

# THE UNITED FRONT IN AN AGE OF SHARED DESTINY

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## Back in the Spotlight

Ling Jihua 令计划 had been an aspirant to the Party's top leadership before his son Ling Gu 令谷 crashed a Ferrari in Beijing in March 2012, killing himself and one of the two young women with him (see the *China Story Yearbook 2013: Civilising China*, Information Window 'Black Ferrari, Red Ferrari', p.166). In the wake of the tragedy, which raised a number of questions (including how Ling's son had been able to afford the car), Ling Jihua was removed from his post as the chief of the General Office of the Communist Party's Central Committee and appointed head of the United Front Work Department 统一战线工作部 instead.

The United Front Work Department (UFWD) is the organisation

through which the Party reaches out to many key non-party groups within and outside China in order to achieve important political goals. It also monitors sensitive constituencies and selects representatives from them who they can then incorporate into the political system. The last time the UFWD garnered any significant attention from foreign media was during the tumultuous events surrounding the 1989 student democracy movement centred on Beijing's Tiananmen Square. Yan Mingfu 阎明复, then head of the UFWD, played a key role in liaising with the students, meeting with students at UFWD Headquarters and famously offering himself up as a hostage.

The Ling Gu Ferrari incident and its aftermath had been one of the few times in recent years that the department has made international news until 6 June 2014, when Xi Jinping brought United Front work back into prominence in remarks he made at a Conference of Overseas Chinese Associations in Beijing. 'As long as the overseas Chinese are united,' declared Xi, 'they can play an irreplaceable role in realising the Chinese Dream of National Rejuvenation as they are patriotic and rich in capital, talent, resources and business connections.' He was implicitly appealing to the Chinese in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau, where just two days earlier there had been significant, large-scale commemorations of the deaths that resulted from the government's military crackdown on the protests in Beijing twenty-five years earlier.

### **What is United Front Work?**

United Front work has been a key strategy of the Communist Party since the early 1920s, when some of its members joined the Nationalist Party or Kuomintang (KMT) 国民党 (see Forum 'Occupy Taiwan', p.136), ostensibly to build up the KMT but in reality

to take it over. When the Nationalists turned on the Communists in 1927, violently purging its ranks of them and attacking suspected sympathisers, the Communists suffered heavy losses. It nonetheless emerged bigger than before and with broader support, despite being confined to the remote countryside and under constant Nationalist military pressure.

From 1936, in the wake of increasing Japanese aggression, the Communist Party worked assiduously to convince urban Chinese in particular that the country's survival as a nation depended on the Nationalists joining it in an anti-Japanese 'United Front' and that it was unpatriotic for the Nationalists to prosecute its extermination campaign against the Communists when it ought to be confronting the threat of national extinction from Japan. From 1936 to 1945, when the Japanese surrendered, and from 1946 to 1949, when full-scale civil war between the Communists and the Nationalists broke out, the Communists also put great effort into building a United Front with 'fellow travellers'. These included famous intellectuals, writers, teachers, students, publishers and business people who were not necessarily themselves Communists.



'Long Live the Unity of all the People of the Nation': ethnic minorities pictured in Tiananmen Square. Yang Junsheng, 1957  
Source: ycwb.com

Many of them belonged to or were influenced by the so-called democratic parties 民主党派. This 'New Democratic, Anti-Imperialist Anti-Feudal United Front' became a key to the Party's success in undermining, isolating and de-legitimising the Nationalists. The common goals of national triumph over Japan and a better future had powerful appeal. No wonder then, that after achieving victory in 1949, Mao Zedong declared United Front work one of the Party's three great secret weapons, alongside party-building and its armed forces.

After 1949, United Front work continued to be aimed at enlisting the co-operation of many of the groups outside of the Party's ideologically determined constituency of peasants, workers and soldiers. The United Front called on 'capitalists', intellectuals, prominent individuals and others to help rebuild the nation. When such allies expressed support for the Party or its policies, they influenced wider society and bolstered the Party's legitimacy and democratic credentials. Such behaviour by influential figures profoundly influenced many of the groups targeted.

After 1949, the United Front's representation of these groups and individuals became a key part of the symbolism of communist socialist democracy. It is institutionalised in the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC 中国人民政治协商会议), a high-level public advisory body that meets at the same time as the National People's Congress. Unlike the Communist-dominated Congress, two thirds of the UFWD-vetted CPPCC membership are non-communists. (However, neither the Party nor the government are obliged to act on any CPPCC resolutions.)

