



CHINA IN CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE

France's "influence diplomacy" under CCP influence

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Abstract

"Cultural and influence diplomacy" plays an important role in France's foreign policy. Values it aims to promote include human rights, democracy and the diversity of cultural expression. Yet, in Greater China, heavyweight united front figures such as Jonathan Choi and Pansy Ho – the focus of the present article – have become major donors to French cultural operations organised by French authorities, in spite of their public defence of policies and values at odds with those promoted by France. Both have pledged to advance "people-to-people diplomacy" – which, in the CCP's language, effectively means acting in their unofficial capacity (both Choi and Ho are businesspersons) to further the party-state's interests. Their newfound status as major donors to French cultural events has enabled them to gain easy access to France's top diplomats and to increase their network within French political elites. It has also helped legitimise some of the positions they publicly defend on behalf of the Chinese party-state (on the security and political crackdown faced by Hong Kong since 2019, most notably). Lastly: it virtually allows them to acquire leverage over the organisation of French cultural operations in Greater China – although no undue attempt at censoring their content has been identified in the course of this research. In order to prevent cultural operations in Greater China from being slowly repurposed as quiet platforms serving the CCP's external propaganda efforts, it could be recommended that French authorities rethink their funding policy for cultural operations in the country.



0 French cultural diplomacy and the CCP's use of culture for political influence

“Cultural diplomacy” is at the core of the *Roadmap for Influence Diplomacy* published in December 2021 by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. According to then Minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, this document serves as a “consolidated doctrine in the field of influence”.¹ It states that “the struggle for influence is also a fight between narratives and, ultimately, models”.² After the promotion of “a new humanism serving the common goods”, “taking responsibility for who we are” is thus ranked as the second priority of France’s “influence diplomacy”. Values to be defended under this umbrella include the promotion of democracy and human rights, gender equality, and the diversity of cultural expression. The stated objective is to help “co-build the world”.³ Paradoxically, though, a large part of France’s diplomatic action in the cultural field is self-funded, meaning that French embassies and consulates general overseas have to find patrons. In China and Hong Kong, pro-establishment and united front-affiliated personalities have been quick to fund cultural events organised by the French embassy or General Consulates in the country and, in some cases, have also donated funds to cultural institutions in France. Although some of them may have a genuine interest in (French) culture, they have also proven keen on using those events and institutions as conduits to deploy people to people diplomacy.⁴ The term “people-to-people diplomacy” is closely related to united front work and refers to the use of people or organisations acting in an unofficial capacity in support of official diplomacy to further state interests, defined so as to include broadening international support or acceptance of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its value system.⁵

This paper shows how Jonathan Choi and Pansy Ho, two Hong Kong citizens who stand out for their contributions to France-China cooperation in the cultural field, the strength of their relationship with the party-state and their zealous public defence of some of its policies, are using “cultural cooperation” with France as a platform to access its top diplomats and decision makers and contribute to China’s external propaganda effort.

Since Mao Zedong’s 1942 speech entitled “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art”, it has been well known that the united front system is to extend its action upon artists and cultural workers. The CCP has been striving ever since to co-opt the latter into mass organizations to ensure they do not depart from the party line.⁶ In recent years, China’s influence on cultural products produced overseas has also attracted a significant level of attention: IRSEM’s reports on “Chinese influence operations” touched upon this topic and Erich Schwartzel dedicated a book to China’s influence on

¹“*Feuille de route de l’influence*”, Ministère de l’Europe et des affaires étrangères de la France, 14th Dec. 2021.

²*Ibid*, p. 7.

³*Ibid*, p. 38.

⁴Besides united front figures, Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei, with known political and intelligence links, has been a regular sponsor of “Festival Croisements”, the Embassy’s flagship cultural festival, in Guangzhou. See: “*Mix contemporary, China France art view*”, 2010 edition. Kingold, whose founder is Chau Chak Wing 周澤榮, well-known for his influence activities in Australia, has financed the 2022 edition of the “Mois de la francophonie” (month of the French-speaking world). See: “*Lancement du Mois de la francophonie en Chine du Sud*”, French General Consulate in Guangzhou.

⁵李桃, “中国民间外交的历史和现状分析”, 理论观察 1 (2011), via 欧美同学会.

⁶毛泽东, “文化工作中的统一战线”, 30th Oct. 1944.



Figure 1: Jonathan Choi and French President Emmanuel Macron in Beijing in April 2023. Source: 大公报.

Hollywood.⁷ Some countries have even issued regulations to prevent such influence: in the United States, the recently passed National Defense Authorization Act prohibits the spending of defence funds for projects whose content is susceptible of being altered by Beijing.⁸ Yet, little attention has been devoted to how united front networks and personalities may exploit cultural cooperation to buy access and influence within diplomatic and political circles. Previous efforts include Lin Li and James Leibold's ASPI report "Cultivating Friendly Forces", which analyses how cultural events held overseas by community groups have been used by united front officials to promote official narratives.⁹ Clive Hamilton and Mareike Ohlberg's *Hidden Hand* also includes a broad description of the People's Liberation Army-linked Poly Group's activities in the cultural field in foreign countries.¹⁰

This paper hopes to shed more light on this phenomenon, using the case of France. Jonathan Choi's and Pansy Ho's willingness to cooperate in cultural projects and their financial largesse have been noticed by French mainstream media. In 2017, *Le Figaro* devoted an article to Jonathan Choi, calling him a "discreet hero" and comparing him to a Buddha.¹¹ Economic daily *Les Échos* and *Le Monde* followed suit in the following months, the latter with an article in which Pansy Ho was also mentioned.¹² But none has mentioned their links with the united front and foreign affairs systems, let alone tried to analyse how investing in "cultural cooperation" could help them assist China's official diplomacy. Even though IRSEM's aforementioned report helped popularise the

⁷Paul Charon & Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer, "Chinese Influence Operations: A Machiavellian Moment", IRSEM, 2021; Erich Schwartzel, *Red Carpet: Hollywood, China, and the Global Battle for Cultural Supremacy*, Penguin Press, 2022.

