

CPC Futures

*The New Era of
Socialism with
Chinese Characteristics*

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The CPC's Global Power

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Much has been said and written about the Communist Party of China's (CPC's) influence abroad, often on the assumption that whatever a communist party does is inherently dangerous and part of a systemic rivalry with democratic political systems.

In this chapter I will show that the CPC does indeed assume a coordinating and controlling role over China's presence outside its borders, but does so mainly as an extension of its domestic ways of governing. The CPC does not want to control the politics and societies of other countries. Like the governments of many other great powers, some of its activities are aimed at gaining political influence and "soft power", but the bulk of the CPC's work abroad seeks to tie global Chinese actors (overseas Chinese, enterprises, media, associations) more firmly back into the "system" in China itself. These activities are a far cry from the CPC's spotty but persistent attempts at spreading communist ideology and revolution across the world in the Mao Zedong period (Lovell 2019).

The CPC's foreign work and party building that are discussed here are a specific and discrete part of the build-up of China's global influence that has many different faces and aims. Richard McGregor in his chapter in this volume, for instance, discusses the Chinese government's strategy to modify the existing international order to better suit Chinese interests and preferences. Local government friendship ties, Confucius institutes, public diplomacy, research cooperation and exchange, and talent recruitment programmes serve a strategy on the part of the Chinese Communist Party and government to gain influence in foreign countries.

A deliberate thrust to build Chinese influence certainly exists, but should be distinguished from directly malign political interference, espionage, IP theft and strategic acquisition of critical infrastructure. Chinese influence usually caters for

fairly modest aims that can be dealt with without resorting to the hyperbole of systemic rivalry or existential competition. This is even true for most, if not all, of the CPC's own foreign activities, as I hope this chapter shows.

Internationalism and international liaison

The Party's International Department is the principal agency responsible for liaison with foreign communist parties and other political parties, and more generally for dealing with foreign party elites visiting China. After the year 2000, there has been a considerable uptick in the Department's work. In countries under one-party rule, the Department works exclusively or mainly with the ruling party of that country; in democracies, the Department hedges its bets by also working with parties or elites currently not in power (Hackenesch and Bader 2020: 727; Lovell 2019; Shambaugh 2007).

The International Department tends to deploy what in international relations is often called "Track II" diplomacy that targets leaders of political parties, upcoming or retired politicians, academic or think tank researchers, and others not (currently) in executive positions of power. This serves two aims. First, the Department can act as a conduit for exchange or negotiations when China's direct political or diplomatic contacts with a foreign government have stalled or been broken off. In the past, this for example included countries in Latin America or the Pacific that recognised the Nationalist government on Taiwan rather than the People's Republic of China.

Second, the work of the Department seeks to gain long-term influence by emphasising cooperation and a better understanding of and sympathy for China, its system and its foreign policy goals at some remove from the cut and thrust of day-to-day international politics and the government that happens to be in power in a country at a particular time.

Under Xi Jinping, the International Department's focus has shifted and expanded perceptibly. The CPC much less feels the need to push China's long-standing foreign policy goals, such as non-recognition of Taiwan, non-interference with activities in Tibet and Xinjiang, or support for China's territorial claims in the South China Sea and elsewhere. Instead, and more ambitiously, the CPC looks for ways to cultivate support across the world for China's global role as a great power and its vision of the future world order, including the Belt and Road Initiative, the Community with a Shared Future for Mankind and the Chinese Dream (*Chai Shangjin* 2021).

Complementing this new global goodwill strategy is the effort to spread the experience and governance model of the CPC. The International Department

coordinates training courses, visits and other exchange events, and even sets up party schools where members of foreign partner parties are instructed in the CPC's organisation, party building and discipline inspection, and more generally China's model of governance and development.

Borrowing Jessica Chen Weiss's phrase, this effort is not intended to make the world "safe for autocracy" (Chen Weiss 2019). The CPC seeks to present China as a world power with a proven alternative model of government and development that many other countries may want to learn from and one that will establish a more pluriform and multi-polar world order. This order will reassert the principle of national sovereignty and the cooperation of nations unfettered by Western impositions, demands and norms (Caffarena 2022). China, so the Party argues, does not seek a new alliance of autocratic countries against the democratic world, but merely offers up its example for others to emulate.

