国家互联网信息办公室主任等职务", 人民网, 21st Aug. 2018), on whose development from party external propaganda agencies see, e.g., Lulu, Jirouš & Lee, *op. cit.*

²⁵⁰ Zhuang did indeed visit Italy in June 2018 ("“中华乐园”和“中国馆”项目罗马启动 校际合作助力“感知中国”", CRI, 17th June 2018).

²⁵¹ "COMUNICATO STAMPA: Cerimonia Inaugurale dell'Associazione di Ricerca Culturale Italo-Cinese YanHuang", Facebook, 18th June 2016. On AYHCC, see section 1.4.1.

²⁵² "Italy aims to develop closer trade ties with China through Belt and Road", *Global Times*, 16th May 2019; "In Brescia, the Silk Road becomes the Taste Road", Xinhua Silk Road Information Service, 1st Aug. 2019.

²⁵³ 林毅斌, "意大利华侨华人青年联合会举行成立庆典 杨海杰任首届会长", 青田网, 7th Apr. 2015; cf. "Atto costitutivo" The youth federation appeared to exist in some form before its official launch: its first chair used it as his affiliation to co-sign a statement by diaspora organisations condemning Hong Kong protests, published by CCP-controlled media months before the 2015 launch event ("全球各地華人華僑社團領袖督促(呼籲)「佔中」者迅速撤離聯合聲明", 大公報, 29th Nov. 2014). The youth federation, established in Vicenza, is not to be confused with the Italian Chinese Youth Association (Associazione Giovani Cinesi in Italia, 意大利华侨华人青年会), set up in Rome in 2012, even though the same Italian name is used for the Federation in Physeon materials ("Associazione PHYSEON", Physeon). On this older youth association, its links and activities, see "意大利华侨华人青年会换届庆典, 曾步锋先生蝉联第三届会长", 欧华联合时报, 2nd June 2019; "意大利华社多方协力 助流落罗马街头同胞回归故乡", 中国侨网, 19th July 2021; "谢谢你, 中国人! 意大利罗马警察总督亲手写了一封感谢信", 浙江侨联, via 搜狐, 25th Mar. 2020; "Esquilino, l'associazione giovani cinesi in Italia dona 3500 mascherine alla Polizia di Stato", Roma Today, 23rd Mar. 2020; "VI Beijing Career Day: appuntamento il 12 maggio a Pechino", Fondazione Italia Cina, 12th May 2019.

²⁵⁴ 林毅斌, *op. cit.*



held united front appointments in the PRC, described the new Italian group as the tenth youth federation established with the European one's support.²⁵⁵

3.1.3 Coopting local governments into the Belt and Road

As an intermediary in contacts with local administrations, ICLA has helped the CPAFFC achieve key successes: notably, one province and at least four municipalities have officially joined a subnational derivative of Xi's geopolitical initiative, without these interactions apparently bringing comparable benefits to the Italian local constituencies involved. ICLA's role as an intermediary remains, however, largely limited by to the geographical reach of its network of contacts, centred in Brescia.

ICLA's contacts have allowed the CPAFFC to add several local governments to one of its BRI-themed initiatives, while making others interlocutors of its leadership as well as of CCPIT. ICLA's role has entered the official record: the Brescia province government's decree announcing it would join BRLC explicitly acknowledged its interactions with ICLA among its motivations for the decision.²⁵⁶ In addition to the province itself, at least three municipalities in Brescia joined BRLC.²⁵⁷ CCPIT exchanges with the province's top officials have also benefited from ICLA's mediation, including meetings and joint events.²⁵⁸

Beyond Moreni's home turf of Brescia, ICLA has facilitated CPAFFC and CCPIT contacts with officials elsewhere in Lombardy and other regions. Following the Brescian municipalities, BRLC was eventually joined by Fermo, in the Marche.²⁵⁹ In 2017, CPAFFC Vice President Song Jingwu attended an "Italy-China Local Government Cooperation Day" co-organised by ICLA and CPAFFC and sponsored by the Lombardy region, with high-level officials from three regions (Lombardy, Puglia and Abruzzo) in attendance and an opening address titled "Lombardy towards the new Silk Road".²⁶⁰

The local networks of Moreni's partners appear to allow her to extend these activities beyond Lombardy. Zheng Jinjiang and Marco Toson feature in ICLA's activities in

²⁵⁵ *ibid.* On the European Chinese Youth Federation, its first chair Fu Xuhai 傅旭海, and their role in united front work in the continent, see Jirouš, *op. cit.*, pp. 86 sq.; idem, "The Role of Coopted Diaspora Groups in Czech and European United Front Work", *China Brief* 20.16 (16th Sept. 2020); Filip Jirouš & Petra Ševčíková, "Covert propaganda operations in plain sight: The CCP united front system's media network in Europe", *Sinopsis*, 30th July 2021, p. 16.