⁸US Congress, *James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023*, Pub. L. No. 117-263 (2012), s 1257.

⁹Lin Li & James Leibold, "Cultivating friendly forces: the Chinese Communist Party's influence operations in the Xinjiang Diaspora", *ASPI Policy Brief* 61 (2022).

¹⁰Clive Hamilton & Mareike Ohlberg, *Hidden Hand: Exposing how the Chinese Communist Party is Reshaping the World*, Hardie Grant, 2020.

¹¹Valérie Duponchelle, "Dr Jonathan Koon-Shum Choi, un héros si discret", *Le Figaro*, 16th Feb. 2017.

¹²Frédéric Schaeffer, "Jonathan KS Choi, le milliardaire de Hong Kong devenu mécène de l'école des Beaux-Arts de Paris", *Les Échos*, 14th Jul. 2017; Roxana Azimi, "Les musées français cherchent à profiter des largesses des mécènes chinois", *Le Monde*, 16th Oct. 2018.



concept, united front work remains understudied in France and does not attract much interest from mainstream media. Former French parliamentarian Buon Tan's recent hearing at the National Assembly's investigative committee on foreign interference, following a previous report by Sinopsis exposing his links with the united front and foreign affairs systems, was not covered by any of them.¹³

1 Jonathan Choi and Pansy Ho's commitment to people-to-people diplomacy

Jonathan Choi Koon-shum 蔡冠深 and Pansy Catalina Ho Chiu-king 何超琼 are businesspersons: Jonathan Choi is the CEO of Hong Kong-based Sunwah Group (food, real estate, infrastructure, etc). As for Pansy Ho, she currently manages several companies in Hong Kong and Macao, including MGM Macau (gambling), Shun Tak Holdings (shipping, property, hospitality, investments, etc), Occasions (public relations) and others. Both are also heirs: Sunwah Group was founded by Choi Kai-you 蔡继有, Jonathan Choi's father.¹⁴ Nicknamed "the King of Seafood", the elder Choi was also seen as a "patriot" who used to donate large sums of money to fund schools in mainland China after the Reform and Opening period kicked off.¹⁵ Pansy Ho is the daughter of Stanley Ho, Macao's casino magnate, himself nicknamed "The King of Gambling". Stanley Ho used to control a large portion of Macao's economy and was a well-known political figure who used to sit in the National People's Congress and on the standing committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). A controversial figure, he was also alleged to entertain links with triads, which he consistently denied.¹⁶

Besides being businesspersons, Jonathan Choi and Pansy Ho are also heavyweight united front figures. Among their many affiliations (see Table 1), both currently sit on the standing committee of the most important united front forum: the CPPCC. Both also have links with the foreign affairs system. In particular, Jonathan Choi is a vice president of the advisory committee of the China Center for Contemporary World Studies (CCCWS), a think tank run by the International Liaison Department (ILD) of the CCP's Central Committee.¹⁷ According to CCCWS's official description, "its main fields of research include the international situation, political party politics, and comparative studies".¹⁸ Along with the United Front Work Department-linked Center

¹³"Compte rendu d'audition de M. Buon Tan, ancien député", Assemblée nationale, 23rd Mar. 2023; René Bigey & Alex Joske, "The tea leaf prince Chinese Communist Party networks in French politics", Sinopsis, 2nd Mar. 2022.

¹⁴蔡冠深: 爱港报国的多面人生, 中國兒女海外版, 4th Sep. 2019.

¹⁵“中山华侨中学国际高中部”, 深圳翰林学院, 25th Nov. 2020.

¹⁶Stanley Ho made his initial fortune gambling luxury goods. A 2009 report by the New Jersey attorney general's Division of Gaming Enforcement alleged Stanley Ho counted 14K and Sun Yee On triad members as associates. See: "Special Report of the division of gaming enforcement to the casino control commission on its investigation of MGM Mirage's Joint Venture with Pansy Ho in Macau, Special Administrative Region, People's Republic of China", New Jersey Department of Law and Public Safety, 18th May 2009.

¹⁷“关于新华”, 香港新華集團.

¹⁸“中心简介”, 当代世界研究中心, 31st Mar. 2011.



for China and Globalization, it is the co-organiser of a Global Young Leaders Dialogue and also serves as the secretariat of the Silk Road Think Tank Association, designed to “enhance the accurate understanding of the Belt and Road Initiative” and to “enhance positive feelings” towards it.¹⁹ The core role of the ILD is to develop relationships with foreign political parties, which includes gathering intelligence on them, as Czech intelligence service BIS pointed out in its 2015 annual report.²⁰ Besides, the ILD uses its connections to attempt to build support for the party and its international agenda. In particular, it has encouraged representatives of political parties to endorse and normalise CCP talking points.²¹

Table 1: Jonathan Choi and Pansy Ho’s main affiliations with the united front and foreign affairs systems

Jonathan Choi	Pansy Ho
<i>Links to the united front system</i>	
<i>In Mainland China</i>	
Member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) since 2003. ²² He has been a member of its standing committee since 2018 and a vice president of its commission for education, science, culture, health and sports between 2018 and 2023. ²³	Daughter of Stanley Ho (何鸿燊, 1921–2020), a long-standing member of the National People’s Congress, of the standing committee of the CPPCC, and member of the Consultative Committee for the Basic Law in Hong Kong. Pansy Ho is herself well acquainted with the united front system:
Executive council member of the China Overseas Friendship Association (中华海外联谊会, COFA), founded in 1997, and directly managed by the UFD. United front figures governments have accused of involvement in foreign interference, such as Christine Lee (with whom Jonathan Choi has indirect links – see below) and Huang Xiangmo, are members of COFA. COFA’s broad political agenda is clearly spelt out in its constitution, which states that the group’s objectives include “contributing strength towards the ancestral nation’s unification and realising the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” ²⁴	Member of the standing committee of the CPPCC since 2023. ²⁶
Member of the executive committee of the the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce. ²⁵	Member of the executive committee of COFA since 2019. ²⁷
	Member of the standing committee of the Beijing CPPCC since 2008; in this capacity she founded two associations to promote patriotism among Hong Kong and Macao’s youth. ²⁸
	Executive vice-president of the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce since 2022. ²⁹

