

**Studying Abroad to Serve China:**  
*Research on the Systematic Threats of CSSAs  
in the UK*

**By Anson Kwong**



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Cover image: ‘Rear view of university graduates wearing graduation gown and cap in the commencement day’ taken by EduLife for Shutterstock.

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## About the author

**Anson Kwong** is a freelance researcher and journalist based in London.

## About the Henry Jackson Society

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## Executive summary

Universities and students' unions are operating under the fiction that CSSAs, the Chinese Students and Scholars Associations [中国学生学者联谊会] in the UK, are normal student societies, independent in their operation and function and solely beneficial to, and representative of, all ethnic Chinese students at a given institution or in a given area. But the reality is that CSSAs are branches of a central CSSAUK [全英中国学生学者联谊会], which is overseen by Chinese diplomats in the UK, and part of the United Front Work system of China.

There are more than 90 CSSAs in the UK, widely spread across the country. Most but not all are affiliated to a university. They claim to be non-political, and many of their activities are cultural and concerned with helping Chinese students adjust to life in a foreign country. However, they are also closely tied to the Chinese Government, which helps to fund them.

In 2018, the United States' Congressional US-China Economic and Security Review Commission reported that while CSSAs varied in their degree of political involvement, overall, they “are active in carrying out overseas Chinese work consistent with the United Front strategy, and some have been shown to coordinate directly with the Chinese government, to be involved in the harassment of activists, and to have cooperated directly with Chinese security personnel”.<sup>1</sup>

In 2019, Human Rights Watch proposed that all institutions of higher education should monitor CSSAs and require them to report the funding they receive from Chinese diplomatic missions.<sup>2</sup> This year, the Intelligence and Security Committee's (ISC) report on China stated that: “CSSAs are – along with Confucius Institutes – assessed to be used by the Chinese state to monitor Chinese students overseas and to exert influence over their behaviour.”<sup>3</sup>

Based on these assessments, the author believes that CSSAs should be understood as a network actively engaged in serving the interests of the Chinese state and their activities in the UK should be taken more seriously, by Government, students' unions and universities.

CSSAs appear to be committed to delivering on Xi Jinping's call: “studying abroad to serve the country”.<sup>4</sup> This report presents evidence that CSSAs in the UK have been propagandising for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and suppressing students who hold dissenting views against the People's Republic of China (PRC), especially students from Hong Kong and East Turkistan. CSSAUK and local CSSAs are also involved in recruitment drives, seeking to bring to China UK-based Chinese intellectual talents in risky research fields such as AI, biotechnology,

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<sup>1</sup> “2018 Report to Congress”, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, November 2018, <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2019-09/2018%20Annual%20Report%20to%20Congress.pdf>, p. 321

<sup>2</sup> “China: Government Threats to Academic Freedom Abroad (New 12-Point Code of Conduct to Help Educational Institutions Respond)”, Human Rights Watch, 21 March 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/03/21/china-government-threats-academic-freedom-abroad>

<sup>3</sup> Intelligence and Security Committee of UK Parliament's report on China, 13 July 2023, <https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/ISC-China.pdf>, p. 107, par. 298

<sup>4</sup> “习近平在欧美同学会成立 100 周年庆祝大会上的讲话”, Central People's Government of the PRC, [https://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2013-10/21/content\\_2511441.htm](https://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2013-10/21/content_2511441.htm) (<https://archive.vn/XTTrd>)

materials engineering and physical science, which have been identified as a concern by the ISC.<sup>5</sup>

This report suggests that it is critical for universities and students' unions to recognise that CSSAs are not independent from one another, or from CSSAUK and Chinese diplomats – they are part of a *system*. As such, they must look beyond evidence from their particular CSSA to the wider phenomenon when evaluating the *systematic* threat that CSSAs pose to freedom of speech and national security in the UK.

University regulators which have responsibilities and investigative power in this regard, including the Office for Students (OfS), must also address this issue.

It should be noted that, based on the assessment of the ISC that CSSAs serve to monitor and influence Chinese students abroad, individual overseas Chinese students who take part in CSSA initiatives, or even in the running of local CSSAs, should not necessarily be seen as willing participants. The former British diplomat Charles Parton has said that:

*Chinese mainland students are themselves victims because they don't have a great deal of choice. If they don't mobilise, people within the student community are informing the security authorities and other embassies and it will go down on their file and get back to China.*<sup>6</sup>

Also, while CSSAUK and local CSSAs' 'talent programmes' are done openly and are not in any way illegal, such programmes are considered to be a tool used by the Chinese state to try to transfer data and IP to Chinese research groups and government agencies – and in some cases even to steal it.<sup>7</sup> Universities should be more conscious of the risks of participating in such schemes, and the Government should follow the US in tackling the threat. Researchers should be required to disclose foreign funding when applying for government grants or working in sensitive areas.

This report also recommends that the Government should issue guidance on whether CSSAs fall under the requirement for registration under the newly created Foreign Influence Registration Scheme.

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<sup>5</sup> According to the Intelligence and Security Committee of UK Parliament's report on China 2023, the risk of UK research being used to benefit Chinese military can most clearly be seen in respect of dual-use technologies which can be used for both civil and military applications. HMG also noted that "research related to engineering or physical sciences was most likely to have a defence use (and therefore was at greatest risk)". Ibid., p. 112, par. 310-13.

<sup>6</sup> Charlie Parker and Rosemary Bennett, "Call to ban students who are used as puppets of China", *The Times*, 6 June 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/call-to-ban-students-who-act-as-puppets-of-china-353gw3l9x>

<sup>7</sup> Intelligence and Security Committee of UK Parliament's report on China 2023, p. 111, par. 308-9

## Chapter 1

### ***CSSA organisation structure, UFWD and Xi Jinping’s instructions to Chinese students studying abroad***

#### **1. CSSAs, CSSAUK and the Education Section of the Chinese Embassy in the UK**

CSSAs in the UK present two faces. On the one hand, they pose as normal student societies and are often formally registered as such under the aegis of the campus students’ union. There are active CSSAs at 96 British higher education institutes. On the other hand, they are “local member units” [地方学联会员单位] (according to the Mandarin version of CSSAUK’s website)<sup>8</sup> or “subsidiary associations” (according to the English version)<sup>9</sup> of CSSAUK [全英中国学生学者联谊会], a national body that is affiliated to the Chinese Embassy in the UK.

The Mandarin version of CSSAUK’s official introduction says it is “supported” by the Education Section [教育处] of the Chinese Embassy in the UK,<sup>10</sup> which also sends out invitations to CSSAUK’s main annual event on CSSAUK’s behalf.<sup>11</sup> CSSAUK also acts as the overseas directorate for a wing of the United Front Work Department (UFWD), the Chinese state department responsible for influencing operations at home and overseas to support the goals of the Chinese Communist Party (see below).

As subsidiaries of CSSAUK, it follows that local CSSAs are also, at least to some degree, under the influence of the Chinese state. Most CSSAs admit this to some extent, and although some stock phrases are used, the language also varies from case to case and over time. For example, Manchester’s CSSA currently describes itself as follows on Manchester University’s website:

*The association is supported by the Education Section of the Chinese Consulate General in Manchester and has over 3,000 registered members with approximately 1,000 new students arriving in Manchester from China each year.*<sup>12</sup>

In the past, however, the Manchester CSSA has described itself as “affiliated to CSSAUK and based in the Chinese Embassy, which also subsidises its activities.”<sup>13</sup>

Many CSSAs are eager to state their close ties or direct subordination to Chinese diplomats. For instance, the Sheffield CSSA states that it is “under the support and guidance of the

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<sup>8</sup> “关于学联”, CSSAUK, [https://cssauk.org.uk/?page\\_id=42](https://cssauk.org.uk/?page_id=42) (<https://archive.vn/FGyJi>)

<sup>9</sup> “About CSSAUK”, CSSAUK, [https://cssauk.org.uk/?page\\_id=185](https://cssauk.org.uk/?page_id=185) (<https://archive.vn/I5vmD>)

<sup>10</sup> “关于学联”, CSSAUK, [https://cssauk.org.uk/?page\\_id=42](https://cssauk.org.uk/?page_id=42) (<https://archive.vn/FGyJi>)

<sup>11</sup> FOI release held by Sam Dunning and shared with the author.

<sup>12</sup> “Student societies: Chinese Students and Scholars Association in Manchester”, University of Manchester, <https://www.manchester.ac.uk/study/international/country-specific-information/china-mainland/student-societies/>

<sup>13</sup> “Manchester Investment Portfolio”, The Manchester China Forum, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220616165528/https://www.investinmanchester.com/dbimngs/China%20Forum%20IP%202019%20ENG.pdf>



Chinese Embassy in the UK, the Consulate General in Manchester”.<sup>14</sup> Warwick’s CSSA “receives official guidance [接受官方指导] from Chinese consulate-general”<sup>15</sup> while the Bristol CSSA is “subordinate to” [隶属于] and “officially guided by” the Chinese Embassy in the UK.<sup>16</sup>

In 2019, the head of the Education Section of the Chinese Embassy pointed students to CSSAUK’s official WeChat account as an information source guided by the Education Section of the Embassy in the UK – further evidence that the line between CSSAUK and the Embassy is blurred at best. The Section also urged Chinese students to follow CSSAUK for necessary information.<sup>17</sup>

For the purposes of administering its subsidiaries, CSSAUK divides the UK into seven ‘regions’ [地区]: London, Southern, Wales, Midland, Greater Manchester, Northern and Northern Ireland. These regions largely overlap with the ‘administrative regions’ [分管地区] of the Education Section under the Chinese Embassy in the UK in their internal division of labour.<sup>18</sup>

## 2. CSSAUK, Western Returned Scholars Association and the United Front Work Department of China

### 2.1 CSSAUK activities and departments

CSSA activities are a mix of the cultural and social – which may be of great benefit to the wellbeing of Chinese students – and the overtly political.<sup>19</sup> This is in spite of the fact that CSSAs typically describe themselves as ‘non-political’.