²⁵⁶ "Oggetto: adesione della Provincia di Brescia all'iniziativa di cooperazione internazionale Belt and Road Local Cooperation (BRLC)", Provincia di Brescia, Decreto del Presidente N.459/2018, 27th Dec. 2018; cf. "Investimenti e turismo, la Provincia di Brescia incontra la Cina".

²⁵⁷ Carpenedolo, Montichiari and Orzinuovi ("会员"), BRLC). Orzinuovi's mayor was Andrea Ratti, vice president of Brescia, who, in Moreni's words, put the province "in the centre of Chinese interests" ("I Cinesi amano la provincia di Brescia", Radio Vera, 25th Oct. 2018; Maria Moreni, "Regione Lombardia, Italy-China Link, CPAFFC: Squadra che vince si rafforza!", LinkedIn Pulse, 8th June 2018). Further reflecting the overlap between BRLC's membership and ICLA's network of contacts, Moreni referred to a Carpenedolo government consultant as an old friend (*ibid.*). Carpenedolo's BRLC membership appears to have remained active even after Moreni's friend lost his post following his arrest while driving without a licence between two BRLC member towns ("L'assessore nei guai scaricato dal sindaco", *Bresciaoggi*, 23rd May 2019; Vittorio Prestini, "Carpenedolo, guida senza patente: 6 mesi ex assessore", *QuiBrescia*).

²⁵⁸ "Italia 4.0 China 2025", Provincia di Brescia, 18th May 2018; "La Provincia di Brescia sempre più protagonista della Belt & Road cinese: dagli investimenti diretti al turismo: a che punto siamo", Provincia di Brescia, 25th Oct. 2018; "Italy-China Friendship & Cooperation Day in Brescia Province —Programa della giornata", Smart City Association, 24th July 2019.

²⁵⁹ "Anche Fermo guarda alla Cina: nuove prospettive per aziende e turismo", *Cronache Fermane*, 29th Mar. 2019.

²⁶⁰ "1° Italy-China Local Government Cooperation Day", Provincia di Brescia, 26th Oct. 2017.



Figure 11: PRC Consul-General in Milan Song Xuefeng, Lombardy Vice President Fabrizio Sala, CPAFFC Vice President Song Jingwu and Carlo Capria, October 2017. Source: CPAFFC.

Veneto: in 2018, ICLA and OpenGate China coorganised a trip where Fabio Bui, vice president (later president) of Padua province, met CPAFFC's Song Jingwu, together with Moreni, Toson and Zheng.²⁶¹

ICLA's network remains geographically limited, leaving the association far from a monopolising role as the CPAFFC and CCPIT's local-government intermediary. When, in 2019, CPAFFC vice president Song met local administrators and a Northern League MP in Sicily, Moreni did not appear to be involved.²⁶²

Considering the cluster of intermediary entities linked to ICLA does, however, put its reach in a broader perspective. A recent BRI-themed event, opened by De Gasperis and graced by a CPAFFC representative, sheds further light on his OBOR Institute's activities and links. The April 2021 event, titled "Belt and Road Exhibition 2021 – Digital Edition", was attended by former Rome mayor Francesco Rutelli,²⁶³ the PRC ambassador and the president of the Tuscany region, Eugenio Gian.²⁶⁴ A journalist with the financial daily *Il Sole 24 Ore*, which signed an MOU with the CCP-controlled *China Economic Daily* in March 2019, moderated.²⁶⁵ The event illustrates how the CPAFFC and its Italian partners can successfully engage with local and national public officials, as well as reputed national media outlets.

Compared to the success for CCP localised influence work manifest in these government endorsements of Xi's geopolitical theme, less evidence is available of these interactions having brought meaningful economic benefits to the communities represented by the local governments involved, with a possible link to an actual deal being

²⁶¹ "意大利代表团访问立国集团洽谈合作", 东北网, 26th Apr. 2018; Fabio Bui, "Curriculum formativo e professionale", Provincia di Padova, 18th Mar. 2019.

²⁶² "宋敬武副会长率团访问意大利、圣马力诺", CPAFFCsite, 28th Oct. 2019; "Twitter feed of Alessandro Pagano", Twitter, 25th Oct. 2019; "Alessandro Pagano", Camera dei deputati. Moreni's previous association had, however, coorganised a Sicily visit with ICFA in 2014 (see p. 48).

