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Who Represents? Xi Jinping's Grand United Front Work, Legitimation, Participation and Consultative Democracy

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ABSTRACT

The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) 'with-Chinese-characteristics' discourse proclaims its superiority in reflecting people's genuine needs without poisonous partisan politics, as in Western democracies. The Party's consultative democracy, as represented by its allies in forums including the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, is key to this superiority. Consequently, the organizer of these inputs, the United Front Work Department (UFWD), is a key element of CCP legitimacy as its organizer of representation of the increasing number of non-Party social forces. This ostensible alliance allows the Party to proclaim itself as the representative of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people. Nevertheless, little recent work has been done on either this consultation or the Department. Through the processes of legitimation and de-legitimation, this article decodes how this consultative process works by examining the UFWD's methods in relation to religious believers. Under Xi Jinping, united front work is again being prioritized and is closely tied to his reform plans.

Introduction: Doing Rights, Chinese Style

In September 2014, at a ceremony marking the 65th anniversary of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping highlighted the sensitive topic of democracy.¹ Coming after waves of censorship (including the infamous 2013 'Seven don't discuss' ban that includes talking about universal values and civil rights etc.) and persecution of numerous groups, his words attracted considerable attention. Democracy, he told CPPCC delegates including members of the eight Chinese 'democratic parties' and other non-Party social elites, 'is not a decoration, but a means of *solving problems*' (emphasis added). Representatives had to promote 'consultative democracy' with confidence: 'Democracy is defined not only by people's right to vote in an election but also the *right to participate* in political affairs on a *daily basis*' (emphasis added).² To allow such participation via the CPPCC and elsewhere, representatives must first be selected by the United Front Work Department (UFWD). This format of chosen delegates representing elites or interest groups in the united front system under CCP leadership makes this 'democracy with Chinese characteristics'. It

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¹Cary Huang, 'China's Xi Jinping supports "democracy" ... but not in the Western sense', *South China Morning Post*, (24 September 2014), available at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1599068/xi-supports-democracy-not-western-sense> (accessed 15 May 2017).

²Xinhua Insight: What does China-style democracy matter to its people?, *Xinhua Net*, available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-03/10/c_136118749.htm (accessed 15 May 2017).

is significant for its stress on group and interest representation as reflected by key 'representative' (有代表性的) individuals of the Party's choosing rather than any selection by the constituencies themselves.

This discourse of Chinese characteristics, which includes consultative democracy or 'authoritarian deliberation' as He and Warren termed it,³ is now a reality which challenges Western political theories. Chinese-style capitalism with double-digit GDP growth has surprised the world, while 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', the 'China model' or 'red capitalism' challenges liberal economic orthodoxy.⁴ Concepts including 'international relations theory with Chinese characteristics' or 'human rights development with Chinese characteristics' are gaining traction since Xi announced his 'China Dream', linking China's rising economic and geopolitical significance to the CCP's discourse of Chinese exceptionalism.⁵

This promotion of special Chinese characteristics, regardless of topic, is used to highlight the CCP's superiority in channeling inputs and demands that ostensibly reflect people's genuine needs without resorting to partisan politics as proscribed by Western democratic theory and practice. It certainly helps explain why Xi has promoted the United Front Work Department since coming to power. This CCP organ manages the key consultative forum, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference system, and it is mandated by the Party to supervise the inputs and issues regarding all non-Party socio-economic elites and constituencies. This work sustains the Party's consultative/deliberative processes and is used to send messages downwards to society via the relationships of the representatives. According to Xi, 'the effectiveness of united front work is determined by how many friends it made and how qualified and loyal these friends are'.⁶

Despite its apparent importance though, little new work has been done on this consultative democratic system.⁷ The problem is that the conventional concept of legitimacy or deliberative democracy is difficult to apply to China's consultative democracy due to various conceptual and methodological pitfalls.⁸ For example, if consultative democracy equals political participation, its representative institutions should be central to CCP legitimacy. However, both the National People's Congress and the CPPCC systems are often criticized as 'rubber stamps'. Moreover, their ceremonial functions reveal little about the 'making friends' process. If 'making friends' is merely a gesture, why would Xi keep pumping resources into united front work? In 2012, the UFWD announced additional hiring of 40,000 more cadres; in 2014 the number of groups declared as UFWD priorities increased from 11 to about 14,⁹ and in 2015 Xi invested significant personal capital in a long-delayed national United Front Work Conference and raised its importance to Party leaders nationwide. There is even a new United Front Law. Most importantly, how do such legitimacy building mechanisms solve problems and alleviate discontent generated by Party domination of all matters?

³Baogang He and Mark E. Warren, 'Authoritarian deliberation: the deliberative turn in Chinese political development', *Perspectives on Politics* 9(2), (2011), pp. 269–289.

⁴Deng Xiaoping was the first to use the phrase 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics', which has evolved into new form capitalism, for example, allowing business elites to join the Party since 2001. Carl E. Walter and Fraser J. T. Howie, *Red Capitalism: The Fragile Financial Foundation of China's Extraordinary Rise* (Singapore: Wiley, 2010), pp. 2–11.

⁵Two of the earliest discussions in English on this issue are found in Dorothy J. Solinger, 'Democracy with Chinese characteristics', *World Policy Journal* 6, (1989), pp. 621–632; Song Xinning, 'Building international relations theory with Chinese characteristics', *Journal of Contemporary China* 10(26), (2001), pp. 61–74.

⁶扎實做好統戰工作 壯大共同奮鬥力量 ['Doing united front work well, growing common force strong'], 求是 [Seeking Truth], (16 June 2015), available at: http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2015-06/15/c_1115589026.htm (accessed 15 May 2017).

⁷The exceptions are: He and Warren, 'Authoritarian deliberation'; Gerry Groot, 'The expansion of united front work under Xi Jinping', Forum article in Gloria Davies, Jeremy Goldkorn and Luigi Tomba, eds, *China Yearbook 2015 Pollution* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2016), pp. 168–177.

⁸Gunter Schubert, 'One-party rule and the question of legitimacy in contemporary China: preliminary thoughts on setting up a new research agenda', *Journal of Contemporary China* 17(54), (2008), pp. 191–204; Gunter Schubert, 'Political legitimacy in contemporary China revisited: theoretical refinement and empirical operationalization', *Journal of Contemporary China* 23(88), (2014), pp. 593–611; Peter Sandby-Thomas, 'How do you solve a problem like legitimacy? Contributing to a new research agenda', *Journal of Contemporary China* 23(88), (2014), pp. 575–592.

⁹Groot, 'The expansion of united front work under Xi Jinping', pp. 168–177.

