

AFTERLIVES OF CHINESE COMMUNISM

POLITICAL CONCEPTS
FROM MAO TO XI

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and Nicholas Loubere



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统一战线

United Front

Laura DE GIORGI

The notion of ‘united front’ (*tongyi zhanxian*), originally formulated by Lenin, was first adopted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the early 1920s—a period of strong Comintern and Soviet influence. At that time, it referred to the Party’s need to consider the historical stages of social revolution, and consequently to be able to set class contradictions aside and seek for more inclusive alliances in order to support what was then supposed to be nationalist revolution. As the military nature of the term reveals, the idea of united front was originally connected to the tactic of cross-class mobilisation against a target on a temporary basis, and it assumed the differentiation between friends and enemies according to this goal as its rationale (see also Dutton’s essay in the present volume).

In time, the original concept took on a broader meaning, coming to refer to the CCP’s ability to work with, unite under its guidance, and manipulate other political parties and social forces, eliminating possible sources of opposition by means of cooptation and control. From this perspective, throughout the history of global communism, the CCP is the communist party that has most comprehensively developed the united front in both theory and practice.¹

Origins and Development

The history of the CCP before 1949 has seen two important configurations of united front activity, both of which mainly concerned the relationship with other political parties, and the Nationalist Party in particular (*guomindang*, hereafter GMD). The First United Front was the alliance between the CCP and the GMD which was initiated in 1923 with the aim of fighting foreign imperialism and the warlords in order to carry on a national revolution, and tragically ended in 1927 with a bloody purge of the Communists commonly referred to as the ‘White Terror.’ Since at that time the CCP was

just a small political organisation, the First United Front permitted the Party to expand and gain political and cultural recognition outside the circles of radical intellectual and labour elites. It was, however, a short-lived experiment. The Second United Front (1937–41) was destined to have a stronger and more lasting impact on the CCP's political strategy and theory. Historically it consisted of an alliance with the GMD and other minor patriotic and intellectual parties to fight the Japanese occupation of China. While in 1923 the members of the CCP had entered the GMD, on this occasion they maintained their separate political identity and worked in Nationalist-controlled areas and institutions to engage in patriotic resistance against the enemy. At the end of the war, this united front formation had become a distinctive feature of the CCP's political strategy, as was demonstrated by the alliances that the Party revived with the so-called 'minor parties' during the Civil War with the GMD in 1946–49, and then again after 1949.

The wartime period was also pivotal to a first theoretical elaboration of the notion of the united front, and to its institutionalisation within the structures of the CCP and, subsequently, the new Chinese state. First, war experiences shaped Mao's attitude towards the united front, making him appreciate its importance for the final victory of the CCP. In 1939, he defined it one of the three 'magic weapons' (*fabao*) wielded by the CCP, along with people's war and Party-building (see Guan's essay in the present volume).² In his view, the united front implied the choice of the proletarian class to temporarily suspend class struggle in order to lead and unite the Chinese people. Patriotism and nationalism were fundamental to this end. The final goal was to establish the political and ideological hegemony of the CCP, laying the foundations for the Communist Revolution. At that time, the united front was considered to be a specific transitional stage rather than a permanent feature of the political and ideological identity of the CCP. Mao also emphasised how one core issue in a successful united front had to be the ability of the CCP to interact with several political, cultural, and social constituencies within an apparent win-win strategy, but without jeopardising its ability to take autonomous political action.

The institutionalisation of the united front work within the CCP also dates from the wartime years. It was in this period that the United Front Work Department was established under the direct supervision of the Central Committee, with branches at the local administrative level. During the Civil War, the CCP made extensive use of the united front—as an alliance with the other minor parties—to distinguish itself from the GMD and to win the political and symbolic battle as the best representative of the interests of the Chinese nation.

After 1949, the notion and strategy of united front found an embodiment in the socialist state with the establishment of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), which mirrored similar institutions created by the GMD during the War of Resistance against Japan. The CPPCC was instrumental in the adoption of the so-called 'New Democracy' that, as an interclass alliance, constituted the basis for the birth of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and characterised the early years of the new socialist state (see Blecher's essay in the present volume). Though initially conceptualised as a representative and consultative institution useful for the transition towards the new Constitution, the CPPCC remained active as a symbolic element of the united front even after 1954, when the National People's Congress was established.