²⁶³ On Rutelli, see p. 37.

²⁶⁴ "Export, De Gasperis (Istituto Obor): "La cultura unisce, non alziamo muri"", Adnkronos.com, 12th Apr. 2021.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.; Harth, "Cosi la macchina di propaganda cinese penetra nei media italiani".



Figure 12: Fabio Bui (fourth from left) posing with Song Jingwu (next) and Maria Moreni (at the centre), April 2018. Source: 龙江阅读 via Sohu.

burdened with data security risks and complicity with human rights abuses. The Brescia decree to join BRLC mentions a 2017 agreement between the province and ZTE Italy for local “smart city” services.²⁶⁶ Although, unlike with the BRLC membership, the sources consulted do not establish a direct role of Moreni in the ZTE deal, ICLA’s interest in the field is evidenced by a Brescia-based Smart City Association’s membership in BRLC and partnership with ICLA.²⁶⁷ The data security risks related to the involvement of the state-controlled ZTE in smart-city and other infrastructure have led to bans and warnings in, e.g., Australia and the Czech Republic, where efforts to enlist the support of friendly local officials for smart-city plans have been noted.²⁶⁸ As with other major PRC providers, ZTE’s deployment of smart-city technology in Xinjiang can contribute to surveillance and repression activities that include system of ethnic reeducation camps.²⁶⁹ Huawei’s smart-city development in Sardinia attracted media attention in 2019.²⁷⁰

In Veneto, where the main actor appears to be Toson and Zheng’s OpenGate China rather than ICLA, OpenGate appears to have acted as an intermediary to obtain medical equipment (described as donations) from China for Padua province in April 2020,

²⁶⁶“Oggetto: adesione della Provincia di Brescia...”

²⁶⁷“TSCAI among BRLC members”, TSCAI, 15th Jan. 2019; “Alliances”, TSCAI, 24th June 2021.

²⁶⁸Scott Morrison & Mitch Fifield, “Government Provides 5G Security Guidance To Australian Carriers”, Minister for Communications and the Arts, Media release, via Parliament of Australia, 23rd Aug. 2018; Tim Biggs & Jennifer Duke, “Government implies 5G China ban in new security advice”, *Sydney Morning Herald* (23rd Aug. 2018); “Varování NÚKIB před používáním softwaru i hardwaru společnosti Huawei Technologies Co., Ltd., a ZTE Corporation”, Národní úřad pro kybernetickou a informační bezpečnost, 17th Dec. 2018; Hála & Lulu, “Huawei’s Christmas...”; Lomová, Lulu & Hála, *op. cit.*

²⁶⁹“ZTE”, ASPI, Mapping China’s Tech Giants.

²⁷⁰Milena Gabanelli & Andrea Marinelli, “5G: in Italia la rete strategica è in mano alla Cina, mentre l’Europa si defila”, *Corriere.it*, 10th Feb. 2019.



Figure 13: CPAFFC message on a box as part of a donation organised by OpenGate China. Source: [OpenGate](#).

in boxes emblazoned with the CPAFFC logo.²⁷¹ Later that year, OpenGate claimed an involvement in the procurement of Covid-19 tests, officially adopted by the region.²⁷²

²⁷¹“Donazioni di materiale sanitario durante la pandemia”, OpenGate China, 28th Feb. 2020; “I veri amici sono come le stelle...”, OpenGate China, via Facebook, 5th Apr. 2020.

²⁷²“Presentazione del test rapido “fai da te””, OpenGate China, 17th Nov. 2020.



4 Conclusions and perspectives

As this study has established, the CCP uses multiple agencies across the party-state, their fronts and local intermediaries to influence Italian politics across ideological divides and at the national, regional, provincial and municipal levels, largely evading the public attention that a few high-profile figures' displays of CCP-alignment have attracted. The recent evolution of these operations has taken them closer to redefining mainstream attitudes on the relationship with China, coopting figures with decision and opinion-making power at the national and local level into espousing or implicitly legitimising CCP policy goals, initiatives and talking points.

The use of fronts and intermediaries and the cooption of neutral or sceptical voices unable to recognise the nature of influence agencies and operations effectively out-sources the pursuit of aspects of CCP policy to its targets. The efficiency the CCP gains with this delegation to local proxies contrasts with the loss of creative, autonomous policy-making imagination Italy and other targeted democracies experience.