CSSAUK’s departmental structure and the stated purpose of the departments reflect this political nature. There are departments obviously involved in cultural enrichment and normal student activities: for example, the Department of Arts and Culture [文艺部], which organises spring festival galas, and the Sports Department [体育部], which organises sports games between local CSSAs.<sup>20</sup> Other departments, such as the External Contact Department [外联部], are tasked with the day-to-day maintenance of CSSAUK’s relationship with local CSSAs,<sup>21</sup> which underlines the subordination of the CSSAs to the central CSSAUK.

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<sup>14</sup> “About us”, Sheffield CSSA, <https://cssasheffield.com/>

<sup>15</sup> “关于学联”, Warwick CSSA, <http://cssawarwick.org.uk/%E5%85%B3%E4%BA%8E%E5%AD%A6%E8%81%94/> (<https://archive.vn/O7LEG>)

<sup>16</sup> Introduction of the Bristol CSSA by Dong Bowen [董博文], Chairman of the Bristol CSSA for 2020–2021, <https://cssauk.org.uk/?p=6174> (<https://archive.vn/hoGWt>)

<sup>17</sup> “Chinese Scholars in the UK” [《英伦学人》], edited by CSSAUK and supervised by the Chinese Embassy in the UK, <https://cssauk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/%E8%8B%B1%E4%BC%A6%E5%AD%A6%E4%BA%BA2019.pdf>, p. 2

<sup>18</sup> “教育处留学生事务管理人员分工”, Education Section of the Chinese Embassy in the UK, <https://england.lxgz.org.cn/england/lxyg/lxxxylfw/20191216122848135171/index.html> (<https://archive.vn/aKafV>)

<sup>19</sup> Sam Dunning and Anson Kwong, “An Investigation of China’s Confucius Institutes in the UK”, Henry Jackson Society, 12 October 2022, p. 56

<sup>20</sup> “部门介绍”, CSSAUK, [https://cssauk.org.uk/?page\\_id=229](https://cssauk.org.uk/?page_id=229) (<https://archive.vn/gewee>)

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



CSSAUK has also set up a ‘Legal Aid Centre’ [法律援助中心] to assist local CSSAs to train ‘consular protection liaison officers’ [领事保护联络员] in their region under the guidance of the Chinese Embassy and Consulate Generals.<sup>22</sup> The following departments are even more overtly political:

- The Organization Department [组织部] is responsible for “building organizational unity in the UK and fostering a patriotic mentality”.<sup>23</sup>
- The Department of Entrepreneurship Development [创业发展部] states that its purpose is to “support the national [China’s] Dual Innovation strategy” [支持国家双创战略] by building a database of entrepreneurial Chinese students in the UK and helping them network and apply for prizes, etc.<sup>24</sup>

These departments are evidently involved in the promulgation of political ideology – for example, promoting patriotism – and in the pursuit of the PRC’s political agendas regarding technology and social control.

## 2.2 CSSAUK as the ‘overseas directorate unit’ of WRSA

CSSAUK also links to the Western Returned Scholars Association (WRSA) [欧美同学会], another national academic organisation established in Beijing that “keeps close contact with more than 100 associations of Chinese scholars overseas in major destination countries for Chinese students.”<sup>25</sup>

In the Mandarin version of CSSAUK’s introductory paragraph on its official website, CSSAUK describes its relationship with WRSA<sup>26</sup> as follows:

*Due to its strong academic atmosphere, CSSAUK has also become an overseas directorate [海外理事单位] of national organisations such as the Western Returned Scholars Association and the Overseas-educated Scholars Association [中国留学人员联谊会] of China.<sup>27</sup>*

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> “A Brief Introduction of the Western Returned Scholars Association (Overseas-educated Scholars Association of China)”, WRSA official website, [http://www.wrsa.net/content\\_40128737.htm](http://www.wrsa.net/content_40128737.htm) (<https://archive.vn/5W6Ks>) This English Introduction is below the Mandarin one.

<sup>26</sup> The English version of CSSAUK’s introduction has no mention of the WRSA. See: “About CSSAUK”, CSSAUK, [https://cssauk.org.uk/?page\\_id=185](https://cssauk.org.uk/?page_id=185) (<https://archive.vn/l5vmD>)

<sup>27</sup> “关于学联”, CSSAUK, [https://cssauk.org.uk/?page\\_id=42](https://cssauk.org.uk/?page_id=42) (<https://archive.vn/FGyJi>)

There are two points to note for this paragraph:

1. The Western Returned Scholars Association and the Overseas-educated Scholars Association of China are in fact not different organisations; the latter is actually a name that has been appended to the former since 2003.<sup>28</sup>

2. Rather than a normal academic organisation of the kind found in free societies, the WRSA states in the English introductory paragraph on its own website that it is “under the leadership of the Secretariat of the CPC Central Committee [中共中央书记处] and *guidance* of the United-Front Work Department”.<sup>29</sup> But in the Mandarin introductory paragraph, WRSA states that it is “*managed by* the Central United Front Work Department on behalf of” [中央统战部代管] the CPC Central Committee rather than merely guided by the UFWD.<sup>30</sup>

Article 18 [第十八条] of the *CCP Regulations on United Front Work 2021* [《中国共产党统一战线工作条例》(2021)] states that “the Western Returned Scholars Association (China Overseas-educated Scholars Association) is the bridge and link of the Party to the overseas students” [欧美同学会(中国留学人员联谊会)是党联系留学人员的桥梁纽带],<sup>31</sup> which legally confirms that WRSA is a part of the united front work system of the CCP.

This has very serious ramifications. The UK Parliament’s Intelligence and Security Committee has described the UFWD as follows:

*The United Front Work Department, one of the most important departments of the CCP, is tasked with building and maintaining support for the Party, both at home and overseas, and is therefore concerned with domestic influence and control, and influence and interference activities directed at the Chinese diaspora, from managing relations with prominent Chinese individuals and groups to co-ordinating support for Chinese positions or targeting dissident groups abroad.*<sup>32</sup>

This reflects academic understandings of the role of the UFWD in transnational repression and political and commercial interference.

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<sup>28</sup> “欧美同学会(中国留学人员联谊会)简介”, WRSA, [http://www.wrsa.net/content\\_40128737.htm](http://www.wrsa.net/content_40128737.htm) (<https://archive.vn/5W6Ks>)

<sup>29</sup> “A Brief Introduction of the Western Returned Scholars Association (Overseas-educated Scholars Association of China)”, WRSA official website, [http://www.wrsa.net/content\\_40128737.htm](http://www.wrsa.net/content_40128737.htm) (<https://archive.vn/5W6Ks>). This English Introduction is below the Mandarin one. Please also note that both ‘CPC’ and ‘CCP’ refer to the Communist Party of China. See: Ryan Ho Kilpatrick, “CCP or CPC: A China Watchers’ Rorschach”, The China Media Project, 30 March 2023, <https://chinamediaproject.org/2023/03/30/ccp-or-cpc-a-china-watchers-rorschach/> and Alex Joske, “The party speaks for you: Foreign interference and the Chinese Communist Party’s united front system”, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 9 June 2020, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/party-speaks-you>

<sup>30</sup> “欧美同学会(中国留学人员联谊会)简介”, WRSA, [http://www.wrsa.net/content\\_40128737.htm](http://www.wrsa.net/content_40128737.htm) (<https://archive.vn/5W6Ks>)

<sup>31</sup> “中共中央印发《中国共产党统一战线工作条例》”, PRC Ministry of Justice, [http://www.moj.gov.cn/pub/sfbgw/jgsz/gjjwzsfbjz/zyzsfbjjztzcfg/202101/t20210106\\_181433.html](http://www.moj.gov.cn/pub/sfbgw/jgsz/gjjwzsfbjz/zyzsfbjjztzcfg/202101/t20210106_181433.html) (<https://archive.vn/EgNj1>)

<sup>32</sup> Intelligence and Security Committee of UK Parliament’s report on China 2023, p. 28.

As a directorate of the WRSA, CSSAUK should also be regarded as a part of China's united front work system, working on behalf of the UFWD. Moreover, because all CSSAs are CSSAUK's subsidiaries, all CSSAs could potentially be working on behalf of the UFWD.

### 3. Xi's instructions to WRSA and the wider community studying abroad

On 21 October 2013, Xi Jinping gave a speech at the 100th anniversary of the founding of the WRSA. While claiming that "the Party and the state respect the choices of those studying abroad" of whether to return to China or not, he also emphasised that "if you stay abroad, we will support you serving the country through various means" [留在海外，我们支持通过多种形式为国服务]<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, while Xi encouraged the WRSA to promote talent recruitment programmes such as the 'Thousand Talents Plan' [千人计划] and 'Ten Thousand Talents Plan' [万人计划] with greater efforts, he also assigned political tasks to the Association. Xi said the WRSA should be "a think-tank for advising on policy-making, and a forceful force for carrying out peoples' diplomacy".<sup>34</sup>

In a speech for the Central United Front Work Conference [中央统战工作会议] in May 2015, Xi Jinping stated clearly that "overseas students are an important part of the talent team and a new focus point for united front work."<sup>35</sup>

In a letter of reply to a young returned scholar in 2022, Xi urged the wider community studying abroad to "tell the good story of China" [讲好中国故事].<sup>36</sup> An article in *China Scholars Abroad* (《神州学人》) reported a number of leading CSSA figures in the UK as supporting this call, including the Chairman of CSSAUK, the Deputy Secretary-General of Manchester's CSSA and the Chairman of the Warwick CSSA.<sup>37</sup>

In the following chapters, the author will explain how Xi Jinping's instructions appear to have translated into an effort by CSSAUK (and its branches), Chinese diplomats and the UFWD to serve CCP interests in a *systematic* way.

