

CHAPTER THREE

The Chinese American Community

Chinese Americans have made essential contributions to almost every aspect of American life for over a century. They form a vital strand in the social fabric of the United States. At the same time, however, Beijing views Chinese Americans as members of a worldwide Chinese diaspora that, whatever the actual citizenship of individuals may be, presumes them to retain not only an interest in the welfare of China but also a loosely defined cultural, and even political, allegiance to the so-called Motherland (祖国). Under Xi Jinping's leadership, diaspora Chinese have been called on to help achieve the rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation—a summons that places growing pressure on ethnic Chinese around the world to serve the “China Dream” (中国梦). While many overseas Chinese do feel pride in China as a country, Beijing's demands that they actually serve China can put them in a difficult position.

Under both the Nationalist and Communist parties, overseas Chinese have played an important role in modern Chinese politics as well as in China's relations with the outside world. Diaspora communities worldwide have been key sources of legitimacy and support for whatever government held power in Beijing, but just as often they have been centers of antigovernment agitation. With PRC influence-seeking activities now expanding, China's long-standing focus on diaspora communities has also intensified to become an important element in overall US-China relations. Such trends demand not only greater societal attention and

understanding but also an appropriate response from the US government as well as nongovernmental institutions.

As the Chinese Communist Party seeks to encourage, even entice, ethnic-Chinese communities and individuals overseas to more fully support its interests, Chinese Americans in the United States and ethnic Chinese in other free societies need to better inform themselves as to the nature of this dynamic, and our governmental institutions may need to do more to defend their freedoms against harmfully intrusive and coercive activities. At the same time, it is essential that we not allow overseas Chinese as an ethnic group to fall under any kind of indiscriminate cloud of suspicion. Above all, it is important to bear in mind that while ethnic Chinese can be quite naturally expected to take an interest in things Chinese, it is the Chinese Communist Party that puts a target on their backs through its presumption that they are all somehow the “sons and daughters of the Yellow Emperor” (炎黄子孙) and thus owe some measure of loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party.

Origins and Structure

From the 1950s to the 1970s, when the United States maintained an alliance with the regime of Chiang Kai-shek on Taiwan, pro-PRC organizations faced challenges gaining traction in the United States. During the 1950s, the FBI, aided by pro-Kuomintang security organizations, closely monitored their activities and participants. This antagonistic state of affairs began to change after President Nixon’s historic trip to China in 1972.¹ On February 24, 1973, more than forty Chinese on the East Coast, most of them immigrants from Taiwan, established the Washington Association to Promote China Unification to help advocate for Beijing’s official positions. One of the founders was a professor at the University of Maryland who was actively involved in organizations that already supported China’s position on Taiwan and Tibet.² However, a more beneficial contribution came in the form of advancing US-China scientific, educational, and cultural exchanges that began to be promoted by a growing number of preeminent Chinese American scientists, engineers, and academics who were also advising the Chinese government

to launch reforms in science and education. These Chinese Americans were also personally helping them establish various programs to bring thousands of talented Chinese students to American institutions of learning.

Recognizing the achievements, influence, and growth of the Chinese diaspora, Beijing undertook a systematic program designed to target and exploit overseas Chinese communities as a means of furthering its own political, economic, and security interests. The Beijing government used specialized bureaucracies to manage what it called “united front” activities abroad. Organizations such as the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO), the Communist Party Central Committee’s United Front Work Department,³ and the State Council’s Taiwan Affairs Office led the charge. Almost all of these agencies have established nongovernmental fronts overseas, including the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification, the China Overseas Exchange Association, and the China Overseas Friendship Association (COFA).⁴ Other united front organizations, such as the Chinese Enterprise Association and other Chinese chambers of commerce, are almost always linked both to the United Front Work Department and to the Ministry of Commerce.

Following the violent crackdown on the prodemocracy movement in Beijing on June 4, 1989, the Chinese Communist Party redoubled its efforts to reach out to overseas Chinese. Many members of these communities had supported the student democracy movement, providing funds and safe havens for fleeing dissidents. But senior Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping was not dissuaded. In 1989, and again in 1993, he spoke of the “unique opportunity” overseas Chinese offered the PRC. Deng insisted that by drawing on their help, China could break out of international isolation and improve its international political standing. Gaining influence over overseas Chinese groups in order to “turn them into propaganda bases for China” became an important task of overseas Chinese united front work.⁵

In China, all of the organizations involved in outreach to the overseas Chinese community are led by senior members of the Chinese Communist Party. Party officials run the China Overseas Friendship Association and the China Council to Promote Peaceful Reunification.