4.1 A multi-system influence effort

The analysis of three cases of CCP-linked entities targeting Italian parliamentary and local politics in this study has shown the existence of operations conducted by agencies in several of the major components of the CCP's external influence apparatus. The International Liaison Department (ILD), the CCP's main organ coopting foreign politicians and their parties, is present at the national level, acting as the main partner of two "friendship" groups in Parliament. Agencies in the CCP **propaganda** system target both politics and the media: while a Central Propaganda Department front organisation has brought the party's redefinition of human rights to politicians and well-connected think tanks, state media have brought journalists from Italy's mainstream press on trips presented as endorsements of everything they were shown of the régime's security policy. The **united front** system uses friendly Italian politicians to relay its portrayal of the repression of ethnic and religious minorities as an aid to 'development'. Less directly, it also targets Italian politics through the involvement in influence activities of leaders of CCP-coopted diaspora organisations, the key locus of united front activity abroad. Influence agencies in the CCP's foreign affairs and economic systems target Italy's subnational administrations: the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC), and the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT) and their fronts exploit the networks of local political consultants to coopt politicians and officials down to the municipal level into the party's geopolitical designs. Civilian and military **intelligence** agencies' links to culture-themed front organisations, one of which had its first foreign affiliate set up in Italy, open further channels for the cultivation of the national and subnational political élite. Party-guided state and private businesses, such as the state-controlled ZTE, stand to benefit from contacts established through influence operations, which can make local officials receptive to deals whose security and human-rights implications often meet hostile reactions in democratic societies. The evidence in these selected cases thus suffices to establish the need to track the Italian influence operations of major components of the CCP-driven apparatus: the party-state's foreign affairs, propaganda, united front, economic, and political and legal systems, as well as the influence activities of the PLA and state-controlled companies.



This study has identified two groups – the **Italy-China Parliamentary Friendship Association** and the **Institute for Chinese Culture (ICC)** – that have succeeded in getting parliamentarians across the political spectrum involved in ‘friendly’ liaison activities with CCP influence agencies, with the ILD playing the main role. The former group, most visibly treated as a vehicle for Tibet-themed propaganda, has been eclipsed by the newer ICC, which regularly organises initiatives targeting politicians and the media with the support of the PRC embassy and various CCP organs. Boilerplate references to “culture” and the development of bilateral relations obscure the squarely political purposes of initiatives that on the PRC side involve CCP agencies dedicated to the cooption of foreign élite actors and seek to boost the party’s legitimacy at home and abroad.

At the level of regional, provincial and municipal government, the case of the **Italy-China Link Association (ICLA)** provides evidence of intensive localised influence work by CCP influence agencies like the CPAFFC and CCPIT. The attention these central organs have dispensed to an obscure political consultant whose network is largely concentrated in one out of 107 province-level jurisdictions, at times treating it as the local node of the global network of “friendship associations”, with an invitation to a high-profile event also attended by a former Italian prime minister and European Commission president, shows the importance of granular localisation within CCP influence activity.

4.2 Exploiting knowledge asymmetry to redefine the mainstream

Using local politicians, lobbyists and consultants to build intermediary entities, the CCP’s influence agencies supplement their own capabilities to coopt target policy and opinion-making élites, installing propaganda narratives as legitimate options within local political debate. The neutral image of organisations like ICC allow the ILD and other influence organs to cross the respectability threshold: the resistance bellicose diplomats or obscenely pro-CCP personages may inspire in much of the mainstream can be overcome by surrounding CCP-linked entities with “middle-ground” figures. In the logic of influence operations, the presence of critics of aspects of CCP policy at these organisations’ activities is as valuable an achievement as the faithful repetition of propaganda by more predictable cooptees. The adoption of the language of Xiist geopolitics, from a ‘Belt and Road’ city alliance to the ‘Health Silk Road’, in initiatives endorsed by parliamentarians, local governments and business associations is a visible manifestation of these discourse-engineering successes. Less obviously for some Italian participants, ostensibly innocuous trips and meetings by CCP-critical or indifferent figures are presented as endorsements by the CCP’s media to its captive domestic audience. For Italian, Chinese and global élites and the general public, these influence operations help turn propaganda narratives on the benignity of the CCP’s totalitarian rule and international expansionism into a new *common sense* of political discourse.

