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The Communist Party of China's United Front Work in the Gulf: The “Ethnic Minority Overseas Chinese” of Saudi Arabia as a Case Study

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Abstract

The report examines the ‘United Front’ activities undertaken by the Communist Party of China towards Saudi Overseas Chinese in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, estimated to be anywhere between 150,000 and 180,000. It introduces the concept of the ‘United Front’ as it relates to Chinese politics and foreign relations, examining both its historical evolution and contemporary applications. The report then explores the ways in which United Front activities have been carried out in the Saudi context, and specifically with respect to the Sinophone Muslim (Hui) and Turkestanian (Uyghur, Uzbek and Khazakh) clusters constituting the Saudi Overseas Chinese community. Finally, it considers – in connection to ongoing global debates on the issue of the United Front – whether these United Front activities can be seen as a potential political problem for Sino-Saudi, and perhaps even Sino-Gulf, relations overall.

Introduction

This report examines the “United Front” (统一战线工作, UF) activities undertaken by the Communist Party of China (中国共产党, CPC) toward Overseas Chinese (华侨华人, OC) residing in the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) who are not citizens of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).¹ This category therefore excludes “Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan compatriots” (港澳台同胞) and recent PRC-passport-holding “new immigrants” or “new OC” (新移民/新侨).² More specifically, the report looks at UF outreach in Saudi Arabia, which is host to one of the largest OC populations in the Middle East (estimated to be at 150,000–180,000). This report is divided into four sections. The first describes the concept of UF work and highlights its significance for Chinese domestic politics and foreign policy through an institutional and historical account. The second section offers an overview of the history and makeup of the OC community in Saudi Arabia targeted by this UF outreach. The third section then explores the UF practices deployed toward the Saudi OC community. The final section then considers the implications of these evolving and intensifying forms of UF activities for Saudi Arabia and the GCC states.

1. The “Magic Weapon” (法宝) of the Party: An Overview of United Front Work

UF is a longstanding Leninist practice of forging tactical alliances or coalitions with different non-Communist groups “to achieve a common cause, usually to defeat a common enemy,”³ forming an alliance within which the Party retains “leadership authority” (领导权).⁴ In essence, it is not about

(1) The author is grateful to Dr. Gerry Groot and Dr. Makio Yamada for their thoughtful comments and input that went towards improving this report.

(2) These are designations and communal categories utilized by the Chinese party-state. Any cursory examination of the texts made available on, for instance, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council (国务院侨务办公室) website (at www.gqb.gov.cn/), will show this to hold. This does not mean that the communities or groups in question necessarily accept these designations as such.

(3) Groot, Gerry, *Managing Transitions: The Communist Party, United Front Work, Corporatism, and Hegemony* (London: Routledge, 2004), 13.

(4) “统一战线的基本原则.” 中国共产党新闻, undated, accessed March April 3, 2018, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64171/65717/65719/4456602.html>.

building “an ideological majority, the way a democratic political party would” but rather, is about “[maintaining] and [extending] the power of a stable, centralised, hierarchical organisation, over time, territory and resources” through these constructed sets of alliances and networks.⁵ UF is also of a temporary and shifting character, as it is contingent on how the balance of power is configured at any given moment, with the overall strategy aimed at ensuring the dominance and hegemony of the Party. As J. D. Armstrong points out, “enemies will be defeated ‘one by one.’ Once a united front has achieved its purpose by isolating and defeating one enemy, another front will emerge, this time directed against an erstwhile ally.”⁶ UF also carries with it some sort of transformative ideological dimension, as allied non-Communist actors could be subverted or converted to accept the normative and ideational values espoused by the Party. This was actually asserted by Mao Zedong (毛泽东) during his October 1944 speech, “The United Front in Cultural Work”: “There are two principles for the United Front: the first is to unite, the second is to criticize, educate and change” (统一战线的原则有两个：第一个是团结，第二个是批评、教育和改造).⁷

The concept of UF as a political doctrine and tactic was already foreshadowed in many of Vladimir Lenin’s writings prior to, and following the eruption of, the Bolshevik Revolution, but was only first formally enunciated in December 1922, during the Fourth Congress of the Communist International (Comintern).⁸ Its “Theses on Comintern Tactics,” written against the backdrop of growing Soviet perceptions of a coming global war with the fascist-capitalist countries and the need therefore to obtain support among sympathetic segments among the Euro-American proletariat and the peoples of the colonized and semicolonized countries, it described UF as:

(5) Lulu Jichang, “United Frontlings Always Win,” *China Heritage*, undated, accessed March 17, 2018, <http://chinaheritage.net/journal/the-battle-behind-the-front/>.

(6) J. D. Armstrong, *Revolutionary Diplomacy: Chinese Foreign Policy and the United Front Doctrine* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1977), 38.

(7) “文化工作中的统一战线。” 求是理论网, June 30, 2009, accessed March 25, 2018, www.qstheory.cn/zl/llzz/mzdxjd3j/200906/t20090630_4103.htm.

(8) Armstrong, *Revolutionary Diplomacy*, 14–20.

simply an initiative whereby the Communists propose to join with all workers belonging to other parties and groups and all unaligned workers in a common struggle to defend the immediate, basic interests of the working class against the bourgeoisie. Every action, for even the most trivial everyday demand, can lead to revolutionary awareness and revolutionary education; it is the experience of struggle that will convince workers of the inevitability of revolution and the historic importance of Communism.⁹

The CPC, like other Communist parties, adopted UF work as a critical tactic and survival strategy in its road to power. In its tumultuous history, the Party entered into two UF alliances with the Nationalists (国民党), the first aimed at ending the rule of the warlords (1923–1926), and the other directed against the Japanese invasion (1937–1941). During its Yan’an phase (延安时期), in the late 1930s and 1940s, the CPC engaged the Muslim-Hui and Tibetan communities occupying the strategically significant borderland regions under the framework of the UF.¹⁰ This legacy partially explains the relative ease by which Islamic and Buddhist religious associations were formed in the early Maoist era, for instance.¹¹ Not surprisingly, Mao identified UF work—in addition to Party building and the Red Army—as one of the three “magic weapons” (法宝) that had enabled the CPC to decisively defeat its Japanese and Nationalist enemies and assume power.¹²

(9) “‘Theses on Comintern Tactics’ at Fourth Congress of the Communist International,” December 5, 1922, *Marxists.org*, <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/4th-congress/tactics.htm>.

(10) For a colorful description of this with respect to the Muslim community, see Edgar Snow, *Red Star over China: The Classic Account of the Birth of Chinese Communism* (London: Atlantic Books, 2017), 339–348 (“The Four Great Horses”), 349–355 (“Muslim and Marxist”). For a systematic study of the United Front’s history during this period, see: Lyman P. Van Slyke, *Enemies and Friends: The United Front in Chinese Communist History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1967).

(11) Pitman B. Potter, “Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China,” *China Quarterly* 174 (2003): 317–337.

(12) Groot, Gerry, “The Expansion of the United Front under Xi Jinping,” in Australian Centre on China in the World, *The China Story Yearbook 2015*, accessed March 11, 2018, <https://www.thechinastory.org/yearbooks/yearbook-2015/forum-ascent/the-expansion-of-the-united-front-under-xi-jinping/>; Brady, “Magic Weapons,” 2.

1.1 *The History and Application of United Front Work in post-1949 China*

Following the establishment of “New China” (新中国) in 1949, UF work retained considerable importance for the CPC as a key governing tool. This was especially true, with respect to marshaling the support and collaboration of various non-Communist (national bourgeoisie) elites, intellectuals, representatives of ethnic and religious communities, and OC toward realizing the dual tasks of facilitating domestic reconstruction, on the one hand, and obtaining diplomatic recognition abroad, on the other. In the early Maoist era this was embodied in the formation of such institutions as the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (中国人民政治协商会议, CPPCC), an advisory body that is now a permanent fixture of the Chinese political system.¹³ The body convenes at the same time as the National People’s Congress (全国人民代表大会, NPC), hence the term “The Two Meetings” (两会), although the CPPCC’s resolutions and memoranda are nonbinding, in contrast to those of the NPC, which is constitutionally the main legislative organ of the PRC.¹⁴ The CPPCC’s political significance lies in the way it enables the Party-state to symbolically perform the democratic and popular inclusion of non-CPC elites, especially as two-thirds of its members—many of whom are co-opted religious, business, and artistic elites, among others—are not members of the Party.¹⁵ The eight “democratic parties” that are legally allowed to operate within the PRC, aside from the CPC, are represented primarily through this organ.