In previous special issues of *Journal of Contemporary China*, Sandby-Thomas and Schubert provided a possible solution.¹⁰ Following Bourricaud's idea of legitimacy as an 'active, contested political process' of legitimation, the authors argue that it is better to understand consultative democracy as a process of legitimation and they identify the actual contested processes stimulating, forming and sustaining social support.¹¹ Using the concepts of legitimation and de-legitimation, this article decodes consultative democracy by examining UFWD methods of legitimation, which entails granting rights and privileges to selected social elites via key individuals in order to divide, weaken and isolate others, which in Mao's times were regarded as 'anti-Party elements' or today's terms, civil society-like elements.¹² The CCP's *consultative* and representational processes are different from taking policy inputs as dialogue or negotiation, as in democracies; it is a dynamic, largely one-way process of enforcement and direction with a clear political agenda: maintaining Party hegemony. As Gramsci noted, Communists sustain their legitimacy not only by beating political rivals but also by conquering countless ideological alternatives within civil society, trade unions, churches et cetera.¹³

By legitimizing certain groups or individuals as representatives or 'friends' in their given fields, the Party can de-legitimize by containing, dividing or denouncing others so that critics can be co-opted, neutralized or isolated. Crucially, at all times it is the Party, via the UFWD, which interprets the right of representatives of groups to participate and be legitimate. Selection by the Department allows the CCP to not only avoid openly discussing rights in an individualist and more Western sense, but also promotes the notion of collective and group rights instead. With this system in place, the Party acts as mediator of key groups and their legitimate collective interests, thereby 'solving problems' on a 'daily basis' as Xi puts it.¹⁴ The UFWD, assesses the worthiness of particular groups, interests and individuals and judges who are to be co-opted, ignored or isolated if not actively discredited.

Xi's regime is upgrading the UFWD to handle many of the pressing issues confronting it as it works to buttress Party-state legitimacy. This article begins with an evaluation of the UFWD in the 1950s using its consolidation of the representation of Christians as a case study to clarify basic united front principles and methods, then moves to the review of its institutional development during the reform era and the current three-step reconstruction under Xi. It concludes with a discussion of obstacles facing the use of this work now and into the future.

The Origin, Principles and Methods of the UFWD

'Rallying all those who can be rallied; uniting with all those who can be united (and isolating our enemies)' is the most basic understanding of the term 'united front work'. It started as an imposition by the Communist International in 1924 [as the bloc-within United Front in which communists joined the Guomindang (GMD) in order to build it up and later take it over 1924–1927]. Similarly, the Second United Front began as an imposition by the Comintern to protect the Soviet Union from Japan and the CCP from the Nationalists. While united front work was not originally Mao's idea, he did take on its principles and helped develop and institutionalize it as a central aspect of CCP work. He then used it to not only defend against Chiang Kaishek, but uniquely among communist parties, to subsequently also manage the transition to socialism (1949–1956). The challenge of the transitional 'New Democracy'

¹⁰While the issue involves multiple layers of methodological and conceptual argument, the debate centers on an important assumption that many students of China studies are taking for granted, intentionally or unintentionally, that CCP survival depends mainly on legitimacy (or legitimation) as perceived by citizens and/or elites, its coercive power or physical capacity being insufficient to sustain long-term existence. Schubert, 'Political legitimacy in contemporary China revisited', p. 594.

¹¹Francois Bourricaud, 'Legitimacy and legitimation', *Current Sociology* 35(2), (1987), p. 57. Quoted from Sandby-Thomas, 'How do you solve a problem like legitimacy?', p. 585.

¹²The concept of legitimation demands that the researcher go beyond the aggregated information from a select few fortunate enough to be chosen for surveys, represented in a mix of elite and mass data that consist of different levels of support in administrative tiers. Schubert, 'Political legitimacy in contemporary China revisited', p. 604.

¹³Gerry Groot, *Managing Transitions: The Chinese Communist Party, United Front Work, Corporatism and Hegemony* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2004), pp. xv–xvi.

¹⁴Huang, 'China's Xi Jinping supports "democracy"'.

period was how to deprive China's nominal bourgeois classes of property and power while maintaining their active participation managing business and government. Moreover, they were indispensable for also educating and training their properly socialist successors. Erstwhile class enemies were friends until the need for them had passed. To achieve this controlled participation, the political rights of supporters of socialist reforms (i.e. the Party) were protected and any legitimate status and rights of critics were denied because any opposition, by CCP circular logic, was counter-revolutionary and subject to the dictatorship of the proletariat. Behind proclamations of long-term class coexistence was also the threat of denunciation, punishment and even execution. Judging who fell into which camp was the job of the UFWD. It used thought reform of allies to model appropriate behavior for society and to represent hegemonic, common sense support for CCP political campaigns. The UFWD and most notably its director from 1948 to 1964, Li Weihan, mobilized elite ally participation in the 1957 Hundred Flowers campaign criticizing CCP flaws to promote Mao's goal of combating CCP bureaucratism. However, the subsequent Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1958–1959 marked the end of most domestic united front work, as Mao then increasingly preferred class struggle to class assimilation. It was only revived after Mao's death.¹⁵

Much of the CCP's united front work in cities was about preparing for participation in the GMD's Political Consultative Assembly (10–31 January 1946) and then the GMD's planned National Assembly. However, after victory in 1949, the CCP established its own People's Political Consultative Conference (PPCC) to represent all of China's political groups and other allies as part of the national government. The transition to a new constitution and National People's Congresses (NPC) in 1954 left the PPCC, renamed as the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, as the symbol of the united front in which open CCP members numbered only a third of delegates. Real power, though, remained in the hands of the UFWD. In the NPC, it is two-thirds CCP vs. one-third allies. These ratios were in turn derived from rural experiments and united front work with the three-thirds system in which the ruling councils consisted of one-third Communists, one-third leftists and one-third neutrals. In 1982, the revised Constitution declared that China had a 'system of multi-party cooperation and political consultation led by the Communist Party of China'. This formulation persists today.¹⁶

Importantly, these changes also marked the formalization by the CCP of corporatist forms of representation in which the UFWD decided which interests could be represented by which organization and who would lead them. This process saw, for example, a rationalization of democratic parties down to eight, each with specific constituencies, and the reduction of Christian groups down to one Catholic and one Protestant. The CCP demands the cooperation of all of these allies in order to justify its claim that it represents 'the majority of the population and majority of the classes'.¹⁷ In addition, it needs them to understand and mobilize their constituencies, and to contain potential critics. In the 1950s then, united front work was aimed at utilizing important groups until they were rendered redundant by the successes of socialism; today it is used to cope with increasing complexity resulting from rapid economic and social change. The increase in UFWD bureaus since the 1980s reflects this growing complexity and subsequent need for more consultative democracy and representation. Implicitly, a very similar history applies to religious believers, including Christians.

The 'Three-Self Patriotic Movement'

In united front work, uniting with and recognizing allies with whom to consult goes hand-in-hand with de-legitimation strategies such as denunciation, containment and isolation. The CCP's treatment of Christianity appropriately illustrates how consultative democracy occurred in the past and is operating today as the religious population is again increasing. Historically, Christianity has been seen by both the GMD and the CCP as a dangerous 'anti-Party element' due to its foreign origins and ties. Although

¹⁵Groot, *Managing Transitions*, pp. 67–85, 117–132.

¹⁶Some Chinese scholars argue that this system sustains the foundation of a Chinese vision of constitutionalism. See Quanxi Gao, Wei Zhang and Feilong Tian, *The Road to the Rule of Law in Modern China* (New York: Springer, 2015), pp. 67–68.