The head of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, Qiu Yuanping, also leads the China Overseas Exchange Association. Qiu has a career background with the Party's International Liaison Department. The president of the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification is none other than Yu Zhengsheng, the former chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and a former member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party's Central Committee.⁶

Goals and Methods

The key goal of the party's united front work with overseas Chinese is to gain support for the Communist Party's efforts to modernize the country by convincing members of overseas Chinese communities that the party is the sole representative of China. A second goal is to isolate competing forces that the party perceives to be adversarial, or even hostile. For example, as part of a massive campaign to monitor, control, and even intimidate China's ethnic minorities (no matter where in the world they are), Chinese authorities are creating a global registry of Uighurs who live outside of China. Chinese authorities threaten to detain Uighur relatives who remain in China if they do not provide personal information about their relatives living abroad to the Chinese police. This campaign has particularly targeted Uighurs living in Germany but is now reaching Uighurs in the United States as well.⁷ Uighurs are not alone; Tibetan exiles living in the United States have long reported similar campaigns against members of their families and community. Chinese security officials have even been known to travel to America on tourist visas to exert pressure on Chinese dissidents living here.⁸ FBI agents have contacted prominent Chinese exiles in the United States offering them protection from Chinese agents who might travel to the United States to menace them.⁹

For most Chinese Americans, however, China's efforts to influence them are far more anodyne. The official description of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office states its purpose as: "to enhance unity and friendship in overseas Chinese communities; to maintain contact with

and support overseas Chinese media and Chinese language schools; [and] to increase cooperation and exchanges between overseas Chinese and China related to the economy, science, culture and education.” Over the past three decades, the OCAO has dispatched former reporters and editors from the OCAO-run China News Service to establish pro-Beijing Chinese media organizations in the West. (Chinese officials have described such Chinese-language media outlets, schools, and other kinds of organizations as the “three treasures” [三宝] of united front work overseas.)¹⁰

Officials from Beijing have stated clearly that they do not view overseas Chinese as simply citizens of foreign countries, but rather as “overseas compatriots” (华侨同胞们) who have both historical connections and responsibilities as “sons and daughters of the Yellow Emperor” to support the PRC’s goals and the “China Dream.” As Xi Jinping¹¹ described it in a 2014 speech to the Seventh Conference of Overseas Chinese Associations, “The Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation is a Dream shared by *all Chinese*” [emphasis added]. In January 2018, Politburo member and former state counselor and foreign minister Yang Jiechi made this presumption even clearer when he called upon the government to expand and strengthen “Overseas Chinese Patriotic Friendly Forces” in the service of the “Great Rejuvenation” of the Chinese nation.

In addition to appealing to the cultural affinities of Chinese Americans, the Chinese government has also implemented a wide range of programs to strengthen ties with elite members of this community. China has appointed hundreds of Chinese Americans to positions in its united front organizations and provided thousands with free trips to China, during which they have been feted by senior united front officials. In some cases, Chinese Americans are offered senior positions in united front organizations. For example, in 2013, one Chinese American, a native of Guangdong Province, became the first and only foreigner to become a vice president of the COFA.¹²

China has used this tactic of handing out what one senior Chinese American called “honors” to Chinese Americans as a way for united front departments, and even espionage agencies, to cultivate contacts in the United States, often to the detriment of other groups—such as Tibetans,

supporters of Taiwanese independence, supporters of the Republic of China, Uighurs, prodemocracy activists, and other independent Chinese voices with which the party does not agree. Chinese Americans appointed to such positions in organizations established by the Communist Party have led protests against Taiwan and Tibet and participated in campaigns to silence Chinese dissidents, such as the exiled billionaire Guo Wengui. For example, the Chinese American who is a vice president of COFA spearheaded a campaign against Guo that was encouraged by officials from the PRC. On a video posted to YouTube, this individual is seen railing against Guo, vowing that he will “not rest” until Guo is returned to China to answer charges against him.¹³

United front organizations in China have been surprisingly aggressive and transparent in their public tasking of Chinese Americans to carry out activities that support the PRC policies. One example occurred after the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party in October 2017. The state-owned *Fujian Daily* reported on November 24, 2017, that representatives of local Chinese community associations based in the United States, Australia, the Philippines, and Europe had gathered in Fujian and received letters of appointment from local provincial and city united front agencies in China to serve officially as “overseas propaganda agents” on their return to their home countries. These commissions obliged them to accept responsibility for promoting the decisions of the party’s national congress in their home countries. The article noted that this practice of offering party commissions to overseas Chinese to work on united front tasks in their home countries was not new. The president of the United Fujianese American Association (美国福建公所) told reporters: “I have received quite a few letters of appointment on previous occasions, but none for which I have felt such deep significance as the one today. It’s a heavy responsibility.”¹⁴

