



**Royal United Services Institute**  
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# China–UK Relations

Where to Draw the Border Between Influence  
and Interference?

Charles Parton



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RUSI Occasional Paper, February 2019



**Royal United Services Institute**  
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# Executive Summary

- The boundary between influence (legitimate) and interference (unacceptable) in another country's affairs is hard to define. Unlike Moscow, Beijing's interference is not aimed at subverting the West, but represents a rigorous, ruthless advancement of China's interests and values at the expense of those of the West, including through actions which encourage self-censorship and self-limiting policies.
- The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sees controlling the narrative about China abroad as important for reinforcing its legitimacy and justifying its monopoly on domestic power. It is also important for advancing its geopolitical aims. This work is led by the United Front Work Department (UFWD), with the support of other major departments and agencies of the Party and state.
- The UK's Five Eyes allies have been important targets of CCP efforts: these countries have large Chinese ethnic communities, which the CCP sees as its starting point for interference. The UK is also a target due to its economic importance, geopolitical standing, number of Chinese students, innovation and technological expertise, and open markets.
- In countering Chinese interference, the UK should distinguish between what cannot be tackled, what is not worth addressing because CCP efforts are ineffective, and what is harmful to the UK and must be stopped. This paper covers seven areas: academia/think tanks; interference in the Western press and freedom in publishing; freedom of speech and rule of law; public policy and politics; espionage; threats to critical national infrastructure; and wider technological threats including the spillover from surveillance and control technology/systems and internet governance. It includes recommendations for action in each of these areas.
- Defence against Chinese interference requires: knowledge (of how the Party works and of China's foreign policy and external actions); transparency (particularly relating to funding); publicity (of unacceptable activities); unity/solidarity (within government and with allies); and reciprocity (would China allow the equivalent actions/interference by foreigners in China?). Some turbulence in relations is unavoidable, but risks are manageable. The greater risk is inaction, which will make longer-term resistance to interference harder. Ultimately, the UK's goal must be genuine reciprocity and an equal, mature and comprehensive relationship with China.



# Introduction

**A** COUNTRY'S FOREIGN POLICY aims to maximise the interests of that country abroad. In many areas, the business of influencing other governments and peoples, of promoting soft power, sometimes known as 'public diplomacy', is an acceptable part of foreign policy carried out by all countries. But there is a border between activities which constitute influence (legitimate) and activities which constitute interference (unacceptable). That boundary is neither clear nor easy to define, and the consequences or effectiveness of interference activities are not easy to measure. If the judgement is that certain activities are ineffective and are likely to remain so, the best policy is to ignore them.

To talk of China and Chinese policy is to talk of a Leninist system and therefore of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) policy. Criticism in this paper is not aimed at the Chinese people. The Party is adept at turning criticism of itself into a charge of being anti-Chinese and thereby racist. This must be resolutely challenged, because it allows the CCP to deflect Western criticism of Party policy on the grounds that it 'hurts the feelings of the Chinese people'. It also appropriates the voice of Chinese people living abroad.

There has been much concern generated in other countries, notably New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the US, about Chinese influence/interference,<sup>1</sup> or what is tolerable and what is unacceptable behaviour. But there is not always a sufficient distinction between the two. This matters for two reasons. If influence and interference are conflated, the CCP will focus on the influence end of the spectrum. Activities at this end, while undesirable, do not constitute unacceptable interference. By focusing on them the CCP deflects attention from more unacceptable activities and enables it to claim that the threat is exaggerated. Additionally, many in the UK do not know about the issue or do not want to know, and some may have interests which would suffer from countermeasures. To convince these people that countermeasures are necessary, the focus must be on activities which are manifestly out of order.

Except in the sphere of espionage and cyber attacks, CCP interference is not of the Russian kind, which is more deliberately hostile, even destructive. It is more subtle, incremental and often under the radar, although it is occasionally brazen. The CCP encourages self-censorship and self-limiting policies in spheres which it sees as harming its interests. Countering it means finding a balance between creating dangerous dependencies on economic benefits (often short term) and causing an unproductive confrontation with Beijing. The UK must make it clear that measures are not aimed specifically at China. Rather it is defending UK values and security interests by resisting interference in the country from any and all quarters – a concept the CCP ought to understand, given the readiness with which it accuses others of interfering in China.

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1. See *BBC News*, 'CIA Chief Says China "As Big a Threat to US" as Russia', 30 January 2018.

This paper is not an academic research paper. Rather it seeks to outline the likely extent of CCP interference activities in the UK and to make some recommendations on what needs to be done to counter them. But nothing appears like *Athene* fully formed out of the head of Zeus. The government should commission wider, deeper research and lead a debate on CCP interference in the UK, in order to stimulate government, academia and other parts of society into ensuring that unwarranted CCP-promoted behaviour is minimised and mutually beneficial relations between the UK and China are maximised.

# I. How to Define the Line Between Influence and Interference

**D**EFINING WHICH ACTIVITIES constitute influence and which interference is more of an art than a science. Perhaps the place to start is with former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's words: 'foreign influence activities that are in any way covert, coercive, or corrupt'.<sup>2</sup> Those close to Turnbull refined this to extend 'covert' to include 'deceptive' behaviour. They also introduced the wider notion of 'corrupting' in order to encompass activities which corrupt political processes, media markets, public debate and academic freedom, for example, by using improper inducements falling short of criminal bribery.<sup>3</sup>

To this must be added some concept about the potential for interference. There is nothing covert, coercive or corrupt(ing) about purchasing routers and other equipment for UK telecommunications from Huawei (China's largest telecommunications company), nor about *The Telegraph* accepting £750,000 a year to include a supplement from the CCP's *China Daily*. But it is possible to conceive that Huawei might, in future, if it has not already, covertly collect data via the UK's systems, or that *The Telegraph*, if in future it finds itself in financial trouble, might be less willing to offend the CCP by forthright reporting on matters such as abuses in Xinjiang, Tibet or other sensitive issues.

Another way of looking at the influence/interference debate is through the lens of reciprocity: would similar activities by UK actors be allowed by the CCP in China? In some areas this approach has to be limited by the recognition that the UK must not forsake its values or imitate CCP practices. Nevertheless, in other areas, for example the participation of Chinese companies in critical UK telecommunications infrastructure, the question is a valid one.

Ultimately, the approach to determining interference might be best summed up by the words of a US Supreme Court justice describing his threshold test for obscenity: 'I know it when I see it'. This suggests that it might be better to look at individual issues on their own merits, with a pragmatic assessment of whether and to what degree they harm UK interests, values and security. Hence this paper's approach is that of a policymaker rather than an academic. Nevertheless, it is essential that academic studies are also undertaken to provide intellectual underpinning.

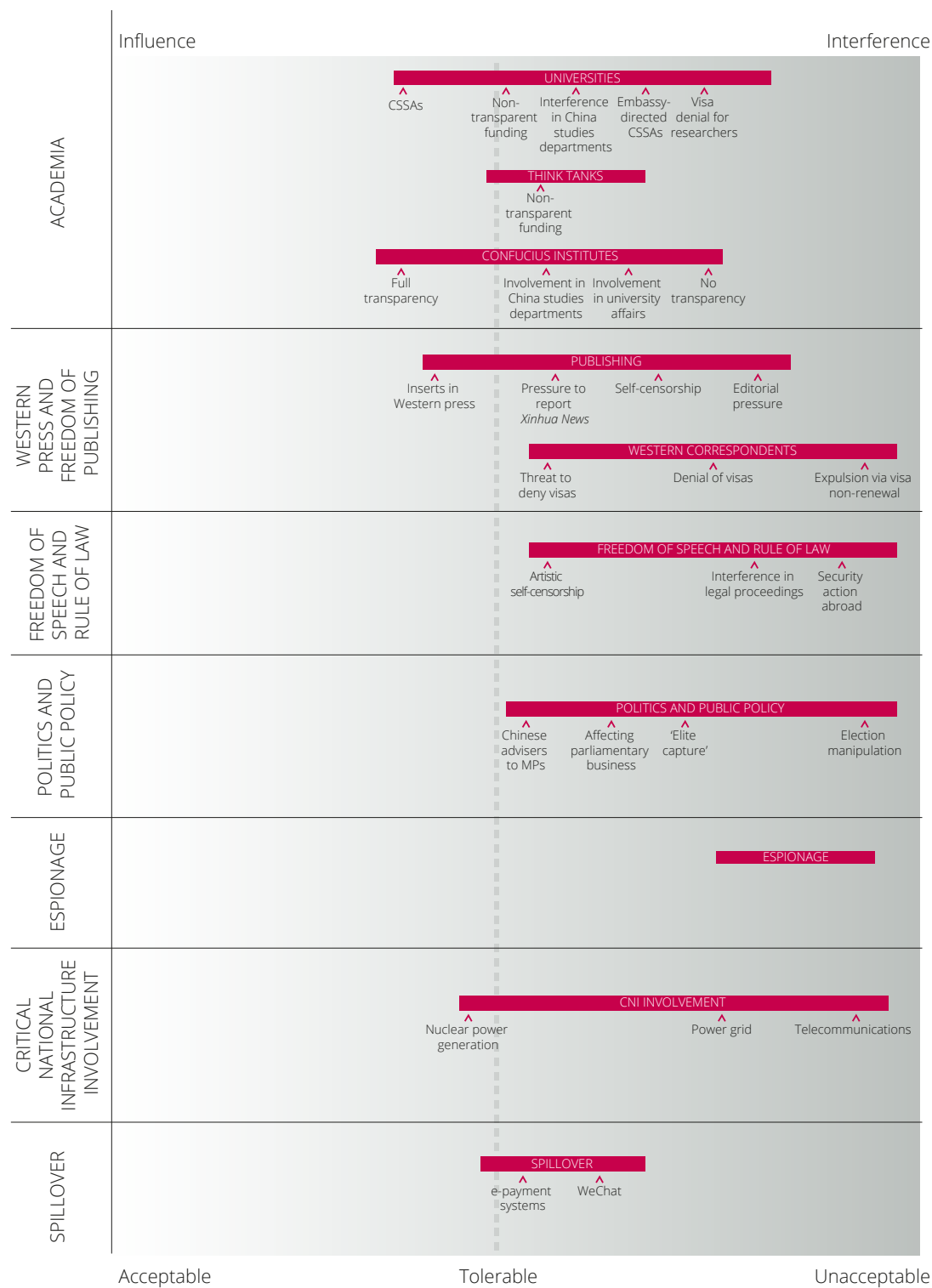
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2. Peter Mattis, 'Laws on Foreign Influence Just the Beginning in Fight Against Chinese Coercion', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 December 2017.
  3. Author's email correspondence with John Garnaut, who worked with Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull on Chinese Communist Party (CCP) interference in Australia, 19 October 2018.

