
CASE STUDY

Harnessing Suspicion, Not People: The Jamestown Foundation and Modern Exclusion

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ABSTRACT

This case study analyzes the Jamestown Foundation’s claim that 575 Canadian organizations operate under the influence of the Chinese Communist Party’s United Front Work Department. Examining the groups named, it finds that the report relies on expansive and weak criteria, treating community representation as evidence of co-optation, without any indication of direction. This logic reflects modern exclusion: cultural expression and community representation are treated not as democratic participation, but as evidence of disloyalty.

Introduction

In early February 2026, the Jamestown Foundation, a DC-based think tank, released a report titled “Harnessing the People: Mapping Overseas United Front Work in Democratic States.” It sounds the alarm over the more than 2,000 organizations they have identified as being part of the Chinese Communist Party’s United Front Work Department (UFWD), of which 575 operate in Canada. They say these organizations, which on the surface seem to serve the Chinese diaspora, have been co-opted by the Chinese government to “represent the voice of the [CCP]” and “constitute latent capacity that the Party can mobilize to advance the Party’s agenda.”

The claim that 575 organizations in Canada operate under the influence of a foreign government, which can mobilize their membership to support that government, is a serious allegation that warrants careful

scrutiny. Unfortunately, Jamestown has not made its list of United Front organizations public. CUAME requested access to the list but received no response.

Based on the evidence presented in the report, the Jamestown Foundation appears to treat activities such as celebrating Chinese culture, promoting Canada-China trade, and generally representing Chinese Canadian communities as conclusive evidence of co-optation by the Chinese government. In doing so, they cast broad suspicion on all organizations representing Chinese Canadians, exemplifying a form of modern exclusion in which cultural and civic engagement are recast as illegitimate and evidence of foreign control.

The report reflects a broader narrative in which anything short of opposition to China is treated as evidence of loyalty to it, and therefore as contrary to Canadian interests. Aside from the implications for civic participation, this framing risks narrowing the scope of debate over Canada-China relations, particularly at a time when the two countries appear to be entering a more collaborative phase in their relationship, one that, if managed carefully, could carry meaningful benefits for Canadians.

Modern Exclusion in Practice

Jamestown adopts an expansive approach to defining a UFWD organization, treating as evidence of co-optation anything from having a board member affiliated with the United Front, which includes the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO), to simply having “attended events alongside representatives of the united front system.”

The following sections discuss some of the Canadian organizations explicitly identified as part of the UFWD, which comprise 1.4% of the network that Jamestown claims exists in Canada.

Taken together, a consistent pattern emerges: Jamestown presents observable activities that cast Chinese culture in a positive light or seemingly align with the Chinese government’s interests as evidence that the CCP was behind those activities.

This reasoning rests on an implicit assumption that such conduct would not occur without CCP direction. However, Jamestown does not present evidence that these groups have been co-opted by the UFWD, instead relying on an incorrect inference that treats expressions viewed as “pro-China” as evidence of state control. There are many reasons why Canadians may engage in such activities, including celebrating the culture and language of their heritage. Absent evidence of influence, the report amounts to nothing more than a criticism of lawful civic engagement.

China Cultural Centre in Vancouver

The “evidence” of co-optation: At the centre’s opening ceremony, the CEO said their goal was to “tell

Chinese stories well, show the charm of Chinese culture, spread Chinese culture well, and strive to make it a platform for cultural exchanges and cooperation between China and Canada.”

Analysis: For publicly expressing pride in Chinese culture and support for cross-cultural exchange, this organization was labelled as part of the United Front. Yet Jamestown provides no evidence that such statements reflect co-optation by the CCP, suggesting that the report’s reasoning equates cultural pride with political allegiance to a foreign government.

Canada-China Friendship Society of Edmonton

The “evidence” of co-optation:

- Its president attended the 10th Conference for Friendship of Overseas Chinese Association, where President Xi was also in attendance to greet the attendees.
- They hosted community events showcasing Chinese culture, such as Chinese calligraphy.

Analysis: As in the case of the China Cultural Centre above, Jamestown again treats cultural celebration as evidence of being a part of the UFWD.

The president’s attendance at a conference in China comes closer to establishing some form of contact with the UFWD. However, mere attendance at an event does not equate to co-optation. If presence were sufficient to establish control, then the definition would be so expansive that anyone who has ever attended a public event involving Chinese officials could be considered by the Jamestown Foundation to be co-opted by the UFWD.

Jamestown also highlights that a 2019 event hosted by the society was linked to the 70th anniversary of the founding of the PRC and that representatives “used the platform to eulogize the PRC’s material progress, its manufacturing strength, and its respect for ethnic minorities.” Jamestown is certainly entitled to criticize those views. However, expressing positive opinions about China does not in and of itself constitute evidence of co-optation or state direction.