The relative ease with these operations in Italy and other democracies succeed rests on the *knowledge asymmetry* between CCP influence agencies and their foreign interlocutors. While organs such as the ILD have dedicated units staffed by career area specialists, Italian politicians and others involved in these exchanges typically lack any background in China’s language, history or politics. Without such knowledge, targets are unable to recognise the nature and goals of their PRC counterparts, often further obscured by the use of front organisations. The opacity of the CCP-linked



parties to Italian targets contrasts with the information-gathering and analysis capabilities of dozens of party, state, military and other entities involved on the PRC side. The process is self-reinforcing: targets on the less-informed side of the relationship are in turn receptive to propaganda turned common sense: as best evidenced at the local level, a default belief in Xi's "Belt and Road" as a miraculous source of economic growth and international prestige leads to no-questions-asked receptivity to influence operations.

4.3 Beyond a few case studies: Perspectives for further research

With the three case studies presented, this study lays no claim to a comprehensive overview of CCP influence work in Italy. These cases were simply selected to demonstrate the Italian presence of a representative sample of the CCP's foreign influence agencies. Below, we note some influential entities with known interactions with the CCP influence apparatus.

The Italian-Chinese Institute (Istituto Italo-Cinese, IIC), which has held meetings with representatives of, e.g., the CPAFFC and the China Society of Human Rights Studies (CSHRS).²⁷³ In 2018, the CPAFFC "renewed" a cooperation agreement with the IIC. Like the closely linked Italy-China Foundation (Fondazione Italia Cina), the IIC is a decades-old organisation with state and business connections long associated with former Fiat CEO Cesare Romiti.²⁷⁴

Beyond comparatively obscure groups like the ones presented in this paper, influential Italian politicians have enduring ties to CCP influence agencies. The most visible examples include former premiers Romano Prodi and Massimo D'Alema, both long-term supporters of the PRC's role on the international stage and frequent attendees at meetings of agencies such as the ILD and the CPAFFC.²⁷⁵

Local consultants such as those associated to ICLA mediate only some interactions between CCP influence agencies and Italian subnational governments. For example, although ICLA's Moreni once coorganised a Sicily trip with an older CPAFFC partner, a more recent visit to the island by a CPAFFC vice president had no noticeable ICLA involvement.²⁷⁶

Entities such as the ones covered in the case studies above serve as examples of platforms and proxies for the analysis of the operations of the CCP agencies whose influence on Italy's political mainstream they help mediate. While they may have been at

²⁷³"Who We Are", IIC; "我会与意中协会签订合作协议", CPAFFC, 1st Nov. 2018; "China Society for Human Rights Studies e Istituto Italo Cinese", IIC, 11th June 2018.

²⁷⁴"Rinnovo del protocollo di collaborazione con l'Associazione d'Amicizia del Popolo Cinese con l'Estero", IIC; "我会与意中协会签订合作协议". The Institute was established in 1971, following the establishment of diplomatic relations with the PRC, by Vittorino Colombo, the Christian Democrats' key figure in relations with China ("2020: cinquanta anni di relazioni diplomatiche tra Italia e Cina", Istituto Italo Cinese, 15th Jan. 2021; Pini, *op. cit.*, pp. 147 sq.). Romiti, who led the Institute by 2001, set up the Foundation in 2003 (Giuseppe Zois, "Valerio Bettoni: Romiti ha saputo portare anche Bergamo in Cina", BergamoNews, 19th Aug. 2020; "Quella volta che ospitammo mille operai cinesi in Piemonte". La storia di Romiti con la Cina", Agi, 18th Aug. 2020). The Institute and Foundation continue to be personally linked, both being currently chaired by Mario Boselli, a fashion businessman and leader of business associations ("Il Cavaliere del Lavoro Mario Boselli è il nuovo Presidente della Fondazione Italia Cina", Fondazione Italia Cina, 24th Apr. 2020).

²⁷⁵Poggetti, *op. cit.*, p. 16; "季小林会长会见意大利前总理马西莫·达莱马和匈牙利前总理彼得·麦杰西", CPAFFC, 6th Sept. 2019; "钱洪山会见西欧国家政要代表团", ILD, 25th Apr. 2019; "2012 中国国际友好城市大会圆满闭幕", CPAFFCsite, 14th Sept. 2012.