UF work underwent radical fluctuations during the Maoist era (1949–1976) and was largely sidelined as a governing tool following Mao’s decision from

(13) The CPPCC operated as one of the governing organs in the early years of the PRC and was entrusted with drafting the provisional constitution of the state. For more information, see National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, “A Brief History of the CPPCC,” July 3, 2012, accessed February 21, 2018, <http://www.cppcc.gov.cn/zxww/2012/07/03/ART11341301498359101.shtml>.

(14) “中华人民共和国宪法.” 中国人大网, undated, accessed April 12, 2018, www.npc.gov.cn/npc/xinwen/node_505.htm.

(15) Groot, Gerry. “The United Front in an Age of Shared Destiny” in Australian Centre on China in the World, *The China Story Yearbook 2014*, accessed February 24, 2018, <https://www.thechinastory.org/yearbooks/yearbook-2014/forum-begging-to-differ/the-united-front-in-an-age-of-shared-destiny/>.

the mid-1950s onward to reemphasize class-struggle in his bid to transform China along more socialist lines.¹⁶ Internationally, however, the UF doctrine continued to exert considerable relevance, shaping as it did the diplomatic interactions of the revolutionary Party-state throughout this era. A grand “UF alliance” with national liberation and anti-imperialist movements was undertaken against both the United States and the Soviet Union.¹⁷ Varying degrees of attention were also accorded to winning the support and recognition of OC communities in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, whether in order to attract skilled professionals who would be needed to help build Chinese socialism or, more fundamentally, to help to combat the propaganda and countersovereignty claims of the Nationalists governing the Republic of China on Taiwan during the Cold War.¹⁸

The end of the Cultural Revolution (文化大革命, 1966–1976) and the initiation of the “reform and opening up” (改革开放) era following the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee (中央委员会, CC) of the CPC in December 1978 saw a return to a more traditional, decentralized “economic interest”-driven utilization of UF work in both the domestic and international spheres.¹⁹ In the 1980s, for instance, UF outreach was purposed toward attracting foreign investment and economic aid from OC businessmen and entrepreneurs, a strategy that was especially successful with those who still retained familial and ancestral ties with coastal provinces that had established “Special Economic Zones” (经济特区, SEZ), which included provinces such as Guangdong 广东, Fujian 福建, and Zhejiang 浙江.²⁰ Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from 1979 to 2000 was cumulatively equal to one third of China’s gross domestic product (GDP) in 2000; “over half this money came from Hong Kong alone, and over three quarters from East Asia, mostly from

(16) Groot, *Managing Transitions*, 126–138.

(17) Armstrong, *Revolutionary Diplomacy*, 77–113.

(18) James To, *Qiaowu Extra-Territorial Policies for the Overseas Chinese* (Leiden, the Netherlands, Brill, 2014), 37–38.

(19) *ibid.*, 85.

(20) Elena Barabantseva, “Trans-nationalising Chineseness: Overseas Chinese policies of the PRC’s Central Government,” *Asien* 96 (2005): 7–28.

diaspora Chinese.”²¹ This translates into nearly USD 300 billion worth of FDI from OC sources alone.²²

Various developments in the 1990s and 2000s also added further impetus for the intensification of UF work, especially in international settings. Among these were geopolitical-economic concerns (e.g., the international fallout arising from the sanctions imposed in the wake of the Tiananmen incident); domestically linked political trends (i.e., Taiwanese democratization and growing fears over independence and the domestic ramifications of the 1989 events); and the exponential growth in the size of the PRC citizen populations overseas, a phenomenon largely driven by the Party-state’s promotion of a “going out policy” (走出去政策), all of which have contributed to this dynamic. Reshaping discourses, winning new friends in a more constrained and tense international environment, as well as reclaiming the “hearts and minds” of OC communities, among other audiences, necessitated renewed UF outreach.²³

1.2 The Expansion of the United Front under the Xi Administration

Over the last few years, the Xi Jinping administration has sought to strengthen UF work and emphasize its importance in serving the foreign policy objectives of the Party-state. This reemphasis could be evidenced in the fact that a “Central UF Work Conference” (中央统战工作会议) was held in May 2015, after nearly a decade of hiatus, with a discernible elevation in status marked by the attendance of members of the Standing Politburo, including President Xi.²⁴ The meeting proceedings stressed the necessity of mobilizing OC communities—including Chinese students abroad—in the task of obtaining the “Great Rejuvenation” (伟大复兴) of the Chinese nation. In July, a “Leading Small Group for United Front Work” (中央统一战线工作领

(21) John Lee, “The Chinese Diaspora’s Role in the Rise of China,” East Asia Forum, September 14, 2016, accessed January 12, 2018, <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2016/09/14/the-chinese-diasporas-role-in-the-rise-of-china/>.

(22) The figure is drawn from the International Monetary Fund’s DataMapper, accessed February 17, 2018, <http://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/datasets/WEO/1>.

(23) To, *Qiaowu Extra-Territorial Policies*, 17.

(24) Marcel Sngliviel De la Beaumelle, “The United Front Work Department: ‘Magic Weapon’ at Home and Abroad,” *China Brief*, 17, no. 9 (July 6, 2017, accessed February 14, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/united-front-work-department-magic-weapon-home-abroad/>).

导小组) was created in order to coordinate the efforts of different bureaucratic entities and groups in UF outreach.²⁵ Most notably, the recent institutional restructuring, unveiled following the conclusion of the “Two Meetings” in March 2018, showed a considerable expansion in the power of the United Front Work Department (中共中央统一战线工作部, UFWD). This restructuring entailed the incorporation of several organs of the state under its umbrella, including the State Council Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (国务院侨务办公室, OCAO), and the State Administration for Religious Affairs (国家宗教事务局, SARA), a development that reflects the overall trend, also seen elsewhere within the Chinese political system, of the “Party’s advance” (党进) and growing control over all spheres of government and society.²⁶

The UFWD, as Gerry Groot notes, is the main CPC entity entrusted with the task of reaching out “to many key non-party groups within and outside China in order to achieve important political goals.” It also “monitors sensitive constituencies and selects representatives from them who they can then incorporate into the political system.”²⁷ It mainly oversees the Party’s engagement with six particular categories or groups, including other legalized parties, entrepreneurs and businessmen, ethnic minorities, religious groups, the populations of the special administration regions (Hong Kong and Macau), and Taiwan. Even prior to the institutional restructuring, its influence has grown under the Xi administration, as can be evidenced by both its organizational growth (adding 40,000 cadres within its ranks), increased funding, and the elevation of its heads to powerful positions within the Party hierarchy.²⁸ Its former head, Sun Chunlan (孙春兰), was, and remains, a member of the 25-member-strong Politburo (中央政治局), and its current head, You Quan (尤权), is the secretary of the Secretariat of the CPC (书记处), which carries out the operations of the CC.²⁹

(25) “习近平主持中共中央政治局会议 设立中央统一战线工作领导小组,” 新华网, July 30, 2015, accessed February 18, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/2015-07/30/c_1116095178.htm.

(26) “中共中央印发《深化党和国家机构改革方案》,” 新华网, March 21, 2018, accessed April 3, 2018, www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-03/21/c_1122570517.htm.

(27) Groot. “The United Front in an Age of Shared Destiny.”

(28) Groot. “The Expansion of the United Front under Xi Jinping.”

(29) “孙春兰简历,” 中新网, February 19, 2018, accessed April 2, 2018, www.chinanews.com/gn/2018/03-19/8471409.shtml; “尤权,” 百度百科, undated, accessed April 2, 2018, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/尤权/2164991?fr=aladdin>.



The consul-general having dinner with the Huimin in Taif, Saudi Arabia. Date: February 6, 2016.
Source: PRC Jeddah Consulate website.

1.3 Overseas Chinese and United Front Work in Practice

As noted in the previous discussion, UF work is not limited to the national boundaries of the Chinese state, but has extraterritorial manifestations as well. Party-state actors are often involved in UF outreach abroad, mostly operating from PRC embassies and consulates, include the UFWD, the Propaganda Department (宣传部), the All-China Federation of Overseas Chinese (中华全国归国华侨联合会), and the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (中国人民对外友好协会), among others.³⁰ While abroad, UFWD personnel, as Anne-Marie Brady observes, “often operate under diplomatic cover as members of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, using this role to guide united front activities outside China.”³¹

The targets of such UF work have generally included politicians, scholars, religious and business associations, and companies of various sorts and alignments, but OC populations have been of particular interest, as they feature strongly, as James To notes, “in three of China’s grand strategic goals:

(30) Brady, “Magic Weapons,” 8; De la Beaumelle, “The United Front Work Department.”