The United Front and the Chinese abroad

Distinct from the International Department, the foreign activities of the CPC's Department for United Front Work focus mainly on the overseas Chinese. Xi Jinping imagines the overseas role of the United Front Department to be complementary to the work on non-Chinese foreigners by the International Department. Moreover, in speeches given in 2015 and 2016, Xi explicitly connected the overseas Chinese work of the United Front with his Belt and Road Initiative (Sapio 2019).

Whilst the United Front Department's main responsibility remains domestic, recently the Department's overseas Chinese work has become more prominent and pervasive among overseas Chinese communities. The new united front foreign strategy emphasises not just support for but also loyalty to China and its system, model and foreign politics (Pieke 2021).

The United Front is thus rapidly developing from a somewhat antiquarian mechanism which aimed to broaden the CPC's support base into a cornerstone of the Party's grip on internal and external security, and of the monitoring (and possibly enforcement) of political orthodoxy at home and among overseas Chinese. This steady expansion of the United Front Department's responsibilities and administrative scope is causing rising reservations and suspicions abroad about Chinese influencing or even interference (Fedasiuk 2020; Joske 2020).

Overseas Party Building

In addition to the work of the United Front and International Departments, the CPC also builds its own organisation and membership abroad. In 2017 and

2018, Western media exposed the presence of a number of party “cells” (branches) at universities abroad (Allen-Ebrahemian 2018). Surprisingly, some Chinese newspapers also openly reported on this (Zhang Yu 2017). The immediate consequence of these “revelations” was that the CPC gave much less publicity to foreign party work, without intending to end it. Nevertheless, in the Chinese literature it is not difficult to find ample evidence of the existence of active Party branches at foreign universities. In particular, Chinese universities with many exchange students abroad continue to set up temporary Party branches for the party members among their students at foreign universities.

Party members are also found in many Chinese state-owned institutions and companies abroad as they are in China itself. Moreover, commercial labour recruitment agencies in China often send large groups of Chinese to work on temporary contract on projects abroad, and here too party members are quite naturally present.

Party building work abroad explicitly concerns party members who in principle have gone abroad temporarily. It does not concern ordinary Chinese citizens or party members who have emigrated permanently. The latter must give up their party membership or at least de-activate membership of their original party branch in China, after which they are subject to the Party’s overseas Chinese policies run by the United Front Department.

State-owned enterprises, state-coordinated projects and Chinese exchange students are seen as foreign extensions of China’s domestic economy and society and are therefore “part of the system” of the Party and the state. Party members abroad will in principle remain members of the party committee to which they belong in China. The party committees of universities and companies are required to involve their members abroad in their activities and, if possible, to organise activities abroad for them. In addition, party members abroad must also remain locally involved in the Party.

In practice, these arrangements present a number of major problems. Without an active connection to a real party branch, “only those party members with strong ideals and beliefs can resist the temptation” of the “sugar-coated bullets”¹ of a Western lifestyle and “international hostile forces”. With the erosion of their party spirit and party discipline the Party is in danger of losing control of its own members abroad (Feng Liujian 2021).

To address these issues, the CPC Centre in 2016 issued a “leading opinion” on party building work among state-owned enterprises abroad. Although this opinion has remained confidential, its gist can be distilled from other Chinese articles and documents.²

The document also reveals which agencies at the Centre are responsible for foreign party building. In addition to the Party's Central Organization Department as first responsible for party building in general, the document was co-issued by the Party Committee of the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council, the Party Committee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Party Group of the Ministry of Commerce. In other words, through its party committee structure, the CPC Centre also enlists in its foreign party building efforts those parts of the government that are most directly involved in foreign affairs, trade and investment.

The Ministry of Commerce, for instance, plays an important role in foreign party building among state-owned enterprises. The Ministry does so directly through its foreign trade and investment sections at Chinese embassies, and more indirectly through organisations that are directly associated with the Ministry, in particular the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT) and the China Chamber of International Commerce (Pieke and De Graaff 2022, Chapter 6).

According to the 2016 regulations, in many countries overt party activities are often not possible, especially in situations where, for example, employees of a Chinese company frequently work with non-Chinese colleagues. Although the CPC is only formally banned in a few countries like Indonesia, many other, especially Western, countries treat CPC activities, should they occur, with suspicion.