This paper considers in more detail below interference in seven areas: academia/think tanks; interference in the Western press and freedom in publishing; freedom of speech and rule of law; public policy and politics; espionage; threats to critical national infrastructure (CNI); and wider technological threats, including the spillover from surveillance and control technology/systems, and internet governance. There is a spectrum: at one end, acceptable influence activities, through unwanted but tolerable interference, to unacceptable interference against which action is required, at the other end. But it is not easy to specify exactly where on the spectrum individual CCP activities in the UK should be placed. Much has been written, for example, about interference from Confucius Institutes, justly in some cases but with exaggeration in others where transparency and proper practice prevails.<sup>4</sup> Further considerations are whether some unacceptable activities can be ignored because they are ineffective, or simply cannot be countered (although they can still be highlighted). Figure 1 attempts the difficult task of capturing the range from influence to interference.

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4. For a considered view, see Christopher Hughes, 'Confucius Institutes and the University: Distinguishing the Political Mission from the Cultural', *Issues and Studies* (Vol. 50, No. 4, 2014), pp. 45–83. For more recent considerations, see Ethan Epstein, 'How China Infiltrated US Classrooms', *Politico Magazine*, 16 January 2016; Rachelle Peterson, *Outsourced to China: Confucius Institutes and Soft Power in American Higher Education* (New York, NY: National Association of Scholars, April 2017).

Figure 1: The Spectrum from Influence to Interference



Source: The author's research.



## II. Why Does the CCP Interfere?

**O**NE THING IS unchanging: the Party's foremost consideration is remaining in power, not least because political transitions in authoritarian states are often violent and the personal consequences dangerous. Thus, the CCP's priority is to avoid instability and unrest, which might lead to its being unseated.

Domestically, the process of legitimising one-party rule is based on:

- Continued economic growth and prosperity.
- Claims of effective governance (in contrast to the USSR/Russia, Western democracies).
- Efforts to end disparities (regional, urban/rural, income) and environmental problems.

In foreign affairs, to legitimise its rule the CCP seeks to convince its people of its success in:

- Ending foreign bullying since the Opium Wars and returning China to its rightful place at the centre of world affairs.
- Upholding territorial integrity (Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, the South China Sea).
- Renewing global respect for China's culture.

A major reason for pushing these 'six legitimacies' abroad is that foreign support and approbation for the Party's achievements and policies can be played back into China, thereby reinforcing the CCP's exercise of power.

Former leader Deng Xiaoping's policy of 'biding one's time' has given way to 'going out': which includes pursuing an active and assertive role in global affairs and governance, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), modernisation and foreign deployments of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and a determination to ensure regional security by leadership in East Asia and control of surrounding seas. The increased importance of foreign policy is reflected in the upgrading of the Party's Leading Small Group on Foreign Affairs to a Commission<sup>5</sup> and the promotion of the person in charge of foreign affairs, Yang Jiechi, to the Politburo.<sup>6</sup>

When 'abroad' matters, 'abroad' must be brought into line with CCP narratives and interests.

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5. *Xinhuanet News*, 'CPC Releases Plan on Deepening Reform of Party and State Institutions', 22 March 2018.

6. Shi Jiangtao, 'It's a Good Day for China's Diplomats as Foreign Policy Chief Lands Seat on Politburo', *South China Morning Post*, 25 October 2017, updated 1 November 2017.



# III. How Does the CCP Interfere?

Reinforcing the 'six legitimacies' leads the CCP into foreign interference in four broad areas:

- Controlling the narrative about territorial integrity, what is said, written and acted upon with relation to Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and the South China Sea.
- Preventing attacks on the governance system of the CCP and how it deals with sensitive subjects, such as human rights, civil society, and ethnic or religious affairs.
- Ensuring that foreign countries, politicians, civil servants, think tanks and advisers adopt policies favourable to CCP aims.
- Ruthlessly promoting China's economic prosperity by whatever means available.

These broad areas are motivated both by geopolitical concerns and by domestic issues relating to maintaining internal stability and control. In particular, the CCP wishes to control Chinese citizens living abroad, such as students, academics and businessmen, and seeks, where possible, to prevent them from being exposed to 'unhealthy' ideas and ideals they might bring back to China. However, the effects of this are not confined to Chinese abroad; they are also deleterious to the values, interests and security of liberal democracies. They go against the UK's deep attachment to freedom of speech and academic freedom, risk distorting economic and political policies, and may work against the UK's security concerns (for example, the CCP's territorial ambitions in the South China Sea conflict with freedom of the seas and upholding international law).

The second target group for CCP interference efforts is the Overseas Chinese (OSC) community. The increasing number who have emigrated from China in recent decades are expected to follow the Party line, and pressure through relatives and business interests can be used to ensure that they do. But the CCP seeks to include all ethnic Chinese, no matter how many generations since their ancestors left China, in a concept of 'Chineseness' which presumes loyalty to China (hence the official translation of President Xi Jinping's core concept as 'Chinese Dream' not 'China Dream', which might be taken as referring only to the country).<sup>7</sup>

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7. See, for example, *Xinhuanet News*, 'Xi Urges All Chinese to Contribute to National Rejuvenation', 17 February 2017. There is extensive reference throughout United Front Work Department (UFW) literature to the concept of Overseas Chinese (OSC) being 'sons and daughters of China'. See, for example, Zhongguo Tongyizhanxian Jiaocheng, 'Make Efforts to Bring About the Great Unity of the Sons and Daughters of China Both at Home and Abroad', People's University Press, May 2013, p. 265. For the importance of the OSC to China's foreign policy, see State Councillor Yang Jiechi's emanations in *CPC News*, 'Yang Jiechi: Be a Considerate Person, Get Things Done, and Unite the Hearts and Power of the Overseas Chinese and Share the Chinese Dream', 16 May 2017.

But, as China's globalisation deepens, the Party is becoming ever more keen that non-ethnically Chinese foreigners be brought on side, preferably to support the new aims, but at least not to oppose them.

A major tool of interference is to create dependency on Chinese funding (or to imply that it may be withdrawn). Often this promotes self-censorship and self-limiting policies, to avoid losing financial support. Another is to get Chinese who can be trusted to advance the CCP's interests, whether in universities, the media, politics or business. A further tactic is 'elite capture', the appointing of former politicians, civil servants, businessmen, or high-profile academics/think-tank personnel who retain influence in their home countries on positions in Chinese companies and think tanks or on affiliated posts in Chinese universities. Often paid very generously for their advice, they risk becoming more amenable to CCP aims. At the more covert end of the spectrum, the threats from hacking, cyber attacks, control of critical national infrastructure and espionage are obvious.

## IV. Who Interferes? The United Front Strategy

**M**UCH HAS BEEN written about the United Front strategy and the United Front Work Department (UFWD).<sup>8</sup> Its main function is to ensure support within China for the Party from non-communist elements of society (minorities, religions, entrepreneurs, intellectuals, the middle classes, Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and the OSC community). It is one of the CCP's most important departments, an importance emphasised last March when it took charge of the State Council's Overseas Chinese Affairs Office and the State Administration for Religious Affairs,<sup>9</sup> and was included in the national constitution.