Mao himself lost interest in United Front work after 1956, favouring confrontation and 'class struggle' over conciliation. It was nevertheless revived each time the Party had to recover from a Mao-induced crisis. At such times the Party recognised the value of the talents, voices and influence of non-party-affiliated intellectuals and others. For example, after the disastrous Great Leap Forward and three years of famine (1958–1961), the Party effected a temporary reconciliation with surviving United Front allies whom it had denounced during the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957; this temporary reconciliation was known

as the Second Hundred Flowers Movement of 1961–1963.

After Mao's death and the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, the Party revived the United Front Work Department and instructed it to rebuild links with overseas Chinese business leaders to attract much-needed foreign investment. The UFWD also tapped available surviving talent at home to help China establish its first post-1949 stock market in the 1980s. The idea for the Special Economic Zones, which played a huge role in starting China's economic reforms, for example, was first raised publicly by the Guangdong Provincial CPPCC around 1977.

During the society-wide protests of April–June 1989, many of the democratic parties and other United Front allies supported the students and even marched in demonstrations. After 4 June and the Beijing Massacre, they were quickly exonerated while other participants were punished. The new Party general secretary Jiang Zemin even implied that the Party would relax the strict controls on them and give more freedom to the CPPCC. His promises echoed key elements of democratisation proposed earlier by the deposed party leader Zhao Ziyang, which

entailed an expansion of the United Front system and greater prominence and responsibility for the CPPCC. The Communist Party was worried about its loss of legitimacy after 1989. It needed help to cope with the disruption to the economy and the damage to China's national image caused by the flight of most foreigners and the near drying-up of foreign investment. It also needed to reassure China's own new capitalists who might have been spooked by the dramatic change in political climate. But the foreigners and their money soon returned, the status quo prevailed, and the Party didn't need to make any political compromises in service of the United Front. The UFWD began to slip out of sight.

### **United Front Work Today**

Since then, twenty-five years of rapid economic development have made China an increasingly complex society with many new interest groups and classes, as well as new social fissures. United Front work today aims to prevent the emergence of resentful interest groups such as a disaffected capitalist class. The official list of United Front targets includes those from before the reform period: the members of the eight 'democratic parties'; prominent

non-party figures; intellectuals who do not belong to the Party; representatives of ethnic and religious groups; the original (pre-1949) capitalist class; former Nationalist military personnel; people from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan; Taiwanese who remained in China after 1949 and Overseas Chinese including those who have moved (or returned) to China. The new groups include independent professionals such as lawyers, managers and influential figures in private- and foreign-owned businesses, Chinese who have studied or returned from abroad and Chinese immigrants in foreign countries. The UFWD attempts to harness them to the aims of the Party and prevent them from becoming a problem in the first place. The Department's work abroad extends beyond reaching out to foreign citizens of Chinese ethnic origin and recent emigrants, to trying to influence foreign nationals to accept the Communist Party's point of view on a plethora of topics.

The recent dramatic incidents of unrest, violence and terrorism in Xinjiang and Yunnan, the continuing self-immolations in Tibet and the demolition of churches in Zhejiang all point to significant failures of the United Front. Many religious people and

many Uyghurs and Tibetans do not believe the rhetoric found in recurrent United Front slogans that they are ‘in the same boat’ 风雨同舟 with the rest of the nation, or indeed, that the rest of the nation is committed to ‘sharing weal and woe’ 同甘共苦 with them.

The protests in Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan (see Forum ‘Occupy Taiwan’, p.136) have targeted, explicitly or otherwise, government officials, political parties, big business and others believed to be too cosy with the Communist Party — with United Front work a key reason for these close relationships. These allies (including, according to some reports, the Triads

— the ‘Chinese Mafia’) have been cultivated by the UFWD largely because of their assumed influence on the wider population. Such allies may in turn benefit from their links to the Communist Party, and believe it will protect their interests. But the growing number of protests show that the United Front message is failing to resonate with many ordinary people in these places and elsewhere across China, undermining Xi Jinping’s vision of a Shared Destiny. The lessons of twenty-five years ago though, warn us that that the Party has other ways of realising such ideals as ‘China and Hong Kong are One Family’ 中港一家亲.



Pro-Beijing protests in Hong Kong: the red banner on the tank reads ‘China and Hong Kong are One Family’

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