¹⁹“China Center for Contemporary World Studies”, Belt and Road Studies Network, 18th Feb. 2019; “‘一带一路’智库合作联盟理事会成立”, 新华, 8th Apr. 2015. For more information about the CCWS, and the silk road think tank association, see Nadège Rolland, “Mapping the footprint of Belt and Road influence operations”, Sinopsis, 12th Aug. 2019.

²⁰“Annual Report of the Security Information Service for 2015”, Security Information Service (BIS).

²¹See: Jichang Lulu, “Repurposing democracy: The European Parliament China friendship cluster”, Sinopsis, 26th Nov. 2019.

²²“第十届中国人民政治协商会议全国委员会组成人员名单”, CPPCC, 20th Nov. 2019.

²³“中国人民政治协商会议第十四届全国委员会常务委员名单”, CPPCC, 11th Mar. 2023; “教科文衛體委員會”, CPPCC.

²⁴“海联会章程”, 中华海外联谊会.

²⁵“专访全国政协委员蔡冠深”, 人民网.

²⁶“中国人民政治协商会议第十四届全国委员会主席, 副主席, 秘书长, 常务委员名单”, 新华, 11th Mar. 2023.

²⁷“中华海外联谊会第五届理事会人员名单”, COFA, 18th Jun. 2019.

²⁸“何超琼委员: 25年前, 我对自己许下承诺”, 人民政协报, 5th Jul. 2022.

²⁹“工商联领导”, 中华全国工商业联合会.



Table 1 (cont.): Choi and Ho's affiliations

Jonathan Choi	Pansy Ho
<i>In Hong Kong</i>	
<p>“Special counsellor” of “Our Hong Kong Foundation”, a think tank founded by Tung Chee-hwa 董建华, Hong Kong’s first chief executive, long-time vice president of the CPPCC (2005-2023) and also founder of the China-United States Exchange Foundation (CUSEF). CUSEF’s funding of research at the Brookings Institution and Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies has caused alarm in Washington.³⁰ Our Hong Kong Foundation is a conservative think tank that develops research in support of Beijing’s Hong Kong policy. In 2019, it popularised the idea that “black hands” were behind the anti-ELAB protests, with Tung even pointing fingers at Taiwan and the United States.³¹</p> <p>Since 2008, he has been the president of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong (CGCC). CGCC sends some members to the commercial sub-sector of the Election Committee that selects Hong Kong’s chief executive. CGCC is also a major platform to coopt Hong Kong business elites into supporting Hong Kong’s integration into the “motherland” and spread its political messaging within Hong Kong business circles. Its role as a propaganda tool is explicitly assumed by Jonathan Choi. When asked about its future orientations, Jonathan Choi said that CGCC had to “tell the China story well” and “tell the Hong Kong story well” to the outside world.³²</p>	<p>Committee member of the Chinese General Chamber of Commerce, Hong Kong.³³</p> <p>President of the Hong Kong Women’s Federation and member of the executive committee of the All-China Women’s Federation since 2018.³⁴ In August 2019, she convened the members’ organisations to issue a statement opposing the protests.³⁵</p> <p>Vice-president of the Hong Kong Girls Guides Association since 2010; she organised tours in the mainland, suggested the association to become a member of the Beijing CPPCC-initiated “Beijing–Hong Kong–Macao Youth Connected Association” (京港澳青少年互联社) aimed at fostering patriotism among Hong Kong and Macao’s youth.</p> <p>Governor of Our Hong Kong Foundation (see left column).</p>
<i>Links to the foreign affairs system</i>	
<p>Since at least 2013, Jonathan Choi has been a vice-president of the China Center for Contemporary World Studies (当代世界研究中心) – see main text.³⁶</p>	<p>She sits on the strategic committee of the France China Foundation, set up in 2013 on the initiative of the Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs (CPIFA). Closely linked to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, CPIFA had been tasked with conducting research on international issues and foreign policy, establishing contacts with foreign political activists and diplomats, and expanding people to people diplomatic activities (see main text).</p>

³⁰On CUSEF, see Peter Mattis, “The Center of Chinese Influence: the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference”, in *Insidious Power: How China Undermines Global Democracy*, ed. by Hsu Szu-chien and J. Michael Cole, Eastbridge, 2020; John Dotson, “The China-U.S. Exchange Foundation and United Front “Lobbying Laundering” in American Politics”, *China Brief* 20.16 (2020); Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, “This Beijing-Linked Billionaire Is Funding Policy Research at Washington’s Most Influential Institutions”, *Foreign Policy*, 28th Nov. 2017.

³¹“以堅定信念戰勝風暴”, Our Hong Kong Foundation, 1st Aug. 2019.

³²“蔡冠深: 講好香港的故事 三年嘅嘢一年做埋佢”, *Dot Dot News*, 10th Feb. 2023.

³³“Other Committee Members”, Chinese General Chamber of Commerce, Hong Kong.

³⁴“中华全国妇女联合会第十二届执行委员会主席、副主席、常务委员、书记处书记名单”, 中华全国妇女联合会.

³⁵“向暴力说‘不’”“守护家园”——来自全港妇女守护家园大集会的声音”, *Xinhua*, 26th Aug. 2019.

³⁶《當代世界研究叢書》述評”, *人民網*, 27th Apr. 2013; “关于新华”, 香港新華集團.