²⁷⁶See p. 52.



times privileged intermediaries of specific actors and avenues of CCP influence work, they are recyclable and disposable partners of the party's influence systems. Political influence operations may avail themselves of whatever rhetorical cover ('parliamentary democracy', 'dialogue', 'investment promotion') and configuration of intermediaries (including the ones in the cases above) are expedient to the cultivation of a target. Recent and planned propaganda events involving senior political voices illustrate this adaptability. In May 2021, ICLA hosted a CCPIT-coorganised event titled "China: a different truth" which, like an earlier BRI-themed one opened by an ICLA associate, was moderated by a journalist from a newspaper partnered with CCP propaganda media,²⁷⁷ included the participation of a former Italian diplomat partnered with an ILD front²⁷⁸ and an Italian think tank leader who has attended SCIO and CSHRS propaganda activities.²⁷⁹ Days later, a Xinjiang-themed paper co-published by the same think tank titled "Understanding complexity, building peace" and endorsed by, i.a., Beppe Grillo was promoted on social media by Petrocelli, who noted that that the "political and social situation in Xinjiang" is far more complex than how it is portrayed by the "sensationalism of the Western generalist press".²⁸⁰ Partners and interlocutors of influence agencies across multiple systems, from CCPIT to the Propaganda Department's 'human-rights' fronts, once again including actors covered in this study, had thus been mobilised to try and counter exposure of the CCP's repression in Xinjiang province with positive, propaganda-aligned accounts, implanted in the narrative mainstream through the endorsement of a high-ranking Italian public official.²⁸¹ The party-state's attempts to trick its noted critics into legitimising its influence work under cover of 'middle-ground', 'win-win' concepts continued at the time of writing: an event planned for late November 2021, titled "Foreign Investment and Internationalisation: a strategy for Italy", organised by an Italian international-relations think tank, was scheduled to include the participation of Senator Adolfo Urso, the President of the Joint Parliamentary Committee for the Security of the Republic, and the CEO of ZTE Italy.²⁸² The presence of the head of the same committee that in 2019 unanimously recommended considering the exclusion of PRC technology companies from 5G development in Italy, explicitly referring to ZTE, at an invested-themed event would allow one of the state-controlled companies targeted by such an exclusion to present itself as an acceptable partner, notwithstanding the national security concerns on its involvement in European infrastructure.²⁸³

²⁷⁷ See p. 52.

²⁷⁸ See p. 13.

²⁷⁹ "Cina: una realtà differente", China Communication Academy; "18 Maggio 2021 | Conferenza online "Cina: una realtà differente"", CeSEM, 12th May 2021. On the Centro Studi Eurasia and Mediterraneo (CeSEM)'s vice president Stefano Vernole, see "Organigramma", CeSEM, 11th June 2021; "Stefano Vernole", LinkedIn, 11th June 2021. On his links to far-right, antisemitic groups, see "Mr. Stefano Vernole", CSHRS, 11th Sept. 2015; Cristina Cucciniello, "Ex fascisti e a processo per truffa: chi c'è nel gruppo del ministero per i rapporti Italia-Cina" (23rd Apr. 2019); "Neofascismo e Islam ovvero le amicizie pericolose", *Gnosis* 4 (2005); Alexander Reid Ross, "Meet 'Leftist' Grayzone's New Neo-fascist Allies in Denying China's Genocide of Uyghurs", Haaretz, 27th July 2021.

²⁸⁰ "Xinjiang: understanding complexity, building peace", Eurispes and Istituto Diplomatico Internazionale and CeSEM; Vito Petrocelli, "Capire la complessità...", Twitter, 31st May 2021.

²⁸¹ CCP attempts to mainstream its denialist narrative on Xinjiang has similarly benefited from recent visits to the region by Michele Geraci, former undersecretary of state at the Italian Ministry of Economic Development ("Vice Foreign Minister Xie Feng: Whoever Heard of Such a Genocide in the World!", MFA, 15th May 2021; "Is China really involved in genocide? What I saw in Xinjiang", michelegeraci.com, 23rd July 2021).

²⁸² "Investimenti esteri e internazionalizzazione: una strategia per l'Italia", CeSI.

²⁸³ "Relazione sulle politiche e gli strumenti per la protezione cibernetica e la sicurezza informatica, a tutela dei cittadini, delle istituzioni, delle infrastrutture critiche e delle imprese di interesse strategico



Repeatedly involving, but going beyond, the handful of intermediaries analysed in the case studies above, new episodes continue to illustrate mechanisms sketched in this paper. Time and again, agencies across the CCP's influence apparatus leverage fronts, platforms and 'foreign friends' to coopt their way into target countries' opinion and policy-making élites, with each new legitimisation by an unwitting critical 'frenemy' further embedding CCP narratives in neutral, default, common-sense policy options. Knowledge asymmetry vis-à-vis CCP influence agencies makes targeted political élites easy prey for operations that allow an expansionist totalitarian power to hijack the mainstream of democratic societies.

nazionale”, Comitato parlamentare per la sicurezza della repubblica, 12th Dec. 2019. Cf. the Czech cybersecurity agency's warning on ZTE equipment (Hála & Lulu, *op. cit.*).