Peaceful Reunification Councils

A key goal of PRC overseas activities is to convince, and sometimes pressure, Chinese in the United States to accept that the PRC government in Beijing is the sole representative of China and all things Chinese, and

that the Republic of China on Taiwan is an illegitimate government. To this end, in 1988, the party's United Front Work Department founded the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification, and the Washington, DC-based Association to Promote China Unification was folded into the council. The DC chapter's assignment was to organize concerts, demonstrations, and other gatherings to support the PRC.¹⁵ Other chapters soon opened, so that by 2018, the council had established thirty-three in the United States and more than two hundred branches overseas. In America, these organizations are generally registered as domestic nonprofit community organizations, even though their leadership in Beijing includes senior members of the Chinese Communist Party. An article in the *People's Daily*, the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, spoke in glowing terms about how useful the Peaceful Reunification Councils were in furthering China's goals of taking over Taiwan, noting that while chapters of the Peaceful Reunification Council complied with US law by registering as nonprofits, they were established to support Chinese government policies and coordinate activities with PRC consulates in the United States.¹⁶ "Over the years, the China Peaceful Reunification Council in Northern California has actively cooperated with the local Chinese consulate to work against 'Taiwan independence' and promote national reunification activities, and has some influence in San Francisco's overseas Chinese community," the Northern California Council notes on its website.¹⁷

Around the United States, the councils count numerous prominent Chinese Americans as members. For example, one successful California businesswoman was for years the honorary chairwoman of the council in Northern California.¹⁸ While helping promote US-China educational exchanges, this individual has also consistently advocated on behalf of PRC policies in the United States, including China's claims on Taiwan, and has helped to organize demonstrations against "Taiwan independence." She is listed as an adviser to the China Overseas Exchange Association, which is part of the United Front Work Department.¹⁹

The Chinese government has also sought to co-opt local Chinese American community associations to serve its goals.²⁰ In the past,

organizations such as regional associations had generally been close to the Nationalist government of Taiwan. In San Francisco, however, that began to change as early as the 1980s when Suey Sing, one of San Francisco's six major community organizations (Tongs) representing Chinese immigrants, became the first major Chinese group to fly the flag of the PRC on its building. Then a second Tong flew Beijing's flag, and a competition broke out between the PRC and Taiwan in San Francisco's Chinatown to see which side could fly the most flags. This competition can be vividly seen from the seventeenth floor of a public housing project overlooking Chinatown, where PRC and Republic of China flags sit atop adjacent buildings stretching into the horizon. The flying of the PRC's flag reflects two things: increasing PRC influence in America's traditional Chinatown, as well as a recognition of reality by these associations that Beijing had been recognized, even by the United States, as the legitimate capital of China.

The value of these associations to Beijing can be seen in this example: When China's president Xi Jinping visited the United States in September 2015, one of the leaders of San Francisco's local Chinese American community associations was listed as first among twenty prominent Chinese Americans honored by the Chinese president.²¹

Chinese Americans and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference

Several Chinese Americans have been given membership on China's most prominent national united front body, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). The preamble of China's constitution defines the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference as "a broadly based representative organization of the united front which . . . will play a still more important role in the country's political and social life, in promoting friendship with other countries and in the struggle for socialist modernization and for the reunification and unity of the country." In practice, the CPPCC has served as an important advisory committee to help legitimize the Chinese Communist Party's rule to audiences both domestic and abroad.

Beijing has been appointing Chinese Americans to the CPPCC for years. In some cases, authorities in Beijing seem to have had problems finding willing Americans to take seats on the committee, such as in 2017, when a Chinese property developer and educator (who appears to still be a Chinese citizen) was one of seven “Americans” listed as CPPCC members.²²

In doling out prestigious positions on the CPPCC, China seeks to show overseas Chinese that prominent members of their community want to be connected with China’s government. The American contingent to the thirteenth CPPCC (announced in March 2018) was perhaps the most remarkable in years, comprising four highly successful Chinese American academics, scientists, and businessmen.²³

The appointment of Chinese Americans to positions on this advisory body to the Chinese Communist Party raises difficult questions of divided national loyalty. Americans should, of course, be free to participate in whatever organizations they see fit, since freedom of association is hardwired into the constitutional DNA of the United States. However, the CPPCC is not an independent civil-society NGO but an organization controlled, managed, and dominated by the Chinese Communist Party. Members of these organizations are expected to adhere to the disciplines and goals of the party and work to strengthen China and the party’s rule of China. Members of the CPPCC are expected to write reports about how their activities have aligned with China’s interests and to detail their work on China’s behalf.²⁴ The potential exploitation of Chinese American members in this body by the Chinese government not only risks harming the interests of the United States but also has the potential to harm the security, reputation, and welfare of these Chinese Americans.