Jonathan Choi and Pansy Ho have publicly committed to “people-to-people diplomacy”. The term is closely related to united front work and refers to “expanding the network of our friends by making as many friends as possible” to supplement overall diplomacy and “foster a more favourable public opinion of China across the world”.³⁷ As early as 2013, Jonathan Choi identified culture as a conduit to promote such people-to-people diplomacy. In an interview with *People’s Daily Online*, he characterised “people-to-people diplomacy” as “business associations, social groups, companies or well-known personalities using non-official events as conduits to propagate certain information”. To him, “this way, because it does not look official, discussion is made easier and the degree of acceptance by the other state of the information propagated is higher”.³⁸ For his contributions in this field, Jonathan Choi was granted the “Friend of Diplomacy” award in 2019 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.³⁹ In an interview conducted in July 2022, Pansy Ho described how she puts such a strategy into action: “I am on very good terms with many foreign consulates” that “would always come to me to listen to my opinions about Hong Kong”. She added that acting in a non-official capacity is “more effective to move people”. In the same interview, she hinted at the type of messaging she sought to convey to her “foreign consulate” contacts: “before judging us with bias or applying your way of thinking, you [apparently referring to diplomats] first need to listen to us on issues like: what is democracy?”⁴⁰

2 Buying access and status through cultural cooperation

Funding cultural exhibitions and events seemingly has been the method favoured by both Jonathan Choi and Pansy Ho to deploy such people-to-people diplomacy towards foreign countries in general and France in particular.⁴¹ This situation can be explained by a number of factors:

- opportunism: French diplomatic posts need funding to run their cultural operations. Providing this funding is an easy way to be seen as benevolent partners by top-level diplomats (ambassadors, consul-generals). Such status enables people like Choi and Ho to secure easy access to diplomats and places them on the shortlist of personalities that can be introduced to high-level politicians during official visits;
- access: elite cultural events usually attract community leaders and senior politicians, who rank among the main targets of any “people-to-people” diplomatic effort;
- strategic thinking: while actually seen by the CCP as “one of a number of fronts in the party’s struggle against its enemies and critics”, culture can easily be

³⁷Wang Chao, “People-to-People Diplomacy: A Propeller of Major-Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era”, CPIFA, 24th Dec. 2019.

³⁸“蔡冠深委员：推动民间外交 发扬中华文化”，人民网，9th Mar. 2013.

³⁹“蔡冠深荣获外交部驻港公署“外交之友”称号”，中国网，31st Jan. 2019.

⁴⁰“何超琼现担任香港妇女联合会主席，她也在各种民间外交上，对于外国友人了”，Douyin, 21st Jul. 2022.

⁴¹France is not the only target of Jonathan Choi and Pansy Ho, who are also active towards Vietnam (where Sunwah Group invested very early), Canada, Italy, Japan (where Jonathan Choi studied) and several other countries.



perceived as a non-contentious, apolitical space, which makes it the ideal arena in to deliver messages in a non-official way to an unready public;⁴²

- control: although this does not appear to have been the main objective so far, it enables important donors such as Choi and Ho to keep a degree of oversight upon the cultural programming of the French authorities and put them in a position to influence it if necessary.

Despite their numerous links with the united front and the foreign affairs systems, both Jonathan Choi and Pansy Ho have thus become major partners of the French authorities for the organisation and funding of cultural events in Greater China. In several instances⁴³, Jonathan Choi mentioned his actions as contributions to Xi Jinping’s “One Belt One Road” project. Yet, little effort seems to have been devoted so far to project China’s soft power in French museums. The organisation, in France, of a project dedicated to the “silk road” was once contemplated, but seems not to have been followed through.⁴⁴ So far, Jonathan Choi’s actions have mostly consisted in funding French cultural operations and institutions both in France and in China. As shown in Table 2, Choi’s known donations amount to more than 2,5 million euros, to which must be added those whose amount has not been disclosed. In 2017, Jonathan Choi also transferred Sunwah Group’s “3E school” to the compound of the Lycée français (French International School in Beijing) at the invitation of then French Ambassador Maurice Gourdault-Montagne.⁴⁵

Table 2: Selected contributions to French cultural events and institutions by Jonathan Choi

Event	Funding / Contribution	Date
<i>In China</i>		
Festival Croisements (French Embassy in China’s flagship cultural festival)		2023
Festival Croisements	≈ €100,000 / year	2017–2019 ⁴⁶
Preservation of the “Cloud House” (which now hosts the “Choi Centre”) – following a letter by French President Emmanuel (who had visited the site in 2018) Macron to Xi Jinping		2021
French movie week in Shenyang (“Sunwah (Shenyang) French Movie Week” in Chinese) ⁴⁷		2018
Transfer of Choi’s “3E school” onto the compound of the Lycée français (at the invitation of then French Ambassador Maurice Gourdault-Montagne)		2017

⁴²David Bandurski, “Culture”, Decoding China, 2023.

⁴³胡明明, “蔡冠深“法国文化中心”落子沈阳 系列交流活动启幕”, 大公网, 24th Jan. 2018; Schaeffer, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴Véronique Yang, “Inauguration du Centre Jonathan K.S. Choi pour la Promotion du Patrimoine Culturel”, Impact European, 18th Oct. 2018.

⁴⁵“3e International School Bolstered by 3e-LFIP Partnership”, 3e International School.