5 Addressing knowledge asymmetry: Policy recommendations

By coopting often unwitting politicians as proxies or endorsers of CCP policy, influence operations interfere with Italy's democratic political process. CCP influence work blurs the lines between legitimate diplomatic, trade or cultural exchanges and efforts to capture foreign élites, making policy-makers unable to understand the nature of their interlocutors and keeping the public unaware of the interactions between its representatives and a foreign power. The asymmetry in mutual knowledge between CCP influence agencies and Italian decision-makers not only threatens the integrity of the democratic system as a whole, but also that of individual politicians targeted by organs of an unfamiliar totalitarian apparatus, often behind layers of fronts and intermediaries.

Decision-making informed by up-to-date empirical research on China's politics and the CCP's power projection through political influence operations can refocus exchanges with PRC counterparts on legitimate exchanges, recognising influence agencies, their operations and propaganda memes as detrimental to a balanced relationship. Providing crucial information to political personalities and government officials across levels of administration can provide insights on and an understanding of CCP-controlled agencies, their goals and tactics, and serve as input to policy-making processes. This imperative should transcend partisan divisions: democratic politics is incompatible with cooption into operations that advance the global interests of a totalitarian power and deflect scrutiny of its repressive governance model. Those who believe in Italy as a democratic, independent global actor should understand and address external influence operations.

Beyond the policy-making élite, the public has a right to know if and to what extent its representatives are being coopted by a foreign political party that is a direct perpetrator of mass crimes against humanity in its controlled territory and increasingly seeks to interfere in democratic processes abroad, often undermining constitutionally sanctioned values and principles. Principles of transparency and accountability demand parliamentary scrutiny and disclosure of exchanges with PRC counterparts. Experience elsewhere has shown that transparency can degrade or thwart influence operations, exposing to the public interactions CCP influence agencies would rather keep under wraps. Italy's media, academia and think tanks have a role to play: interactions discussed in this paper and previous literature, otherwise largely unreported or underresearched, could serve as an invitation to further coverage of exchanges with CCP-controlled agencies.

The measures sketched below can help policy-makers reclaim their ability to craft a relationship with China based on Italy's interest, rather than a projection of the CCP's own. Only an understanding of the CCP and its influence operations can let the public and its representatives expose and scrutinise them and break the vicious circle of knowledge asymmetry and political interference.



5.1 *A cordon sanitaire* around CCP influence agencies

- **Government bodies at all levels, politicians and political parties should avoid interactions**, such as entering into agreements with, participation in or endorsement of their events or platforms, with **CCP influence agencies**, such as the ones discussed in this study, among which the ILD, the CPAFFC, CCPIT, propaganda and united front organs stand out for their operations targeting Italian politics. The activities of these agencies and their fronts by-pass norms that require accountability of state-to-state relationships, disguising the party-state's activities through "people-to-people", "cultural", "non-government" or other labels. Instead, diplomatic, trade, cultural and other exchanges should take place through the appropriate channels, as in relationships with other foreign states.
- **Government bodies should reject the hijacking of exchanges**, such as bilateral agreements, for influence activities, even when interacting with legitimate PRC counterparts. Such unacceptable hijacking may involve an overt propagandistic presentation (e.g., "Belt and Road" or other Xiist themes forced into cooperation in healthcare or culture) or the less evident use of interactions to coopt elite figures into instruments of CCP policy. The focus of such exchanges should be on shared goals beneficial to both sides rather than those of one side's geopolitical agenda (e.g., BRI propaganda, or raising the profile of CCP-linked actors).
- **Democratic political parties should avoid allying themselves to the CCP**, a totalitarian party responsible for massive human-rights violations, by becoming **partners of party organs**. In particular, there is no legitimate reason for parties that hold democratic principles to maintain exchanges with International Liaison Department (**ILD**) under the CCP's Central Committee. Even when ostensibly ideologically neutral, such exchanges serve the purpose of coopting foreign parties into serving the CCP's global interests, and are often presented by the CCP side as foreign endorsements of its policies. Politicians who do not want to be seen as endorsers of totalitarianism should instead help shape the relationship with China through the legitimate channels of Italy's democracy.