The implication appears to be that if an organization celebrates Chinese culture, attends events associated with the Chinese state, or speaks positively about China in any way, it must be the case that they have been co-opted by the UFWD. This reasoning exemplifies modern exclusion: treating cultural engagement as evidence of disloyalty to Canada.

Ottawazine Globe Inc.

The “evidence” of co-optation: They provide “the latest news about the Chinese community and [create] multilingual content to enhance cultural dialogue.”

Analysis: The report does not identify any alleged ties between this outlet and the UFWD. Providing news about the Chinese community and publishing multilingual content does not constitute evidence of

coordination with, or direction from, a foreign government. Absent such evidence, the designation as a UFWD organization rests not on alleged affiliation but on the mere fact that the outlet serves Chinese-speaking audiences. Labelling journalism as foreign-influenced simply because of the language used further illustrates how the Jamestown Foundation contributes to the modern exclusion of Chinese Canadians.

Chinese Canadian Conservative and Liberal Associations

The “evidence” of co-optation: The Chinese Canadian Conservative Association and the Chinese Canadian Liberal Association are listed as United Front organizations, yet the report does not explain what actions, affiliations, or evidence justify their inclusion.

Analysis: In the absence of any explanation, the designation appears to rest not on conduct, but on the fact that these associations represent Chinese Canadians. Conflating community representation with foreign political alignment is deeply concerning. Under this logic, the mere existence of Chinese Canadian political associations becomes sufficient grounds for suspicion.

Fujianese Community Groups in Canada

The “evidence” of co-optation: Jamestown also labels Fujianese community groups in Canada as part of the UFWD because, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, these groups donated N95 masks and other medical supplies to Fuzhou after the Fuzhou Federation of Returned Overseas and OCAO requested assistance from Fujianese community groups worldwide.

Analysis: The reasoning appears to be that responding to such a request constitutes evidence of United Front affiliation. Yet donating medical supplies during a global health crisis does not, without more, demonstrate political direction or co-optation.

In a previous case study ([available here](#)), we documented similar allegations made by Dotting the Map. The authors of that report had similar intentions to the Jamestown Foundation, except they are focused on naming individuals they deem as United Front proxies rather than organizations. As we noted in that study, the fact that Chinese Canadians sent PPE to China does not mean that they did so at the direction of the Chinese government. There are many plausible explanations: for instance, concern about the global spread of COVID-19 at a time when cases were concentrated in China, or a desire to assist family in China and communities facing shortages of life-saving supplies. To infer control from conduct alone is to presume on the basis of ethnicity that some Canadians act not as autonomous citizens, but as instruments of a foreign state.

The Implications of Modern Exclusion

This case study examined several of the organizations identified in Jamestown's report as part of the United Front in Canada. Based on the report's own evidence, the threshold used to justify these designations is strikingly low. The report does not demonstrate coordination, direction, or even affiliation with the UFWD. In most cases, it does not even attempt to.

Instead, the Jamestown Foundation treats cultural celebration, multilingual media, and the general representation of Chinese Canadians as sufficient indicators of United Front affiliation. Their logic is that anything short of opposition to China is treated as evidence of alignment with and influence by it. Organizations become suspect not because of demonstrated foreign direction, but because of who they represent and what positions they do, or do not, publicly adopt.

These are not trivial accusations. If taken at face value, they could be interpreted as evidence of "surreptitious or receptive conduct" engaged in "at the direction of, or in association with, a foreign entity." Under the 2024 Foreign Interference and Security of Information Act, this offence carries a maximum penalty of life imprisonment.

By not publicly naming the organizations they allege to be part of the United Front, the effect of this report is to cast suspicion on every single organization that represents Chinese Canadians.

In fact, blanket suspicion may have been the goal. Public messaging surrounding the report amplified the perception of a vast network of foreign agents operating in Canada. MP Shuv Majumdar wrote that "Beijing has built a network of more than 500 linked organizations inside our country, more than any of our democratic allies." Senator Leo Housakos similarly emphasized alarming figures: "2,000+ CCP-linked organizations operate across Western democracies. Canada leads with 500+ active on our soil."

This can have serious consequences for the ability of these organizations to serve their community, as we document in a previous case study ([available here](#)) on two that were alleged to be Chinese "police stations" not for their actions, but for a perceived association with China. They faced significant funding cuts and suffered severe reputational harm while under RCMP investigation for more than two years, during which no charges were laid.

It is clear that Jamestown does not acknowledge the harm that their report has on the Chinese Canadian community. Aside from their lack of transparency, there is also no indication that they consulted the organizations they label as part of the United Front or provided them with an opportunity to respond to the serious allegations made against them.

One can criticize the Chinese government, debate the merits of engagement with China, and even object to the celebration of Chinese culture. But to label organizations as instruments of the PRC simply

because of the events they organize or the views they espouse is not a defence of democracy. It is stigmatization that reinforces racialized suspicion and contributes to the reality of modern exclusion that many Chinese Canadians already face.

References

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