⁴⁶Yang, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷胡明明, *op. cit.*



Table 2 (cont.): Selected contributions by Choi

Event	Funding / Contribution	Date
	<i>In France</i>	
Palais de Tokyo – cultural program with the French international school in Beijing ⁴⁸	€900,000	2019
Radio France – Cercle des Amis – Chine		2018
Institut du Monde Arabe – Exhibition	€500,000	2018
Ecole des beaux arts – renovation of the vault (apparently responding to an invitation from then French president François Hollande) ⁴⁹	€865,000 ⁵⁰	2017

Such largesse has enabled Jonathan Choi to come to be seen as a “craftsman of the France-China friendship”, as he has been called by Laurent Bili, former Ambassador of France in China, and to be introduced to several French presidents.⁵¹ Based on public sources only, Jonathan Choi has met the current French president, Emmanuel Macron, at least three times: in January 2018 during Macron’s first official visit to China, in October 2018 in France, on the occasion of an exhibition he funded, and in April 2023 again, during Macron’s third official visit to China.⁵² On this occasion, Jonathan Choi was mentioned three times in the speech delivered by the president at the opening ceremony of the 2023 edition of the “Festival Croisements”.⁵³ Before that, he had met former President François Hollande in November 2015 in Beijing during his official visit to the country⁵⁴ and was received by the French president in the Elysée palace the following year – seemingly in a friendly atmosphere (see Figure 2).⁵⁵ Talks then apparently centred on Jonathan Choi’s project to set up a cultural centre in France to foster bilateral educational and cultural exchanges. In 2016, Jonathan Choi was also able to meet then Foreign Affairs Minister (and former Prime Minister) Jean-Marc Ayrault on the occasion of the inauguration of the French high school in Beijing.⁵⁶

For her part, Pansy Ho has been financing Hong Kong’s French May Arts Festival since at least 2009, for undisclosed amounts.⁵⁷ Created in 1993 and organised around May every year by the Association Culturelle France–Hong Kong, the French May Arts Festival is the leading French cultural festival in Hong Kong. It showcases visual arts, music, theatre, cinema, heritage artifacts, etc. Besides, Pansy Ho has also been instrumental in organising arts exhibitions such as “Biennial of the Lions, Edgar Degas:

⁴⁸“France : Le Palais de Tokyo et la Fondation chinoise Sunwah signent un partenariat”, Xinhua, 20th Oct. 2019.

⁴⁹“Dr Jonathan Choi presented the famous Chinese classic “Tao Te Ching” written in French to President of France H.E. Emmanuel Macron”, Sunwah Vietnam, 11th Jan. 2018.

⁵⁰Azimi, *op. cit.*

⁵¹“Signature d’un partenariat autour du « CloudHouse – Choi Center »”, Ambassade de France en Chine, 12th Mar. 2021.

⁵²Sunwah Vietnam, *op. cit.*; “巴黎蔡冠深文化遗产促进中心”, 香港新华集团, 16th Oct. 2018.

⁵³“Discours du Président de la République à l’occasion de l’inauguration du Festival Croisements”, Elysée, 5th April 2023.

⁵⁴“奥朗德邀蔡冠深赴巴黎建文化中心共推教育交流合作”, 光明网 via 人民网, 5th Nov. 2015.

⁵⁵Sunwah Vietnam, *op. cit.*

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷“Pansy Ho décorée Chevalier de l’Ordre National du Mérite”, Consulat général de France à Hong Kong et Macao, 20th Oct. 2011.



Figure 2: Former French President François Hollande and Jonathan Choi at the Elysée (presidential palace) in 2016. Source: [Sunwah Vietnam](#).

Figures in Motion” and “A Golden Way of Life – Très’Ors to Macau”. A patron of the foundation “Les Amis du Louvre”, she has been appointed as ambassador of the French museum in China in 2012 and helped fund the organisation of an exhibition for the Louvre in Beijing and Hong Kong (2016-2017).⁵⁸ In 2022, Pansy Ho was appointed co-chairperson of the French May Arts Festival. The organising committee of the festival is nominally independent from the French authorities, but the French consul general in Hong Kong is an honorary president of the festival and, together with the cultural department of the Consulate General, exercises some degree of supervision over the appointment of its board members. Despite the fact that Hong Kong, until very recently, boasted an open society with well-known independent artists and cultural workers, the current organising committee of the festival is packed with members of prominent pro-establishment families. As shown in Table 3, half of its 14 members, including Pansy Ho, have direct or indirect links with the united front system.⁵⁹ Some of those personalities may entertain a genuine interest in arts or find business interest in cooperating with the festival, and no undue attempt at censoring its content has been identified in the course of this research.⁶⁰ Yet, such a situation puts the festival under risk of influence, in addition to providing those personalities with status and opportunities to conduct people-to-people diplomacy. In other words, it sits rather oddly with the stated objective of France’s “influence diplomacy”.

⁵⁸“[Mme Pansy Ho, Chevalier dans l’ordre national de la Légion d’Honneur](#)”, Consulat général de France à Hong Kong et Macao, 19th June 2018; Enid Tsui, “[The irony of Louvre’s soft-power lesson for China, as museum’s history tour comes to Hong Kong](#)”, *South China Morning Post*, 15th Mar. 2017.

⁵⁹“[Board of Directors](#)”, French May, 2023.

⁶⁰Adrian Cheng, for instance, manages the K11 shopping mall chain under New World Group. K11 aims at blending shopping and art experiences. Cheng therefore may find an interest in hosting French cultural events to bring quality content to his shopping venues.