¹⁷Groot, *Managing Transitions*, p. 25.

the Christian population was very small in the 1940s, the CCP prized it for its united front values, both towards domestic and international audiences. It had therefore successfully infiltrated several Protestant groups before 1949 and mobilized a team of pro-CCP clergymen who would subsequently become crucial representatives.¹⁸ The process of creating the one 'Three-Self Patriotic Movement' Council (TSPM or TSPM church) out of the numerous Protestant churches operating in China before 1949 is one of the best examples of UFWD methods.¹⁹ It reflects both corporatist licensing and control, as well as the use of state legitimation and de-legitimation techniques to create a body under CCP control, but speaking in the name of a key interest group.

The TSPM is promoted by the CCP as a 'voluntary association', established in 1952 to represent all Protestant Christians, no matter their pre-1949 denomination. Its high leadership consists of the *ex officio* delegates to the CPPCC. In the aftermath of the CCP–GMD civil war and later the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the TSPM working with the UFWD, played both consultative and executive roles assisting the government to re-group church leadership, return church properties and re-train clergy who respected and reflected the CCP's latest political doctrines—in other words, to legitimize this new team among Christians.²⁰ Today, the Movement is still the only legal organization representing 50–70 million Protestant Christians. If present growth trends continue, China will by 2030, have the world's largest Christian population, a change with international ramifications.²¹

The foundation of the UFWD's method was the legitimation of a new team to convince believers that cooperation was in their best interest. On the eve of victory in 1949, the CCP instigated a group of reformist Christians with sympathies for the Party's cause, guaranteeing their safety and policy support, to begin a quasi-'religious coup' attacking Protestant establishments that were seen as illegitimate according to the Party's anti-imperialist doctrine and any links with foreign organizations had to be destroyed.²²

The centerpiece of this operation was a set of discourses to legitimize the new CCP leadership. During meetings with Zhou Enlai, a key figure in united front activities, and Christian clergy such as Wu Yao-tsung, a ten-point document was drafted under UFWD guidance. This document was revealed at the CPPCC on 20 May 1950, then mailed to 1,000 Christian leaders demanding their support. *The Way for Chinese Christians in Building New China or Three-Self Manifesto* highlighted the principles of self-administration, self-support and self-propagation (meaning independent of foreign influence, not the UFWD), principles which would become major tools for establishing legitimacy under the CCP. These demanded the complete severance of connections with founding bodies like the London Missionary Society, the Lutheran Church in Germany, the American Bible Society and many others.

The Three-Self Movement was an instrument to distinguish 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' religious groups, where legitimacy was determined by willingness to submit to UFWD demands and to consolidate the many Protestant groups under one integrated umbrella. Behind this new body was the UFWD's hidden agenda to rebuild the leadership of Chinese churches through thought reform and denunciation campaigns so that they reflected the CCP's agenda and were neither independently-minded nor influenced by whatever foreign nation/denomination had given rise to them. The *Manifesto* signified the beginning of a four-year movement to purge the leadership of all Protestant groups and eliminate any dissidents.

After 1950, Wu Yao-tsung and his collaborators traveled across China, organizing public gatherings to promote what was ostensibly 'their' *Manifesto*. In the first two months, this reform movement progressed

¹⁸Ray Wang, 'Quiet confrontations: transnational advocacy networks, local churches, and the pursuit of religious freedoms in China', *Journal for the Scientific Studies of Religion*, (December 2017), pp. 1–19.

¹⁹Ren Jie, 中國共產黨的宗教政策 [*The Religious Policy of Chinese Communist Party*] (Beijing: People's Publishing House, 2007), pp. 1–12.

²⁰One of the best Chinese discussions of these changes is Ying Fuk-tsang and Leung Ka-lun, 五十年代三自運動的研究 [*The Three-Self Patriotic Movement in 1950s*] (Hong Kong: Alliance Bible Seminary, 1996).

²¹'China's booming Christian population is rattling the Communist Party', *Washington Post*, (8 September 2015), available at: <http://www.businessinsider.com/chinas-booming-christian-population-is-rattling-the-communist-party-2015-9?IR=T>.

²²Fuksang Ying, *Christianity's Failure in China? Essays on the History of Chinese Communist Movement and Christianity* (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 2008), pp. 77–91.

slowly, but on 8 September 1950, under Mao's order, the *People's Daily* published the *Manifesto* on its front page. This was accompanied by a signed editorial praising this 'spontaneous patriotic movement', supported by 1,527 signatures.²³ Conveniently, this purge coincided with the CCP's highly successful nationwide anti-imperialist 'Resist America and Aid Korea' campaign that launched following China's entry into the Korean War.

On 10 October, UFWD-approved Christian leaders led the last annual meeting of the National Christian Council of China (1922–1950), the biggest Protestant association and missionary platform in China, and declared the second version of the *Manifesto*. While the first version abstractly denounced the financial sponsorship from the West, the second version added provocative political missions. Henceforth, 'patriotic' Christians needed to passionately participate in the Resist-America movement–Aid Korea Movement; support governmental policies dealing with land reform and counter-revolutionaries; and reject imperialism, help the government to ferret out reactionaries and villains, expose plots against the Three-Self Movement and organize appropriate denunciation campaigns in all churches and Christian organizations.²⁴ Failure to comply automatically meant labeling oneself as reactionary. Foreigners became liabilities while their Chinese colleagues became open to accusations of harboring Western imperialists. In February 1951, the CCP announced the *Law for the Punishment of Counterrevolutionaries* and a few key Protestant leaders were arrested without clear charges.²⁵ The chilling effect enhanced the speed of the TSPM's purge.²⁶ In April, the UFWD invited 150 Protestant leaders to Beijing to 'discuss' a new centralized leadership model.²⁷

The meeting was a model of how the UFWD co-opted and transformed social elites both then and now. Church leaders had first to agree to the new order through a seemingly democratic and consensual process after which only TSPM-member churches were officially permitted a continued existence. Second, delegates were forced to learn how 'progressive' Christians should act, through denouncing their foreign and non-progressive Chinese colleagues,²⁸ a pattern used repeatedly in subsequent ideological campaigns. Department cadres decided the targets and nature of accusations and those selected were made examples of in front of their congregations using forced accusations and confessions. Mass meetings were followed up with government encouragement (newspaper articles and radio programs), appraisal (supervision by Party cadres) and punishment (for alleged anti-revolutionary crimes).²⁹ After the existing leadership was expelled, jailed or forced to resign, parishioners with 'correct attitudes' were promoted to take over church management.³⁰

The 'UFWD–CPPCC–TSPM' legitimization process was complete; the Party authorized the CPPCC, the CPPCC legitimized the TSPM, and the Party thereby won the endorsement of the churches and the believers they represented. Any religious organizing outside of these strictures was henceforth illegal, illegitimate and worse, counter-revolutionary. Instead of the dozens of Christian organizations before 1949, the CCP now had only two and its religious corporatism was set in stone. The Catholic Church

²³Signed editorials must have the authorization of the CCP. Subsequent official literature recognizes and shows pride in this 'resolute action'. Jie, *The Religious Policy of Chinese Communist Party*, pp. 2–9.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 19.