The 2016 regulations stipulate that party activities in such countries must take place on the basis of "the principle of the 'five non-disclosures'": the non-disclosure of party organisation, internal party positions, party member status, internal party documents and internal party activities in overseas party building activities.

For the consumption of foreign employees and visitors, party activities should be presented as a part of the company's "corporate culture and team building". Improving corporate efficiency, enhancing corporate competitiveness, and maintaining and increasing the value of state-owned assets are "the starting point and the end point" of party organisation work in enterprises abroad. In other words, not ideology nor influencing, but business and profit are the main point of foreign party work.

Party building in companies and projects abroad is intended to ensure that they do not stray too far from the interests, plans and objectives of the CPC and its vision for the Chinese nation. Overseas party building work also concerns itself with business interests coupled with China's larger aims in international politics, especially those that concern China's public diplomacy and soft power

strategies, rather than with influencing or interfering in foreign societies, economies or politics.

Conclusion

CPC activities abroad cannot be compared to the international branches and activities of political parties operating in competitive multi-party political systems. The latter's foreign activities chiefly serve to garner electoral support and financial contributions (Von Nostitz 2021).

The CPC as a ruling Leninist party is a fundamentally different entity. The International Department serves the broader foreign policy objectives of the regime. The CPC's United Front work is in certain respects more akin to the diasporic policies of governments of countries with very large emigrant populations, such as the Philippines, India or Turkey. As with these countries, the focus is on return migration, remittances and ensuring that the diaspora does not become a political liability to regime stability at home and the government's foreign policy abroad.

CPC foreign party building, in turn, caters to three quite different agendas. First, party building work principally helps Chinese businesses in their local operations and strengthens the brand of Chinese business. Second, party building ties Chinese actors abroad to the system back home and the interests of the CPC. Third, party building work also contributes to China's foreign policy strategy in promoting the "Chinese story", the "Chinese way", the "Belt and Road" and the "shared community of mankind".

Overseas party building has been borne from finding solutions to a range of often contradictory, practical problems arising from China's globalisation. It does not constitute a plan hatched in advance and systematically rolled out across the globe. Instead, the Party is learning by doing. Nevertheless, a deliberate drive continues to step up party building efforts, particularly in countries with a large number of Chinese-invested firms, especially state-owned and -controlled ones.

Foreign party building will likely become more prominent, especially where Chinese firms and other agencies are most active. It is also quite possible that foreign party building over time will evolve to connect more with the Party's overt influencing work through the International and United Front Departments, particularly as China's foreign relations become more expansive, forceful and they meet with increasing pushback. It is also possible that the Party will start to recruit new members among resident overseas Chinese (for instance locally-recruited employees of state-owned enterprises), thus further blurring the line with the overseas Chinese work of the United Front. Countries with a

large Chinese presence are therefore well-advised to monitor the degree—and especially the nature and aims—of CPC foreign party work and party building.

However, this ought not be premised on the assumption that all types and aspects of party building and party work by definition run counter to the interests or national security of the receiving country. For now, they chiefly seek to build up soft power and influence, especially among overseas Chinese communities, and target party members abroad with the aim to tie them back more firmly into the system in China. As long as this stays within the confines of the local law and does not facilitate unwanted influencing or interference in local affairs, this is neither particularly good nor particularly bad, but should be considered a normal aspect of the Chinese presence in their country.

Notes

¹ “Sugar-coated bullets” is a CPC phrase used during the early 1950s’ Three Anti- and Five Anti- Campaigns that targeted capitalists and party members that had been corrupted by capitalists.

² Reportedly, these regulations are called Zhongyang zuzhibu, guowuyuan ziwei dangwei, waijiaobu dangwei, shangwubu dang zuzhi guanyu jiaqiang zhongyang qiye jingwai danwei dangjian gongzuode zhidao yijian 中央组织部、国务院国资委党委、外交部党委、商务部党组关于加强中央企业境外单位党建工作的指导意见 [Guiding Opinions of the Central Organisation Department, the Party Committee of the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council, the Party Committee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Party Group of the Ministry of Commerce on Strengthening the Party Building Work in Overseas Units of Central Enterprises]. One of the sources that summarises the document is Liang 2019.

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