5.2 Reclaiming Parliament from totalitarian cooption

- **Senators and MPs should avoid participating**, as members or attendees, in the activities of **parliamentary 'China friendship' groups** with links to the CCP's influence agencies, such as the Institute for Chinese Culture or the Italy-China Parliamentary Friendship Association. Even those with CCP-critical views unwittingly endorse CCP propaganda when legitimising platforms linked to the ILD and other influence organs.
- **Senators and MPs should decline invitations** from CCP influence agencies (e.g., the ILD), their fronts and local intermediaries to events in China and elsewhere. Such exchanges, their superficially apolitical themes notwithstanding, seek to coopt foreign politicians as instruments of the CCP's expansionist policy and its propaganda. Legislators should understand the nature of cooption and propaganda events to which they are invited as influence tools, rather than 'dialogue' partners. Even attending them to express critical views allows the CCP to publicly present its interlocutors as endorsers of its platforms and narratives.



5.3 Resisting local-level influence operations

- **Regional, provincial and municipal elected officials and civil servants** should **ignore approaches** by CCP influence agencies such as the CPAFFC or CCPIT, and local lobbyists or ‘Italy-China’ associations acting on behalf of such agencies or otherwise linked to them. These agencies, controlled by the PRC party-state at the central level, use these approaches to by-pass the scrutiny of Italy’s government and national public opinion. Outsourcing international contacts to lobbyists and consultants creates serious vulnerabilities to national security and the integrity of a democratic political system accountable to the governed.
- **Regional, provincial and municipal authorities** should **not endorse** political influence activities, such as those subsumed under Xi Jinping’s “**Belt and Road**” geopolitical initiative (e.g., the CPAFFC’s “Belt and Road Local Cooperation Committee”, which has successfully targeted Italian provinces and cities). The adoption of a foreign dictator’s propaganda slogans is below the dignity of a free country. Exchanges with partners in China should instead be conducted within a local administration’s competencies and in pursuit of their constituents’ interests.

5.4 Knowledge to protect the political integrity of influence targets

- Relevant **parliamentary committees**, such as the Permanent Committee for the Security of the Republic (Comitato parlamentare per la sicurezza della repubblica, COPASIR) and both chambers’ Foreign Affairs Committees should exert oversight by conducting a **review of the findings** in this brief and holding **regular hearings on authoritarian influence operations** with experts and other stakeholders from Italy and its allies to allow for the prompt identification of new threats and adequate responses to CCP influence agencies’ evolving tactics. Recent hearings, findings and actions on this topic at the European Parliament’s Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation, may serve as a guide for further insight and subsequent action.
- **Senators and MPs** should be regularly briefed, in particular with **backgrounders** at the beginning of new legislatures, on the goals, tactics and agencies of CCP influence. The results of empirical, up-to-date, policy relevant **research on specific CCP agencies** and their influence activities, as in the present study, should inform parliamentary debate. Such information can help potential targets of influence operations recognise the tactics of influence agencies, e.g., their use of fronts, intermediaries and ostensibly neutral platforms, in order to avoid becoming unwitting instruments hijacked by a totalitarian actor.
- **Political parties** should **brief local party organisations**, their elected officials (e.g., city mayors) and membership with information on CCP influence agencies and operations that might target them, as well as on the need to reject Xiist geopolitical vocabulary and narratives in cooperation with PRC partners.



5.5 The public's right to know: Responding to grey-zone influence activity with transparency and accountability

- **Legislators and government officials** should be required to declare their interactions with foreign entities and related parties, such as membership or other participation in platforms and attendance of meetings and events, in a publicly available register.
- **Senators, MPs and local administrators** should scrutinise national and local government exchanges with PRC counterparts through parliamentary questions and other institutional oversight mechanisms, in order to bring transparency to interactions vulnerable to hijacking as CCP influence operations. In particular, legislators should review the involvement of Italian government bodies in exchanges bearing the “Belt and Road” or other propagandistic labels, demanding information on these exchanges including the content of any signed documents.

5.6 Pooled strengths and a democratic consensus for a balanced relationship

- **Senators and MPs** should review and adapt the legislative framework to counter foreign interference, such as that conducted by CCP influence agencies, considering the accrued experience and knowledge in allied states in the EU and elsewhere, including findings of the European Parliament's Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, as well as Australia's counter-foreign interference legislation.
- **Parties across the political spectrum** united by a commitment to Italy's national interest and the integrity of its political system should build consensus in countering totalitarian influence operations, as well as seek cooperation with like-minded forces across international democratic alliances. Forceful political debate over pressing domestic and EU-wide issues, a component of a healthy democracy, should not become a vulnerability to divide-and-rule tactics. Democratic forces across Europe and its allies face a common threat in CCP influence operations and should join forces to address it, however fundamental their disagreements on other issues. Resisting CCP influence work is a prerequisite to bilateral and multilateral relations on the basis of equality and the defence of the values and economic interests of European states and their democratic allies.



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