²⁵中華人民共和國懲治反革命條例' [The PRC *Regulation* for the punishment of counterrevolutionaries'], *People's Daily*, (22 February 1951), p. 1.

²⁶Two famous cases are the Methodist missionary F. Olin Stockwell and Chen Wenyuan (陳文淵), Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church in China. Stockwell was charged with espionage activities and deported in 1953. His case is detailed in his memoir, *With God In Red China: The Story of Two Years in Chinese Communist Prisons* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953), pp. 72–85. Chen's case can be seen in Ying, *Christianity's Failure in China?*, p. 56. Ying's work collects documents from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong; it is the most detailed and balanced work on the struggle between Wu's TSPM and independent Chinese churches.

²⁷處理接受美國津貼的基督教團體會議開幕通過處理辦法及聯合宣言，代表們一致同意組織“中國基督教抗美援朝三自革新運動委員會” [The united declaration of the representatives of US-funded churches to organize “Chinese Christian anti-US support Korea TSPM Council”], *People's Daily*, (22 April 1951), p. 1.

²⁸The list of targets under denunciation, including two American missionaries, four Chinese leaders and two national associations, was given by UFWD officials to assigned speakers. For example, Presbyterian missionary and the Chief Pastor of Shanghai International Church, Frank W. Price, was accused of being an 'American imperialist' and was forced to leave China in October 1952. Ying, *Christianity's Failure in China?*, pp. 88–89.

²⁹Ying documented this kind of thought reform on three different denominations in Shanghai. *Ibid.*, pp. 96–103.

³⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 118–119.

had also undergone a similar set of procedures to create a new Patriotic Catholic Church. Unlike the Protestants though, some Catholics went underground where some remain.

The victory for UFWD and its collaborators was short. After the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957, itself triggered in part by the 'failure' of united front work with the 'democratic parties' when they dared criticize him, Mao moved toward an even more radical transformation of society with his disastrous Great Leap Forward Campaign 1958–1962. In the wake of political campaigns, including the Socialist Education Movement of 1962, and with the UFWD discredited, the CCP launched a series of religious persecutions including seizing church properties and evicting clergy. The TSPM and CPPCC were powerless. In 1966, the 'Destroy the Four Olds' campaign marked the beginning of the Cultural Revolution and the final de-legitimation of all religious activities as feudal. The consultative system dissolved and the UFWD was itself accused by leftists as 'capitulationist' and forced to shut down.³¹ Even collaborators like Wu Yao-tsung were consumed by the revolutionary fervor; he was sent to a labor camp and died in 1979. Since the closed allies had denounced and purged anyone who might have spoken for them, their 'dangerous privilege', the short-lived and nominal role of loyal opposition to the Party, made them the easy targets in each and every political movement afterward.³² Many allies, even those in the CPPCC, were jailed; some of them were not released until the 1980s.³³

The Revival of UFWD in the Reform Era

After Mao's death in 1976 and the beginnings of reforms to realize the Four Modernizations, however, united front work and therefore the UFWD were once again important. The Party had to rebuild legitimacy and mobilize support for opening and reform, especially from so-called 'Rightists' whose knowledge, skills and foreign contacts were again useful. It began to re-invest in the UFWD and strengthen its capacity, adding more staff and offices throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The revitalized Department helped those former allies to recover property, clear their names and seek full rehabilitation, apply for compensation and begin to rebuild the processes of legitimation in order to help realize modernization and what became known as 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'.³⁴

However, the UFWD in the 1980s and 1990s, was a relatively small and weak Party organ compared to others. Zhou Enlai, the key engineer, served as the head of the Central United Front Department from 1947 to 1948. His successor, Li Wei-han (1948–1964), worked in the UFWD on major events, including negotiating the Seventeen Point Agreement with Tibet (1951), promoting the nationalization of private sectors in urban areas (1953), drafting the 1954 Constitution, and fighting with the so-called 'Gang of Four' until the Cultural Revolution.³⁵

The UFWD major tasks include macro-managing social forces including religious organizations, ethnic minorities, business and professional associations, intellectuals and 'democratic' parties, welcoming Overseas Chinese returning for family reunions, business and/or religious purposes. From 1982 it also began preparing for resumption of sovereignty over Hong Kong and Macau while maintaining a clear focus on unifying with Taiwan. Moreover, the UFWD had to cover so many players and interests while its administrative level was not particularly high. The pay level of the Chair of the UFWD is equal to that of a state minister or a provincial governor, and there are other 400 Party cadres at the same

³¹Premier Chou En-lai reports on the work of the government', *Peking Review* no. 1, (1965), pp. 12–13, cited from James Roger Townsend, *Political Participation in China* (University of California Press, 1969), p. 101.

³²Eddy U, 'Dangerous privilege: the united front and the rectification campaign of the early Mao years', *The China Journal* 68, (2012), pp. 32–57.

³³An estimated 550,000 people were classified as 'Rightists' and lost their jobs, families, and property during waves of political campaigns in Mao's time. According to the CCP's records, only 96 of them did not receive correction and remained as 'Rightists' for life until 1980. More detailed discussion is given in Groot, *Managing Transitions*, pp. 98–100.

³⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 106–107.

³⁵It is noteworthy that Li Wei-han's articles and works have been re-published and quoted by many publications in the reform era: '深切緬懷老一輩無產階級革命家李維漢同志' ['The memorial day of Comrade Li Wei-han's 100th birthday'], *Hunan Daily*, (2 June 2006), available at: <http://news.sina.com.cn/s/2006-06-02/07049099204s.shtml> (accessed 23 July 2012).

level.³⁶ Nevertheless, its policy opinions and organizational interests are never taken lightly inside the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, or the Central Politburo of the Communist Party of China.

The mechanism to ensure policymaking status is through allies in the Political Bureau. For example, in the 17th Political Bureau (2007–2012), there were three Central Politburo members connected to the UFWD. Past heads, Wang Zhaoguo (王兆國) and Liu Yandong (劉延東) were subsequently promoted to Vice Chairs of the CPPCC. If we see the Chair of the CPPCC as the clan leader of the United Front Work system, Jia Qinglin (賈慶林) was both the Chair of the CPPCC and No.3 in the core of the nine-member Standing Committee of the Political Bureau from 2002 to 2013. He was also responsible for work directed at Taiwan after it elected the pro-independence Chen Shuibian (陳水扁) in 2000.³⁷

In the 18th Political Bureau (2012–2017), Zhang Dejiang (張德江) and Yu Zhengsheng (俞正聲), the de-facto third and fourth ranked leaders, shared the burdens of united front work. Zhang was responsible for the People's Congress and also winning hearts and minds in Hong Kong and Macau but retired in 2017. This has left Yu in charge of the CPPCC and dealing with Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan. Both have faced problems, especially with strong opposition and protests against aspects of Party policies in all areas except Macau, particularly since 2014. Yet one of the key hardliners behind Hong Kong's united front work, and hence at least in part responsible for the problems, such as the rise of the localist movement, Zhang Xiaoming (張曉明), was promoted to Beijing to head the Office in Hong Kong and Macau Affairs under the State Council.³⁸

Not all posts have been settled for the 19th Political Bureau (2017–2022). Before the Plenum in October 2017 it seemed that Wang Yang (汪洋), former Party Secretary of Guangdong Province and Vice Premier of the State Council, would take charge of NPC legitimization work. Even in late 2017, no new NPC head had been appointed but there was increasing speculation that it would be Li Zhanshu (栗戰書) instead of Wang.³⁹ In early November it was announced that You Quan (尤權) had replaced Sun Chunlan (孫春蘭) as head of the UFWD and was promoted to the Party Secretariat to do so.⁴⁰ Perhaps it was You's experience as Party head in Fujian which had helped qualify him for his promotion. This change left Sun as the only woman in the Politburo and most senior member of the Party with such extensive united front work experience; indeed, this may be the reason Xi has kept her there.