(31) Brady, “Magic Weapons,” 4.

as a diplomatic vanguard for promoting China’s integration with the world (tuishou [推手]), as a lobby group opposing Taiwanese independence, and as soft power promoters of Chinese pride, culture, and confidence.”³² In order to obtain these goals, UF work often reveals two facets: cultural and material. Culturally, UF actors seek to inculcate and deepen the sense of identification OC populations have with China on ethnocultural and civilizational grounds. This is accomplished through a wide range of activities, from holding an annual Spring Festival (春节) to more complex forms of educational outreach, which can include the opening of Chinese-language schools, the provision of scholarships for study on the Mainland, and the organization of “Seeking Roots” (寻根) or “Birthright” programs for younger generations of OC akin to those utilized by Israel, for example.³³ In effect, the goal of such activities is to enhance the positive “feelings” (感情) that these populations have toward China and the Party-state, creating the grounds for potential solidarity and advocacy for the latter’s interests. Materially, UF outreach might involve the co-optation of individuals or groups through various types of rewards such as commercial opportunities and social benefits (personal-political relations, 关系, with PRC and CPC elites), not to mention, since the 1990s, potential incorporation—albeit in a rather limited and symbolic capacity—into the PRC’s political system, primarily *via* the CPPCC, with all the prestige accrued from such connections.

Through these facets, various links are developed between UF actors and high-ranking figures (business tycoons, social media influencers, politicians, etc.) and organizations and associations from the OC population. Such links enable the Party-state to exert a guiding role (指导) and to obtain its strategic objectives as a consequence of its UF efforts. By way of “instructions to Chinese community groups and the Chinese language media” and supporting a change in editorial and ownership patterns among media platforms for example, UF actors could help reshape discourses and media frames—especially anti-China ones—found among these populations, disseminating in

(32) To, *Qiaowu Extra-Territorial Policies*, 40.

(33) *Ibid.*, 161.

turn their own propaganda and minimizing the voices of opposition groups that might threaten the claims to legitimacy of the CPC (such as independence and secessionist advocates, religious and political activists, etc.).³⁴ More important, and as Anne-Marie Brady observes, UF actors work “with foreign and overseas Chinese personages (the more influential the better) to influence, subvert, and if necessary, bypass the policies of their governments and promote the interests of the CCP globally.”³⁵ OC figures could thus lobby and influence domestic political outcomes in their home countries in ways that are favorable to the Party-state’s interests. The case of Sam Dastyari, the Australian Labour Party senator who resigned in December 2017 due to corruption allegations connected to OC businessmen associated with the CPC, exemplifies this effort.³⁶ Dastyari was known for having taken a pro-China stance with regard to the South China Sea dispute, contrary to the position of his own Party.³⁷

2. An Overview of the “Ethnic Minority Overseas Chinese” Community in Saudi Arabia

For the purposes of this study, recent influxes of long-term resident PRC citizens in the Kingdom—numbering anywhere between 40,000 and 60,000, according to an official from the Chinese embassy’s “Overseas Chinese Service Section” (领侨处) in Riyadh—are not included within the category of “Saudi OC” (沙特华侨) and are not, furthermore, part of the 150,000–180,000 estimate cited previously.³⁸ The account also excludes non-Muslim Taiwanese immigrants who arrived in the 1960s–1980s as Saudi Arabia developed robust economic and military ties with the authorities of the island.³⁹ Although “Taiwanese compatriots” (台湾同胞) and Taiwan itself have long

(34) Brady, “Magic Weapons,” 8–11.

(35) Anne-Marie Brady, “Magic Weapons: China’s Political Influence Activities under Xi Jinping,” Wilson Center, September 2017, 3, accessed February 23, 2018, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/for_website_magicweaponsanne-mariesbradyseptember2017.pdf.

(36) “Sam Dastyari Resignation: How We Got Here.” *ABC*, December 12, 2017.

(37) Quentin McDermott, “Sam Dastyari Defended China’s Policy in South China Sea in Defiance of Labor Policy, Secret Recording Reveals.” *ABC*, November 29, 2017.

(38) Interview with the Director of the Overseas Chinese Service Section by author, February 12, 2018.

(39) Makio Yamada, “Islam, Energy, and Development: Taiwan and China in Saudi Arabia, 1949–2013,” *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 22, no. 1 (2015): 77–98.

been targets of UF work, they do not appear to be a priority in the Saudi context, perhaps due to their relatively small numbers. The study focuses on the so-called Saudi OC, a community largely constructed and imagined into being by the ethnic and diasporic scholarship of the Mainland, as well as from the discourses and practices of Chinese officialdom.⁴⁰ Neither the Saudi state nor the members of this community conceive of themselves as such. The Saudi OC is depicted in Chinese sources as one of the oldest in the Middle East, having a long-established presence in the Hedjaz (including the cities of Mecca, Medina, Jeddah, and Taif) dating back to the late nineteenth century. This community can be divided into two distinct but asymmetrical non-Han clusters, the Turkestani and Sinophone Muslim peoples, with each possessing its own complicated identity in connection to its presumed origins in China.

2.1 The Turkestani Cluster

The first cluster, consisting of the vast majority of the “Saudi OC,” is that of the Turkic-speaking “Overseas Chinese of Xinjiang origin” (新疆籍华侨华人), which includes a subset of groups, including Uyghurs (维吾尔族), Uzbeks (乌兹别克族), and Khazaks (哈萨克族), among others. Groups within this cluster often self-identify as “Turkestanis” (تركستاني), an all-encompassing term for various groups hailing from Central Asia.⁴¹ This cluster’s emergence in the Hedjaz is connected to the multiple population outflows that left Xinjiang 新疆 throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These outflows were catalyzed by the tumultuous events that enveloped the region from the late Qing onward—encompassing the suppression of various short-lived emirates and republics (1865–1877, 1933–1934, 1944–1949), the establishment and consolidation of Communist rule there in 1949–1951, and

(40) 张秀明, “中东地区华侨华人与‘一带一路’建设,” in *华侨华人研究报告 (2016)*, 皮书研创出版, 2017, 55, 61–62; 冀开运, “中东华侨华人若干问题研究,” 《中东问题研究》, 2015, 年第1期; 冀开运, “中东华人华侨研究,” 国别和区域研究, May 5, 2016, accessed February 21, 2018, www.ris.edu.cn/index.php/default/index/getContentInfo/3676.

(41) In the conception of different nationalist imaginaries, the region of “Turkesta” encompasses both a western flank (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) and an eastern flank (the region of Xinjiang), which had been divided by the machinations of outside imperial powers, namely, Russia and China.

the various major upheavals of the Maoist era in the late 1950s and 1960s. Refugees followed the many commercial, religious, and communal networks that are dispersed across the breadth of the Asian continent, with Saudi Arabia—in addition to Russia (the Soviet Union), South Asia, and Turkey—emerging as one of the major foci of settlement.⁴² The 1960s and 1970s also saw new influxes of Turkestanis, who benefited from the Sino-Soviet border struggles, although these were far smaller in number in comparison to older waves.⁴³

The Turkestanis are a relatively wealthy community. Many families are involved in white-collar professions and various fields of business, allowing them to enjoy middle- and even upper-class status within Saudi society. This has conferred on them a degree of political and cultural prestige. The Saudi ambassador to Japan from 2008 to 2013, Abdulaziz al-Turkestani, and Abdulrazaq Khoja, the calligrapher and designer of the insignia on the national coinage, typify such individuals.⁴⁴ In the sociocultural sphere, Turkestanis have had a notable impact on Saudi society, especially through their introduction of Central Asian cuisines. The so-called Bukari dishes, such as *mantu*, *yaghmush*, and Bukhari rice, have become popular among Saudi families.

Despite these contributions and their long-term settlement within the Kingdom, however, many Turkestanis—numbering nearly 8,000—do not possess Saudi citizenship but are conferred semicitizenship privileges endowed by their status as permanent residents (مقيم) coming from an “oppressed Muslim” background.⁴⁵ This status has exempted them from deportation and

(42) Bayram Balci, “Central Asian Refugees in Saudi Arabia: Religious Evolution and Contributing to the Reislamization of Their Motherland,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (2007): 12–21.; Justin M. Jacobs, “Exile Island: Xinjiang Refugees and the ‘One China’ Policy in Nationalist Taiwan, 1949–1971,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 18, no. 1 (2016): 188–218.

(43) Ibid.

(44) “الاقصادي عبدالعزيز التركستاني,” undated, accessed February 11, 2018, <https://aliqtisadi.com/>; “شخصيات/عبدالعزيز-تركستاني,” May 26, 2016, accessed February 13, 2018, <http://www.okaz.com.sa/article/1059166>.