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<sup>33</sup> "习近平在欧美同学会成立 100 周年庆祝大会上的讲话", Central People's Government of the PRC, [https://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2013-10/21/content\\_2511441.htm](https://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2013-10/21/content_2511441.htm) (<https://archive.vn/XTTrd>)

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> "习近平：巩固发展最广泛的爱国统一战线 为实现中国梦提供广泛力量支持", Central People's Government of the PRC, [https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-05/20/content\\_2865448.htm](https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-05/20/content_2865448.htm) (<https://archive.vn/HXXF2>)

<sup>36</sup> "习近平给南京大学留学归国青年学者的回信", People.cn, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0519/c1024-32425313.html> (<https://archive.vn/LiETB#selection-1145.0-1145.19>)

<sup>37</sup> "习近平总书记给南京大学留学归国青年学者的回信在留英学子中引起强烈共鸣", China Scholars Abroad, [http://chisa.edu.cn/exclusive/202205/t20220526\\_2110873213.html](http://chisa.edu.cn/exclusive/202205/t20220526_2110873213.html) (<https://archive.vn/s0yLc>)

## Chapter 2

### **Systematic control of Chinese diplomats over CSSAs and issues presented to student governing bodies**

The Intelligence and Security Committee's July 2023 report on China warned that the Chinese state "seeks to monitor and control Chinese students' behaviour – primarily via the network of Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSAs)".<sup>38</sup> This lends credence to longstanding claims of CSSAs being manipulated by Chinese diplomats in the UK, including claims by former CSSA leaders.

Interviewed by the *Epoch Times* [大紀元時報] and New Tang Dynasty TV [新唐人電視台] in 2007, Dr Liu Wei [刘伟], a Falun Gong practitioner who was the Chairman of the Manchester CSSA during 1998–1999, before the Chinese suppression of Falun Gong, accused the Chinese Embassy of controlling CSSAs' appointment of personnel and financial sources.<sup>39</sup>

Recently, the author has also noticed that a former chairwoman of the Durham CSSA complained about the Chinese Embassy's pressure on CSSA chairmen in a public post on her Xiaohongshu (小红书, one of the hottest social platforms among Chinese youngsters). She said if a union society at a CSSA-based university invited a lecturer to speak on a topic like 'Is China a threat to the West?', the Chinese Embassy or Consulate General would call the chairman of the CSSA and require them to 'sort it out'. If a campus incident turned political, Chinese diplomats would blame that chairman. She mentioned that there had been cases where a CSSA chairman had been summoned to the Embassy or Consulate General because of such incidents.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Intelligence and Security Committee of UK Parliament's report on China 2023, p. 107, par. 298

<sup>39</sup> “前英曼城学联主席述中领馆控学生会助延伸政治意图”, *Epoch Times*, <https://www.epochtimes.com/gb/7/6/21/n1750377.htm> and “前曼城学联主席谈领馆对学联的控制”, New Tang Dynasty TV, <https://www.ntdtv.com/gb/2007/06/24/a60304.html>

<sup>40</sup> Full transcription from the post:

设想一个场景。

你是某大学中国学联主席，

你们学校的 union society 要邀请一位 lecturer 来校讲演。这位 lecturer 各种反华言论，题目是“中国是否会成为西方威胁？”

本来你不打算管这个事儿，

反正这种活动也不会真有几个人去听。

但是你们学校来留学的中国硕士生群情激愤，  
爱国精神直冲上云霄。

他们建立了一个微信群【我们必须要做点儿什么】，短短几分钟五百人疯狂@你施压。

他们一早上给 Shi 馆打了几十通电话请求支援，说他们打算游行横幅示威，威胁学校取消讲演。

Shi 馆给 Ling 馆打电话，

Ling 馆给你打电话，

“把这个问题解决掉。”

那麼问题来了：为甚麽 Shi/Ling 馆不出面？因为英国大学是有言论自由的。一旦干预，这件事就会从简单的校园活动演变成 ZZ 问题。然而如果不干预，一旦学生真的游行，这属于馆领导任内过失，发酵过大就会有人背锅。（确有过类似事件发生过，学联主席被请去喝茶了）

Some outspoken British scholars also raised their concerns. For example, Professor Steve Tsang from the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London) gave oral evidence to the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament in May 2019 on how the Chinese Embassy exerted pressure on CSSA members, which resulted in a culture of fear and suspicion among Chinese students in the UK.<sup>41</sup>

But in this chapter, the author is going to provide more evidence to shine a light on the nature of the control of CSSAs by Chinese diplomats and state officials.

## 1. Instructions given by Chinese diplomats to CSSA leaders through regional workshops and trainings

As explained in the last chapter, CSSAs in the UK are regarded as branches of CSSAUK and are divided into seven 'regions' [地区] of the UK, which largely overlap with the 'administrative regions' [分管地区] of the Education Section under the Chinese Embassy in the UK in their internal division of labour.<sup>42</sup> Over the years, regional workshops and trainings were given to CSSA leaders by Chinese diplomats either from the Chinese Embassy or Consulate Generals located in the region, accompanied by 'teachers' from the Education Section.

### 1.1 Embassy-guided workshops for CSSA leaders in the 'Southern Region'

In 2010, a workshop for CSSAs in the Southern Region was held at the Chinese Embassy building in London; 37 representatives of CSSAs from 18 colleges and universities in the region attended, including Oxford, Bath, Bristol, Southampton and Cardiff. Representatives from the CSSAs showed their activities with pictures and videos. They also proposed to strengthen exchanges between CSSAs in the region. Tian Xiaogang [田小刚], Minister-counsellor of the Education Section of the Chinese Embassy, and other Chinese diplomats were invited to provide guidance.<sup>43</sup> In his speech, Tian praised CSSA leaders for uniting and leading the majority of Chinese students in the region to study hard and repay China with their studies under the banner of patriotism.<sup>44</sup>

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背锅之人，你是首选。

<sup>41</sup> Professor Steve Tsang told the Committee:

*The student bodies are infiltrated ... We know that ... there are meetings that happen through the middle of the night and the following morning some Chinese students can get rung up by somebody at the cultural or education section of the embassy to ask them: why did you say that? Why did you do that?*

See: Intelligence and Security Committee of UK Parliament's report on China 2023, p. 107.

<sup>42</sup> “教育处留学生事务管理人员分工”，Education Section of the Chinese Embassy in the UK, <https://england.lxgz.org.cn/england/lxgy/lxxyfw/20191216122848135171/index.html> (<https://archive.vn/aKAfV>)

<sup>43</sup> “驻英使馆教育处举办英国南部中国学联工作交流会”，Chinanews.com, <http://www.chinanews.com.cn/lxsh/2010/09-21/2549578.shtml> (<https://archive.vn/yuULZ>)

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

The workshop was followed on 28 September 2010 by an on-campus briefing at Imperial College London, hosted by diplomats from the Education Section of the Chinese Embassy, where a lawyer was invited to introduce knowledge of the law in the UK to participants.<sup>45</sup>

## 1.2 Workshops and ‘Formal Cadre Trainings’ for CSSAs in the ‘Northern Region’

In 2019, the workshop for CSSA leaders in the Northern Region was named ‘Formal CSSA Cadre Training’ [学联干部正式培训].<sup>46</sup> Note that ‘cadre’ [干部] has a specific connotation in China’s bureaucracy. It refers to members who are in a position of leadership and authority: they are the professional staff who are the backbone of the party apparatus,<sup>47</sup> and ‘cadre training’ [干部培训] refers to the ideological education of provincial governors or training courses for staff in a township office in China.<sup>48</sup> This reveals that CSSA officers are in some respects viewed as officers of the Chinese state – at least by those responsible for organising this event.

This training was co-hosted by the Glasgow CSSA and the Confucius Institute in the University of Glasgow. The training was held in the Sir Charles Wilson Building in the University of Glasgow. Participants included leaders of the Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Edinburgh Lombard, Heriot-Watt, Dundee, St Andrews, Stirling Federation and West of Scotland CSSAs – they were all regarded by the Embassy or CSSAUK as ‘cadres’ for the purposes of the training.<sup>49</sup>

Minister-Counsellor Xia Jianhui [夏建辉]<sup>50</sup> from the Education Section of the Chinese Embassy attended the training and praised the CSSA leaders for playing an important role in integrating the Education Section’s guidelines into the management of local CSSAs. He also put forward several initiatives relating to the management of CSSAs, including standardisation and institutionalisation of the management model, as well as the idea of the integration of students from Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, with “no sense of exclusivity towards overseas Chinese groups and university student associations”.<sup>51</sup>

The Chairman of CSSAUK led the CSSA cadres to study the message to CSSA members from Liu Xiaoming [刘晓明], the Chinese Ambassador to the UK, which was to bear in mind the advice from Xi Jinping, who proposed that overseas Chinese students in the “New Era” [新时期] should link their ideals closely with the future of the motherland.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> “中国驻英国大使馆在伦敦帝国理工学院举行‘文明暨安全进校园’领事宣讲活动”, Chinese Embassy in the UK, [http://gb.china-embassy.gov.cn/zytz/201009/t20100930\\_3140831.htm](http://gb.china-embassy.gov.cn/zytz/201009/t20100930_3140831.htm) (<https://archive.vn/7hJ4H>)

<sup>46</sup> “全英学联北区各学联干部培训会议成功召开”, CSSAUK, <https://cssauk.org.uk/?p=3815> (<https://archive.vn/XiqWX>)

<sup>47</sup> Frank N Pieke, *The Good Communist Elite Training and State Building in Today’s China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 28.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>49</sup> “全英学联北区各学联干部培训会议成功召开”, CSSAUK, <https://cssauk.org.uk/?p=3815> (<https://archive.vn/XiqWX>)