While most UFWD departments are concerned with domestic influence and control, important ones deal with the OSC community, which the CCP has traditionally sought to use as its first port of call for promoting its interests abroad, and with Hong Kong and Taiwan. In major foreign countries, Chinese with close links to the UFWD fund associations which support CCP policies on Taiwan.<sup>10</sup> In the UK, the China Reunification Society, among others, mirrors over eighty<sup>11</sup> similarly titled organisations elsewhere.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to emphasise that it is the United Front strategy which is important, and that the UFWD is not the only body to carry out the strategy. Many other departments (Party and state) also work to align foreign opinion and foreign governments more closely to China's interests: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), International Department of the Communist Party of China (IDCPC, more important than the MFA in foreign policymaking), Ministry of Commerce, Central Propaganda Department,<sup>13</sup> Ministry of State Security (MSS), Ministry of Public Security, and Ministry of Education, among others. The UFWD has officials posted in Chinese embassies abroad, as does the IDCPC and the MSS. Then there is a plethora of think tanks and other 'people-to-people' organisations, such as the China Association for International Friendly

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8. See James Kynge, Lucy Hornby and Jamil Anderlini, 'Inside China's Secret "Magic Weapon" for Worldwide Influence', *Financial Times*, 26 October 2017.

9. *Xinhuanet News*, 'CPC Releases Plan on Deepening Reform of Party and State Institutions'.

10. Rowan Callick, '"Non-Profit" Group Linked to Chinese Donors', *The Australian*, 5 September 2016.

11. *Ibid.*

12. See, for example, the National Association for China's Peaceful Unification in the US or the Australian Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China.

13. The Chinese *xuanchuan* literally means 'announce [and] propagate'. Chinese official media previously translated the word as 'propaganda', but now usually renders it as 'publicity'. The author has chosen to use the old translation because it more accurately reflects the nature of much material put out.

Contact and the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, as well as regional bodies.

The Party leadership issues guidance on policy and aims to the UFWD and other departments, seeking to bring it into line with the CCP's narrative or to control what is said about China in foreign countries; what foreign leaders, media or academia think about China; and what policies they adopt towards China. It leaves the details of implementation to the UFWD and other departments.

## United Front in Action: Australasia

There has been considerable discussion of Chinese interference in Australasia, leading to the Australian government employing respected China scholar and journalist John Garnaut to carry out a study.<sup>14</sup> The position in New Zealand has been well laid out by the academic Anne-Marie Brady, who as a result has been the target of CCP harassment, which is being investigated by New Zealand's security services.<sup>15</sup>

CCP policymaking, domestic and foreign, proceeds incrementally. It launches localised initiatives, assesses the lessons learned and then extends them more broadly. Australia and New Zealand have been guinea pigs for interference. There are several reasons for this: their ethnic Chinese populations are large relative to their overall population, with considerable numbers being recent immigrants with relatives and close ties to China (Australia 6%,<sup>16</sup> New Zealand over 4%), so that there is a greater chance of influencing politics; they are regarded by China as being in its desired sphere of influence; their economies are increasingly dependent on China; and, being English speaking, they attract a large number of Chinese students, whom the Party wishes to keep an eye on. Until recent changes in Australia,<sup>17</sup> the lack of legislation on foreign sources of funding for political parties had also made interference easier.

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14. See John Garnaut, 'How China Interferes in Australia', *Foreign Affairs*, 9 March 2018.

15. See Anne-Marie Brady, 'Magic Weapons: China's Political Influence Activities Under Xi Jinping', paper presented to the conference on 'The Corrosion of Democracy Under China's Global Influence' supported by the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, Arlington, Virginia, 16–17 September 2017. See also Thorsten Benner et al., 'Authoritarian Advance: Responding to China's Growing Political Influence in Europe', Global Public Policy Institute and the Mercator Institute for China Studies, February 2018.

16. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Cultural Diversity in Australia, 2016', <<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0~2016~Main%20Features~Cultural%20Diversity%20Article~60>>, accessed 30 January 2019.

17. Paul Karp, 'Coalition Bill to Ban Foreign Political Donations Passes Senate', *The Guardian*, 15 November 2018. New Zealand limits foreign donations to NZD1,500. See Simon Chapple, 'New Zealand Politics: How Political Donations Could be Reformed to Reduce Potential Influence', *The Conversation*, 30 October 2018.

Interference in politics has attracted particular attention. The CCP targets ethnic Chinese, seeking to use them to lobby and vote in its interests. In Australia, funding through naturalised citizens with close Party links has influenced politicians' stances, in one case leading to the resignation of Senator Sam Dastyari.<sup>18</sup> In New Zealand, one MP had worked for Chinese military intelligence over some years, a fact not revealed to his party.<sup>19</sup> Another tactic is the establishment of associations which do not advertise their UFW links and which lobby for positions supported by the CCP.

There has been considerable controversy over interference on university campuses, capture of the media, and giving positions (and large emoluments) in Chinese companies or Chinese-financed think tanks to former politicians or businessmen, as well as threats against and intimidation of the CCP's opponents, usually, but not always, Australian and New Zealand nationals of Chinese ethnicity.

## Why Might the UK be an Important Target for CCP Interference?

Given a global UFW strategy, there are reasons why the UK should be a target for the same type of interference. The UK's economic importance, geopolitical standing (it is a permanent member of the UN Security Council), innovation and technological expertise, open markets and number of Chinese students all contribute to the Party's need to ensure UK compliance with its aims. The UK's departure from the EU may increase the CCP's desire to interfere, as it seeks to implement further a 'divide and rule' strategy, aimed at imposing its global vision and promoting its interests.

In some areas the UK may not be so vulnerable. Ethnic Chinese make up around 0.7% of the UK population,<sup>20</sup> making it difficult for the CCP to mobilise sufficient people in this sector to influence specific seats at elections. However, the UK does have more Chinese students (just under 100,000 in 2017)<sup>21</sup> than the rest of Europe combined.

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18. *ABC News*, 'Sam Dastyari Resignation: How We Got Here', 12 December 2017.

19. See Brady, 'Magic Weapons', p. 19.

20. Institute of Race Relations, 'Ethnicity and Religion Statistics', <<http://www.irr.org.uk/research/statistics/ethnicity-and-religion/>>, accessed 30 January 2019.

21. Universities UK International, 'International Facts and Figures', May 2017, <[https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/International/International\\_Facts\\_and\\_Figures\\_2017.pdf](https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/International/International_Facts_and_Figures_2017.pdf)>, accessed 13 January 2019.



# V. Areas Vulnerable to Interference or Unacceptable Behaviour

## Academia, Think Tanks and Confucius Institutes

### Universities

The CCP's prime aim is to control its own students, for reasons already noted. A secondary aim is to exercise broader control over the narrative about China. Such action, on UK soil, affects UK students and undermines UK values, particularly those of freedom of speech and association. We should not overstate the threat: most academics continue to write and speak critically about China, and seminars are held on topics the CCP would wish to be avoided. But there is evidence of incentives and pressure on academics, particularly younger ones with careers to consolidate, to self-censor or to limit debate (sometimes the pressure comes from the university's administrators). We need to find out how pervasive such interference is, because, if left unchecked, unacceptable behaviour will proliferate.

One instrument of this interference is the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA), which is supported and partly financed by the Chinese government. Its open aim is to look after Chinese students, but it also reports on them to the embassy and authorities, tries to stop discussion of topics sensitive to China (Taiwan, Tibet, Tiananmen), and takes more direct action under guidance of the embassy (see below). When it is attacked for the latter actions, it highlights its student welfare activities, a deliberate ambiguity.

In 2017, Chinese embassy officials in Canberra gave training to hundreds of CSSA students to form 'security squads' to help drown out protesters during the visit of Premier Li Keqiang to Australia.<sup>22</sup> The same thing seems to have happened during Li's visit to the UK in 2014.<sup>23</sup> In February 2017, the CSSA organised students to barricade the building where the Durham University Debating Society had invited a speaker who supports the Falun Gong (a spiritual

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22. Alex Joske and Wu Lebao, 'The Truth About the Chinese Students and Scholars Association', *Woroni*, 12 October 2017, <<https://www.woroni.com.au/words/the-truth-about-the-chinese-students-and-scholars-association/>>, accessed 13 January 2019.

23. Ryan Hooper, 'Chinese Embassy Accused of Recruiting People to "Drown-Out" Protesters as Premier Visited Downing Street', *Evening Standard*, 17 June 2014.

movement banned in China). The Chinese embassy also contacted the debating society, asking it to cancel the speaker's invitation and accusing it of harming the China–UK 'Golden Era'.<sup>24</sup>

Direct Chinese government interference in UK universities has yet to match that seen elsewhere. An egregious example is its reaction to the appearance of the Dalai Lama at the University of California, San Diego campus. As a warning to others, China refused to process government scholarships for the university, in order to deprive it of students and revenue.<sup>25</sup> It is almost certain that were a UK university to invite the Dalai Lama to its campus, the CCP's reaction would be the same.

But generally, the CCP's preferred method is to create dependencies and induce self-censorship and self-limiting policies. This is less visible and harder to link directly to unacceptable interference. Chinese funding for UK universities (for example, in 2012, a professorship in development studies at Cambridge University was funded by a foundation linked to a relative of the then Chinese premier),<sup>26</sup> access to research in China and paid invitations to think tank events in China all create obligations which may encourage UK academics to shade the truth or avoid the awkward. Without transparency it becomes impossible to know whether there might be a conflict of interest. For example, in a public lecture, an academic who holds a position at a UK university in addition to posts at three Chinese universities argued that censorship in China was 'at the margins', that investigative journalism was alive and well and that the CCP's interference in the press was less than that of newspaper proprietors in the West.<sup>27</sup> He made no mention of China being ranked 176 out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders 2018 press freedom list,<sup>28</sup> or of incarcerated journalists, or the armies of censors employed. University websites generally do not show whether academics receive emoluments and benefits such as flights and living expenses.