(45) “مرسوم ملكي باعفاء التركستانيين,” August 6, 1965, accessed February 15, 2018, http://darahservices.org/services/umqura/QURA_PICS/3000/qur_2082_01.jpg. In the case of the examples mentioned previously, Khoja surprisingly does not have Saudi citizenship, and Ambassador Turkestani only obtained his citizenship a few years before his posting in Japan.

expat levies imposed on the private sector to encourage the nationalization of the workforce.⁴⁶ (However, with this status, they are unable to travel or make use of state scholarships and other benefits that are generally to citizens.) Recent developments suggest that these exemptions are in the process of being reviewed by the state, with an eye toward their suspension.⁴⁷ The uncertain status makes some segments of the Turkestani community highly vulnerable: one example is the case of Sadiq Ahmad Turkestani, who, though a Taif-born native, was deported to Afghanistan in 1997 due to both his lack of identity papers and possession of hashish, is illustrative.⁴⁸ Imprisoned first by the Taliban and then the Americans in Guantanamo Bay, he only obtained his release in 2006, suffering nearly 10 years in prison until he was finally repatriated back to the Kingdom.

2.2 The Sinophone Muslim Cluster

The second cluster is that of the non-Turkic “Sinophone” Hui (回族华侨华人, *Sini*), who, varying—depending on the degree to which they have appropriated ethnic markers promoted by the Chinese state—identify themselves as Huizu (回族) or as Chinese Muslims (中华穆斯林). The majority of this cluster, who are of Xibei 西北 (Gansu 甘肃, Qinghai 青海, and Ningxia 宁夏) origins, arrived in the early 1950s and are mostly comprised of families and courtiers associated with the Nationalist-aligned Muslim warlord “Hussein” Ma Bufang (马步芳, 1903–1975).⁴⁹ The latter left the Mainland for Saudi Arabia in 1949 as the civil war decreasingly turned in the Communists’ favor. Ma Bufang eventually came to serve - following a brief stint in Egypt—as the first ambassador of the Republic of China to the Kingdom (1957-1961) until a scandal later on forced him to step down from that position. After

(46) "Small firms exempt from expat levy", *Saudi Gazette*, January 1, 2018, accessed March 17 2018, <http://saudigazette.com.sa/article/525092/SAUDI-ARABIA/Small-firms-exempt-from-expat-levy>.

(٤٧) "الموسم ٢٠١٧ الحلقة ٧٩: وضع التركستانيين في السعودية."

(48) "Detainee Cleared for Release Is in Limbo at Guantanamo," *Washington Post*, December 15, 2005, accessed February 15, 2018, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/12/14/AR2005121402125.html>.

(49) Hyeju Jeong, "A Song of the Red Sea: Communities and Networks of Chinese Muslims in the Hijaz," *Dirasat* 13 (July 2016).

obtaining Saudi citizenship, Ma Bufang remained in Jeddah until his death in 1975. During this period, he essentially functioned as head of the Sinophone Muslim community in the Hedjaz.⁵⁰

The cluster is also made up of the descendants of Sinophone Muslims who had arrived earlier in the 1920s and 1930s as well as a few who left China later, in the late-1950s (generally originating from places like Shandong [山东], Tibet [西藏], Sichuan [四川], and Yunnan [云南]).⁵¹ Typical of the latter group are individuals like Ding Shiming (丁世明, d.1997), a native of Gansu who left the Mainland through Tibet in 1958 and eventually settled in Saudi Arabia.⁵² He and his son, Ding Mudi (丁目迪), were pivotal in facilitating Sino-Saudi relations at certain critical junctures in the 1980s and 1990s and were both a focus of Party-state outreach and official visits. Mudi, for instance, was later brought in as a member of the All-China Youth Federation (全国青年联合会) and as a vice-chairman of its sub-organization in Gansu, positions that marked him—symbolically—as having become a “returned OC” (归侨), despite his continued residency in Saudi Arabia.⁵³

The Sinophone cluster, despite its smaller size, has also left its mark on Saudi society and the transnational Sinophone world. Figures such as Othman al-Sini, the long-running journalist and editor (most notably of *al-Watan*), among other intellectuals, have made contributions to the Saudi print media and intellectual scene. Businessmen and religious notables, operating in a more clandestine fashion, were important middlemen in facilitating Saudi ties with the Republic of China (Taiwan) and, later on, the PRC.⁵⁴ Their influence and impact beyond the Kingdom has also been significant. Given their cultural and educational backgrounds, especially as some are descendants of notables and government officials from the Xibei of the Nationalist era, a few have succeeded in cultivating excellent reputations in the wider Sinophone

(50) “Foreign News: The Northwest Falls,” *The Times*, October 3, 1949, accessed February 19, 2018, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,800835,00.html>.

(51) 冀开运, “中东华人华侨研究.”

(52) Ibid.

(53) To, *Qiaowu Extra-Territorial Policies*, 38.

(54) Jeong, “A Song of the Red Sea.”

world, albeit remaining unrecognized within the Kingdom itself. One of these is “Shamsuddin” Gao Wenyuan (高文远, 1911–2010), an accomplished Academia Sinica scholar and diplomat for the Republic of China to both Saudi Arabia and Indonesia.⁵⁵ He is primarily well known for editing Ma Jian’s (马坚) translation of the Quran in 1984 (which the Saudi authorities later printed in 1987, gifting a million copies to the PRC Muslim communities during the informal phase of Sino-Saudi engagement prior to diplomatic normalization) and wrote a 1988 book entitled *The Anti-Qing Movement of the Northwestern Hui in the Late Qing* (清末西北回民反清运动), which was published in both Taiwan and the Mainland. Upon his passing in 2010, Gao was buried in Taif, where he had lived most of his life.

As a concluding remark, it should be noted that while the Sinophone cluster had not historically enjoyed the same privileges conferred upon the Turkestanis—which was a by-product of their small numbers—many did obtain Saudi citizenship when the opportunity for naturalization was relatively easy (1950s–1970s), although to this day some of its members remain bereft of any official status.

2.3 Problematizing the Concept of a “Saudi Overseas Chinese” Community

It is clear when discussing these clusters that we are confronted with two major challenges or problems. The first relates to the suitability of considering them as part of an imagined and transnational OC community. Although the CPC identifies them as OC, Turkestanis themselves do not identify as “Chinese” in the ethnic, cultural, or even geographic sense. Parts of this cluster perceive themselves, furthermore, as being part of an oppressed group whose homeland is currently under Han occupation. Among the Sinophone cluster, who do identify as Chinese at some ethnocultural level, many remain oriented toward Taiwan, where they still maintain robust familial, religious, commercial, and even political links. More broadly, both clusters have undergone some degree of assimilation, with many obtaining Saudi passports

(55) “高文远,” 维基百科, undated, accessed February 28, 2018, <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/高文远>.

and acculturating themselves into Arab society and its norms. Many have also lost fluency in their mother tongues and dialects, especially among the third and fourth generations.

These complexities raise many questions, therefore, about the appropriateness of designating them as OC in any substantive sense. Nonetheless, Mainland officials and scholars consistently situate these clusters within an “ethnic minority” (少数民族) paradigm, treating them as the core elements of a Saudi OC population, which they then often describe as an “ethnic minority OC” (少数民族华侨华人) community that should be of interest to the Party-state’s UF outreach.⁵⁶ Since this paper is interested in the activities of UF-involved state actors that view these clusters as targets of UF work, it accepts the conceptual frameworks and nomenclature proffered by Mainland sources while acknowledging the problems they entail.

The second issue relates to the exact size of this Saudi OC “community,” as no reliable statistics are available. The cited Chinese works for this study claim that the OC population is within the range of 150,000–180,000, of whom 90% are identified as Uyghurs or Turkestanis.⁵⁷ When we turn to specific breakdowns, we encounter further problems. Various sources claim that the Turkestanis were estimated to be at around 20,000 in the early twentieth century, with a discernibly large commercial presence in the holy cities, although this tells us little about their geographic origins in the context of Central Asia.⁵⁸ During a trip to the Hedjaz in 1956, Yolbars Khan (1888–1971), the head of the Xinjiang Provincial Government (of the Republic of China) in exile, placed their numbers then at around 8,000.⁵⁹ A recent MBC documentary on

(56) 张秀明, “中东地区华侨华人与‘一带一路’建设”; 冀开运, “中东华侨华人若干问题研究”; 冀开运, “中东华人华侨研究.”

(57) Ibid.

(٥٨) “المجتمع المكّي.. عناصر متنوّعة صهرتها أقدس البقاع: الشرق الأوسط,” June 6, 2008, accessed February 23, 2018, <http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=43&article=473739&issueno=10783#WjiUeLpu12w>; العمل لسعودية: احتساب الفلسطينيين: “والتركستانيون بربع نقطة في نطاقات,” *Arabian Business*, March 5, 2013, accessed 23 February 2018: <http://arabic.arabianbusiness.com/politics-economics/2013/mar/5/325315>; Presentation by Mansour Bukhary on “Turkestani Hijra and Its Impact on Medinan Society,” KFCRIS Annual Contemporary Islamic Thought Conference, December 7, 2017.