On the policy implementation level, the UFWD has eight bureaus (局), playing gateway roles between allies and government offices. Bureau One is responsible for the CPPCC where the eight democratic parties and All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce are under its control and perform important tasks of consultative democracy. Religious believers are also ostensibly represented.⁴¹ From a power politics perspective, Bureau One can seem inconsequential but the people it organizes play key roles legitimating the regime as 'consultative partners', no matter how much of a rubber stamp outsiders might believe the Conferences to be. At the very least, the presence of non-communist party groups 'proves' that China is not a single-party state, both to the CCP and others.

Bureau Two is responsible for religious and ethnic affairs, supervising the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA), the State Ethnic Affairs Commission (SEAC) and numerous provincial Religious

³⁶Legally speaking, UFWD is equivalent to a State Ministry. Qian Hao-ping, '中國有多少部級單位?' ['How many ministries are in China?'], *Southern Weekly*, (19 February 2012), available at: <http://www.infzm.com/content/70110/> (accessed 21 July 2012).

³⁷Yun-han Chu, 'Power transition and the making of Beijing's policy towards Taiwan', *The China Quarterly* 176, (2003), pp. 960–980.

³⁸Tammy Tan, 'Getting to know more about one of Beijing's top men on Hong Kong', *South China Morning Post*, (3 December 2017), available at: <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2122647/key-man-hong-kong-mainland-relations-reasserts-national> (accessed 21 December 2017).

³⁹Ng Kang-chung Phila Siu, 'Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam to meet President Xi Jinping in Beijing in December', *South China Morning Post*, (28 November 2017), available at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/2121826/hong-kong-leader-carrie-lam-meet-president-xi-jinping> (accessed 21 December 2017).

⁴⁰Luo Wangshu, 'New United Front head stresses CPC spirit', *China Daily*, (8 November 2017), available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-11/08/content_34263381.htm (accessed 21 December 2017).

⁴¹In terms of religion, the unwritten rule is each religious and ethnic group has at least one representative in the CPPCC. There are 74 representatives from 16 minority groups and five legal religions. TSPM has been guaranteed one representative as the co-chair of the Religious and Ethnic Affairs Committee of the CPPCC. 'Chen Guangyuan (陳廣元) reveals the secrets of Religious and Ethnic Affairs Committee of CPPCC', co-published by *Chinese Communist Party News* and *China Ethnic News*, available at: <http://minzu.people.com.cn/GB/166030/183185/index.html> (accessed 27 July 2012).

and Ethnic Affairs Committees (REACs). Bureau Three oversees activities involving Overseas Chinese, including non-religious and non-governmental organizations from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, Singapore, the United States and other nations. Together, Bureaus Two and Three sustained the major functions of societal legitimation pre-1956, as well as gathering the talents and influence of key social elites and using these to sustain a friendly group to monitor, co-opt and combat possible dissidents, activists and protestors. Such teamwork can be seen in mobilizing support and suppressing opposition within overseas Chinese and human rights communities before the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.⁴²

In addition to Bureau Five, which focuses on training and managing local UFWD staff and offices, Bureaus Six, Seven and Eight are devoted to the re-specification of the major tasks of Bureau One–Three in the post-reform era. Bureau Six is an offshoot of Bureau One and focuses on intellectuals outside the old consultative system including the democratic parties and the so-called democratic personages. Bureau Seven takes a part of the workload on Tibet from Bureau Two. The most recent, Bureau Eight, was established in July 2016 to target young activists from among returnees (海歸), Internet celebrities, and those working in cultural and creative industries.⁴³ Hence the new organization was labeled the ‘New Social Strata’ Bureau.⁴⁴ The most recent, Bureau Nine, was announced in May 2017, to oversee Xinjiang affairs.⁴⁵

Xi’s Reform and the ‘Grand UFW’

Superficially, the UFWD is a supra-Party organ handling relations between the Party and key elites. As a Party department, UFWD branches operate at every level from the Polit Buro to province, municipality, autonomous region, and further down to the lowest administrative level in towns, even to villages—if these have a Party branch. It is one of the few Party organs (apart from the Organization, Propaganda, Discipline and Youth League) that have such scope and permeability.

However, for a very long time, the UFWD’s influence has been limited because the major legitimation platform (the CPPCC) is relatively aged, and many see participating in its activities as largely ritualistic and symbolic. This situation did not change until social forces in Hong Kong and Taiwan showed their autonomy, reacting negatively to the Party’s policies directed at them; the Central leadership then realized that revitalization was urgent.

The current 18th PSC leadership (2012–2017) acted to improve domestic united front work. The first solution is to recruit more active, higher ranking officials as leaders. Ulanhu (烏蘭夫), an Inner Mongolian and former army general) was the last Chair of the UFWD (1977–1982) who had also been a member of the Politburo. In the 1990s and 2000s, most heads of the Department were re-assigned to the CPPCC awaiting retirement. This situation signified to aspiring cadres that UFWD leadership jobs were a ‘dead end’ that the aspiring should avoid. In 2013, UFWD Chair Liu Yandong was promoted by Premier Li Keqiang to be his Deputy in the State Council. From the end of 2014 to mid-2015, two key positions of the Department were also filled with stars. Sun Chunlan, former Party Secretary of Tianjin, mayor of one of the four municipalities and a member of the Polit Buro, became UFWD chair.⁴⁶ In April 2015, Wang Zhengwei, former CPPCC deputy chair, director of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission

⁴²For example, the last round of the eight meetings between the exiled Tibetan government and China was held in Beijing just a month before the 2008 Games, and the purpose of this bad timing could be to hold back the criticism from Tibetans of China. Claude Arpi, *Dharamsala and Beijing: The Negotiations That Never Were* (Atlanta, GA: Lancer Publishers, 2013), ch. 10, Google Book.

⁴³The UFWD conference was upgraded for the first time in 65 years, focused on uniting Yang, Wang, Chuang (洋、網、創); *South China Morning Post*, (21 May 2015), available at: <http://www.cbfa.com/cbf-201517056.html> (accessed 10 June 2017).