A potent method of CCP interference is the threat of withdrawing access to research opportunities in China, particularly from junior foreign academics, potentially a death knell to their careers. A number of UK academics have raised this problem with the author, highlighting its effect of encouraging self-censorship (two egregious examples cannot be quoted because permission to reference them has not been given).<sup>29</sup>

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24. Gabriella Swerling and Grant Tucker, 'Student Debate Will Harm Relations, Insists China', *Sunday Times*, 11 February 2017.

25. Josh Horwitz, 'China is Retaliating Against a US University for Inviting the Dalai Lama to Speak at Graduation', *Quartz*, 19 September 2017.

26. Simon Montlake and Peter Foster, 'Revealed: Wen Jiabao's Family is Behind Cambridge University Professorship', *The Telegraph*, 10 June 2014.

27. The author was present at the lecture.

28. Reporters Without Borders, '2018 World Press Freedom Index', <<https://rsf.org/en/ranking>>, accessed 19 January 2019.

29. For more on self-censorship, see Sheena Chestnut Greitens and Rory Truex, 'Repressive Experiences Among China Scholars: New Evidence from Survey Data', <<https://papers.ssrn.com/>>

There are growing numbers of young academics, born in China, who are working in the UK (not least because of the demands for language and experience). Many have been 'invited to tea' by the Chinese embassy or authorities in China and told to support the Chinese line.<sup>30</sup> This is interference in UK values and academic freedom. It is backed up by actions exemplifying the Chinese phrase 'kill the chicken to frighten the monkeys'. Australia-based academic Feng Chongyi believes his detention and forced confession on television on a visit to China was designed to send a message to 'stay away from sensitive issues and sensitive topics'.<sup>31</sup>

The problem does not lie primarily with teaching staff. Often, when they meet pressure, they are not backed up by university administrators. A number of professors have told the author that vice-chancellors and other administrators have not supported them when they have been subject to pressures which impinge on academic freedom. They put budgetary concerns over values. That these academics are not willing to go on the record shows the nature of the problem.<sup>32</sup>

### Think Tanks

There is evidence from the US, Australia and the EU that China is helping to fund the establishment of think tanks, often through front companies.<sup>33</sup> The aim is to create an influential voice which appears to be independent in its support for the Party's line and may influence the national government. A lack of transparency makes it very difficult to know the precise origin of funds and how they are used. In many cases, funding may not be direct, but involves the provision of visiting appointments and positions in Chinese universities and organisations.

UK think tanks working on China, as opposed to universities' China studies centres, are few. More work needs to be done to establish whether the activities of think tanks, such as the Global China Institute, a UK-based subsidiary of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, which in turn

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sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\_id=3243059&download=yes>, accessed 13 January 2019. Some 68% of scholars indicated that censorship is a concern in the field.

30. More research is needed for a scientific conclusion and to establish the lines taken by the Chinese authorities (assuming Chinese academics are happy to talk about this sensitive subject). One academic, for example, told the author that written material that might be a problem was sent back to a 'protector' in China. That this is seen as necessary presupposes that material might have to be altered if it is deemed too sensitive.
31. Nick McKenzie et al., 'The Party Line', *Sydney Morning Herald*, accessed 13 January 2019.
32. An honourable exception is Louise Richardson, Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University. Asked by the Chinese embassy to prevent the Chancellor Lord Patten from visiting Hong Kong, she refused. When threatened with the withdrawal of Chinese students, she replied that there were many Indians who would willingly take their place. See the evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Commons, given by Lord Patten on 8 January 2019, <<https://www.parliamentlive.tv/Event/Index/c0588b7c-9e39-4a08-81dc-570351216bd9>>, accessed 30 January 2019. Nevertheless, the incident shows the willingness of the Chinese to interfere.
33. See for example, James Leibold, 'The Australia-China Relations Institute Doesn't Belong at UTS', *The Conversation*, 4 June 2017.

is subject to the ‘guiding role’ of the Central Propaganda Department,<sup>34</sup> go beyond acceptable efforts to influence the debate on China.

### **Confucius Institutes (CIs)**

CIs have been much in the news, not least because in the US some senators have called for their closure. Some have been closed. The main objections to them are: that they are foreign government entities (they are run by and part-funded by the Hanban, an organisation under the Ministry of Education, which is ultimately controlled by the CCP’s Central Propaganda Department, making them different from the British Council or Institut Français) set up on university campuses in buildings paid for by the universities; that the Hanban’s charter says that CIs must obey Chinese law, in theory advocating extra-territoriality; that they censor discussion on China by not allowing events, speakers or textbooks to refer to matters deemed sensitive by the Party; that contracts and financial arrangements with their hosts are not openly available for scrutiny; and that they play a part in universities’ China Studies faculties beyond teaching language and culture.

There is truth in these criticisms. For example, CIs rarely discuss Tibet, and it is contrary to the values of free speech and academic freedom to impede discussion and debate, especially on a UK university campus. Using Hanban money creates dependencies, and there have been cases in the UK where CI staff have meddled in China Studies faculties. The University of Nottingham is one (it also has a branch campus in Ningbo, China, which increases its vulnerability): pressure has also been applied to academics at Nottingham to stand down or avoid inviting certain external speakers because they and/or their chosen subjects were deemed too sensitive.

Equally, some universities manage relations with CIs successfully and benefit from having a Chinese-language capability which they otherwise might not be able to afford, particularly universities outside the better-resourced Russell Group. Given the need to understand a rising China, for which language is key, the advantages seem to outweigh the disadvantages, providing there is transparency, proper administration, and a clear division between the CIs and China Studies departments. The threat to UK values posed by a skewed presentation of China in teaching materials is not serious: for those who advance from language study to a degree on China, there are copious materials which convey a more balanced picture; and those of us educated through Mao-era material have not ended up as Maoists.

The real battle is not with the CIs, but with wider interference in universities. If kept transparent and out of a university’s operational affairs, CIs can be confined to the influence end of the spectrum; without that proviso, they constitute interference. More generally, inadequate funding for universities means a greater reliance on foreign students, of whom the Chinese are

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34. See Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007) p. 18.

the greatest in number and make up one third of non-EU international students in the UK.<sup>35</sup> In turn, some towns in depressed regions are dependent on universities for economic survival. This makes universities vulnerable to interference in their programmes. We live in a financially constrained world. But what price knowledge, without which the UK will be poorly placed to seek a balanced, mutually beneficial relationship with China?

## Interference in the Western Press: Freedom in Publishing

### Media in Foreign Countries and the UK

There is ample evidence of Party interference in the foreign press and no reason why the UK should be an exception. The strategy begins with Chinese-language print, radio and television. According to Anne-Marie Brady, the leading Auckland Chinese-language paper, website and broadcaster work closely with the consulate and UFWD organisations.<sup>36</sup> As ever, money is the main weapon: in 2015 ‘a Reuters investigation spanning four continents ... identified at least 33 radio stations in 14 countries that are part of a global radio web structured in a way that obscures its majority shareholder: state-run China Radio International’,<sup>37</sup> a subsidiary of the Chinese government whose ties with Beijing were hidden by front companies.<sup>38</sup> In the Czech Republic, while overall coverage of China in the main media was largely negative, an in-depth study concluded that ownership of print and television outlets by Chinese companies has led to more positive coverage of China.<sup>39</sup> More detailed analysis is needed to assess the degree of reliance by UK Chinese-language newspapers on material from the Chinese government, particularly online, where increasingly people access news. There is no obvious reason why the UK should be an exception, although it is reassuring to note that, among others, the BBC and *Financial Times* have online news in Chinese.

The threat from Chinese companies and entities to withdraw advertising could severely damage the profitability of media outlets, thus applying pressure on media companies to self-censor. Many media company owners also have interests in other areas of business, including in China, which could be affected by negative coverage in their media interests.

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35. Figures for 2016-17 taken from UK Council for International Student Affairs, ‘International Student Statistics: UK Higher Education’, last modified 3 April 2018, <<https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/Research--Policy/Statistics/International-student-statistics-UK-higher-education>>, accessed 30 January 2019.

36. Brady, ‘Magic Weapons’, p. 35.

37. Koh Gui Qing and John Shiffman, ‘Beijing’s Covert Radio Network Airs China-Friendly News Across Washington, and the World’, *Reuters*, 2 November 2015.

38. *The Economist*, ‘How China’s “Sharp Power” is Muting Criticism Abroad’, 14 December 2017.

39. In hardline leftist media (*Haló noviny*) or media with a Chinese (co-)owner, the image of China was distinctly more positive. On the cases of the *Týden* weekly and TV Barrandov, it is evident that the ownership by the Chinese company CEFC led to an exclusively positive coverage of China. See Chinfluence, ‘Czech Media Analysis’, <<http://www.chinfluence.eu/media-analysis/>>, accessed 13 January 2019.