(59) “Report and Recommendations by Yolbars Khan on Uighur and Kazak Refugees in the Middle East (16 July 1956),” *Wilson Center Digital Archives*, accessed February 13, 2018, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/123645>.

the plight of the Turkestanis placed their number at 100,000.⁶⁰ There are even fewer sources with respect to the Sinophone cluster, although it would appear to not exceed more than a few thousand—a figure often cited by members of the community themselves—with the majority residing in Taif. A recent *Arab News* interview with the PRC mission in Jeddah (in April 2015) claimed that according to official Chinese figures, the OC population in the Kingdom that had received Saudi citizenship was estimated at 20,000, although little else is mentioned regarding the ethnic and communal breakdown of this population.⁶¹

3. United Front Work in Saudi Arabia

The Chinese embassy in Riyadh, much like other PRC diplomatic missions around the globe, carries out different forms of UF outreach aimed at the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan residents of the Kingdom, as well as ethnic minority OC. New Year (新年) and Spring Festival (春节) receptions (招待会)—sometimes lasting for up to two weeks—are held in both Riyadh and Damman.⁶² Invocations of patriotism and commitment to the development of the ancestral homeland (祖国) are common themes during many of these events.

Chinese students, numbering nearly 600, are also under the purview of the diplomatic missions and their UF work, as reflected in its efforts to organize

(60) “الموسم ٢٠١٧-٧٩: الحلقة ٧٩: وضع التركستانيين في السعودية” *MBC*, October 29, 2017, accessed February 15, 2018: <http://www.mbc.net/ar/programs/alhamena/articles/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%85-2017-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A9-79--%D9%88%D8%B6%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9.html>.

(61) “China Endorses KSA’s Counterterrorism Strategy,” *Arab News*, 3 April 3, 2015, accessed April 4, 2018: <http://www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/news/727141>.

(62) “中国驻沙特大使武春华夫妇举行华人华侨春节招待会,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, January 29, 2006, accessed February 23, 2018, <http://www.chinaembassy.org.sa/chn/xwdt/123ijdn/t233336.htm>; “中国驻沙特大使武春华举行沙特东部华人华侨春节招待会,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, February 5, 2006, accessed February 23, 2018, <http://www.chinaembassy.org.sa/chn/xwdt/123ijdn/t233813.htm>; “李华新大使出席沙特东部华人及中资企业春节联欢晚会,” The Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 25 January 25, 2017, accessed February 23, 2018, <http://www.chinaembassy.org.sa/chn/xwdt/t1433812.htm>; “中国驻沙特大使馆举行2018年新春招待会,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, February 11, 2018, accessed February 23, 2018. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/zwbdt_673032/gzhd_673042/t1534131.shtml



An “Ethnic Minority” dance performance held during the Chinese New Year celebrations held at the PRC consulate in Jeddah. Date: January 17, 2017. Source: PRC Jeddah Consulate website.

regular basketball matches for students; the hosting dinners for political-thought work (政治思想工作); and the dispatching of officials to Saudi university campuses with sizable Chinese student populations.⁶³ Despite the growing presence of Chinese students attending Saudi universities, whether at the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology or at the Islamic University of Medina, there are no Chinese Student and Scholars Association (中国学生学者联合会) in operation due to Saudi government regulations.

(63) “China Endorses KSA’s Counterterrorism Strategy,” *Arab News*; “驻沙特使馆与利雅得地区中国留学生篮球友谊赛成功举行,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, May 9, 2017, accessed February 23, 2018, <http://www.chinaembassy.org.sa/chn/xwtd/t1459864.htm>; “常驻总领事赴麦地那看望中国留学人员,” Consulate-General of the People’s Republic of China in Jeddah, May 10, 2006, accessed February 25, 2018, <http://jeddah.china-consulate.org/chn/zlgxx/t259699.htm>; “积极落实领事走出去·服务少数民族留学生,” Consulate-General of the People’s Republic of China in Jeddah, 1 January 2017. Accessed 24 February 2018: <http://jeddah.china-consulate.org/chn/zlgxx/t1427848.htm>; “中国驻吉达总领事馆举办首届领区留学生篮球友谊赛.” The Consulate-General of the People’s Republic of China in Jeddah, November 4, 2017, accessed February 23, 2018, <http://jeddah.china-consulate.org/chn/zlgxx/t1311843.htm>; “驻吉达总领馆举行2017年华人华侨新春招待会.” Consulate-General of the People’s Republic of China in Jeddah, January 17, 2017, accessed February 25, 2018, <http://jeddah.china-consulate.org/chn/zlgxx/t1431161.htm>.

This, in fact, offers diplomatic missions greater room to exercise their much-strengthened role under the Xi administration of guiding (指导) and promoting patriotism among one of the new focus groups (着力点) for UF outreach, namely, overseas students.⁶⁴

3.1 The Sinophone Muslim Cluster and the Early Phases of the United Front

The distinct character and geographic positionality of the Saudi OC community, the bulk of which resides in the Hedjaz, has entailed that the locus of UF activity would necessarily radiate from the PRC consulate in Jeddah as opposed to the embassy in Riyadh.⁶⁵ This is evidenced by the fact that the consulate has an “Overseas Chinese Service Section.” Since its opening in April 1993, the consulate has pursued a purposeful strategy of specifically targeting the Sinophone Muslim cluster, a choice that may have originated from two considerations. The first relates to the way in which this group, by virtue of its cultural and linguistic links, constituted a natural space for UF engagement. The second is that this choice may have been galvanized by the desire to weaken the networks and connections enjoyed by the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office (台北经济文化代表处, TECRO)—many of whose assigned diplomats are Muslims themselves—with respect to this group. A dynamic of competition has often characterized the TECRO and the PRC Jeddah consulate’s relationship with to the Sinophone Muslim cluster, which is a function of the latter’s historically grounded support for the Nationalists in Taiwan.⁶⁶ This dynamic is altogether , given that one of the longstanding strategic objectives of the CPC with regard to UF work has been to undermine support for Taiwanese independence as well as to promote peaceful reunification, which is a core element in the Party-state’s contemporary nationalist project.⁶⁷

(64) “教育部：把爱国主义融入各级教育各环节,” *Zhongguowang*, February 9, 2016, accessed February 17, 2018, http://news.china.com.cn/2016-02/09/content_37763496.htm.

(65) There does not appear to be a UFWD presence in Saudi Arabia, and it is unclear why this is so. Accordingly, UF activities are undertaken by the PRC diplomatic missions there.

(66) Interview with Ma Jingwu and family members by author, December 30, 2017.

(67) To, *Qiaowu Extra-Territorial Policies*, 195.

The PRC Jeddah consulate's UF work has focused on cultivating personal ties with the perceived leadership (elders) of the Sinophone Muslim cluster, who are dispersed between Jeddah and Taif.⁶⁸ Special attention has been accorded to strengthen the contact of these individuals with the Mainland, whether by facilitating contact between visiting Hajj missions (which included many relatives and family members) and these communities, or by expediting the visa applications of notable figures such as Ma Zhizhong (马致忠) and Ma Rongying (马蓉瑛; Ma Bufang's great-niece).⁶⁹ These intensifying contacts in the 1990s were accompanied by repeated efforts to encourage such leaders to visit their ancestral hometowns (侨乡) and families (探亲) in the Xibei. This focus parallels many of the practices identified by James To as part of the toolkit utilized by the Party-state to deepen the identification of OC with the Mainland, which is done mainly through such cultural-sentimental visits (which enable individuals to rebuild their families ties and restore and renovate ancestral graves and mosques) and via the creation of "Seeking Roots" programs.⁷⁰ These efforts, needless to say, also carried an economic dimension, as many of these visitors were also approached with the hope they would invest in their hometowns or, at the very least, contribute toward disaster-relief and poverty-alleviation efforts.

In the context of Jeddah, a major focus of these relationship-building activities has centered on the person of the elderly Ma Jingwu (马经武).⁷¹ A Qinghai native and former Nationalist-government official, Ma Jingwu was one of the individuals who traveled with Ma Bufang to Saudi Arabia. While obtaining Saudi citizenship, he was considered sufficiently influential over the rest of the community to warrant being appointed as the representative of the Chinese overseas community in the Middle East in the Taipei-based National Assembly (国民大会) of the Republic of China from 1980 to 1986. Because of his perceived status as a leader of the Sinophone community

(68) Ibid.

(69) 冀开运, "中中华侨华人若干问题研究."

(70) To, *Qiaowu Extra-Territorial Policies*, 161–164.