⁴⁴中央統戰部正式組建八局，全名叫‘新的社會階層人士工作局’ [‘The UFWD officially formed the eighth bureau, and the whole name was “New Social Class Work Bureau”], 澎湃 [The Paper], (4 July 2016), available at: http://www.thepaper.cn/news-Detail_forward_1493171 (accessed 10 July 2015).

⁴⁵Why the Communist Party has created a new bureau for Xinjiang’, *South China Morning Post*, (5 May 2017), available at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2093026/why-communist-party-has-created-new-bureau-xinjiang> (accessed 12 October 2017).

⁴⁶Bo Zhiyue, ‘Will China have its first female politburo standing committee member?’, *The Diplomat*, (2 January 2015), available at: <http://thediplomat.com/2015/01/will-china-have-its-first-female-poliburo-standing-committee-member/> (accessed 22 March 2017).

and an expert on Islamic economies, was appointed as the deputy head of the UFWD.⁴⁷ This was the first time the Department had two deputy minister-level officials and signals that the administrative significance of the Department has been upgraded.

The second signal of reform is the comeback of early Mao's united front work methods. The UFWD is responsible for organizing and hosting the key National United Front Conference of minor party leaders, provincial UFWD heads and representatives from the CPPCC. It is the major channel for delivering new doctrines, strategies and messages from the central leadership.

Before the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), such conferences were held annually or even twice if Mao considered it necessary, some 13 times in 18 years. The conference was held only seven times after Mao died. The older revolutionary generation, Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin, maintained the practice (three times each), but Hu Jintao did so only reluctantly, once in 2006. Since Xi Jinping secured leadership in 2012 though, he has emphasized revitalizing united front work, and the first United Front Work Conference under his administration was held in May 2015. According to the UFWD, Xi personally participated in 11 pre-meeting workshops and talks to make sure the conference reflected the latest opinions of major united front teams.⁴⁸ To reflect the new thinking and the more centralized power structure, the old 'National United Front Work Conference' was renamed the 'Central United Front Work Conference'. Although few details are yet known, the new name indicates that the conference has been upgraded from a Departmental-insider event to a Party-wide platform.⁴⁹

The third step of the reform is a highly symbolic drafting and publishing of the first United Front Law. Led by Xi, Yu and Sun, the UFWD drafted the *Chinese Communist Party's United Front Regulations (Trial) (Regulations)*, approved by the Committee of the Central Politburo on 30 April 2015. While most of its content was a summary and re-emphasis of established united front concepts, Xi's imprimatur places new mandates and responsibilities on all cadres.

Regulations clarifies the obligations of united front work at the provincial level. In the reform era, this work was rarely viewed as a priority and cadres were rarely evaluated on it (with exceptions, such as Xinjiang and Tibet and to some extent in Special Economic Zones). The common practice has been that governors and mayors placed such work in the hands of career UFWD staff led by retiring senior officials. Local Party chairs only participated in united front work when work involved central level visits or high-valued targets (e.g. celebrities or political figures from Taiwan or Hong Kong). Now, according to *Regulations*, local leaders assume direct responsibility:

The principal leader of each local Party committee (organ) is the primary responsible person of united front work. The leading members of each local Party committee (organ) shall take the lead to learn, propagate, and implement the Party's united front theories, policies, and regulations; they shall take the lead to participate in important united front events and make more non-Party friends (*Regulations*, Article 6, Section 7).⁵⁰

The wording is clear. Xi's new 'Grand UFW' requires local Party Chairs to add united front work to their schedules and evaluations. While unclear how much they will take this policy to heart, united front work demands intensive effort and connections with diverse targets. Suitable goals and evaluation criteria are hard to set. Nevertheless, there are reports that provincial leaders have begun assigning deputies to run UFWD offices. Since August 2015 there have been 35 provincial UFWD appointments, 30 of which have been filled with incumbents of Provincial Standing Committees. Only four are over

⁴⁷ According to the latest update, Wang had left both jobs by March 2016. The reasons of his departure and his future are still unclear. '全國政協副主席王正偉不再兼任中央統戰部副部長' [Vice Chairman of the CPPCC, Wang Zhengwei is no longer the Vice Minister of UFWD], 文匯網 [Wen Wei Po], (12 April 2016), available at: <http://news.wenweipo.com/2016/04/12/IN1604120064.htm> (accessed 10 July 2017).

⁴⁸ Russell Leigh Moses, 'China's Xi puts up a stronger front', *Wall Street Journal*, (22 May 2015), available at: <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2015/05/22/chinas-xi-puts-up-a-stronger-front/> (accessed 26 October 2015).

⁴⁹ The journalist quoted by Zhu Li-Jia, a professor who served in the Chinese Academy of Governance: Qin Yunfeng, '習近平洗牌統戰部弦外有音', [Xi Jinping reorganization of UFWD, meaning far-reaching], 看中國 [Vision Times], (5 May 2015), available at: <http://b5.secretchina.com/news/15/05/22/576574.html%E7%BF%92%E8%BF%91%E5%B9%B3%E6%B4%97%E7%89%8C%E7%B5%B1%E6%88%B0%E9%83%A8%20%E5%BC%A6%E5%A4%96%E6%9C%89%E9%9F%B3%E5%9C%96> (accessed 18 November 2015).

⁵⁰ Full text in '中國共產黨統一戰線工作條例 (試行)' [Chinese Communist Party's United Front Regulations (trial)] *People's Daily*, (23 September 2015), available at: <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2015/0923/c64107-27622040.html> (accessed 19 January 2016).

60. Some provinces have gone further and had their 'number ones' take the lead (e.g. Sichuan, Tibet, Shanxi, Shaanxi and Henan). These have mimicked the Center by establishing or proposing 'United Front Work Leading Groups' above existing united front structures to better coordinate different offices and improve effectiveness.⁵¹

In authoritarian regimes, the follow-the-leader effect is particularly strong. Xi Jinping has shown his personal preference for setting up these Mao-style 'Leading Groups' and naming himself chair.⁵² The 'Central Leading Group of United Front Work' is the sixth such group. For Party cadres this is a clear message that Xi cares and may bypass the bureaucracy to judge their work directly.

It is possible that the UFWD could become a handy tool for Xi's government to construct a 'united front' band wagon. It used to be seen only in provinces like Fujian, Guangdong, Tibet and Xinjiang where the effectiveness of united front work is taken seriously for promotion because of their geographical significance to Taiwan, Hong Kong, internal stability and India, and Central Asia respectively. With the new Grand UFW doctrine, this work may well become a national norm.

The UFWD is used not only as a legitimation tool but could also be a political weapon to fight cadres operating in the interest of cliques rather than the Party. For example, Zhejiang's cross-removal campaign cost more local officials' jobs than church defenders' because they were 'closer to the churches than the Party'.

The political implication of this Grand UFW will not be limited to local affairs. It is possible that the UFWD is going to be another tool to check cadres' ideological integrity and loyalty, in addition to the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), which has been at the forefront of combating corruption. A retired UFWD chief secretary has revealed that at least 14 departmental inspection teams were dispatched after the *Regulations* were issued.⁵³ It is therefore logical to assume that the future of the UFWD is closely tied to Xi's reform plans, among which fighting corruption is crucial.