<sup>50</sup> Formerly, Xia was the Deputy Chair of the Hanban [汉办]. See: “西部开发司与孔子学院总部/国家汉办代表团座谈交流‘一带一路’教育人文合作”, National Development and Reform Commission of the PRC, [https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/fzggw/jgsj/kfs/sjdt/201603/t20160314\\_1085991.html](https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/fzggw/jgsj/kfs/sjdt/201603/t20160314_1085991.html)

<sup>51</sup> “全英学联北区各学联干部培训会议成功召开”, CSSAUK, <https://cssauk.org.uk/?p=3815> (<https://archive.vn/XiqWX>)

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*



### 1.3 Zheng Xiyuan's instructions to CSSA leaders in the 'Manchester Region'

On 24 March 2019, China's Consul General, Zheng Xiyuan [郑曦原],<sup>53</sup> held a 'spring tea gathering' for CSSA chairmen at the Chinese Consulate General in Manchester. During the gathering, Zheng mentioned Xi Jinping's 'ideological and political theory' course for teachers in Beijing and urged CSSA chairmen to follow Xi's instructions and make unremitting efforts to realise the great rejuvenation of China and the 'China Dream'.<sup>54</sup>

Heads of all 22 CSSAs in the Manchester Region attended the gathering. As reported by the consulate, all the CSSA representatives who spoke expressed how the growing strength of China makes overseas students feel proud and keen to carry on the glorious tradition of their predecessors who studied abroad to serve the country.<sup>55</sup>

In 2020, an article in *China Scholars Abroad* (《神州学人》) told the story of the Manchester CSSA, including how it continued to expand its influence with the care and guidance of the Chinese Embassy in the UK. It also set out various accomplishments, such as hosting the China Overseas Student Innovation and Entrepreneurship Competition and job fairs (three fairs per month) for Chinese universities and enterprises, in order to facilitate sending back high-quality Chinese talents and excellent projects from Manchester to Zhejiang, Shandong, Shaanxi and other China cities.<sup>56</sup>

Talent recruitment campaigns launched by CSSAs in the UK are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

## 2. CSSAs as agents of the Chinese Embassy networking with British universities in ostensible cultural events

There is evidence that CSSAs in the UK are required to play a role in facilitating collaboration and exchange between their host universities and the Chinese Embassy through holding annual cultural events such as spring festival galas [春晚].

On 15 February 2023, a representative of the Bristol CSSA sent an email to the university administration on behalf of Counsellor Kuang Jianjiang [匡建江], a Chinese diplomat who would attend the 2023 Spring Festival Gala held by the Bristol CSSA. The email explained that

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<sup>53</sup> In October 2022, Zheng was accused of kicking down the poster of a Hong Kong pro-democracy protester and pulling his hair. He denied the video evidence but returned to China two months later. See: Josh Halliday and Emma Graham-Harrison, "Chinese diplomat involved in violence at Manchester consulate, MP says", *The Guardian*, 18 October 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/oct/18/china-claims-hong-kong-protester-entered-manchester-consulate-illegally> and George Bowden and James Landale, "China diplomats leave UK over Manchester protester attack", BBC News, 14 December 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-63972640>

<sup>54</sup> "驻曼彻斯特总领馆召开领区学联主席春季茶话会", Chinese Consulate General in Manchester, [http://manchester.china-consulate.gov.cn/chn/sbgx/jylx/201903/t20190329\\_3989484.htm](http://manchester.china-consulate.gov.cn/chn/sbgx/jylx/201903/t20190329_3989484.htm) (<https://archive.vn/ihcOc>)

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> "披荆斩棘七十载与国同梦曼城路", *China Scholars Abroad*, [http://www.chisa.edu.cn/issues/201970zn/hygzxjstxl/202001/t20200103\\_2110739817.html](http://www.chisa.edu.cn/issues/201970zn/hygzxjstxl/202001/t20200103_2110739817.html) (<https://archive.vn/QIFjn>)



Kuang would like to have a face-to-face discussion with a female attendant of the Gala, whose name was redacted in the FOI release which revealed this information. Discussion topics included “international communication between Chinese & UK Universities” and “suggestions on international student affairs from the University’s perspective/areas that the University would require strengthened collaborations or support from the Embassy Department of Education”, adding that the Bristol CSSA would “carefully arrange the VIP seats to make this happen”.<sup>57</sup>

### **3. Issues presented to students’ unions and universities regarding Chinese diplomats’ control of CSSAs**

The control of CSSAs by the Chinese Embassy/state represents a problem for students’ unions (SUs). Many SUs require student societies in the UK to be independent and self-governing – this is often a condition of registration as a student society under the union. Other requirements relate to student democracy and voting. For example, the University of Warwick SU’s *Code of Conduct and Disciplinary Regulations* makes it clear in Article 10007 (d) that all members of Warwick University and all student societies “must be the independent voice of Warwick students”.<sup>58</sup> *Club and Society Regulations* of the UCL Students’ Union also specifies that society officers should be elected via online elections or at general meetings and that a president elected in this way should govern the society.<sup>59</sup>

The fact that CSSAs follow the guidance of the Chinese Embassy, or even function as extensions of the Chinese state power as outlined above, renders them incapable of always promoting the views and interests of the members of the group, because sometimes the desires of the Chinese Embassy and the desires of the university members from China diverge.<sup>60</sup>

The control of CSSAs by the Chinese Embassy/state has even more important legal ramifications, which will be explored in more detail in the ‘Policy Recommendations’ section of this report.

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<sup>57</sup> Please visit <https://ukctransparency.org/library/> for FOI release seen by the author.

<sup>58</sup> “Code of Conduct and Disciplinary Regulations”, Warwick SU, November 2022, <https://www.warwicksu.com/pageassets/your-union/how-the-su-works/governingdocuments/Regulation-10-Code-of-Conduct-and-Disciplinary-Regulations.pdf>, p. 2

<sup>59</sup> *Club and Society Regulations*, Students’ Union UCL, August 2019, [https://studentsunionucl.org/sites/default/files/u210044/documents/clubs\\_and\\_society\\_regulations\\_19.20\\_final.pdf](https://studentsunionucl.org/sites/default/files/u210044/documents/clubs_and_society_regulations_19.20_final.pdf), pp. 15-16

<sup>60</sup> For instance, Chinese citizens studying in the UK protested in 2022 to show solidarity with those at home who have taken to the streets in rejection of Beijing’s Covid rules. But Consul General Zheng Xiyuan from the Chinese consulate advised them to “consciously resist distorting and discrediting China’s epidemic prevention and control policies”. Chen Wei, a counsellor at the consulate praised the Manchester CSSA for having “assisted the consulate general to actively carry out preventive consular propaganda”. See: Daniel Boffey, “Chinese students in UK told to ‘resist distorting’ China’s Covid policies”, *The Guardian*, 8 December 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/08/chinese-students-uk-china-covid-policies-diplomacy>

## Chapter 3

### ***CSSA-organised political activities and the systematic threat to freedom of speech on UK campuses***

CSSAs typically declare themselves to be ‘non-political’ [‘非政治性’] groups. This seems at odds with the subordination of CSSAs to CSSAUK, an organisation which explicitly states its pursuit of China’s national strategy.

As previously mentioned, the ISC reports that CSSAs “monitor Chinese students overseas and [...] exert influence over their behaviour”. Based on that assessment, together with the fact that CSSAs are heavily influenced by the Chinese Embassy and CSSAUK is part of the united front work system of the CCP, the author believes that CSSA-run activism *is not normal student activism, but instead state-directed activity* that poses a serious threat to freedom of speech and academic freedom.

In this chapter, new evidence of CSSAs’ active involvement in political activities that serve the interests of the CCP will be presented. These activities, ranging from counter-protests against students who hold dissenting views against the Chinese Government to pressure campaigns against student regulatory bodies on cultural activities related to Hongkongers and Uyghurs, posed a *systematic threat* to the safety and freedoms of tens of thousands of individuals on British campuses.

#### **1. CSSA-organised counter-protests and physical harassment in 2019**

In 2019, Hong Kong experienced a large series of demonstrations against the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government’s introduction of a bill to amend the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance in regard to extraditing offenders to mainland China. Rallies in support of Hong Kong’s democracy movement took place on university campuses across the UK. Hong Kong students who organised these rallies at Aston, Cambridge, Exeter, Liverpool and Newcastle universities reportedly faced harassment from mainland Chinese students, who threatened, photographed and videoed them.<sup>61</sup>

One counter-rally in Newcastle, which saw involvement by the Newcastle CSSA, which introduces itself as an association “managed by and registered under the Chinese Consulate General in Manchester” [中国驻曼城领事馆管理下的正规注册的学生学者联谊组织],<sup>62</sup> is a case in point.

On 13 October 2019, Hong Kong protesters took to the streets of Newcastle to raise awareness and show support for their region’s cause through a peaceful protest. But a

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<sup>61</sup> Ian Williams, *Every Breath You Take: China’s New Tyranny* (Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd, 2021), p. 153

<sup>62</sup> “英国纽卡斯尔大学中国学联简介”, Newcastle CSSA, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?biz=MzAxMjA3MDY2Ng==&mid=206264633&idx=1&sn=6b2a794caad2bd57604196c2f44b8ace&scene=0#rd> (<https://archive.vn/l2QuA>)

commotion resulted when a group of Chinese students and elders appeared as part of a counter-rally.