(71) "马经武," 百度百科, undated, accessed 17 February 17, 2018, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/马经武>.

in Saudi Arabia as well as his ostensible links to Taiwan, the PRC Jeddah consulate has sought to “win” him over through repeated UF efforts. These have been typified by various honorific gestures such as allowing him to give the keynote speech during major events hosted by the consulate, a practice that has evolved into something of an annual custom.⁷² This symbolic gesture both offers such individuals prestige and respect and engenders an image of solidarity and respect between the OC community and China.

A major component in these relationship-building activities also involves visits to homes, meeting for tea, and even holding informal dinners bringing together members of the consulate and the wider Sinophone community in Saudi Arabia. These, in fact, have become part of the more “personalized” instruments found within the UF repertoire, as they help present a warm and benevolent face for the Party-state’s officialdom before such constituencies.⁷³



Ma Jingwu receiving a visit from the consul-general at his hospital bed. Date: April 23, 2017.
Source: PRC Jeddah Consulate website.

(72) “驻吉达总领馆举办华人华侨新年招待会,” Consulate-General of the People’s Republic of China in Jeddah, January 1, 2017, accessed February 22, 2018, <http://jeddah.china-consulate.org/chn/zlgxx/t1427849.htm>.

(73) “安总走访塔伊夫侨民,” Consulate-General of the People’s Republic of China in Jeddah, February 6, 2016, accessed February 18, 2018, <http://jeddah.china-consulate.org/chn/xgxw/t1339108.htm>.

This was amply demonstrated during the then 82-year-old Ma Jingwu's hospitalization in 2016, when he was visited by the consul-general (总领事) himself. As described in a news article found on the consulate's website, "Old Ma" (老马), who was also identified as the "Leader of the Overseas Hui" (回族侨领), purportedly held the consul-general's hand and said, "The care and love of the great motherland has made me feel warm and enthusiastic. Thank you, consul-general, for the special trip you have made, I am recovering gradually, and will endeavour to continue to enhance the cohesion of overseas Chinese feelings, and to serve the hometown with all due effort."⁷⁴ Such coverage aims to accomplish several objectives: it shows the positive and patriotic identification the Saudi OC hold toward the Mainland; their support for the CPC; their appreciation of the paternalistic and protective role the Party plays in defending their, as well as China's, national interests; and their commitment to the rejuvenation of the ancestral homeland. The coverage is directed at both Saudi OC and PRC audiences, albeit with different intents and purposes: the former with UF narrational aims in mind, and the latter in order to strengthen the legitimacy of the CPC in China itself.

3.2 The Turkestani Cluster and the Expansion of the United Front

In recent years, UF outreach has moved beyond its disproportionate focus on the Sinophone cluster toward a more systematic engagement with the wider Saudi OC population, namely, the Turkestanis. Indicative of this shift has been the selection of a Uyghur consul-general, Anwar Habibullah (安瓦尔), in September 2013.⁷⁵ Although stationed at the consulate since the early 2000s, his appointment as one of the PRC's rare Uyghur diplomats, follows a much broader trend of refocusing UF activities on the often-neglected Turkestani community located in the Hedjaz. Increasingly for instance, many events

(74) "安瓦尔总领事探望回族侨领," Consulate-General of the People's Republic of China in Jeddah, April 23, 2017, accessed February 21, 2018, <http://jeddah.china-consulate.org/chn/zlgxx/t1358277.htm>.

(75) "历任总领事," Consulate-General of the People's Republic of China in Jeddah, October 1, 2009, accessed February 12, 2018, <http://jeddah.china-consulate.org/chn/zlsxx/t193844.htm>; "维吾尔外交官:我所在的地方就是中国," *Tianshanwang*, September 17, 2014, accessed February 15, 2018, http://www.ts.cn/homepage/content/2014-09/17/content_10529713.htm.

undertaken by the PRC Jeddah consulate—akin to those held in Riyadh—are conducted, not just in Mandarin and Arabic, but in Uyghur as well. According to some of the regular attendees to such activities, Turkestanis now constitute the majority of guests.⁷⁶

Invitations to prominent members of the Turkestani community to visit Xinjiang have also been increasingly extended as a means to alleviate concerns and fears about the ill-treatment of their brethren on cultural and religious grounds in China. These visits, which are a hallmark of UF work, allow the Party-state to showcase its preservation and celebration of ethnic minority cultures, and are dually purposed toward “building national unity and [preventing] separatist feeling.”⁷⁷ They are also aimed primarily at bringing about a “transformation” (转变) in the negative attitude of traditionally hostile groups to the PRC.⁷⁸ One report states that the OCAO and the Xinjiang-level OCAO have been arranging such trips since 2005 and claims that these trips have had positive transformational consequences for the visitors.⁷⁹ According to another paper, a second-generation Turkestani-Saudi who took up one of these offers ended up donating nearly 6 million yuan to cultural preservation projects in Xinjiang and was, more significantly, involved in persuading members of his community to refuse to help fund advocates for the “East Turkestan” secessionist movement.⁸⁰

The catalyst behind this inclusion of the Turkestani cluster in UF activities might have been prompted by three factors. The first relates to the role of this community as a stronghold for anti-Chinese and anti-CPC sentiment in Saudi Arabia, and one that has had some influence in shaping Saudi elite and popular perceptions toward the PRC and CPC.⁸¹ The life of Muhammad Amin Islam Turkestani (محمد أمين اسلامي تركستاني، ١٩١٢–١٩٨٨) aptly embodies

(76) Interview with Ma Jingwu and family members by author, December 30, 2017.

(77) To, *Qiaowu Extra-Territorial Policies*, 164–165.

(78) *Ibid.*, 216–217.

(79) 张秀明, “中东地区华侨华人与‘一带一路’建设,” 61.

(80) 冀开运, “中中华人华侨研究.”

(81) There was a particular tradition of mournful commemoration among members of the diaspora of the “conquest” of Xinjiang by the CPC in October every year. Please look at:

أسد شهاب, محمد, كفاح تركستان ضد الاستعمار الروسي. بيروت: دار الصادق, ١٩٧١: ٣٥.

this challenge.⁸² A native of Yarkhand, he fled Xinjiang following the defeat of the short-lived first republic's forces in 1937 by the Chinese warlord Sheng Shicai (盛世才, 1895–1970) and sought exile in India, where he obtained a classical Islamic education. Then, in 1939, he traveled to Japan, where he became a teacher at a Tatar diaspora school in Tokyo. He worked closely with pan-Asianist activists such as Abdurresid Ibrahim (1857–1944) and Musa Jarullah Bigev (1873–1949), with whom he helped establish an “East Turkestan Liberation Association” in Japan. Throughout the 1950s, he advocated for an independent East Turkestan homeland and sought to highlight the oppression being inflicted on the peoples of “Greater Turkestan,” who were languishing under Communist rule in the Soviet Union and PRC, in most of the pan-Islamic conferences and forums he was invited to.⁸³

Turkestanian toured the Middle East widely, while remaining in close contact with the Uyghur exiled leaders in Istanbul such as Muhammad Emin Bugra (d. 1965) and Isa Yusuf Alptekin (d. 1995). In the meantime, he also developed an extensive network with prominent religious and political figures, including the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Amin al-Husseini. The latter facilitated his move to the Hedjaz in 1956 and his obtainment of a residency status within the Kingdom. Since then, and until 1978, he worked in the Hajj Administration in Jeddah as a translator for Turkestanian pilgrims. In 1982, he started working for the Saudi Radio Broadcast, operating their daily one hour-long Uyghur-language program—a program that preceded Radio Free Asia's own Uyghur-language broadcast by a full 16 years.⁸⁴ Turkestanian's advocacy never abated, even during the late stages of his life. He actively campaigned for the Saudi-backed Muslim World League (MWL) to grant representation to East Turkestanian. More significantly, and with funding and support obtained from the Turkestanian community in the Hedjaz, he published a booklet entitled *A Message to the Islamic World . . . Facts about Muslim Turkestan* (رسالة الى العالم الاسلامي...حقائق عن تركستان المسلمة) decrying Han

(82) “المجاهد والمناضل التركستاني.. محمد أمين اسلامي” *Turkistan Times*, undated, accessed February 16, 2018, <http://turkistantimes.com/ar/news-20.html>.

(83) Ibid.