The £750,000 reportedly paid annually to *The Telegraph* for carrying a *China Daily* (a Party newspaper) supplement risks creating dependency.<sup>40</sup> Detailed analysis is needed to determine whether the paper's editorial line has shifted, or whether sensitive topics are omitted or treated differently. That risk might increase if the CCP payment became crucial to the paper's financial survival. It is interesting to note that since 2016 *The Telegraph* has carried 20 signed articles by the Chinese ambassador to the UK, twice the number carried by the *Daily Mail*, *The Guardian* and the *Financial Times* put together (the last two, along with the BBC, were excluded from Xi Jinping's post-Party Congress unveiling of the new Politburo in October 2017<sup>41</sup>). But should we mind? It is debatable whether the *China Daily* supplement achieves much in changing perceptions. Also the line between influence and interference is blurred. We may not like UK papers carrying Party propaganda in supplements, but it would be difficult to stop the practice. It does, however, underline the importance of government support for freedom of the press and for the BBC Chinese-language services.

### Western Correspondents in China

Exclusion or harassment of the Western press in China demonstrates a customary lack of reciprocity between China and the West. The 2017 report of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China makes sober reading.<sup>42</sup> Around half of surveyed journalists reported interference, harassment or violence; problems with visa renewal were up 150% from 2016, and 6% (up from 2% in 2016) had been threatened with cancellation or non-renewal of visas. A recent case was China's decision not to renew the visa of the *Financial Times*' Hong Kong bureau head or later to allow him entry for a short visit.<sup>43</sup> This is an infringement of the autonomy promised under the Joint Declaration and the Basic Law.<sup>44</sup>

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40. Jack Hazlewood, 'China Spends Big on Propaganda in Britain ... But Returns are Low', *Hong Kong Free Press*, 3 April 2016.

41. Tom Phillips, 'Protest After Western Media "Troublemakers" Barred from Xi Jinping Speech', *The Guardian*, 25 October 2017.

42. Foreign Correspondents' Club of China, 'Access Denied: Surveillance, Harassment and Intimidation as Reporting Conditions in China Deteriorate', <<https://cpj.org/blog/Access%20Denied-FCCC%20report%202017.pdf>>, accessed 13 January 2019. The Foreign Correspondents' Club of China's 2018 report was published after the research for this paper was completed. Its findings are even more critical than the already negative findings of the 2017 report.

43. Alvin Lum et al., 'British Journalist Victor Mallet Denied Entry to Hong Kong as Tourist', *South China Morning Post*, 9 November 2018.

44. The Joint Declaration, signed in 1984, is an international agreement lodged with the UN on the future of Hong Kong. The Basic Law, Hong Kong's 'constitution', was signed in 1990. See Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau, Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 'The Joint Declaration: Section XIV', <<https://www.cmab.gov.hk/en/issues/jd3b.htm>>, accessed 30 January 2019. Article 154 of the Basic Law states that '[t]he Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region may apply immigration controls on entry into, stay in

Most UK media resist pressure. But within China, there is little they can do about being prevented from meeting potential interviewees or visiting certain places. Some inevitably have to self-censor, in one case by withdrawing from a project on Tibet in order not to jeopardise other China-related work.<sup>45</sup> A further tactic used by the Chinese authorities to impede Western correspondents is to put pressure on the local Chinese who work for them. Some Chinese working abroad for foreign media have reported pressure on relatives back in China.

### **Publishing**

Recently there have been several well-publicised cases of China putting commercial pressure on Western publishing organisations to censor articles relating to sensitive subjects such as Tibet or the events of 1989.<sup>46</sup> Content from archives and current publications has been affected, in an attempt to rewrite history or hamper research. In the case of *China Quarterly*, its publishers, Cambridge University Press, initially succumbed to Chinese pressure to cut articles from its back catalogue relating to Taiwan, Tibet and the 1989 protests, before bowing to pressure from academics to restore them. While the move affected only accessibility from within China, powerful measures already exist internally to control scholars, which raises suspicions that this might be testing the waters for later pressure to censor more widely abroad. Unlike Cambridge University Press, the German publisher Springer Nature continues to remove articles at Chinese behest.<sup>47</sup>

## **Freedom of Speech and Rule of Law**

### **Extending Chinese Censorship Abroad**

Western organisations with China-linked interests are prone to self-censorship, sometimes prompted by threats that their actions will lead to adverse consequences for their China-based business. Chinese embassies play a part, as in the Durham University Debating Society case mentioned above. More recently, when a China Central Television journalist was charged with assault after slapping a volunteer at a fringe meeting during the Conservative Party conference,<sup>48</sup> her employer and the Chinese embassy claimed the journalist had been assaulted

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and departure from the Region by persons from foreign states and regions'. See The Basic Law, 'Chapter VII: External Affairs', <[https://www.basiclaw.gov.hk/en/basiclawtext/chapter\\_7.html](https://www.basiclaw.gov.hk/en/basiclawtext/chapter_7.html)>, accessed 30 January 2019.

45. Author's interview with a journalist, London, March 2018.

46. Christian Shepherd, 'British Publisher Pulls Academic Journals from China After Government Complaint', *Reuters*, 24 December 2018.

47. Benedicte Page and Natasha Onwumezi, 'Springer Nature Blocks Journal Articles in China', *The Bookseller*, 2 November 2017.

48. *Hong Kong Watch*, 'Volunteer Assaulted at a Conservative Party Conference Fringe Event on Human Rights in Hong Kong', 1 October 2018.

and called for an apology.<sup>49</sup> The assault was a relatively trivial incident, but the attempt by the Chinese embassy to interfere in the UK's legal system is more serious (in the event, the case was dropped). The Royal Court Theatre in London pulled a play about Tibet, so as not to jeopardise the theatre's ability to do further work in or with China.<sup>50</sup> In 2018, many foreign companies with business interests in China (airlines, hotel chains and automobile companies, in particular) were forced to apologise for referring to Tibet or Taiwan in the wrong terms or for running advertisements deemed unacceptable to the CCP.<sup>51</sup>

### Chinese Police and Security Organisations' Action Abroad

Newspapers have documented direct Chinese police action on foreign streets. In Australia, Chinese authorities clearly monitor Falun Gong supporters: they were able to identify and threaten a Chinese student who had merely been in the company of a friend who had signed a Falun Gong petition.<sup>52</sup> In 2015 Swedish citizen Gui Minhai, a publisher of contentious books, many about the CCP leadership, was snatched from Thailand and eventually paraded on television making a confession (four other Hong Kong-based publishers suffered the same fate).<sup>53</sup> This demonstrates the willingness of the Party to undertake such actions where they think they can get away with it.

It remains unclear whether China has kidnapped people in Western countries. A defector to Australia in 2005 insists that it has done so, both there and in New Zealand.<sup>54</sup> Others, including a former Canadian intelligence officer, have described a methodology relying more on threats to harm families back in China.<sup>55</sup> In some cases, the torture of relatives has been alleged.<sup>56</sup>

Threats have been made against British citizens in the UK, including Benedict Rogers, the founder of a UK-based Hong Kong human rights group. He was denied entry to Hong Kong in

49. Matthew Weaver, 'Case Dropped Against Chinese Journalist Who Allegedly Slapped Tory Delegate', *The Guardian*, 20 November 2018; Embassy of the People's Republic of China to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, 'Chinese Journalist Freed After Incident at UK Conservative Party Fringe Event', 2 October 2018, <<http://www.chinese-embassy.org.uk/eng/zywl/t1601512.htm>>, accessed 30 January 2019.

50. Ben Quinn, 'Royal Court Dropped Tibet Play After Advice from British Council', *The Guardian*, 4 April 2018.

51. Cindy Sui, 'China Warns Western Firms Over Taiwan', *BBC News*, 29 June 2018.

52. Clive Hamilton, 'Why Do We Keep Turning a Blind Eye to Chinese Political Interference?', *The Conversation*, 4 April 2018.

53. Zheping Huang, 'Chinese Citizens Don't Believe Hong Kong Bookseller Gui Minhai's Public Confession Either', *Quartz*, 18 January 2016.

54. Zach Dorfman, 'The Disappeared: China's Global Kidnapping Campaign Has Gone on for Years. It May Now Be Reaching Inside U.S. Borders', *Foreign Policy*, 29 March 2018.

55. Tom Blackwell, '"Don't Step Out of Line": Confidential Report Reveals How Chinese Officials Harass Activists in Canada', *National Post*, 5 January 2018.

56. Dorfman, 'The Disappeared'.

2017. His mother, and residents on his street, received letters attacking him personally.<sup>57</sup> There have been other cases involving British citizens, including a similar case to that of Rogers (the victim has asked for details to be withheld). In both cases, the language, typeface and other features of the letters were the same as numerous threats delivered in Hong Kong. This would imply CCP involvement, likely to be commissioned through criminal gangs or triads (in 1993, the then minister of public security praised some triads as ‘patriotic’).<sup>58</sup> In another case, a Uyghur exiled in the UK was directly told by a Chinese interlocutor that ‘we cannot guarantee your safety in this country’.<sup>59</sup>

In April 2018, Sweden charged a resident Tibetan with spying on exiles for the Chinese government.<sup>60</sup> This raises the question whether the UK would tolerate similar activities on its streets.