The importance attributed to the united front has changed over time. As its premise is the CCP's acknowledgment of the complexity of social and cultural differentiation and interests, it has reflected not only the political priorities but also the ideological shifts within the Party. Until 1957, the United Front Work Department of the CCP was quite active, especially in seeking the cooperation of non-Party intellectuals, experts, and ex-businessmen. In exchange, it granted them access to material and symbolic resources—for instance, privileged information about policies, participation in political events, positions in the state bureaucracy, and direct relationships with the CCP leaders.³ Cooperation was, at any rate, carefully managed by ideological education and criticism of individual personalities and groups. From 1957, it began to lose importance as the shift towards radical policies centred on the primacy of class struggle implied the demise of the 'magic weapon' of the united front. During the Cultural Revolution, until 1978, the United Front Work Department remained practically inoperative. It is worth noting that although it was downplayed in the domestic arena, in that period the doctrine of the united front continued to play a role in the theory and practice of international relations of the PRC with third world and European countries (see Teng's essay in the present volume).⁴

Institutionalising the United Front

United front theory and practice were resumed by the CCP in the early 1980s. In 1979, Deng Xiaoping redefined the united front as a 'patriotic' entity, implicitly different from the 'proletarian' one of the Maoist era.⁵ Since the 1980s, the notion of the united front has gained increasing importance for the CCP, as it concerns not only its political strategy but also its ideology and political theory.

More than ever before, in the reform era united front work has required a theoretical elaboration to provide ideological support for the activities of cadres. This elaboration has certainly been connected to the demise of class struggle as core notion of CCP's identity (see Russo's essay in the present volume), and to the adoption of nationalism as a fundamental tool of political and cultural legitimisation. However, it has also reflected the ambition and the need to enhance the ability of the Party to prevent and settle the conflicts generated by the increasing divergence in the economic interests and the cultural identities of different social constituencies in contemporary China.

Consequently, the united front has been increasingly connected to the so-called 'cultural work' of the Party, as it is in the realm of culture (broadly articulated) that it fully displays its effects, by creating relationships and seeking the cooperation of social and cultural elites outside the CCP. For instance, based on the vision of 'one country, two systems,' developed during the 1980s, united front work has aimed at fostering support among local elites to facilitate the return of Hong Kong and Macao to PRC control. This has been accomplished by developing contacts and strengthening the personal links with the CCP through cooptation, while isolating potentially adversarial individuals and groups.⁶

The current discourse on a 'theory of the united front with Chinese characteristics' (*you zhongguo tese de tongyi zhanxian lilun*) is evidence that united front work is now being recognised as a structural element in the ideology and political identity of the CCP. In official Party literature, research and reflections on the united front have multiplied

in the first decade of the twenty-first century, suggesting the need to systematise and offer guidance to the cadres engaged in this work, which is historically perceived as risky and not rewarding for one's political career. Party sources describe the ideological and intellectual genealogy of the 'united front with Chinese characteristics' after Mao, as included in Deng Xiaoping's theory of the primary stage of socialism, Jiang Zemin's notion of the Three Represents (*san ge daibiao*), and Hu Jintao's Scientific Development (*kexue fazhan*). But, from an institutional point of view, the most systematic attempt to organise and assign a new fundamental role to united front work is currently being done under Xi Jinping.⁷ On several occasions, Xi has emphasised the importance of united front work in order to accomplish the 'China dream and national rejuvenation' in the 'new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics.' In his view, the united front is connected to the need to modernise the governance of the CCP according to the perspective of the so-called Four Comprehensives (*si ge quanmian*)—the four political goals set out by the Party leadership in 2012, i.e. comprehensively build a moderately prosperous society, comprehensively deepen the reforms, comprehensively implement the rule of law, and comprehensively enhance Party discipline.⁸ Moreover, in Xi's view, united front is a strategic asset to implement Chinese-style consultative democracy, and to consolidate the interethnic and cultural unity of the country.

The importance that Xi attributes to this work is revealed by the organisation of several conferences on united front under his rule. Even more significantly, the complexity of goals now attributed to the united front has required that, for the first time in its history, the CCP established a regulatory framework for united front work. In 2015, the Party issued a set of 'United Front Work Trial Regulations' to clarify the realms of this activity. These Regulations define the united front as the 'alliance, under the leadership of the CCP, on the basis of the alliance of workers and peasants, of the patriots (*aiguozhe*)—comprehensive of all the socialist workers, the builders of socialism, the patriots who support socialism, the patriots who defend the unity of the motherland and spare no effort in the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.'⁹ Emphasising national cohesion under the CCP to achieve the double centenary goals (2021 for the CCP and 2049 for the PRC), the document lists the targets of the united front work. They include members of the so-called democratic parties, public figures with no party affiliation, non-Party intellectuals, influential members of the national minorities, religious leaders, business people, private entrepreneurs, and important members of the new social strata, students abroad and returned students, citizens of Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and their relatives in mainland China, Chinese overseas and returned from overseas, and in the end all the people with whom it is necessary to make connections (*lianxi*) and unite (*tuanjie*).