(84) “لقنوات الإذاعية السعودية” King Khalid bin Abdul Aziz Database, undated, accessed February 15, 2018, <http://www.kingkhalid.org.sa/Gallery/Text/ViewBooks.aspx?View=Page&PageID=390&BookID=7>.

supremacism and the depredations of atheistic Communist rule. The booklet was later not only distributed to a wide circle of Saudi and international religious figures but also extensively republished in the domestic press and translated into English and Urdu. In all, his work had a considerable impact on internal discourses and perceptions of the PRC among Saudi clerical and religious scholarly circles in the Kingdom, and it was a factor in contributing to complicating the process of Sino-Saudi rapprochement in the 1980s and even the period following the normalization of diplomatic ties in 1990.⁸⁵

The second factor is connected to the Turkestani cluster's transnational cultural and religious links with Xinjiang and the Xibei regions. The influence that Turkestani religious clerics and scholars in the Hedjaz—typified by individuals like Ma'sum Sultan al-Khujandi (معصوم سلطان الخجندی، ١٨٨٠–١٩٦٠)—upon incoming pilgrims and visitors, as well as the later dispatch of literature, cassettes, audiovisuals materials, and other resources to China, has always disturbed the Chinese authorities, who are ever anxious about the spread of so-called Wahhabism (瓦哈比耶) and “extremist thought” (极端思想) among the Muslim populations of these regions. Turkestanis have also been perceived to have obtained some influence and clout within Saudi-backed Islamic organizations such as the MWL. Sa'id Shamil, the grandson of Imam Shamil, the celebrated Sufi resistance leader who fought against the Tsarist invasion of the Caucasus in the mid-nineteenth century, was a key founder of the MWL and a major advocate for Turkestnais under Soviet and PRC rule.⁸⁶ Uyghur-origin Saudi officials have also been instrumental in funneling resources through these organizations to help promote the religious revivals that have taken place in Xinjiang and the Xibei since the 1980s, following relaxation of the Party-state controls on the religious sphere.⁸⁷

(85) Yitzhak Shichor, “See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil: Middle Eastern Reactions to Rising China's Uyghur Crackdown,” *Griffith Asia Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (2015): 62–85.

(٨٦) كفاح تركستان ضد الاستعمار الروسي، ٨٩.

(87) Ahmad Salah Jamjoom, “Notes of a Visit to Mainland China,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 6, no. 1 (1985): 208–209; Edmund Waite, “The Impact of the State on Islam amongst the Uyghurs: Religious Knowledge and Authority in the Kashgar Oasis,” *Central Asian Survey* 25, no. 3 (2006): 251–265; Kendrick T. Kuo, “Revisiting the Salafi-Jihadist Threat in Xinjiang,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 32, no. 4 (2012): 528–544.

A third factor behind this UF shift toward the Turkestanis may be connected to the deteriorating security situation in Xinjiang itself and the potential role this cluster could play in offering resources as well as refuge to advocates of the secessionist movement. The Turkestani community in the Hedjaz, as one of the largest and wealthiest of the Uyghur diasporas, was often a favored destination of numerous activists and militants seeking various forms of support throughout the Cold War.⁸⁸ Moreover, this pattern has endured in recent decades.⁸⁹ According to one report, Hasan Mahsum (1964–2003) of the East Turkestan Islamic Party (ETIM) purportedly visited Jeddah in 1997 to raise money from the wealthy members of the community there, albeit with little success.⁹⁰ Nonetheless, the rise of al-Qaeda, with which the ETIM is allied, and that of the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), both of which have produced significant Arabic Uyghur-focused propaganda and have come to champion the cause of “East Turkestan,” is of great concern to the Chinese Party-state.⁹¹ Beyond funding, there is probably the fear that members from this cluster might also symbolically and actively support and even join pro-independence oppositional groups abroad, such as the World Uyghur Congress, or worse yet, join militant groups outright.⁹² In comparison with other regions, such as Turkey or Germany however, the propensity toward open activism among the Turkestani cluster remains rare, a situation partially shaped, perhaps, by the Kingdom’s laws and political culture, which inhibit and penalize protests and political activity that are not sanctioned by the state.⁹³

(88) “Report and Recommendations by Yolbars Khan on Uighur and Kazak Refugees in the Middle East (16 July 1956),” *Wilson Center Digital Archives*. accessed 13 February 13, 2018.; <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/123645> .

(89) Gardner Bovington, “Autonomy in Xinjiang: Han Nationalist Imperatives and Uyghur Discontent,” *East-West Center Washington*, 2004, 11.

(90) “ETIM Tome Back,” August 5, 2009, accessed February 12, 2018, https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/docs/34/345501_etim-tome-back-.html.

(91) Presentation by author on “A New Idolatrous Tyrant Raises Its Head in the East: Contextualizing ISIS Discourses on China,” in a symposium on terrorism by the Sociology Department of the University of Hong Kong, September 2016.

(92) “Doc#2904,” *Wikileaks*, undated, accessed 12 March 12, 2018, <https://wikileaks.org/saudi-cables/doc2904.html>.

(93) Yitzhak Shichor, “Ethno-Diplomacy: The Uyghur Hitch in Sino-Turkish Relations.,” *Policy Studies* 53 (2009); Shichor, “Nuisance Value: Uyghur Activism in Germany and Beijing-Berlin Relations,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 82 (2013): 612–629.

These factors—the Turkestani cluster’s promotion of contentious and negative attitudes surrounding the Chinese Party-state, its transnational connections to Xinjiang proper, and its potential capacity to support the Uyghur opposition abroad—may have all contributed to the extension of UF focus toward this cluster in recent years. The aims of such UF outreach likely involve neutralizing antagonistic attitudes and activities toward the CPC (akin to what had taken place with respect to the Uyghur diasporas in places like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan for instance) and, more ambitiously, in co-opting members of this cluster in service of the goals of the Party-state. Intelligence-gathering and monitoring purposes cannot be discounted either. Beyond these factors, the refocus could also be understood as part of the renewed emphasis on the UF since 2013–2014 as an important governing and foreign policy instrument under the Xi administration.

4. Conclusion

Saudi Arabia is by no means the only GCC state where such (growing) UF work is taking place. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), which hosts a burgeoning Chinese PRC passport-holding population of 270,000–300,000, has also been a major locus for such activity, and perhaps even more so. This can be evidenced by the increasing number of visits undertaken by officials and cadres from the UFWD as well as the CPPCC in the past few years.⁹⁴ Most notably, during a highly significant visit to Dubai during April 9–12, 2017, Sun Chunlan, the former head of the UFWD, met with representatives of the OC community there.⁹⁵ She exhorted them to continue supporting the development of the ancestral homeland, including both its unity and the integrity of its sovereign territory, and to act as a cultural bridge between China and the Arab world, especially in service of the Belt Road Initiative (一带一路倡议, BRI).⁹⁶

(94) “中国侨联副主席康晓萍一行与迪拜侨界代表座谈,” United Front Work Department of the CPC Central Committee, August 30, 2017, accessed March 19, 2018, <http://www.zyztb.gov.cn/tzb2010/S1815/201708/1399070be1254ad68f919f3585821f4d.shtml>.

(95) “阿联酋副总统兼总理穆罕默德会见孙春兰,” *Xinhua*, April 10, 2017, accessed February 27, 2018, http://news.xinhuanet.com/2017-04/10/c_1120784066.htm.

(96) “中共中央政治局委员、中央统战部部长孙春兰在迪接见华侨华人代表,” Consulate-General of the People’s Republic of China in Dubai, April 18, 2017, accessed February 27, 2018, <http://dubai.chineseconsulate.org/chn/xwdt/t1454434.htm>.



Sun Chunlan, former head of the UFWD, addressing members of the OC community in Dubai.
Date: April 18, 2017. Source: PRC Dubai Consulate website.

The GCC states, as these activities suggest, are no longer isolated from the new trends and developments reshaping the Party-state's engagement with foreign countries, societies, and OC communities abroad, and particularly the increasing empowerment of UF work under the Xi administration. The expansion of UF activity toward the Turkestani cluster, mirroring the 2013–2014 shift in Party-state UF policies, is also indicative of this change.

In examining UF activity in Saudi Arabia, we are confronted with two important questions: How successful are such UF efforts towards Saudi Arabia's ethnic minority OC populations? And, more important, to what extent should this phenomenon be of concern to both Saudi Arabia and the GCC states of the larger region?

With respect to the first query, the extent to which these activities can reshape OC public opinion (舆论) and strengthen their sense of identification with China and the CPC is difficult to gage without systematic surveys and careful qualitative and quantitative research. But in looking at the available anecdotal evidence, however, it does appear that there is greater responsiveness among members of the two clusters to these various forms of UF outreach, a

by-product perhaps of both residual cultural-ideational attachments to China (although this is more complicated in the case of the Turkestanis), as well as out of a pragmatic calculation arising from the country's economic and political rise on the global stage. The growing importance of Sino-Saudi relations and the pressing need for knowledgeable middlemen to manage the various aspects may also underlie this receptivity to UF efforts, informed as they are by the desire to cultivate good ties with Chinese officialdom. Many members from both of these clusters, moreover, maintain various business ties with the Mainland, mostly centered around the cities of Guangzhou (广州) and Yiwu (义乌).