## Politics and Public Policy

There is nothing wrong with influencing a foreign country’s policies: that is what diplomacy is all about. But there is a grey area, or worse, when interference goes beyond diplomacy. For example, the CCP seeks to place its people as advisers to Western politicians. Allegations that an Australian MP has such an adviser were published last year.<sup>61</sup> In the author’s personal experience in the EU delegation in Beijing, on one visit by a group of visiting MEPs a British MEP brought his adviser, a Chinese ex-professor, to an in-house briefing. The MEP endorsed official Chinese positions in wording which differed little, if at all, from material put out by the Central Propaganda Department. The adviser is well known in Brussels for organising pro-China events.

Another grey area is the risk of financial dependencies being set up through consultancies offered to retired politicians, who the CCP hopes will push a sympathetic narrative. The case of former British Prime Minister David Cameron, who is involved in a large China fund which aims to invest \$1 billion in BRI projects, has gained some attention.<sup>62</sup> The question of ‘elite capture’ by the CCP has not been closely examined. It should be, including the issue of how much time should elapse between government service and working for Chinese state or quasi-state organisations.

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57. Benedict Rogers, ‘Beijing Reaches Far and Wide to Silence Critics – We Must Not Stay Silent’, *Huffington Post*, 13 July 2018.

58. Stephen Vines, ‘Triads and China do Hong Kong Deal’, *The Independent*, 12 May 1997.

59. Nathan Vanderklippe, ‘How China is Targeting its Uyghur Ethnic Minority Abroad’, *Globe and Mail*, 29 October 2017.

60. *Reuters*, ‘Sweden Charges Man with Spying on Tibetan Exiles for China’, 11 April 2018.

61. Clive Hamilton and Alex Joske, ‘Political Networking the Chinese Way – a Sydney MP and his “Community Adviser”’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 June 2017.

62. Sam Coates, ‘David Cameron Cleared to Lead £750m China Trade Fund’, *Sunday Times*, 18 December 2017.

As noted above, the UK does not yet have constituencies where the Chinese ethnic vote might be crucial in a local or national election. It is therefore unlikely to be vulnerable to the sort of threat made by China's then head of security to the Australian Labor opposition that the CCP would mobilise the Chinese community to vote against it.<sup>63</sup> But perhaps there is another weapon used to interfere, namely threats not to issue visas to China directed at politicians. This happened to a local Australian politician and his mayor, who were summoned by the Chinese embassy and threatened with the blocking of a planned visit to China.<sup>64</sup> The threat was carried out in the case of a German MP who refused the ambassador's request to cancel speaking engagements and alter his official website.<sup>65</sup> According to *The Economist*: 'It [China] recently tried to ban a pro-Taiwan British MP from a parliamentary-committee trip to China'.<sup>66</sup> The trip went ahead with a full complement.

It is also worth noting that, almost alone among foreign embassies, Chinese embassy staff attend, sometimes in numbers, hearings of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee. When, as on one occasion, four of an audience of around 16 are Chinese officials, it is worth asking whether the intention – and the effect – is to intimidate witnesses, some of whose careers may depend on access to China.

## Espionage

Espionage is a direct form of interference. During the Cold War, the KGB ran not just classic penetration agents, but also 'agents of influence' (one could say 'agents of interference') – politicians, journalists, academics and opinion formers, some paid, some not. In China's case, while the MSS is involved in influence/interference, those foreigners who might perhaps be described as 'agents of influence' are rarely ideological, but are rather advancing China's agenda because it suits their own. Meanwhile, on the Chinese side, there are multiple players/organisations, all pushing the Party's interests because they are controlled by the Party. These forms of interference have been discussed above.

Traditional espionage in the form of Chinese attempts to recruit agents to provide classified or economic/commercial information is on the rise. The director of the FBI has called China the greatest espionage threat currently facing the US,<sup>67</sup> while the French and German security

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63. Primrose Riordan, 'China's Veiled Threat to Bill Shorten on Extradition Treaty', *The Australian*, 4 December 2017.

64. *The Australian*, 'From Beijing to Parramatta: How China Muscled up to Council', 10 November 2017.

65. Didi Kirsten Tatlow, 'China Reaches into the Heart of Europe', *New York Times*, 25 January 2018.

66. *The Economist*, 'Chinese Investment, and Influence, in Europe is Growing', 4 October 2018. Under the term of his engagement as a Special Adviser on China to the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Commons, the author is not permitted to present more detail of this incident.

67. Tara Francis Chan, 'FBI Director Calls China "The Broadest, Most Significant" Threat to the US and Says its Espionage is Active in all 50 States', *Business Insider*, 19 July 2018; US Department of Justice, 'Attorney General Jeff Sessions Announces New Initiative to Combat Chinese Economic

services have recently been reported as being concerned about rising Chinese espionage, including 'a broad attempt to infiltrate regional Parliaments, ministries and administrations' by Chinese agents, to recruit German sources using fake social media accounts.<sup>68</sup> In 2014, the hacking of the US Office of Personnel Management, aimed at securing the personnel information of past and present officials, was laid at China's door. This personal information would be invaluable for a hostile intelligence service looking to target officials. The author is personally aware of three attempts between 2013 and 2016 to recruit foreigners in one Beijing embassy.

There is no reason to think that the UK is excluded from the attentions of the Chinese intelligence services. Even in the past, when they were not especially active, they attempted to recruit serving and retired British officials. China's growing role in global affairs and its strengthening security posture require good political intelligence (on top of its concerted programme to steal technological, economic and commercial secrets).<sup>69</sup> Reasons for spying on the UK include its role as a geopolitical player, its effective military capability, UN Security Council permanent membership, Five Eyes intelligence alliance membership, and cutting-edge civilian and military technologies.

UK security services should be looking to raise the priority given to combating Chinese intelligence interference. This will not be easy, given current concentration on terrorism and the Russian threat. But other countries, such as the US, now consider the CCP to be a greater threat than Russia. Some measures may not consume too many resources. For example, Australia has banned its military from using WeChat and other Chinese apps for personal communications,<sup>70</sup> on the grounds that messages can be read by Chinese security services. The UK might consider following this example.

Cyber attacks are an important form of interference. The UK government is well aware of this and is taking precautions. In 2016 it set up the National Cyber Security Centre. The scale of the problem led the UK to join the US in a public denunciation of Chinese cyber attacks.<sup>71</sup> The

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Espionage', 1 November 2018, <<https://www.justice.gov/opa/speech/attorney-general-jeff-sessions-announces-new-initiative-combat-chinese-economic-espionage>>, accessed 13 January 2019; see also Adam Goldman, 'Ex-CIA Officer is Convicted of Spying for China', *New York Times*, 8 June 2018.

68. Tatlow, 'China Reaches into the Heart of Europe'. For Germany, see *Deutsche Welle*, 'China Denies Using Social Media to Infiltrate German Politics and Business Circles', 11 December 2017; for France, see Joseph Fitsanakis, 'French Government Report Says Thousands Approached By Chinese Spies on LinkedIn', *Intelnews*, 24 October 2018; *Reuters*, 'Two French Agents Accused of Spying for Foreign Power', 24 May 2018.

69. Nicholas Eftimiades, 'The Impact of Chinese Espionage on the United States', *The Diplomat*, 4 December 2018.

70. Angus Grigg, 'Australia's Defence Department Bans Chinese App WeChat', *Financial Review*, 11 March 2018.

71. Edward White, Alice Woodhouse and Xinning Liu, 'China Hits Back at US and UK Allegations of Cyber Attacks', *Financial Times*, 21 December 2018.

government may need to make further efforts to publicise the dangers and to help UK companies take preventive measures.

## Threats to Critical National Infrastructure

While Chinese involvement in CNI is not ‘covert, coercive or corrupt[ing]’, it has the potential for serious interference in certain areas. If properly controlled, it might also bring opportunities, as well as risks.

The Party is not malignant or hostile in its foreign relations, but neither is it *communautaire*; it is ruthlessly self-centred. No country should put into the hands of another the ability to interfere with or bring to a standstill its CNI. While the UK should strive for good relations with China, it would be naive to think that there are no circumstances in which the CCP might move against UK interests and security. The Party might not even need to make a move: fear that it might take action could be enough to influence UK decision-making.

In areas such as power generation, there may be less to worry about. A Chinese priority is to export its nuclear industry. China General Nuclear’s 33% stake in the Hinkley Point nuclear power plant project in Somerset is critical to this, because it serves as an important example to the rest of the world of a major Western country having confidence in China’s nuclear industry. For the CCP to interfere (perhaps by building weaknesses into computer systems),<sup>72</sup> or even to use its participation as a threat, would undermine China’s prospects for growth in this industrial sector. Short of outright war between the UK and China, economic, financial, safety and technological considerations far outweigh security factors in determining whether to allow China into the UK’s power sector. Nevertheless, it would be wise to restrict China from participating in projects that account for more than 10–15% of the UK’s power output. This would prevent Chinese companies from having too great a degree of control over the UK’s grid systems.