Hong Kong protesters told *The Courier*, a student media under Newcastle Students' Union: "someone from the Chinese protest was waiting for us at 1 p.m. and was constantly taking photos. Our faces were captured". Hongkongers donned masks in response but one of the students attending the demonstration claimed some of the counter-protesters tried to take his mask off. In addition to this, one of the photographers accompanying the activists claimed that "five old Chinese men spat water and insulted [them]".<sup>63</sup>

The author has obtained video evidence that links the counter-rally to the Newcastle CSSA, which introduces itself as a "non-political" organisation on its official Weixin platform.<sup>64</sup>

Below are three screenshots from a video shared with the author by a student who took part in the protest on 13 October 2019 and took the video. As shown in the screenshots, one of the Chinese students who participated in the counter-rally and appears to be addressing it was wearing a hoodie with the Newcastle CSSA's logo embroidered on the back.<sup>65</sup>



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<sup>63</sup> Alex Gervas, "Hong Kong protesters confronted by Chinese counter-rally", *The Courier*, <https://www.thecourieronline.co.uk/hong-kong-protesters-confronted-by-chinese-counter-rally/>

<sup>64</sup> English introduction to the Newcastle CSSA on Newcastle CSSA's Weixin page, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?biz=MzAxMjA3MDY2Ng==&mid=206264633&idx=1&sn=6b2a794caad2bd57604196c2f44b8ace&scene=0#rd> (<https://archive.vn/l2QuA>) This English introduction is below the Mandarin one.

<sup>65</sup> The Newcastle CSSA's official Weibo account uses the same logo. See: <https://weibo.com/p/1002062523022000/photos?type=video> (<https://archive.vn/60nsT>)

<sup>66</sup> Screenshots from a video taken by a student on 13 October 2019 who allowed the author to use it.

Members of the Northern Britain Chinese Entrepreneurs Association [NBCEA, 英国北部华人企业家协会] also joined the counter-rally and confirmed via Weibo that the rally organised by the Hong Kong protestors was “ended half an hour early due to boycott from the local CSSA and overseas Chinese in Newcastle” [集会活动在纽卡当地学联、华侨的抵制下提前半小时结束],<sup>67</sup> which confirms Newcastle CSSA’s active role in this counter-rally.

Prior to this counter-rally, the NBCEA held a joint demonstration with Chinese scholars and students in Newcastle in August 2019 and publicly advocated that “all Chinese must speak out in support of the HKSAR Government and the Hong Kong Police”.<sup>68</sup>

## 2. CSSAs’ official responses to on-campus pro-democracy peaceful protests

There are also examples of political activity that falls short of direct interference.

On 6 December 2019, the Sussex CSSA, which confirms its subordination to the Education Section of the Chinese Embassy in the UK on its official website,<sup>69</sup> issued a public statement denying alleged misconduct of mainland Chinese students during a confrontation between anti-democracy students and pro-democracy Hong Kong students on 3 December 2019. The latter had set up a stall on campus to show their support for protestors in Hong Kong. The statement said the Sussex CSSA was a non-political group and emphasised that the Chinese students “NEITHER resorted in violence NOR tried to harass anyone” on that day.<sup>70</sup>

However, footage shared with the author by a student clearly shows one of the counter-protesting students repeatedly using his feet to wipe the Hong Kong protesters’ writings off the ground. The footage also shows an English-speaking lady trying to stop the Chinese student from wiping the writings, repeatedly stating that the demonstration is peaceful and trying to persuade the counter-protestors to ask questions instead.<sup>71</sup>

Some CSSAs did seek to prevent physical interference. For example, the Glasgow CSSA posted a reminder on its official Weibo for Chinese students who were going to join a counter-rally against Hong Kong students in Edinburgh in August 2019,<sup>72</sup> advising them to avoid any verbal and physical confrontations with Hong Kong students.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Transcribed from an NBCEA Weibo post shared with the author.

<sup>68</sup> “英国纽卡斯尔华界举行护港集会游行”, UK Association for the Promotion of Chinese Education, <https://www.ukapce.org/?p=1998> (<https://archive.vn/VxgzN#selection-543.22-543.33>)

<sup>69</sup> “About us”, Sussex CSSA, <https://publicitycssa.wixsite.com/sussex/about-us> (<https://archive.vn/ogNbd>)

<sup>70</sup> “Response to alleged misconducts of mainland Chinese students”, Sussex CSSA official Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/cssasussexuni> (<https://archive.vn/PHpDj>)

<sup>71</sup> Link to the YouTube video shared by a student with the author:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JF8kuBUyLO> (<https://archive.vn/DQwDN>)

<sup>72</sup> Ben Graham, “Hong Kong protests – Edinburgh pro-democracy demonstration met by pro-China supporters”, *The Edinburgh Reporter*, 17 August 2019, <https://theedinburghreporter.co.uk/2019/08/hong-kong-protests-edinburgh-pro-democracy-demonstration-met-by-pro-china-supporters/>

<sup>73</sup> According to a bilingual post on the official Facebook page of the Glasgow CSSA: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2316453201911429&set=a.1937303559826397> (<https://archive.vn/VNdCj>)

### 3. CSSA-organised political campaigns against universities and subsidiary student regulatory bodies

#### 3.1 Bristol CSSA's pressure campaign against the BAME Network of Bristol's SU

On 4 May 2021, a representative of the Bristol CSSA requested through email the removal of the “flag of the East Turkistan” from the advertising poster of a cultural event titled ‘Oppressive Regime Series – Focus on Xinjiang’, which was organised by the BAME Network of Bristol's SU. The email was also forwarded to the International Office of the University of Bristol.<sup>74</sup>

The representative persisted in claiming that “the East Turkestan [sic] has been identified as a terrorist group by United Nations Security Council, United Kingdom, China and many other institutions.”<sup>75</sup>

The organiser refused to amend the event, and the Bristol CSSA representative was told that other members of the BAME Network thought that the characterisation of East Turkestan independence movements was unfair and biased. The organiser invited Bristol CSSA members to attend the event and speak instead. But the representative rejected this and said this opinion “just show[s] the viciousness of their intentions”.<sup>76</sup>

On 12 May, in the hope of making the representative “happy to participate [in the event] and share your perspective”, the organiser agreed to remove the flag from the advertising poster. But the representative further pushed him to delete the word “oppressive” from the event title because “there is no factual evidence to support the word ‘oppressive’”.<sup>77</sup>

Contrary to the Bristol CSSA representative's characterisation of the ‘flag of the East Turkistan’ (called *Kokbayraq*), the term ‘East Turkestan’ and the associated flag are mostly not associated with terrorism and have a much broader significance for the indigenous peoples of Xinjiang.<sup>78</sup> While there is a separatist group, the East Turkestan Islamist Movement, which has been accused of terrorism, the term ‘East Turkestan’ itself has of course not been identified as a terrorist group by global institutions. Rather, this is the Uyghur term for the homeland of the Uyghur people and those of Turkic ethnicity and Muslim faith who prefer not to define themselves by the term ‘Xinjiang’. The Bristol CSSA representative's presentation was misleading.

The leader of the Bristol CSSA from 2020–2021 acknowledged it was “subordinate to” the Chinese Embassy in the UK and “officially guided” by it.<sup>79</sup> In this case, the Bristol CSSA

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<sup>74</sup> Please visit <https://ukctransparency.org/library/> for FOI release seen by the author.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Please refer to Council on Foreign Relations, “The East Turkestan Islamic Movement”, 2014, <https://www.cfr.org/background/east-turkestan-islamic-movement-etim> and Aizhamal Marat, “Uyghur digital diaspora in Kyrgyzstan”, *Diaspora Studies*, 2016, vol. 9, p. 60.

<sup>79</sup> Introduction of the Bristol CSSA by Dong Bowen [董博文], President of the Bristol CSSA for 2020–2021, <https://cssauk.org.uk/?p=6174> (<https://archive.vn/hoGWt>)

representative appears to have been promoting CCP narratives and, in so doing, ended up conflating all forms of Uyghur activism and identity with terrorism.

### 3.2 Warwick CSSA's pressure campaign against the University of Warwick

In November 2019, some Hong Kong students at the University of Warwick put up a Lennon Wall (a wall filled with images and information in support of a particular cause) which featured statistics aiming to inform people about the situation in Hong Kong. An image of a pig was part of the wall.<sup>80</sup>

In an open letter to the university's vice-chancellor and president, a representative from Warwick University Students' Union said the wall had been "full of racist, discriminatory and misleading information" because "the invading Japanese army during the Second World War invented the 'Zhi Na pig' phrase to dehumanise Chinese people to that statue (sic) of less than human." The representative called on the university to explain how permission was granted to post the pig image.<sup>81</sup>

The letter was co-signed by the Warwick Chinese Society, the Warwick China Development Society and the Warwick CSSA, which "receives official guidance [接受官方指导] from Chinese consulate-general".<sup>82</sup>

The pig image was taken down by security staff over this allegation.