A similar quandary could present itself to those Chinese Americans who have chosen to accept positions as consultants for another united front organization, the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese, which also serves the party’s interests. In 2018, twelve representatives from the United States, including wealthy businessmen and civic leaders, were listed as advisors of the federation’s 10th National Congress. The Chinese government picked them in recognition of their prominence and efforts in advocating positions friendly to Beijing.²⁵

To engender a sense of close support, state-owned Chinese media outlets routinely report about contacts made between prominent Chinese Americans and senior Chinese officials. There are literally hundreds of such reports in the Chinese-language press about prominent Chinese Americans escorting leading figures from China's united front bureaucracy in the United States or being hosted by them in China.²⁶ In May 2017, Li Kexin, the deputy chief of mission at the Chinese embassy in Washington, praised the Peaceful Reunification Council's DC chapter for holding a "peaceful reunification forum" in Washington and for opposing Taiwan's independence.²⁷ Officials from China have also traveled freely to the United States to take part in conferences and activities designed to further China's influence operations in the United States. For example, united front officials traveled to the United States in November 2016 for the annual executive meeting of the Peaceful Reunification Council, during which the council pledged to renew its efforts to "oppose Taiwan's independence."²⁸

Conclusion and Recommendations

As US citizens, Chinese Americans enjoy the same constitutional rights of freedom of speech, association, and political participation as everyone else, and their exercise of these rights is fully legitimate and protected by the Constitution and law. What's more, it is incumbent on the US government and American society as a whole not to demonize Chinese Americans for their feelings for and pride in China.

At the same time, it is also important that all American citizens be aware that feelings of pride can sometimes be exploited by an authoritarian regime to advance its goals and interests. Here it is not Chinese Americans who are at fault for having an attachment to their "Motherland" but the Chinese Communist Party for cynically attempting to use Chinese Americans to further its own interests, in the process making overseas Chinese communities vulnerable to distrust.

While the US government needs to adopt a no-tolerance policy toward attempts by Chinese security forces to travel to the United States to secretly harass, manipulate, intimidate, and monitor China's perceived

enemies in the United States, the best antidote to such intrusion is for federal and local governments to do more to strengthen ties to Chinese American communities and to give greater visibility into the various inducements and pressures Beijing exerts on these communities. That the FBI has begun to reach out to prominent Chinese in the United States, offering protection, is a good beginning. But the FBI and the rest of the US government must approach this problem with great sensitivity and be mindful of the sad history of political repression in the Chinese American community and the legacy of the McCarthyite purges of the 1950s.

This is particularly important, as such demonization can lead to the unwarranted targeting of Chinese Americans or long-term Chinese residents of the United States for alleged crimes involving illegal cooperation with China. Over the past decade, there has been a significant number of examples of prosecutorial overreach, such as the case against the hydrologist Sherry Chen, who was exonerated in 2015 of all espionage charges.

A sustained education campaign is also urgently needed to inform the members of the Chinese American community of the potential adverse consequences of involvement with China's united front activities. Chinese American organizations also need to do a better job of informing themselves about the underlying goals of PRC's united front organizations as there are potential reputational costs of allying with them and losing independence. It can be taken as a positive sign that, for example, the Committee of 100, an organization founded by many illustrious Chinese Americans, has begun to debate the possibility of encouraging its leading members from accepting positions with PRC united front organizations officially aligned with the Chinese Communist Party.²⁹

China's activities in the United States can also be made more transparent by requiring spin-off groups from united front organizations in Beijing to register under the Foreign Agent Registration Act as agents of a foreign power. This would include all of the bureaus of the Peaceful Reunification Council, the China Overseas Exchange Association, and the China Overseas Friendship Association, among others that are, in fact, influence-seeking organizations with political implications run by

a foreign state. In addition, Chinese Americans who accept positions in united front structures—such as the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference—should also be required to register as agents of a foreign power seeking influence in the United States. China has tried to sell these “honors” to the Chinese American community as a cost-free way of expressing their sincere feelings of pride in China. However, the reality is that once a person accepts such “honors,” along with free travel to China and other emoluments, the Chinese Communist Party will always seek to exact a further price. And where that price creates divided loyalties and results in actions harmful to American interests and values, the US government must respond with appropriate legal and regulatory measures.