The same is not true of telecommunications, particularly as the UK is set to decide which providers will be permitted to offer fifth-generation mobile networks (5G) in the country. Allowing Huawei’s participation is at best naive, at worst irresponsible, for the following reasons:

- The history of China’s cyber attacks shows that an integral part of CCP interference abroad is getting access to a wide variety of information, whether related to industry, commerce, technology, defence, personal details or politics. 5G will be crucial to the future functioning not just of CNI, but to many processes which will be reliant on the Internet of Things.
- It is far easier to place a hidden backdoor inside a system than it is to find one. In the likely, but unacknowledged, battle between Chinese cyber attackers and the UK’s Huawei Cyber Security Evaluation Centre, the advantage and overwhelming resources

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72. Prime Minister Theresa May’s former chief of staff Nick Timothy voiced this fear reportedly held by security experts inside and outside government. See Nick Timothy, ‘The Government is Selling our National Security to China’, *Conservative Home*, 20 October 2015.

lie with the former. The 2013 Intelligence and Security Committee report on Huawei's participation in the current generation of telecommunications was scathing.<sup>73</sup> Among other criticisms, it pointed out that GCHQ could not be confident in finding insertions embedded in software containing over a million lines of code (or more, given frequent software updates), which would enable covert downloading of information.

- Huawei's Chinese staff have no choice but to accede to requests from Chinese government departments. Huawei may be a private company, but the CCP is strengthening its committees inside private companies and recent Chinese national security laws<sup>74</sup> require cooperation with security authorities in matters of (ill-defined) national security.
- The US, Australia and New Zealand are taking action to exclude Huawei and other Chinese companies from their 5G plans on security grounds; worries about the security of UK networks following their exposure to Huawei may make the Five Eyes partners, and perhaps others such as France, Germany or Japan, less inclined to cooperate with the UK in the future. The maintenance of a 'Five Eyes standard' of cyber security in telecommunications is a vital strategic and security interest, the loss of which would go far beyond a reduction in intelligence reports exchanged and might lead the UK being excluded from work on developing future technologies for intelligence collection.<sup>75</sup>

Although it is not part of CNI, some thought must be given to the protection of UK technology being developed in UK universities, an area of great interest to China. In particular, attention should be devoted to the problems of Chinese PLA or PLA-affiliated researchers studying dual-use technologies in the UK, a subject worrying a number of the country's allies too.<sup>76</sup> There must be a balance between national security interests and technological gain, because the UK benefits from the contributions of Chinese research students in the UK.

## Wider Technological Threat Including Spillover from Surveillance and Control Technology/Systems and Internet Governance

The Chinese strategy of allying big data, artificial intelligence and recognition technology with systems of social and political control is likely to lead to the construction of a tool of repression of previously unimagined effectiveness.<sup>77</sup> Much of the capability for this pervasive oversight

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73. Intelligence and Security Committee, *Foreign Involvement in the Critical National Infrastructure: The Implications for National Security*, Cm 8629 (London: The Stationery Office, 2013).

74. For a discussion of Huawei and national security laws, see Samantha Hoffman and Elsa Kania, 'Huawei and the Ambiguity of China's Intelligence and Counter-Espionage Laws', Australian Strategic Policy Institute, *The Strategist*, 13 September 2018.

75. For the Huawei issue, see Charles Parton, 'Why China's Huawei Should Not Be Allowed in UK's 5G Telecoms', *Financial Times*, 5 December 2018.

76. John Morgan, 'Western Universities Urged to Rethink Chinese Military Ties', *Times Higher Education*, 8 November 2018.

77. Charles Parton, 'China's Bigger Brother', *World Today*, August/September 2018.

comes from the proliferation of highly user-friendly – and surveillance-friendly – technology used in everyday hand-held communication and payment devices. Inevitably, these are spreading to the UK, as those who have lived in or visited China bring back platforms such as WeChat and Alipay. Not only are such platforms vulnerable to Chinese censorship, but the data they hold could be remotely accessed from China. At present, such platforms are not prevalent in the UK, but China is promoting its surveillance, payment, e-commerce and other systems abroad. This has implications for data flows, privacy and more. As an example, it might enable Chinese intelligence organisations to focus on a target for recruitment and amass large amounts of personal details, which might reveal vulnerabilities. It is therefore necessary for the UK government to reduce this threat on national security and privacy grounds. The UK government will also need to be watchful of UK businesses selling technology to China which the CCP can use to sharpen its systems of surveillance and repression.

Internet governance or sovereignty is a major area of difference between liberal democracies and authoritarian states. China and others wish to promote the idea that each country has the right to control the internet within its own borders. Liberal democracies hold that the internet should be an open global good. The UK government needs to continue to give support to this principle.

## VI. Countering CCP Interference

**D**O THE EVIDENCE and arguments show a serious threat to the UK's values, interests and security? Some may argue not, not least because some CCP attempts to interfere may well not have much effect. Others may argue that the evidence from other countries, incidents from the UK, and a need to prevent and deter mean that the UK should increase its defences. To settle that question, the search for evidence must be extended and a full, open debate held. In deciding countermeasures, liberal democracies rightly limit the powers of government, and some countermeasures must necessarily be left to persuasion rather than regulation.

### Risks and Implications

Erecting barriers to CCP interference may cause short-term friction and lead to accusations that the UK is harming the 'Golden Era' of relations. Behaviour deemed inimical to CCP interests can be punished by downgrading relations and harming economic interests. Examples of such responses include Chinese protests over then Prime Minister David Cameron's meeting with the Dalai Lama in London in 2012;<sup>78</sup> a ban on imports of whole salmon from Norway after the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo in 2010; a ban on the import of bananas from the Philippines in light of the country's stance on the South China Sea;<sup>79</sup> and South Korea's decision to deploy the THAAD missile defence system, which provoked a ban on the sale of South Korean package holidays by Chinese travel agencies, and harm to other Korean business interests).<sup>80</sup>

However, if the UK acts cannily, the CCP will find it difficult to take harsh measures. It can have little defence against UK calls for transparency, or against the UK taking measures against interference, which the CCP itself adopts in China.

While the CCP may interpret publicity as hostility and, in an attempt to forestall future publicity, may react loudly, it tends to modify its behaviour when faced with pushback. Its bluff should therefore be called, even if this causes short-term turbulence. Furthermore, unity among Western countries will blunt the CCP's desire to attack, because China needs the West for its global plans. The Party is adept at 'divide and rule' and certain European countries, worried about Chinese investment, may resist unity; but major allies remain concerned about interference.

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78. *BBC News*, 'David Cameron's Dalai Lama Meeting Sparks Chinese Protest', 16 May 2012.

79. *Asia Sentinel*, 'The China–Philippine Banana War', 6 June 2012.

80. Ivan Tselichtchev, 'Beyond THAAD: The Real Reason Why China is Angry with South Korea', *South China Morning Post*, 8 October 2017.

Inevitably, much comes down to resources. The dangers of insufficient knowledge and expertise can be compounded by reliance on CCP funding in many fields, which creates dependencies and a reluctance to stand up to demands made later. Solutions (see the recommendations in Chapter VII) will inevitably involve expense. But if, post-Brexit, the UK is to trade and interact more with other major countries, it must be clear about what it is dealing with. Investment in such knowledge will not be misplaced.

Broadly, there are five defences against CCP interference:

### **Knowledge**

How does the CCP and UFW strategy work? More research, studies and, inevitably, funding, is needed. Government, academia, business and society need to be better informed about the CCP, what it is doing and why. The issue needs to be discussed and aired widely. Only proper recognition of the nature and extent of interference will promote good decision-making on whether and to what extent countermeasures are required.

### **Transparency**

Transparency of affiliations, backgrounds, funding and rewards is needed. MPs declare all benefits and income; should the same not apply to academics, think-tank staff and researchers? Perceived problems with CIs would largely fall away if transparency of contracts, finances and activities is insisted upon.

### **Publicity**

Generally, the Western media is good at publicising interference, although Chinese-language media largely reflects CCP views. But the UK government may need to be more robust. People need to be able to speak up without fear when they perceive unwarranted interference in UK values and interests. The more that people speak out, the more confidence others will have that their interests will not be harmed by doing the same.

### **Unity/Solidarity**

Government departments should adopt a homogenous position. The UK should be consistent with its Five Eyes allies and adopt the same countermeasures, for example, on policy towards Chinese participation in, and security of, telecommunications. Wherever possible, it means acting in concert with other countries which share the UK's values. Note that being too absolute in defining CCP interference or too insistent on taking measures against activities whose effects are not that harmful, but merely disliked, will make consensus harder to achieve. This means concentrating on countermeasures aimed at the more egregious abuses.

**Reciprocity**

The test is to ask whether the CCP would permit in China the actions it carries out in the UK. Imposing reciprocity is not easy, because in doing so the UK must not compromise its own liberal standards and values. That would be a Pyrrhic victory. So, reciprocity will require an imaginative approach, which may fall short of complete equivalence of action, but should nevertheless be as rigorous as preservation of UK values allows.



# VII. Recommendations on Countermeasures

Two preliminary recommendations stand out:

- The UK government should organise a cross-Whitehall effort to map the extent of the problem in the UK to alert, quantify risks and agree measures.
- The government should organise a major conference on CCP interference with countries most affected (Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the US and key European allies) at the level of policymaking officials.