However, students from Hong Kong who organised the Lennon Wall defended the pig when approached by *The Boar*, the student newspaper of the University of Warwick, saying that it was "a symbol of protest commonly used by Hong Kong protestors especially on the messaging app Telegram as stickers".<sup>83</sup>

Another student also told the *Coventry Telegraph*:

*It is being taken out of context. The pig is a peaceful symbol of protest that is used within the Hong Kong protest movement. But other students have somehow linked it with an insult that has historically been used against Chinese people, which is to do with a mispronunciation of the word 'China' in Japanese.*<sup>84</sup>

When presented with 'student societies', some of which admit they are controlled by a foreign state and which engage in harassment and political campaigning on campus in the

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<sup>80</sup> Rachel Stretton, "University of Warwick criticised as protest image removed from Lennon Wall in racism row", *Coventry Telegraph*, 13 November 2019, <https://www.coventrytelegraph.net/news/coventry-news/university-warwick-criticised-protest-image-17217906>

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> "关于学联", Warwick CSSA, <http://cssawarwick.org.uk/%E5%85%B3%E4%BA%8E%E5%AD%A6%E8%81%94/> (<https://archive.vn/O7LEG>)

<sup>83</sup> Evianne Suen and Katie Tarrant, "Warwick security take down 'Lennon Wall' pig dubbed 'racist' by Chinese students", *The Boar*, 6 November 2019, <https://theboar.org/2019/11/warwick-security-take-down-lennon-wall-pig-dubbed-racist-by-chinese-students/>

<sup>84</sup> Stretton, "University of Warwick criticised as protest image removed from Lennon Wall in racism row".



interests of that state, the normal paradigm of student activism must be put aside: *this appears to be political activity directed by a foreign state.*

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that CSSAs' political activities have not been confined to campus. While there is not necessarily any implication of impropriety in this, it shows that the remit of CSSAs appears to stretch well beyond that of any normal student society. For example, the Cambridge CSSA delegation met with Cambridge City Council in 2011, seeking to "work substantively with the County Council" and "expand Cambridge CSSA's influence".<sup>85</sup> The Oxford CSSA wants "to set up a network to strengthen the bond between the Oxford City Council, Oxford University and the Chinese Embassy".<sup>86</sup> In 2010, representatives of CSSAUK attended the British Government's Consultation on Chinese Affairs in London.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> See: "剑桥中国学联主席率团参访剑桥郡政府", CCTV.com, <http://news.cntv.cn/20120119/108436.shtml> (<https://archive.vn/jzFYQ>) and "中国学联代表参观英国剑桥郡政府 畅谈华人参政", China Daily, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hqzx/2011-03/07/content\\_12131749.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hqzx/2011-03/07/content_12131749.htm) (<https://archive.vn/urmXA>)

<sup>86</sup> Please visit <https://ukctransparency.org/library/> for FOI release seen by the author.

<sup>87</sup> "英政府首次举行华人事务咨询会 听取华社代表诉求", Chinanews.com, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/hr/2010/11-02/2627090.shtml> (<https://archive.vn/DhbjD>)



## Chapter 4

### ***UFWD–CSSAUK collaborations in talent recruitment***

Since the organisation of the first Sino-British Technology Entrepreneurship Competition in 2005 (which attracted attention and support from UK Trade & Investment and BBC Chinese Network) and a PhD delegation to China in 2006, CSSAUK's and its branches' commitment to 'networking' has been strengthened in line with changing Chinese Government priorities.

In response to Xi Jinping's call ("studying abroad to serve the country") and Chinese diplomats' instructions to repay China with their studies under the banner of patriotism, which have been frequently given in regional workshops and trainings of CSSA leaders in recent years (detailed in Chapter 2), running talent recruitment activities for the Chinese Government has become one of the most important tasks for CSSAUK and its branches.

The author will list below a number of such talent recruitment initiatives with the subjects that they focused on. This does not mean that the CCP succeeded in stealing secrets from any of the participants or in recruiting or suborning them in any way, but it does show some of the topics the CCP are interested in 'collaborating' on and, it follows, areas of potential risk due to direct or indirect military applications.

There is no implication that any particular talent recruitment initiative is improper or that individuals who take part in CSSA recruitment efforts are doing anything which might be considered underhand. Such recruitment efforts are done openly and are not in any way illegal. Indeed, such arrangements were arguably encouraged and legitimated by the UK Government until very recently, just as Chinese involvement in British critical infrastructure, for example, was welcomed until rising concerns about Huawei and nuclear security changed the calculation. It was only late last year that Rishi Sunak gave a speech acknowledging the end of the so-called "golden era" of UK-China relations initiated by David Cameron.

However, those who innocently take part in these widespread efforts should be aware that such 'talent programmes' are considered to be a tool used by the Chinese state to try to transfer – and in some cases even steal – data and IP into Chinese research groups and government agencies.<sup>88</sup> National security threats posed by these activities are the subject of growing study and concern. In 2020, Alex Joske, a researcher from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), warned that these activities may exploit the high-trust and open scientific communities of developed countries.<sup>89</sup> Alongside legitimate programmes related to exchange and talent recruitment, there are accusations of misconduct, including theft, espionage, fraud and dishonesty.<sup>90</sup> In the 2023 ISC Report on China, it is alleged that Chinese

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<sup>88</sup> Intelligence & Security Committee of UK Parliament's report on China 2023, p. 111, par. 308-9

<sup>89</sup> Alex Joske, "Hunting the Phoenix: The Chinese Communist Party's global search for technology and talent", ASPI, 20 August 2020, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/hunting-phoenix>

<sup>90</sup> Hannas et al., "Chinese industrial espionage: technology acquisition and military modernization". Cited by Joske, "Hunting the Phoenix: The Chinese Communist Party's global search for technology and talent".

talent programmes try to “steal foreign technologies needed to advance China’s national, military and economic goals”, citing the Federal Bureau of Investigation of the United States.<sup>91</sup>

The author has identified more than 10 talent recruitment activities co-organised by CSSAUK, local CSSAs and provincial or municipal UFWDs in China between 2013 and 2023. For reasons of space, only some are examined here. Again, these are not singled out in any way as instances of improper activities, but to show the scale and mainstream acceptance of a practice which has the potential for abuse, and the role of CSSAs in helping to instigate and normalise such activities.

## **1. PhD tours co-organised by WRSA, CSSAUK, Oxford CSSA, UFWD of Wuhan and Qingdao**

On 10 September 2015, the first ‘100 PhDs in the UK Entrepreneurship Tour to China’ [百名留英博士创业中国行] was launched in Beijing, hosted by the WRSU and co-organised by CSSAUK and the Technology & Management Centre for Development (TMCD) of the University of Oxford. A total of 101 PhD students from Imperial College London and the universities of Cambridge, Manchester, Durham, Nottingham and Edinburgh, plus other renowned universities, participated in this China tour with 86 entrepreneurial projects in the fields of electronic information, intelligent manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, biotechnology, material science, internet and other areas. They also discussed platforms for financing with Beijing and Shenyang city councils.<sup>92</sup>

Chen Xiqing [陈喜庆], Secretary of the WRSA, Dr Li Qi [李琦], Chairman of CSSAUK, and Prof Huang Danian [黄大年], Chief Scientist of the ‘Aerospace Instrumentation and Equipment Project’ of the China 863 Programme, as well as the Deputy Director of the Energy, Resources and Environment Committee of the ‘Thousand Talents Plan’, were involved in the tour.<sup>93</sup>

Chen Xiqing was then also the Deputy Chief of the Central UFWD [中央统战部副部长] of the CCP.<sup>94</sup> He said overseas students should focus on the close integration of the theoretical knowledge learnt abroad with the national conditions of China, so as to really make innovation and entrepreneurship practice take root and blossom in the motherland. The topic of the speech given by Prof Huang invoked patriotic loyalty: “Science Knows No Boundaries; Scientists Have Homelands” [科学无国界,科学家有祖国].<sup>95</sup>

On 21 July 2018, the ‘CSSAUK High-level Talents to Wuhan’, hosted by the Wuhan Municipal Government, was opened in the Wuhan Economic and Technological Development Zone.<sup>96</sup> Hu Hongchun [胡洪春], Chief of the Wuhan UFWD, and Nick Whittingham, British Consul

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<sup>91</sup> Intelligence and Security Committee of UK Parliament’s report on China 2023, p. 111

<sup>92</sup> “第一届百名留英博士创业中国行圆满成功”, CSSAUK, <https://cssauk.org.uk/?p=512> (<https://archive.vn/NUxUd>)

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> “中央统战部副部长陈喜庆简历”, People.cn, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2013/0412/c70731-21117916.html> (<https://archive.vn/hb8yO>)

<sup>95</sup> “第一届百名留英博士创业中国行圆满成功”, CSSAUK, <https://cssauk.org.uk/?p=512> (<https://archive.vn/NUxUd>)

<sup>96</sup> “20 支国际顶尖学府创新创业团队角逐武汉开发区”, Wuhan Economic and Technological Development Zone, [http://www.whkfq.gov.cn/xxgk/fdzdggk/shgysy/rlzy/202005/t20200510\\_1301644.html](http://www.whkfq.gov.cn/xxgk/fdzdggk/shgysy/rlzy/202005/t20200510_1301644.html) (<https://archive.vn/dJ25w>)

General to Wuhan, delivered speeches. On the official webpage of the Wuhan UFWD, the news of this event appeared in the “Breaking News for United Front Work” [统战要闻] column.<sup>97</sup>

During the event, seven young innovation and entrepreneurship teams, including Augmented reality head-up displays (AR-HUDs) for smart vehicles, successfully signed cooperation agreements with the Wisdom Eco-City Unit of the Wuhan ETD Zone.<sup>98</sup> Eight project roadshows were given by the University of Sunderland, the University of Cambridge, the University of Liverpool and other British universities, involving AI, biomedicine, internet+, new energy and other areas.<sup>99</sup>

From 8 to 11 August 2019, the ‘Oxford Doctoral Delegation Tour’, organised by Shandong UFWD and Qingdao UFWD and co-hosted by the Qingdao Municipal Bureau of Human Resources and Social Affairs[青岛市人力资源和社会保障局] and Oxford CSSA,<sup>100</sup> invited 30 PhD students from Oxford to meet with Qingdao enterprises and institutions to seek opportunities for entrepreneurial cooperation in areas such as materials engineering, electronic information, biomedicine and intelligent transportation.<sup>101</sup>

According to the description in the official press release, participants were immediately invited outside the venue for private chats and were rushed to exchange ideas straight after the roadshow. Heads of municipal government departments responsible for ‘talent introduction’ came with thick stacks of government documents and offered generous conditions to work with them. There is nothing necessarily improper in such offers or in taking them up, but it shows the sheer enthusiasm on the Chinese side to achieve access to this talent pool.<sup>102</sup>