The Challenges of Legitimation Ahead

It is still too early to tell whether Xi's plan of Grand UFW will come to fruition, but warning signs have appeared on four fronts: work with intellectuals, Hong Kong and Macau, and religious and ethnic communities. In short, the organizational deficiency and the negative reputation from its past may prevent the new UFWD from achieving its goals.

First, internal struggles often promote distrust and self-censorship that hamper the effectiveness of the method. In order to win the hearts and minds of social elites, a reasonable level of flexibility and compromise is required for the UFWD to succeed and for those it rallies to trust it. However, Department officials don't always use the right strategies, and cadres have little incentive to fulfill its promises when their own promotion relies on their loyalty to top leadership and accurate interpretation of the political atmosphere, not the number of elites they turned or collected.⁵⁴

Tao Si-Liang (陶斯亮), the daughter of Party Elder Tao Zhu (陶鑄), was the first de-facto head of Bureau Six in the 1980s, and now a well-known philanthropist. In 2015 she confessed that the 'uniting' side of the system is often in conflict with the Party's desire for control and unquestioning subordination. Tao described the Bureau as struggling between leaders holding different views on liberal intellectuals

⁵¹ 十八大後18省調統戰部長 24省由常委兼任' [After the 18th National Congress of the CCP, 18 provinces filled UFWD chairs with standing committee members], 文匯網 [Wen Wei Po], (10 August 2015), available at: <http://news.wenweipo.com/2015/08/10/IN1508100004.htm> (accessed 19 October 2015).

⁵² Xi has created leading groups including for 'Comprehensive Deepening of Reform', 'National Security', 'Western China's Development', 'Central Financial and Economic Group', 'Central Internet Security and Informatization' and two additional military reform groups. Alice Miller, 'The CCP Central Committee's leading small groups', *China Leadership Monitor* 1(21), (2008), p. 26; 'China founds central leading group to pool support', *Xinhua News Net*, (30 July 2015), available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-07/30/c_134464393.htm (accessed 19 October 2015).

⁵³ Zhang Xun, '專訪]中央統戰部原副秘書長：中國'大統戰'格局初步形成' [Exclusive: UFWD Former Deputy Secretary-general, China's Grand United Front Work setup is initiated'], 大公報 [Ta Kung Pao], (30 September 2016), available at: <http://news.takung-pao.com/mainland/focus/2016-09/3375185.html> (accessed 3 October 2016).

⁵⁴ Xinjiang is a good example of this problem. Groot, *Managing Transitions*, pp. 116–117.

while she was herself criticized as being united with the Party's critics instead of uniting with them and having them accept the Party line.⁵⁵ Ultimately, the UFWD must side with the Party not the social elites with whom they seek to connect.

Tao described the overwhelming distrust, reservations and disappointment of social elites with the UFWD and the Party in general in the late-1980s.⁵⁶ After years of multiple betrayals under Mao, it would be hard for anyone to believe the united front policy is truly asking for their opinions and input. Have these problems been corrected since? Will the situation improve after Xi's institutional and leadership reforms? The declining trust within ethnic and religious constituencies has answered these questions.

Second, for ethnic and religious communities, the provincialism has shown its dangerous trait and made united front efforts counterproductive. United front work in ethnic and religious communities is a core task for the UFWD but there is an obvious reason that it cannot work well: ethnic and religious policymaking has been monopolized by the UFWD system for more than 60 years and there is no other scapegoat on which to blame failures and unrest even though implementation is mostly in the hands of local authorities.⁵⁷

The ethnic and religious policy of the central government is very clear, and it follows the basic principles of legitimation and de-legitimation: support the legitimate, government-sanctioned ethnic and religious groups and leaders while co-opting, containing, or de-legitimizing all others. The united front 'successes' of the 1950s had been duplicated again in the 1980s, and the minorities-state relationship had been largely stable for 20 years.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, cases of persecution and prosecution are frequently reported and some regions have more troubles than others. It is suspected that local cadres are responsible for apparently unnecessary acts of repression and are defeating the purpose of long-term united front efforts. Provincialism proves itself to be one of the most dangerous challenges to the effectiveness of united front work. Harsh local securitization and policies, such as demolishing mosques and churches, banning religious education and publications, ID checking and name-engraving on knives in Xinjiang are incidents showing that the UFWD has substantial difficulties implementing positive uniting with target groups in the face of such measures.

The authors will spare readers accounts of various ethnic and religious cases except for one recent development in Zhejiang. In February 2014, Zhejiang's provincial government issued a policy of 'Three Rectifications and One Demolition' (三改一拆), justified as a plan to remodel old housing, factories, illegal structures and unofficial billboards etc. in order to modernize and improve aesthetics and local amenity. Protestants though, quickly realized that they were the main targets. The policy became one of demolishing church buildings and removing prominent crosses now deemed illegal.⁵⁹

However, most of the targeted churches were considered legal as defined by UFWD policy.⁶⁰ For decades, the Zhejiang UFWD had established a close relationship with Christians, and many places of worship had been legalized, either becoming members of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, or registering under local Religious and Ethnic Affairs Committees. Registration then required church leaders to meet weekly with UFWD officials. Understandably, complaints of religious repression rarely come from these established churches which compare themselves favorably with independent house churches and underground foreign mission-related congregations. The latter of course, are strongly opposed as a basic CCP policy.

⁵⁵Tao was forced to leave the UFWD after the 1989 student movement for sympathy with the demonstrators and for the promise of expanded united front work by Zhao Ziyang. Tao is now the full-time vice-chairman of the China Association of Mayors and the director of the Audiology Development Foundation of China, and chair of China's poor deaf children rescue operations. Tao Si-liang, '我與中央統戰部六局' ['The UFWD Bureaus 6 and I'], 炎黄春秋 [China Through the Ages], (4 February 2015), pp. 9–14.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

⁵⁷James Tong, 'The devil is in the local: provincial religious legislation in China, 2005–2012', *Religion, State, and Society* 42(1), (2014), pp. 66–88.

⁵⁸Pitman B. Potter, 'Belief in control: regulation of religion in China', *The China Quarterly* 174(2), (2003), pp. 317–337; James Leibold, 'Towards a second generation of ethnic policy?', *China Brief* 12(3), (2012), pp. 7–9.

⁵⁹Ying Fuk Tsang, 'The politics of cross demolition: the religious and political analysis of Zhejiang's three rectifications and one demolition', *Logos and Pneuma: Christian Culture Review* 44, (2016), pp. 25–61.