The identification of these categories as the main targets is mirrored by the organisational chart of the United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the CCP.¹⁰ Besides the General Affairs Office, the Theoretical Research Office, the Retired Cadres Office, and the Liaison Office for Mass Organisations, it comprises another nine highly specialised offices. Among these, two are specifically dedicated to Tibet and Xinjiang, and one to the relationship with public figures in new media, a sign of the gradual expansion of the political activities of the United Front Work Department. Currently, it is assumed that there are tens of thousands of cadres officially working in the various branches of the Department, though the number of people

involved in the actual work is surely greater. United front work is expected to be carried out by cadres not only at every level of the Party's administration, but also in other key institutions, such as universities, research centres, and private corporations. Academic and specialised publications dedicated to the subject are numerous.

From Local to Global

Considering the revival of some aspects of Maoist governance and the importance attributed by Xi to enhancing the CCP's capacity to guide and control (using both ideology and legal tools) the different constituencies of Chinese society, this development is not surprising. At the same time, it has become urgent for the centre to increase its ability to control the work of local cadres involved in united front activities, in order to preserve the CCP's hegemony in the social and cultural realm. That this is a paramount concern is demonstrated by the fact that a so-called 'Central Leading Group for the United Front Work' (*zhongyang tongyi zhanxian gongzuo lingdao xiaozu*) has been established in the Politburo under the leadership of Xi himself.

The increasing social and cultural diversity of contemporary China and the impact of globalisation pose new challenges. As the wide spectrum of activities of the united front shows, it is evident that the CCP perceives potential threats as coming from very different constituencies—from religious organisations to ethnic communities, from private entrepreneurs to Chinese students and intellectuals abroad. Each context implies specific strategies and goals. For example, one goal of the united front work among private entrepreneurs is to ensure that they abide by the law and subordinate their personal ambitions to CCP's policies. The work among Chinese students and scientists abroad is addressed at persuading them not to abandon the motherland and cooperate for the development of the national academy and scientific improvement. On the whole, the overarching objective is to guarantee the loyalty towards the Party-state and a sense of belonging and identification with the Chinese nation as it is envisioned and understood by the CCP. In practice, the work of the united front aims at coopting selected figures within these constituencies, while isolating the individuals who do not conform. Unavoidably, this ends up causing a polarisation within these groups regarding their attitude towards the CCP.

Importantly, the Party leadership's use of the united front as an instrument of control often contradicts its stated goal of obtaining the support and collaboration of targeted individuals and communities. In the same vein, the activities of the united front within Chinese communities abroad have been perceived in several countries as a *longa manus* of the CCP in foreign affairs, raising worries about the attempt of the PRC to influence foreign public opinion and to conduct intelligence work through the cooperation of Chinese citizens abroad.¹¹

In the domestic arena, in recent years united front work has also been increasingly connected to the idea that it is necessary to modernise CCP 'governance' (*zhili*), which in turn presumes the full accomplishment of a Chinese socialist 'consultative democracy' (*xieshang minzhu*), different from the Western-style electoral democracy.¹² Centred on the pivotal role of the CPPCC as a distinctive Chinese political institution, the promotion of consultative democracy at any level is described as an important goal of united front activities, as the regular consultation with minor parties, targeted

individuals, and specialised groups about local and national policies is envisioned as a necessary praxis to build wide support and consent for the Party. This 'consultative democracy' must be carried out 'seeking common grounds while putting aside differences,' a method that has a long history in CCP diplomacy and foreign relations.¹³ Regardless of how it presents itself abroad, it is worth remembering that within Chinese borders, the united front cannot be detached from the purpose of maintaining the CCP's political and cultural hegemony through social control.

Adopting a Gramscian perspective, Groot has argued that during periods of crisis, the Party-state relies on the united front as a strategy of 'passive revolution' to absorb potential oppositional elements and their elites into the state's hegemonic structure.¹⁴ From this perspective, the increasing importance attributed to united front work should be seen as a sign that the CCP is going through a critical stage of governance and political legitimisation. Nevertheless, the evolution of the united front has been also studied in light of the evolution of the corporatism of the Chinese state.¹⁵ In this sense, united front work must be seen as a structural aspect of the CCP's strategy to shape the relations between the Chinese state and various interest groups and to settle divergences within society. As economic development, social peace, and stability must be achieved by avoiding the possible conflicts generated by the different social and cultural claims, resorting to the theory and practice of the united front serves to revive a historical 'revolutionary' pedigree to cover up for that socialist state corporatism that seems to be an enduring facet of China's modernisation path.