In order to enhance the success rate, Qingdao UFWD sent out invitations to venture capital firms, banks, universities, research institutes and private enterprises in the city. They also assisted potential employers to establish contact with the desired members of the doctoral delegation. Some members of the delegation were so in-demand that they were selected by nine Qingdao companies at the same time, again showing the level of enthusiasm to work with them.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> “全英学联高层次人才汇聚武汉开发区”, Wuhan UFWD, <https://whtzb.org/home/info/10536.html> (<https://archive.vn/AxJqU>)

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> “20支国际顶尖学府创新创业团队角逐武汉开发区”, Wuhan Economic and Technological Development Zone, [http://www.whkfq.gov.cn/xxgk/fdzdggk/shgysy/rlzy/202005/t20200510\\_1301644.html](http://www.whkfq.gov.cn/xxgk/fdzdggk/shgysy/rlzy/202005/t20200510_1301644.html) (<https://archive.vn/dJ25w>)

<sup>100</sup> “牛津大学林亮博士担任我司首席技术官”, Hongzhi Future, <http://hongzhicn.com/?news1/249.html> (<https://archive.vn/UdRoQ>)

<sup>101</sup> “精准聚才引智助力高质量发展 ---- ‘牛津大学博士团山东（青岛）行’活动圆满成功”, Qingdao UFWD, <http://qwgzyj.gqb.gov.cn/jcsd/208/3180.shtml> (<https://archive.vn/tJSIC>)

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

## 2. PhD forum on BRI co-organised by CSSAUK, QUB CSSA and Ulster CSSA

The All-British Doctoral Forum [全英博士论坛] is organised by CSSAUK and hosted by local associations with the support of the Education Section of the Chinese Embassy in the UK. The theme for the 6th Forum was Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This forum was held at Queen's University Belfast (QUB) on 10 June 2017. It covered a wide range of disciplines in applied sciences, including computing science and information engineering.<sup>104</sup>

## 3. Talent trip to Changzhou co-organised by CSSAUK and Jiangsu UFWD

The UFWD of Changzhou, a city between Shanghai and Nanjing, has been establishing talent-recruitment stations around the world, including a UK station based in Birmingham, established in October 2014.<sup>105</sup>

From 25 to 26 April 2023, talents with a doctoral degree or above from renowned UK institutions including the universities of Oxford, Warwick, London and Bath made a trip to Changzhou with 18 projects, covering fields of advanced manufacturing and automation, biology and new pharmaceuticals. This exchange activity was co-organised by CSSAUK, Jiangsu UFWD and Changzhou UFWD.<sup>106</sup>

Key enterprises such as Wanbang Digital Energy also made precise matching with the talents and negotiated on matters relating to project cooperation.<sup>107</sup>

## 4. Cambridge CSSA's Framework Agreement with Xi Jinping's Xiong'an New Area

On 11 August 2023, 35 Cambridge talents from artificial intelligence, materials science, biomedicine, urban planning and finance visited Xiong'an New Area [雄安新区] in Hebei Province. Li Tao [李涛], Deputy Secretary of Party Working Committee [党工委副书记] of Xiong'an, met with the delegation and said that the establishment of Xiong'an was a major decision and deployment made by "the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core" [以习近平同志为核心的党中央], which is a "major plan for the millennium" and a "national event".<sup>108</sup> The new city has been described as a pet project of Xi's.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> "全英学联成功举办'一带一路'全英博士论坛-北爱尔兰分论坛", WRSA, [http://www.wrsa.net/content\\_39103536.htm](http://www.wrsa.net/content_39103536.htm) (<https://archive.vn/b0Y4G>)

<sup>105</sup> Joske, "Hunting the Phoenix: The Chinese Communist Party's global search for technology and talent".

<sup>106</sup> "30名世界名校博士携18个项目来常对接", Changzhou People's Government, [http://www.changzhou.gov.cn/ns\\_news/767168255547380](http://www.changzhou.gov.cn/ns_news/767168255547380) (<https://archive.vn/FOCIM>)

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> "海外高层次人才系列活动'剑桥中国学联:2023英才交流之旅'在雄安新区举行", Xiong'an Government, [http://www.xiongan.gov.cn/2023-08/11/c\\_1212254709.htm](http://www.xiongan.gov.cn/2023-08/11/c_1212254709.htm) (<https://archive.vn/mleLu>)

<sup>109</sup> Xi Jinping has been placing special attention on his Xiong'an New Area. He protected Xiong'an at all costs when the remnants of Typhoon Doksuri battered northern China in August 2023. See: Lily Kuo, Meg Kelly, Vic Chiang, Nilo Tabrizy and Pei-Lin Wu, "Rural areas sacrificed for Xi Jinping's new city, satellite imagery shows", *The Washington Post*, 31 August 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/08/31/china-floods-beijing-rain/>

In the meeting, Cambridge CSSA leaders gave speeches and signed a Framework Agreement for Cooperation with Xiong'an's Talent Development Service Centre. Cambridge CSSA leaders all expressed that, as overseas "Chinese students in the New Era" under Xi, they always remember that their roots are in China.<sup>110</sup>

Further to running talent recruitment activities, China is also building bases for returned scholars. In February 2023, the WRSA and Nanjing University signed a strategic cooperation agreement and unveiled the first base for the Returned Scholars' China Service [留学报国基地].<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> "欧美同学会和南京大学签订战略合作协议，留学报国基地等揭牌", The Paper [澎湃新闻], [https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail\\_forward\\_21988284](https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_21988284)

## Chapter 5

### ***Governance vacuum: Failure of student regulatory bodies in addressing CSSA threats***

Universities and students' unions do not appear to be abreast of the systematic issues posed by CSSAs. In only a few cases is there evidence that CSSAs have been subject to governance attention.

The aim of this chapter is to expose this problem and explore possible root causes for UK universities' apparent toleration of CSSAs with little oversight and few reporting requirements of the sort recommended, for example, by Human Rights Watch. The widespread presence of CSSAs on British university campuses, with little evident concern about the risks warned against by the Intelligence and Security Committee and the US State Department, is a deep cause for concern. The examples here suggest the need for an urgent, throughgoing investigation of how CSSAs are operating and universities' awareness of their connections to CSSAUK and to the Chinese Government.

#### **1. Lack of countermeasures from SUs to address CSSA threats to freedom of speech**

Over the years, the attention paid by British universities and students' unions to CSSAs has been largely restricted to the undemocratic procedures of CSSA elections and the running of the associations.

For example, Cambridge University temporarily disbanded its CSSA in 2011 after Chang Feifan [常非凡], President of the Cambridge CSSA, backed by the Chinese Embassy, announced that she would continue into a second term without an election. Many people opposed such a move and reported it to the Proctors of the university, resulting in the CSSA losing its association to the university when it failed to submit its constitution for review.<sup>112</sup>

In the academic year 2017–18, the LSE CSSA was disbanded as a student society by the LSE SU for one year at the end of the academic year following numerous complaints about the running of the society. A specific recommendation of the original suspension was that any reinstatement in 2019–20 would be dependent upon compliance with, and full acceptance of the sanction imposed in 2018–19.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> "Chinese Students & Scholars Association disaffiliated from University", *Varsity*, 3 December 2011, <https://www.varsity.co.uk/news/4166>

<sup>113</sup> Please visit <https://ukctransparency.org/library/> for FOI release seen by the author.

Few students' unions issued public statements about the threat posed to vulnerable students from China and Hong Kong and offered limited support to victims of harassment.<sup>114</sup> Moreover, some SUs do not have clear guidelines or a code of conduct that binds societies regarding freedom of speech and harassment. For example, the *Bye-Laws of the University of Birmingham Guild of Students* focuses on defining an organisational structure and administrative procedure for student groups to follow,<sup>115</sup> while the *Edinburgh University Students' Association Regulations* does not have clear guidelines regarding free speech and democratic values.<sup>116</sup> In the past, these bodies no doubt thought such principles were implicit and obvious. But that is no longer so certain.

## 2. The role of universities

### 2.1 Mistaking CSSAs as representative of all ethnic Chinese students

CSSAs claim to represent all ethnic Chinese students but the fact is that they do not and cannot.

As outlined in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, the fact that CSSAs are subordinate to the Chinese Embassy, function as extensions of the Chinese state power and are active organisers of political activities that involve direct interference renders them incapable of credibly representing any student with dissenting views against the Chinese Government.

In spite of this, staff in university administrations appear to often work closely with CSSAs on their campus. In at least one case, university staff seem to have taken the CSSA as the legitimate representative of all Chinese students on their campus and even encouraged them to serve as representatives of the university itself.

Staff from the 'Edinburgh Global Department' of the University of Edinburgh asked the Edinburgh CSSA for help in recruiting CSSA members and Chinese students through WeChat to serve as University Student Ambassadors, a role regarded as "the first representative of the University that a prospective student will encounter" and "crucial in helping form an opinion" of the student body in the university. On 2 July 2019, Edinburgh CSSA was invited

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<sup>114</sup> Cambridge University Students' Union said it was taking the death threats on Ulysses Chow regarding his protest against an honorary fellowship awarded to Carrie Lam "extremely seriously". A students' union welfare officer was helping him put together a data protection complaint according to Chow. See: Tom Ball and Mark McLaughlin, "Death threats sent to Hongkongers studying in Britain", *The Times*, 26 November 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/death-threats-sent-to-hongkongers-studying-in-britain-wxhmg1bct> and Laura Mannering, "Hong Kong students in UK call for action over pro-China threats and harassment", 26 November 2019, Hong Kong Free Press, <https://hongkongfp.com/2019/11/26/hong-kong-students-uk-call-action-pro-china-threats-harassment/>

<sup>115</sup> *Bye-Laws of the University of Birmingham Guild of Students*, October 2019, <https://www.guildofstudents.com/pageassets/representation/campaigns/useful-documents/Guild-Byelaws-2019.pdf>

<sup>116</sup> *Edinburgh University Students' Association Regulations*, May 2020, [https://assets-cdn.sums.su/ED/Your%20Students%20Association\\_YSA/YSA\\_TrusteeMinutes/Regulations.pdf](https://assets-cdn.sums.su/ED/Your%20Students%20Association_YSA/YSA_TrusteeMinutes/Regulations.pdf)



to coordinate and support the Airport Welcoming Services provided by Edinburgh Global to Chinese freshers at the airport.<sup>117</sup>

## 2.2 Funding CSSAs

Some universities have also been actively funding CSSAs.