## Recommendations by Sector

### Academia

- The government needs to do more work with senior management of universities to alert them to interference, to encourage transparency, to give publicity to attempts by Chinese officials and organisations to dictate to them, and to alert them to the dangers of over-reliance on Chinese students for financing. It should establish a point of contact to provide advice.
- The Russell Group and universities UK should establish a university-wide code of conduct which places foreign interference under the umbrella of safeguarding academic freedom.
- Universities should insist that all funding for their institution be fully transparent. Their academics should declare all sources of funding for research, and all personal benefits received as a result of their academic work. The model could be based on Parliament's demands of MPs.
- Funding should be increased to help boost the numbers of UK undergraduates studying China and Chinese in the UK,<sup>81</sup> to provide more scholarships for a year or more to be spent in China, and to support more PhD work on China in the UK.
- The government should be seen to take up with the Chinese authorities the cases of academics who are put on visa blacklists.

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81. A 2016 Report by the British Association for Chinese Studies cites a Higher Education Statistics Agency figure of 1,380 students enrolled in Chinese Studies in the 2015–2016 academic year. See British Association for Chinese Studies, 'Report on the Present State of China-Related Studies in the UK', August 2016, <<http://bacsuk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/BACS-report-on-China-Studies-2016.pdf>>, accessed 14 January 2019.

### **Think Tanks**

- Increase government funding and encourage private funding for research into the CCP, China's political, economic and social systems, and its foreign policy.

### **Confucius Institutes**

Encourage (and perhaps put pressure on) universities to:

- Insist that CIs' operations are completely transparent, especially their contracts and finances (which means accounts and all documentation must be in English).
- Deny CI staff a say in university matters or China Studies faculties.
- Be more alert to and resist interference in intellectual debate/freedom, such as attempts to bar topics or speakers.

### **Interference in the Western Press and Freedom of Publishing**

- Consider legislation against the ownership of media assets in the UK by entities ultimately controlled by a foreign government (as opposed to foreign private companies).
- Ensure reciprocity in granting visas to Chinese journalists. Time taken to issue should match the average time for UK journalists applying for Chinese visas.
- Where unacceptable treatment is experienced by UK media in China, the government, with the media's consent, should raise the matter consistently and robustly with the Chinese authorities, and publicise such efforts.

### **Freedom of Speech and Rule of Law**

- UK police and security services should be briefed/trained on recognising and responding to signs of Chinese covert actions on UK streets.
- Where Chinese officials 'interfere in the internal affairs' of the UK, they should be called out and the incident publicised.
- Continue to take a strong line against Chinese kidnappings elsewhere in the world, especially in Hong Kong. Support other Western countries experiencing such actions.

### **Public Policy and Politics**

- Develop systems to prevent non-transparent financing of political activities and lobbying by CCP-backed individuals and organisations; the ultimate donor should be clear, even when monies are channelled through British citizens.
- Tighten security clearance procedures for parliamentary advisers to ensure that they are not open to undue CCP interference.
- Consider tightening the rules about ex-politicians and civil servants working for Chinese entities, including extending 'restrictive covenant' periods.

- Educate officials throughout government departments which have business with China on the nature of CCP interference.
- Consider ways to prevent potential intimidation of witnesses at parliamentary China inquiries.

### **Espionage**

- Conduct a review of the espionage threat. Ensure that the security services devote adequate resources to counter any increased threat.
- Conduct systematic briefing of officials on the threat from the Chinese intelligence services.
- Where approaches are made, make protests to the Chinese government, using publicity and resulting embarrassment as a deterrent.
- Consider formulating government advice to sensitive workers to avoid the personal use of Chinese messaging apps (for example, WeChat), whose contents can be read by Chinese security services. Promote the use of safer methods of communication.

### **Threats to Critical National Infrastructure**

- Revisit and implement the recommendations of the 2013 Parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee report on Huawei.
- Quickly complete legislative reforms, taking up the more rigorous recommendations outlined in the July 2018 white paper on national security and investment.<sup>82</sup>
- Exclude Chinese companies from those parts of UK CNI which would potentially give them access to data which might compromise national security, and from areas to which foreign companies are excluded in China, in particular, the telecommunications and power grid sectors.
- Maintain the same stance as the UK's Five Eyes intelligence allies, particularly over 5G.
- Permit carefully managed Chinese participation in UK nuclear power projects.
- Increase funding for technology research to reduce reliance on Chinese funds for research and development in the UK, the results of which are likely to flow back to China.

### **Wider Technological Threat Including Spillover from Surveillance and Control Technology/Systems and Internet Governance**

- Raise awareness of CCP interest in, and occasionally unauthorised obtaining of, research in technologically sensitive areas (to ensure that the benefits of research remain in the UK). Sensitise universities to these dangers and consider strengthening the Academic Technology Approval Scheme.<sup>83</sup>

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82. See Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, *National Security and Investment: A Consultation on Proposed Legislative Reforms* (London: The Stationery Office, July 2018).

83. See Foreign Office, 'Guidance: Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS)', 25 March 2013, <<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/academic-technology-approval-scheme>>, accessed 14 January

- Consider ways of alerting consumers to the downsides of using Chinese technologies which hold their information in servers in China.
- Commission research into the CCP's efforts to set up a different form of internet governance.

# Conclusion

**T**HOSE WHO DISCUSS CCP interference risk being seen as having a ‘Cold War mentality’, an accusation which has been deployed by President Xi Jinping and other Chinese leaders. This highlights the importance of both a quiet and calm determination to resist CCP pressure, and also a command of the evidence to support the case. Further research on CCP interference, and in greater depth, is needed. More broadly, there is an insufficient number of UK government officials with a good understanding and experience of China, and only a handful of officials are able to operate fully in Mandarin. This deficiency in understanding China and the CCP puts the UK at a disadvantage in negotiations and relations with a country which has very considerable research and knowledge of the UK.

Knowledge starts with funding for Chinese studies. This would help ‘grow’ British sinologists and ensure that UK universities are not over-reliant on PRC-citizen academics, who are more vulnerable to pressure from the CCP because of families or futures back in China. This is not a call for a localisation policy, because PRC academics make a valuable contribution to UK knowledge of China; it is a call for more balance. According to UK academics, some UK students are put off studying Chinese because of the lack of funding for the year to be spent studying in China. A dearth of PhD scholarships means that many potential UK academics or experts go abroad.<sup>84</sup> This reduces UK knowledge about China.

With greater knowledge, the UK government and people can better differentiate legitimate influence from illegitimate interference; better assess the effectiveness of CCP interference; and thereby better decide what action, if any, to take in response. Even when certainty about action or effect is not possible, the UK would at least be able to make a more informed judgement. Anticipation and prevention may also be better than trying to rectify an adverse situation. At the same time, pragmatism, not ideology (of which there is sometimes a whiff in Western reactions to CCP interference) must be the UK’s watchword.

The UK needs to realise that behind the enticing, but essentially meaningless, language of ‘win-win’ or ‘shared future for mankind’ lies a ruthless CCP agenda to advance its and China’s interests. The UK will not change that, but its aim must be to channel it into a genuinely balanced relationship. In achieving that, language is important: if there must be talk of ‘the Golden Era’ (and within China, the phrase does help UK interests), the UK should not allow it to cloud its perceptions. The UK’s goal must be genuine reciprocity and an equal, mature and comprehensive relationship.

Quiet diplomacy is often taken advantage of. Combating interference is not a policy of confrontation, but an assertion of independence, a concept which the CCP always insists on for

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84. Author’s conversation with Professor Katherine Morton, November 2018.

itself. If, to start with, transparency and publicity cause an adverse Chinese reaction – threats and bullying, particularly related to economic ties, are becoming an increasingly common method for the CCP to get its way in foreign relations – to give way to it would, in the long run, lead to greater dependency and a weakened ability to support UK values, security and prosperity. It is worth noting that during the two years when the UK was being ‘punished’ for Prime Minister Cameron’s meeting with the Dalai Lama, and during the seven years of Norway’s ‘punishment’ over the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo, both countries’ trade with China showed a healthy rise.<sup>85</sup>

In the longer term, an insistence on non-interference will earn respect and ensure a healthier, more mutually beneficial relationship. China’s rise and the UK’s future outside the EU make it ever more important that the UK starts as it means to carry on, with the aim of ensuring a positive and productive relationship with China.

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85. Norwegian Chamber of Commerce Hong Kong, ‘Bilateral Trade with Mainland China’, <<http://www.ncchk.org.hk/trading-and-business/introduction-2/bilateral-relations/>>, accessed 14 January 2019.

# About the Author

**Charles Parton** spent 22 years of his 37-year diplomatic career working in or on China, Hong Kong or Taiwan. In his final posting, he was seconded to the EU Delegation in Beijing, where, as First Counsellor, he focused on Chinese politics and internal developments, and advised the EU and its member states on how China's politics might affect their interests. He has also worked in Afghanistan, Cyprus, Libya and Mali. In 2017, he returned to Beijing for four months as Adviser to the British Embassy to cover the CCP's 19<sup>th</sup> Congress. He is an Associate Fellow at RUSI, and Specialist Adviser on China to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee.