

# CCP's Secret Weapon to Undermine the West: United Front Work Department

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The Chinese Embassy in Washington on Feb. 15, 2023. Saul Loeb/AFP via Getty Images



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*Commentary*

Under Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader Xi Jinping, the United Front Work Department (UFWD) has expanded its scope and sophistication, posing growing challenges to the ability of the United States and other Western nations to protect their democratic processes, freedom of speech, and national security.

A Special Immigration Appeals Commission tribunal recently upheld the 2023 Home Office decision to bar [Chris Yang](#) (also known as Yang Tengbo) from the United Kingdom over allegations of espionage and ties to the CCP. Yang is allegedly linked to the UFWD, an organization that advances Beijing's interests through foreign influence operations. His alleged activities include cultivating relationships with prominent figures like Prince Andrew and facilitating connections between UK businesses and Chinese officials.

Described as a “[magic weapon](#)“ by Xi and former CCP leader Mao Zedong, the UFWD aims to shape global opinions about China, suppress dissent, and advance Beijing's [political agenda](#). Operating under the CCP Central Committee, it employs a range of strategies, from influencing Chinese diaspora communities and recruiting foreign politicians to funding cultural organizations and media outlets. Its activities often blur the line between cultural diplomacy and espionage, leveraging [affiliated groups](#) like the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification and Chinese Students and Scholars Associations.

Under Xi, the UFWD's reach has expanded significantly. Its overseas operations now include funding Confucius Institutes, intimidating dissidents, and pressuring [overseas Chinese](#) to align with CCP policies. The department also targets ethnic minorities such as Tibetans and Uyghurs, conducts transnational repression, and manipulates foreign institutions to promote Beijing's [global narrative](#). These efforts are tied to Xi's broader vision of national rejuvenation and reunification with Taiwan.

Countries like the United States, Australia, and Canada have exposed UFWD-linked operations involving political donations, media investments, and recruitment in Western universities. The UFWD's influence operations often disguise themselves as fostering cultural

exchange while pursuing espionage and undermining democratic institutions.

The operational capabilities of the UFWD are bolstered by China's 2017 intelligence law, which requires citizens and companies to cooperate with state intelligence, effectively blurring the line and making all Chinese nationals potential spies. In Sweden, for instance, the UFWD has established a covert network of at least [103 organizations](#) spanning culture, business, politics, education, and media. These groups aim to strengthen ties with the People's Republic of China while subtly advancing the CCP's strategic objectives.

In the [United States](#), the UFWD avoids federal scrutiny by using entities like the Chinese embassy, consulates, and the Chinese People's Association for Friendship With Foreign Countries to forge ties with state and local governments, businesses, and academic institutions. State-owned media outlets like China Daily amplify pro-Beijing messaging through strategic content in major U.S. publications, while organizations such as the China General Chamber of Commerce use Chinese state-owned enterprises to advance Beijing's economic agenda and influence policy. Framed as economic and cultural exchanges, UFWD initiatives—including sister-city partnerships, economic forums, and research projects—align U.S. subnational actors with the CCP's strategic goals and shape narratives that support its geopolitical ambitions.

The CCP exploits liberal laws and policies in Western countries, including the United States, the UK, and Australia, to advance its influence. In response, countries have introduced measures like foreign interference laws to counter the UFWD's activities. However, these efforts have faced criticism for potentially fostering racial profiling against ethnic Chinese communities. Some caution that overly aggressive responses could alienate diaspora communities and play into Beijing's propaganda, complicating efforts to address legitimate security concerns. The challenge for Western nations lies in countering these threats without adopting measures perceived as discriminatory.

The UK plans to implement a [Foreign Influence Registration Scheme](#) in 2025, requiring individuals acting on behalf of foreign powers to disclose their activities. However, debates persist over whether China should be placed in an “enhanced tier,” which would expand the scope of activities subject to registration.

Calls to designate China as a national security threat have intensified in the UK, but officials remain cautious, mindful of the potential impact on vital trade relations. Financial institutions like HSBC have also cautioned that stricter measures could damage business interests.

In the United States, the U.S. [Intelligence Community](#) identifies the Chinese regime as the greatest national security threat, while the Department of Homeland Security underscores the regime’s role in economic and cyber threats and its complicity in the fentanyl crisis through the supply of precursor chemicals to Mexican cartels.

Western governments, particularly the United States, have recognized the CCP as a significant national security threat. However, their liberal policies often limit their response due to concerns about offending Chinese diaspora communities, accusations of racial profiling, or harming trade and investment relationships. The CCP is well aware of these constraints and exploits them to sustain its covert operations. Simultaneously, it leverages media and social media platforms to push a narrative that allegations of espionage are baseless and rooted in racism.

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