Table 3: French May Arts Festival organising committee members' links to the united front system

Member	Institutional affiliation and links with France
<i>Direct links to the united front system</i>	
Pansy Ho (何超琼), co-chair of the board	See Table 1 for links to the united front system. Other links with France include positions as founder (2007) and president of the French Macao Business Association and Ambassador of the Louvre museum for China since 2012. ⁶¹
Adrian Cheng (郑志刚), director	Member of the CPPCC since 2023. ⁶² Member of Tianjin CPPCC between no later than 2008 and 2023. ⁶³ Adrian Cheng has been a pillar of Beijing's united front efforts towards Hong Kong's youth, with positions including: vice chairman of the All China Youth Federation (a mass organisation with the Communist Youth League as its core) from 2010 to 2020; co-chairman of its Hong Kong chapter set up in 2015 (a year after the student-led Umbrella Movement) with the participation of then Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying; ⁶⁴ executive director of the "Passing the torch" Civic Education Activities Committee (薪火相传国民教育活动系列委员会) set up in 2009 to prepare the ground to the largely unpopular "Moral and National Education" (eventually withdrawn in 2012 under intense public pressure); according to some sources, he was once an honorary vice-president of the Hong Kong United Youth Association (香港青年联会); ⁶⁵ honorary advisor of Our Hong Kong Foundation (see above). Awards by the French government: Ordre des arts et des lettres (2017); Ordre national du mérite (2022)
Douglas Woo Chun-kuen 吴宗权, director	Member of the CPPCC since 2023. ⁶⁶ Son of Peter Woo Kwong-ching (吴光正), chairman of Wheelock and Company and The Wharf Holding, former CPPCC member (2003-2018) and candidate to the 1996 chief executive "election". His mother is Bao Peirong 包陪容, daughter of Pao Yue-Kong 包玉刚, founder of World-Wide Shipping and vice-president of the Basic Law Drafting Committee.
<i>Indirect links to the united front system</i>	
Mignonne Cheng (郑陶美蓉), co-chair of the Board since 2021	Mignonne Cheng's daughter, Michelle Cheng Chan (郑诗韵, CEO and Board director of Occasions PR, founded by Pansy Ho) has been a member of the Guizhou CPPCC between 2013 and 2017 and is currently a member of the Ningbo CPPCC (since 2022). She is also a member of the Hong Kong Federation of Women since 2019 and has been vice chairman of the Hong Kong United Youth Exchange Foundation since 2020. Other links with France: member of the French Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong. Awards by the French government: Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur (2013)
Andrew S. Yuen (阮伟文), founder of the French May Arts Festival and chairman emeritus	Some sources indicate he once was a member of the Guangxi CPPCC. ⁶⁷ Andrew Yuen is the husband of Yvette Yung (荣文蔚), niece of Larry Yung (荣智健), himself the son of Rong Yiren 荣毅仁, vice president of the PRC from 1993 to 1998.

⁶¹"Inauguration de l'Association d'affaires France-Macao", Consulat Général de France à Hong Kong et Macao, 3rd Apr. 2009.

⁶²"中国人民政治协商会议第十四届全国委员会委员名单", CPPCC, 2023.

⁶³"天津市第十二届政协委员会委员名单", 天津日报 via 新浪, 11th Jan. 2008; "政协天津市第十四届委员会委员名单公布, 共 695 人", 天津日报 via 澎湃, 18th Jan. 2018.

⁶⁴"香港全国青联委员协进会成立", 新华 via 新浪, 8th Dec. 2015.

⁶⁵"重要职务", 中华青年精英项目.

⁶⁶"中国人民政治协商会议第十四届全国委员会委员名单", CPPCC, 2023.

⁶⁷"历届世界傑出華人獎", 世界華商投資基金會.



Table 3 (cont.): French May Arts Festival organising committee

Member	Institutional affiliation and links with France
Daphne King (姚金昌玲), director	Daughter of Tung Chee-hwa, Hong Kong's first chief executive (1997-2005) vice-president of the CPPCC and founder of the Our Hong Kong Foundation and the China-United States Exchange Foundation. The latter has been accused of interference activities. ⁶⁸
Ho Kin-lap 何建立, director	Former vice-president of Fok Ying Tung Group and secretary of the Fok Ying Tung Foundation. Henry Fok has been a vice-chairman of the CPPCC.

3 Normalising controversial positions

As can be expected from high level united front figures, the message Jonathan Choi and Pansy Ho hope to be able to convey through their people-to-people diplomacy efforts strictly adheres to the party line. In particular, Jonathan Choi has been very active in providing political cover to the excesses of the security and political crack-down that has been going on in Hong Kong during and in the aftermath of the 2019 anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill movement (anti-ELAB):

- in May 2018, at a time when 67% of the Hong Kong population identified as “Hongkongers” or “Hongkongers in China”,⁶⁹ Jonathan Choi urged Hong Kong citizens to embrace the integration of the city into China, claiming that “in the future, we will not be Hong Kong people but Greater Bay Area People”.⁷⁰ Made public in 2019, the “Greater Bay Area” is Beijing’s strategy to subsume Hong Kong and Macao into an agglomeration including nine cities in neighboring Guangdong province;
- in August 2019, a few days after the notorious beating of unarmed Hong Kong citizens by triads in Yuen Long under conspicuous police absence (officers arrived 40 minutes after the attack began despite receiving thousands of emergency calls⁷¹), Jonathan Choi expressed his gratitude to the Hong Kong police who are working “day and night to protect the rule of law and the security of the Hong Kong citizens”,⁷²
- after Hong Kong’s 2021 electoral reform imposed by Beijing to ensure that only “patriots” (i.e., pro-establishment politicians vetted by Beijing) can run for a seat in the Legislative Council and the election committee, and made it impossible even for moderate members of the democratic camp to run for election, he voiced his support for the reform, on the basis that, in the past 20 years, “elections” had allegedly been used to promote “Hong Kong independence”.⁷³

⁶⁸See note 30

⁶⁹“Categorical Ethnic Identity”, Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute (PORI).

⁷⁰端小二, “將來我們不是香港人, 是大灣區人”, 這是矮化香港, 還是「融入大局」?, 端傳媒, 18th May 2018.

⁷¹Shibahi Mahtani & Gerry Shih, “Hong Kong protesters occupy airport as fears grow of escalating clashes”, *Washington Post*, 26th July 2019.

⁷²“香港中华总商会会长蔡冠深: 香港再乱下去会掉进深渊”, 澎湃新闻 via 新浪, 10th Aug. 2019.