- During 2019–2023, Newcastle University sponsored the Newcastle CSSA with a total of £18,200 for organising Chinese New Year Galas.<sup>118</sup>
- During 2013–2019, the University of Huddersfield made yearly payments to the ‘Global Chinese Society’ (aka Huddersfield CSSA).<sup>119</sup> The payments, totalling £4774.91, included a wide range of sponsorships, ranging from large events, such as £1560 for the 2014 Spring Festival campus event, to miscellaneous expenses such as a £23 taxi fare to a football stadium.<sup>120</sup>

## 2.3 Complacency over potential CSSA abuses

On 2 October 2019, Emily (pseudonym), a Hong Kong student who had set up a stall in Sheffield and was handing out leaflets in support of the democratic movement in her hometown, was surrounded by 200 Chinese students, some of whom, she claims, threatened to kill her.<sup>121</sup> Sheffield’s CSSA was also alleged to be a part of a closed WeChat group that coordinated protests and shared images of Hong Kong activists.<sup>122</sup> Councillor Ben Miskell, who supported Emily, organised a meeting with Sheffield University officials; he has claimed that these officials were quite “combative”, they “weren’t hugely interested in engaging” and “didn’t want to take our evidence.”<sup>123</sup> Sheffield University said it was concerned about the incident as it wrote to all of its students to remind them of its code of conduct. It also said it was working with the student union to address concerns and was “committed to ensuring everyone feels safe and welcome on our campus and in our city”.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Please visit <https://ukctransparency.org/library/> for FOI release seen by the author.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> International societies at the University of Huddersfield were categorised as ‘global societies’, which are funded by the International Office. However, in the University’s introductory webpage for the ‘Chinese Society’, the President of the Huddersfield CSSA clearly states that the society is not only supported and guided by the International Office, but also by the Chinese Consulate General of Manchester.

See: <https://www.hud.ac.uk/international/global-campus-events/global-societies/china/> (<https://archive.vn/94fc0>)

<sup>120</sup> Please visit <https://ukctransparency.org/library/> for FOI release seen by the author.

<sup>121</sup> Ian Williams, *Every Breath You Take*, p.152.

<sup>122</sup> Ian Williams, *Every Breath You Take*, p.155.

<sup>123</sup> Ian Williams, *Every Breath You Take*, pp. 152-153.

<sup>124</sup> Camilla Turner and Ewan Somerville, 12 October 2019, “Police called in as Hong Kong and China tensions spread to UK universities”, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/10/12/police-called-hong-kong-china-tensions-spread-uk-universities/>

This incident again demonstrates how difficult UK universities can find it to arbitrate in what are in effect overseas disputes that have migrated to their campuses.

## 2.4 Economic dependence on Chinese students' fees

Tuition fees from Chinese students have become an important income stream for many British universities. Numerous commentators, researchers and politicians have pointed out that this risks incentivising universities to turn a blind eye to any problems with overseas Chinese students – or associated bodies like CSSAs. This issue has been repeatedly raised by parliamentarians and independent governing bodies such as the Office for Students.<sup>125</sup>

The recent Intelligence and Security Committee report on China is blunt:

*While the numbers are clearly significant, the question is whether, and if so how, China is actively using this 'buying power' as leverage. An article in The Times in 2019 reported that the intelligence Agencies were "concerned that a reliance on Chinese money and students, particularly postgraduates paying up to £50,000 a year in fees, makes some universities particularly vulnerable [to influence and interference by the Chinese government]". During this Inquiry, we were told that "China likely seeks to exert influence over UK universities by threatening to withdraw scholarships or funding for Chinese nationals in the UK."<sup>126</sup>*

## 2.5 Falling between the cracks

Universities appear to see individual CSSAs as independent student societies and, as such, consider their operation a matter for the students' union. This may cause wider issues with CSSAs on campus – and the peculiar structure of CSSAs and their ties to the Chinese state – to be missed. Of the 66% of universities that replied to the FOI requests on documentation that mentioned CSSAs, which were sent out through emails to all 96 universities and higher education institutes that host a CSSA, 97% of them said they do not hold the material because the CSSA based on their campus is registered under the students' union, which is a separate legal entity against the university and is not subject to FOI requests. Particularly, Imperial College London said it was not aware of a scenario where the College's governing body (the Council) would be called on to consider documentation regarding the CSSA.<sup>127</sup>

This, however, is likely to change in the wake of the passage of the *Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act*.

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<sup>125</sup> Sally Weale and Ben Quinn, "English universities warned not to over-rely on fees of students from China", *The Guardian*, 18 May 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/may/18/english-universities-warned-not-to-over-rely-on-fees-of-students-from-china>

<sup>126</sup> Intelligence and Security Committee of UK Parliament's report on China 2023, p. 104, par. 288

<sup>127</sup> Please visit <https://ukctransparency.org/library/> for FOI release seen by the author.

## Policy recommendations

In this section the author is going to give recommendations on what concrete actions should be taken by student and university governing bodies to address the systematic threat posed by CSSAUK and its branches.

- **Both universities and students' unions must proactively investigate CSSA abusive behaviours**

Section A1 (1) of the *Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023* states that:

*The governing body of a registered higher education provider must take the steps that, having particular regard to the importance of freedom of speech, are reasonably practicable for it to take in order to achieve ... freedom of speech within the law for staff, members of the provider, students of the provider, and visiting speakers.*<sup>128</sup>

This means that taking steps to achieve freedom of speech falls within universities' remits. The fact that CSSAs are registered under students' unions, which are separate legal entities, should no longer be a buffer against the need for university action. Universities must address this new legal responsibility.

Regarding "reasonably practicable steps" that both universities and SUs should take in order to stop CSSA anti-free speech activities in the future, this report suggests the proactive investigation of future complaints about CSSA activities.

The fact that CSSAs are heavily influenced by Chinese diplomats in the UK and so lack independence also suggests that CSSAs are wrongly affiliated to students' unions. As mentioned in Chapter 2, many students' unions in the UK require student societies to be independent and self-governing – this is often a condition of registration as a student society under the union.

Although disaffiliating problematic CSSAs might not stop them from posing threats to freedom of speech on British campuses, this report argues that it is still a necessary first step for SUs and universities to take to safeguard the rights of students. At a minimum, universities should follow the recommendation of Human Rights Watch and monitor CSSAs as Chinese Government-linked organisations, and require them to report all funding and support from the Chinese state.

- **Victims of universities or students' failure in addressing CSSA's threat to freedom of speech to make a complaint to the Office for Students**

Section 69C – Schedule 6A of the *Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023* introduces the Free Speech Complaints Scheme. Under the Scheme, a current or former student, member of staff or visiting speaker who claims to have "suffered adverse consequences as a

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<sup>128</sup>*Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023*, 11 May 2023, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/16/enacted>

result of action or inaction of the governing body of a registered higher education provider” and claims that “the action or inaction was a breach of a duty of the governing body” can make a complaint to the Office for Students.<sup>129</sup>

This report recommends victims of universities or students’ failure in addressing CSSA’s threat on freedom of speech to make a complaint to the OfS, who has the power, according to Section 69B (2) of the *Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023* to “impose a monetary penalty on a students’ union if it appears to the OfS that it is failing or has failed to comply with any of its duties” related to securing freedom of speech.<sup>130</sup>

- **The Office for Students to investigate CSSAs’ systematic threats to freedom of speech and any other safeguarding issues posed by CSSAs to students in the UK**

Section 69B of the *Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023* instructs the Office for Students to monitor whether students’ unions are complying with their duties to secure freedom of speech. The Act also enables the OfS to make upholding the Act’s provisions a “condition of registration” for universities to be registered with the OfS.<sup>131</sup>

This means the Act empowers the OfS to unilaterally monitor and investigate universities’ and SU’s compliance with the Act. It should do so. This means a nationwide investigation of the systematic concerns with the CSSA network and its impact on free speech on our university campuses.

- **CSSAUK and its branches must register their affiliations with the Chinese state**

As already discussed, under the recommendation of Human Rights Watch all universities should require CSSAs operating on campus to register their connections to the Chinese state. More generally, new Government legislation specifically addresses influence operations by foreign powers and requires registration for those who are directed by a foreign power.

*The National Security Act 2023* introduces the Foreign Activities and Foreign Influence Registration Scheme (FIRS) which aims to record foreign activity and foreign influence agreements between people in the UK and foreign actors (states, organisations and people) that direct those in the UK to carry out relevant activities in the United Kingdom.

Section 70 (2) defines “political influence activity” as “making any communication to a person listed in Schedule 14 [a list of public officials, including local mayors]; making a public communication, except where it is reasonably clear from the communication that it is made by or at the direction of the foreign power; distributing money, goods or services to UK persons”, where the purpose of such activity is to influence an election or an official government decision.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

Being subordinates of the Chinese diplomatic outposts in the UK, CSSAs' engagements with local city councils in the UK in an attempt to expand their influence (mentioned in Chapter 3) might be one example of "political influence activities" within the meaning of the Act that are carried out by CSSAs on behalf of a foreign power. If this is found to be the case, any CSSAs carrying out such activities will have to register with FIRS in order to carry out these kinds of activities in the future or face serious legal challenges.

As a matter of urgency, the Government should investigate and issue guidance on whether, at least in some circumstances, CSSAs fall within FIRS and are being "directed" within the meaning of the Act by the Chinese state.





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