⁶⁰The demolished crosses were all owned by member churches of the TSPM, which is registered under the State Administration of Religious Affairs and supervised by the UFWD. *Ibid.*

For rule-following Zhejiang Christians, the 'rectifications' and 'demolitions' came as an unwelcome surprise and believers tried every channel, including complaints to the CPPCC, group petitions to the UFWD and to Central-level officials as well as signing open letters to the media. Such actions never occurred with TSPM congregations because such open criticism is considered 'unpatriotic' by authorities. However, all these legal and consultative efforts failed. Many incidents turned into confrontations and street protests that led, in turn, to arrests and yet more conflict. At the end of 2016, Zhejiang's Protestant Christian Council disclosed that more than 1,500 churches and crosses had been demolished or removed. Moreover, some human rights groups believed that this might herald a nationwide anti-Christian movement with authorities increasingly treating the growing numbers of Christians as a front for foreign forces intent on destabilization.⁶¹

The demolitions and protests in Zhejiang are embarrassing for the Central UFWD because the national strategy of uniting religious populations for development and stability has not changed. The new *Regulations* required local cadres to follow the principles of united front work and that cadres should take the lead in 'making friends' with these challenging groups.

What *has* changed are the practices of local cadres who have reset local priorities based on their personal interpretations of political trends. One piece of observational evidence among many other personal reports is that no neighboring provinces have adopted Zhejiang's campaign emphasis. Since it began, TSPM frustration with the UFWD has grown. Well-known official church leaders have publicly stood up to criticize the provincial government while one key figure even resigned from his position in a municipal CPPCC.⁶² The suffering in Zhejiang also has been widely publicized via unofficial news channels and personal networks, including internationally. Clearly, such campaigns weaken united front work and dampen the already shaky credibility of the UFWD.

Third, the rising localism in Hong Kong and Macau seems to demonstrate the weakness, not the strength of grand united front work. Scholars like Loh, Chu, Lam and Lam have documented how the CCP developed an extensive 'underground front' in Hong Kong to influence its politics.⁶³ As a result, the peaceful resumption of Chinese sovereignty over Hong Kong in 1997 and Macau in 1999 were among the UFWD's greatest achievements. The rise of Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement in 2014, increasing rejection of Chinese identity, localism and the rise of other social opposition, though, has spoiled the CCP's victory.

For balancing Hong Kong's oppositional parties and gaining support from former colonial social elites, the CCP funded and supported a series of 'shadow' organizations under the UFWD's proxy, the Xinhua News Agency in Hong Kong (later renamed as the Central People's Government Liaison Office), in major social sectors long before the 1997 regime transition. These groups continue to promote integration, co-opt elites, collaborate with government, influence media, and contain and denounce dissidents and critics.⁶⁴

The legitimization strategy used in the 'UFWD–CPPCC–TSPM' case (Party–State–Society) has been re-visited in Hong Kong. For example, the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB), a flagship pro-Beijing group, has nine members serving as Hong Kong's representatives to the National People's Congress, and 32 as delegates to the CPPCC while the success and failure of the Alliance in Hong Kong elections is considered a proxy for the CCP's legitimization efforts.⁶⁵

However, the effectiveness of CCP de-legitimation in Hong Kong today is much lower than for the TSPM in the 1950s. The pro-Beijing allies have no power to outlaw oppositional groups, such as the

⁶¹Guo Baosheng and Pastor Liu Yi in the "Constant Religious Persecution under the Xi's Regime" speeches at the press conference, *China Aid*, (24 September 2015), available at: http://www.chinaaid.net/2015/09/blog-post_81.html (accessed 5 October 2015).

⁶²Yu Xin-Wei, '浙江基督教協會、天主教兩會首次公開聲明要求停拆十字架' [First time public declaration of Zhejiang's Christian Council and Patriotic Catholic Church to stop demolishing crosses], 福音時報 [*Gospel Times*], (7 July 2015), available at: <http://www.gospeltimes.cn/index.php/portal/article/index/id/29336> (accessed 5 October 2015).

⁶³Cindy Chu, *Chinese Communists and Hong Kong Capitalists: 1937–1997* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Christine Loh, *Underground Front: The CCP in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010); Wai Man Lam and Kay Chi-Yan Lam, 'China's united front work in civil society: the case of Hong Kong', *International Journal of China Studies* 4(3), (2013), pp. 301–325.

⁶⁴Lam and Lam, 'China's united front work in civil society', p. 306.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, p. 313.

outspoken Justice and Peace Commission of the HK Catholic Diocese and the Hong Kong Civil Rights Front. There is also little chance that Hong Kong's autonomous courts would deport unwelcome foreign advocates or exiles, such as Amnesty International or Falun Gong activists, at least for now. A much more open society and strong international attention enables Hong Kong's opposition to combat de-legitimation strategies, even using those incidents to justify their causes. The UFWD is facing great pushback but has argued that time is on its side: the long-term economic downturn in Hong Kong has provided great leverage for pro-China forces to acquire more support and expand their influence. Unfortunately, recent developments have shown that no matter how strong the economy, Hong Kong (and Taiwan) remain among the UFWD's great challenges.

Conclusion: Does Universalism Die?

Since the emergence of the 'with-Chinese-characteristics' discourse, the universality of human rights has come under sustained attack within China and Xi is promoting the CCP's united front-based consultative democracy as an alternative. The rise of Xi's Grand UFW therefore implies a more authoritarian future. However, if the competing discourses of legitimacy are the core of this battle, maybe the future is not yet settled. Giving rights to discuss policy to representatives of non-Party elites might be strengthening Party legitimacy in the short-run but such necessarily biased and minimal level of empowerment leaves the CCP in firm control. The troubles in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang are all ones hinting at this likelihood of dissatisfaction with the united front approach. As theorists of legitimation have argued, the battle over legitimacy never ends.

The new wave of Grand UFW is supposed to facilitate more united front work activities; however, it may just as easily frighten cautious cadres, create more self-censorship and ironically hamper further cooperation. In his widely praised book, *Why Communism Did Not Collapse: Understanding Authoritarian Regime Resilience in Asia and Europe*, Dimitrov and other post-Communist studies researchers conclude that the CCP survives because of its ability to sustain a discourse of simultaneously upholding political conservatism and economic liberalism.⁶⁶ From the theory of legitimation, the Party-capacity explanation makes sense, up to a point. The CCP has conquered numerous challenges through broadening and increasing inputs from new actors using united front work and 'consultative democracy', and it has combated corruption and factionalism with relative meritocracy and strengthened institutions.⁶⁷

Yet this article has found that the importance of the work of the United Front Work Department, as one of the CCP's key institutions, has long been neglected. This is despite the Department's centrality to many aspects of the CCP's discourses of legitimacy. Consequently, it should be included in any reasonable examination of the Party's longevity and practices. Through examination of the UFWD, the core process of legitimation, its principles, methods, institutions, and limitations become visible. This analysis has revealed that while the Party's overall legitimacy is clearly strong, the legitimation and non-legitimation strategies conducted via united front work are suffering significant difficulties and setbacks. These challenges have prompted Xi to retreat to strengthen the UFWD and promote united front work conceptions and organization. This work may also become yet another mechanism to ensure cadre loyalty and ideological purity. As a result, much more research on united front work and the intentions behind them are called for.

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⁶⁶Martin K. Dimitrov, ed., *Why Communism Did Not Collapse: Understanding Authoritarian Regime Resilience in Asia and Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 96.

⁶⁷Andrew J. Nathan, Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, *Will China Democratize?* (Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Andrew J. Nathan, 'Authoritarian resilience', *Journal of Democracy* 14(1), (2003), pp. 6–17.

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