⁷³“蔡冠深: 「愛國者治港」才能有更美好明天”, 香港商報, 22nd Feb. 2021. In reality, “localist” candidates — who were in no way promoters of independence — were first fielded in 2016. Their success was limited (they landed six out of the 35 seats that used to be directly elected) and they often attacked the more traditional part of the democratic camp during their campaign.



Figure 3: Pansy Ho lambasting Hong Kong protesters at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva on September, 11th 2019. The UNHRC lists the Hong Kong Federation of Women as a non-government organisation. Source: 人民政协报.

Pansy Ho also has been instrumental in propagating the same views to an international audience. On 11th September 2019, she participated in a meeting of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva to voice her opposition to the protests. Speaking in her capacity as chairperson of the Hong Kong Federation of Women, which is officially listed as a non-government organisation in by the UNHRC, she claimed to represent the Hong Kong people (apparently ignoring the fact that the protests benefited from the consistent support of a majority of Hong Kong citizens⁷⁴), to express the view that “children of all ages are indoctrinated with police hatred and anti-establishment beliefs at school and online, mobilised to conduct massive school strikes” and called upon “the international community to reprimand those organisers and influencers”, adding that Hong Kong affairs were part of China’s internal affairs.⁷⁵ Like Jonathan Choi, Pansy Ho is also a zealous promoter of the “Greater Bay Area”: in March 2023, during the “Two Sessions”, in which she participated as a standing committee member of the CPPCC, she made the following remark: “some people say I am from Macao, some people say I am from Hong Kong, I say I am from the Greater Bay Area”, seemingly inviting her fellow Hong Kong residents to abandon their distinct local identity, which has provided the impetus for many political movements in recent years.⁷⁶

In addition to facilitating their efforts at building contacts and putting cultural events at risk of influence, accepting such united front figures as major partners contributes to legitimising such views, despite the fact that they are at loggerheads with the values supposed to be promoted by France’s “influence diplomacy”, as well as with

⁷⁴According to a poll conducted by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute in December 2019 (1021 respondents), 59% of Hong Kong residents supported the protest movement, with 30% saying the opposed it (“[Survey on Hong Kong people’s views regarding the Anti-Extradition Bill Movement \(Round 1\)](#)”, PORI, 27th Dec. 2019). The district council elections organised the previous month also saw Hong Kong citizens vote massively in favour of the democratic camp, who won 388 of the 452 directly elected seats.

⁷⁵Nelson Moura, “[HK youth is being radicalised to become “riot fighters” – Pansy Ho](#)”, Macau Business, 12th Sep. 2019; “[何超琼委员：25 年前，我对自己许下承诺](#)”, op. cit.

⁷⁶“[何超瓊：我是大灣區人！9 加 2 為何早已超過了 11?](#)”, Speakout 港人講地 via Youtube, 6th Mar. 2023.



French diplomacy's official support of "a high degree of autonomy" and the "fundamental freedoms of the Hong Kong people".⁷⁷ Such a process of legitimisation has been further reinforced by the decorations with which those personalities have been rewarded. Jonathan Choi's contributions to France-China exchanges in the cultural field have allowed him to be awarded the title of officer of the Order of Arts and Letters in 2017 by the former French minister of culture, Jack Lang, also president of the Institut du Monde Arabe and a former Socialist Party heavyweight.⁷⁸ As for Pansy Ho, she has been granted numerous awards Officier des arts et des lettres in 2004; Officier du mérite agricole in 2007; Ordre national du mérite in 2009; and finally, the highest civilian award available: Chevalier de la légion d'honneur, in 2018.

4 Beyond funding: Institutionalising people-to-people diplomacy

Jonathan Choi and Pansy Ho's efforts to conduct "people to people diplomacy" go beyond *ad hoc* funding and are becoming institutionalised: Jonathan Choi claims to have set up ten cultural centres in countries such as Vietnam, Canada, Hong Kong, Cambodia and Japan, as well as two in France and one in Beijing, which currently targets European countries.⁷⁹ Set up in 2022, the Jonathan KS Choi Cultural Centre Cloud House was given as its first mission conducting "people-to-people diplomacy".⁸⁰ Besides representatives of the German, Italian, Japanese and Swiss embassies, the French and the European Union ambassadors attended its inauguration ceremony and signed a memorandum of understanding with the centre, detailing the content of their contribution to the cultural programme of the Cloud House.⁸¹ As Jonathan Choi mentioned in an interview with Hong Kong's *Ta Kung Pao* in April 2023: the Cloud House "is already more than an exhibition platform, it is also an important stage for international people-to-people diplomacy", which is to be used to "tell China's story" and "Hong Kong's story well".⁸² Introduced by Xi Jinping in 2013, the later phrase encapsulates the notion that state and non-state actors must propagate messages which reflect the party-state's external propaganda objectives in innovative ways (such as through apparently innocuous "cultural cooperation").⁸³ In order to sustain and leverage his growing network in France, Jonathan Choi has also set up two other centers named after him in the country. In 2017, a "Jonathan KS Choi Cultural Centre" was inaugurated at the National Superior School for Fine Arts in France ("Beaux-arts de Paris") to promote exchanges and "peace in the world".⁸⁴ The following year, he inaug-

⁷⁷ "Hong Kong - Q&R - Extrait du point de presse (3 octobre 2019)", via Ambassade de France en Chine, 4th Oct. 2019 ; "Point de presse du 4 juin 2019 : propos de la porte-parole du Ministère des Affaires étrangères et européennes", via Consulat Général de France à Hong Kong et Macao, 14th Jun. 2019.

⁷⁸ Jonathan Choi and Jack Lang are also connected through the "Cercle des Amis – Chine" (Friends Circle – China) of the Institut de France's Music and Radio Foundation. Both men are honorary advisors of the association, while Janice Choi, Jonathan Choi's wife, is its honorary chair. See "Création du Cercle des Amis - Chine", Maison de la radio et de la musique, 22nd Oct. 2018.