There are two important caveats to this claim surrounding receptivity. First, these Saudi OC clusters are largely made up of communities that are already in their third, fourth, and even fifth generations of settlement in the Kingdom. As a result of this longevity, the openings and opportunities available for UF outreach will therefore be different from those that face the Chinese Party-state with respect to the recent PRC immigrants in the UAE, many of whom have been socialized in the discourses and political language of the Party-state (the distinctions made by Mainland officials and scholars between “Old OC” [老桥] and “New OC” [新桥], or recent PRC-citizen immigrants, and who see the latter as a less challenging population for UF work is suggestive of this).⁹⁷ For younger generations of Saudi OC, who are likely to have greatly diminished linguistic and cultural proficiencies than their elders, these efforts might have less resonance and meaning to them overall. These sociocultural barriers have real bearing on UF efforts—it is notable, after all, that seemingly successful forms of engagements have often been limited to elders and second-generation figures, many of whom still cling to romantic notions about the ancestral homeland or who still retain sufficient cultural and linguistic capital to carry out such exchanges.

Second, UF activities will probably continue to face serious challenges in overcoming the negative attitudes found in the Turkestani cluster, which

(97) To, *Qiaowu Extra-Territorial Policies*, 271–273.

continues to hold and produce—as reflected in the availability of a growing number of Arabic-language Uyghur-controlled sources—anti-Communist and anti-Han discourses.⁹⁸ This is a function of the community’s sociocultural memory as a diaspora forcefully exiled from its homeland with perceptions of China as a hostile anti-Muslim and racialist (Han-dominant) power. The task of “winning” this cluster is complicated furthermore by developments within Xinjiang itself. Many within the Turkestani cluster follow the news about the region closely and often express concerns over the fate of family members and friends there,⁹⁹ some of whom have been subject to the increasingly strident rectification and “strike hard” (严打) campaigns undertaken by the Party-state authorities there. According to recent reports, nearly 120,000 Uyghurs have already been sent to reeducation camps as part of an effort to combat the “three evils” (三股势力) of terrorism, separatism, and extremism.¹⁰⁰ Recent Party-state policies to promote the “Sinification” (中国化) and “Indigenization” (本土化) of Islam and Christianity, hand-in-hand with growing Islamophobic trends found within Chinese society, also raise their own set of complications.¹⁰¹ Whether UF efforts can successfully overcome these long-ingrained negative perceptions toward China while also maintaining a degree of credibility in light of contemporary events is difficult to say.

This is not to suggest there is no potential for making any inroads within this cluster. There are elements within the Turkestani cluster that have already signaled—as the previously mentioned UF examples show—a desire to have a more constructive and engaged relationship with the PRC. A subset has even indicated an openness to taking on Chinese citizenship. The recent changes

(98) Presentation by author, “A New Idolatrous Tyrant Raises Its Head in the East.”

(99) In occasional conversations with the author, Saudi Turkestanis have reported that communications between them and their relatives and friends in Xinjiang have generally ceased, often with the latter refusing to receive calls and messages or asking them to halt such contact altogether.

(100) “China ‘holding at least 120,000 Uighurs in re-education camps.’” *The Guardian*, 8 March 8, 2018, accessed March 18, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/25/at-least-120000-muslim-ughurs-held-in-chinese-re-education-camps-report>.

(101) “习近平：全面提高新形势下宗教工作水平，” 新华社， April 23, 2016, accessed April 12, 2018, www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-04/23/c_1118716540.htm; Luwei Rose Luqiu and Fan Yang. “Islamophobia in China: News Coverage, Stereotypes, and Chinese Muslims’ Perceptions of Themselves and Islam,” *Asian Journal of Communication*, March 28, 2018, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01292986.2018.1457063?journalCode=rajc20>.

to the residency status of Turkestanis without Saudi passports has reportedly encouraged some of individuals to reach out to the PRC diplomatic missions in the Kingdom with the hope of applying for citizenship. According to one prospective applicant, he apparently received a positive albeit reserved reaction from the PRC embassy, which stood in contrast with the abrupt rejections given to him by the Uzbek and Turkish embassies.¹⁰²

Turning to the question of whether the CPC's UF activity in the Gulf constitutes a threat to Saudi Arabia and the GCC states, this should be considered at the backdrop of the debate that has erupted over the past few years over the "political-influence" activities of the CPC, and particularly those being spearheaded by the UFD in relation to OC communities around the world.¹⁰³ This debate has been especially intense within the Western countries, including New Zealand, Australia, and the Czech Republic, whose political systems, processes, and cultures are framed as being vulnerable to such outreach.¹⁰⁴ Anxieties over UF work in the United States, among other "political-influence" (or sharp power) activities, led then-Federal Bureau of Investigation director Christopher Wray to declare during a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing that China was now a "whole-of-society" type of threat.¹⁰⁵ In Australia, prime minister Malcolm Turnbull's unveiling of the National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Foreign Interference) Bill 2017 has also been galvanized by similar fears. In all, there has been a growing trend within Western contexts to push back (not

(١٠٢) "الموسم ٢٠١٧ الحلقة ٧٩: وضع التركستانيين في السعودية."

(103) Timothy Heath, "Beijing's Influence Operations Target Chinese Diaspora," *War on the Rocks*, March 1, 2018, accessed March 11, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/03/beijings-influence-operations-target-chinese-diaspora/>.

(104) Brady, "Magic Weapons.," Anne-Marie Brady, "China's Foreign Influence Offensive in the Pacific," *War on the Rocks*, September 29, 2017, accessed March 11, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/09/chinas-foreign-influence-offensive-in-the-pacific/>; "Power and Influence: The Hard Edge of China's Soft Power," *ABC*, June 5, 2017, accessed February 17, 2018, www.abc.net.au/4corners/power-and-influence-promo/8579844; "Martin Hála on CEFC and CCP Influence in Eastern Europe," *China Digital Times*, February 8, 2018, accessed February 21, 2018, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2018/02/martin-hala-cefc-ccp-influence-eastern-europe/>.

(105) "FBI Director: Chinese Spies 'a Whole-of-Society' Threat to US," *Washington Examiner*, February 13, 2018, accessed March 14, 2018: <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/fbi-director-chinese-spies-a-whole-of-society-threat-to-us>.

discounting the problematic racial fears associated with these efforts) against CPC UF activities toward the OC, as best typified by the Dastyari case, and framing them as threats to national sovereignty, security, and the integrity of their political processes.¹⁰⁶

While taking these debates into account, UF activities, in light of what was discussed above, do not appear to threaten the GCC states in any substantive sense. As authoritarian monarchical systems wherein most central decisions are taken up by a narrow leadership, there are no channels or mechanisms through which such forms of subversion could take place. Some constituencies do have the capacity to influence certain policies and issues, as could be observed with respect to the Saudi OC's influence on the development of Sino-Saudi relations in the 1980s and 1990s. Nevertheless, however, these are largely disenfranchised and peripheralized communities. In the UAE for instance, the OC are largely PRC citizens who have little influence or say in the workings of national Emirati politics. In Saudi Arabia, which is the focus of this study, the Saudi OC do not have the sufficient political weight to influence Saudi policies toward the PRC in any fundamental way: the growing interdependence and complexity of the Sino-Saudi relationship has not only brought in a whole gamut of actors and constituencies, it has also endowed it with its own strategic dynamic. It would be problematic, therefore, to treat UF outreach in Saudi Arabia—and the wider GCC states—as a threat to national sovereignty and as undermining the principle of noninterference.

In examining UF activity in Saudi Arabia, it appears that it is less about subverting the Saudi political system in ways that offer the CPC political or security dividends than it is about amplifying positive discourses about the country and the CPC, while also minimizing certain threats to its domestic stability. The Party seeks to “win over” these clusters as a means toward strengthening its legitimacy back home (most of the UF coverage was, after all, directed at Chinese audiences) and realizing China's core strategic objectives.

(106) Peter Mattis, “What We Talk about When We Talk about Chinese Communist Party Interference in the Public Square,” *War on the Rocks*, March 7, 2018, accessed March 17, 2018. <https://warontherocks.com/2018/03/talk-talk-chinese-communist-party-interference-public-square/>.

These can be understood, in reworking James To's analysis, as finding natural advocates and supporters for Chinese global economic initiatives such as the BRI (again, with reference to audiences back home); marginalizing pro-Taiwan independence and East Turkestan independence voices and sources of support within the Saudi OC community; and tapping unto these clusters as potential platforms for the projection of Chinese soft power abroad, as based on the linguistic and cultural ties these clusters retain with respect to China.

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