⁷⁹ "Jonathan KS Choi Cultural Exchange Center is inaugurated officially", Sunwah Group, 27th Apr. 2022.

⁸⁰ A "China-Europe discussion" with Embassies and Chinese officials was planned for May 5th 2022. The content of the discussion, if it ever happened, has not been made public.

⁸¹ 朱燁, "蔡冠深文化交流中心啟幕 意在促進民心相通", 文匯網, 26th Apr. 2022; "Opening Ceremony of the Jonathan KS Choi Cultural Centre Cloud House in Beijing", Sunwah Vietnam, 26th, Apr. 2022.

⁸² "蔡冠深: 冀通过民间外交讲好 "中国故事"", 大公报, 9th Apr. 2023.

⁸³ "Telling China's Story Well", China Media Project, 16th Apr. 2021.

⁸⁴ "Lancement du Jonathan KS Choi Cultural Centre aux Beaux-Arts de Paris", *Connaissance des arts*, 17th Feb. 2017.



urated a “Centre Jonathan K.S. Choi for the Promotion of Cultural Heritage” (Centre Jonathan K.S. Choi pour la Promotion du Patrimoine culturel) at the Institut du Monde Arabe, also set to promote “people-to-people exchanges”.⁸⁵ However, none of them seems to have held any activity since.

For her part, Pansy Ho has been appointed a member of the strategic committee of the France China Foundation, set up in 2013 with the Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs (CPIFA) as a Chinese partner. Closely linked to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, CPIFA is tasked with conducting research on international issues and foreign policy, establishing contacts with foreign political activists and diplomats, and expanding people-to-people diplomatic activities.⁸⁶ The honorary president of the France China Foundation is Li Zhaoxing 李肇星, a former minister of foreign affairs and former president of the China Association for International Friendly Contact (CAIFC), which is an organization of the liaison bureau of the Political Work Department of the Central Military Commission. The “political, administrative and military” sector is explicitly mentioned as the priority category for recruitment into the Foundation’s flagship “Young Leaders programme”, whose main purpose is “to strengthen links between participants and encourage future exchanges and joint projects”.⁸⁷ Although it has been less active in recent years and no new cohort was announced in 2022, the programme has been very successful in recruiting heavyweight French politicians including ministers of Emmanuel Macron’s first and second presidential terms⁸⁸ as well as personalities with access to information pertaining to national defence.⁸⁹

5 Conclusion: Influencing the influencers

Funding French cultural events has enabled Jonathan Choi and Pansy Ho to acquire a status as major partners of France’s cultural diplomacy in Greater China. During his 2023 visit to China, President Emmanuel Macron asked twice the audience attend-

⁸⁵“巴黎蔡冠深文化遗产促进中心”, op. cit.

⁸⁶“中国人民外交学会章程”, CPIFA, Apr. 2021. Its leadership is largely composed of officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In particular, its secretary, Yu Jinsong 余劲松, is a career diplomat who once was consul general in Marseilles (2016-2018) and later deputy head of mission of the Chinese Embassy in France (2018-2021). Its president, Wang Chao 王超, has spent most of his career in the ministry of commerce (and MOFCOM-affiliated organizations) before being appointed vice-minister of Foreign Affairs in 2013 (until 2019).

⁸⁷“Young Leaders – The Program”, France China Foundation.

⁸⁸The former Prime Minister and current presidential hopeful Edouard Philippe (2017-2020), former Prime Minister (1984-1986) and minister of foreign affairs (2012-2016) Laurent Fabius and former Prime Minister (2002-2005) and well-known China friend Jean-Pierre Raffarin are all part of his strategic committee. Past and currently active counsellors and ministers of President Emmanuel Macron have also been recruited: Agnès Pannier Runacher, former junior minister for industry (2020-2022) and current minister for energy transition joined the “Young Leaders cohort” in 2017; Olivier Veran, minister of health between 2020 and 2022 and currently junior minister in charge of “democratic renewal”, was recruited in 2019; Brune Poirson, former junior minister for ecological transition (2017-2020), was recruited in 2017; Franck Riester, junior minister in charge of relationships with the Parliament and former junior minister for foreign trade (2020-2022) and for culture (2018-2020) was recruited in 2014; Philippe Englebort, who worked at the presidential palace between 2020 and 2021 joined the “Young Leaders” in 2021.

⁸⁹Other members of the Young Leaders include high level officials with direct access to confidential and strategic information related to national security: Thomas Gassilloud, French member of Parliament (where he is a member of the committee on defence and armed forces and a co-president of the parliamentary group working on cybersecurity and digital sovereignty), Col. Arnaud Goujon, who serves on the Army staff as the deputy head of the Plans office, in charge of developing the French Army’s future capacities (recruited in 2019); Arnaud Danjean, member of the European Parliament and former advisor (2000-2002) to the head of the French External Intelligence Directorate (recruited in 2015).



ing the inauguration of the 2023 edition of Festival Croisements to give a round of applause for Choi. Yet, Jonathan Choi's and Pansy Ho's status as united front heavyweights and their active involvement in people-to-people diplomacy make them uncommon donors and partners. As this paper has shown, partnering with them raises certain risks:

- it has allowed both of them to gain easy access to France's top diplomats in Greater China and to increase vastly their network within French political elites, which are the ultimate targets of the "people to people diplomacy" they both have committed to;
- partnering with them helps legitimise some of the positions they publicly defend (most notably, on Hong Kong) on behalf of the Chinese party-state, despite the fact that they run at odds with the line defended by French diplomacy and the very purpose of France's "influence diplomacy";
- it allows them to acquire leverage over the organisation of French cultural operations in Greater China (which they may or may not use).

For those different reasons, it could be recommended that French authorities rethink their funding policy for cultural operations in Greater China in order to prevent the latter from being slowly repurposed as quiet platforms serving the CCP's external propaganda efforts.

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