

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 8, 2023

The Honorable Merrick Garland
Attorney General of the United States
U.S. Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington D.C. 20530-0001

Dear Attorney General Garland:

We write to express serious concern about Chinese Communist Party (CCP) influence over Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSAs) at our nation's colleges and universities. With the closure of many Confucius Institutes,¹ the CCP is relying on other actors, including CSSAs, to influence U.S. academic institutions.² This issue requires greater attention from the United States government.

According to the U.S. Department of State, “[w]hen the Chinese government first allowed its citizens to attend western universities in the late 1970s, the CCP created...CSSA[s] to monitor Chinese students and mobilize them against views that dissent from the CCP’s stance. That directive has not changed.”³ These organizations are overseen by the CCP’s United Front Work Department, a “worldwide network of party loyalists” that directs activities of the Chinese diaspora.⁴ In 2016, the PRC Ministry of Education issued a directive demanding that “university and college students be instructed...to ‘always follow the [CCP].’”⁵ The directive instructs officials to “build a multidimensional contact network linking home and abroad,”⁶ such that “overseas students are seen as a population to be mobilized in support of their country and connected through organizations like the...[CSSA]s...and the consulates.”⁷

There are currently 150 *known* CSSA chapters on American campuses. These organizations purport to “support” Chinese students overseas, but the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)

¹ CRS. Confucius Institutes in the United States. (2023). <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11180>

² Jing Wei for Radio Free Asia (RFA) Mandarin. *Experts warn of renewed Chinese Communist Party 'cognitive warfare' on US campuses.* <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/china-us-campuses-08182023161614.html>; “Exposing the Dangers of the Influence of Foreign Adversaries on College Campuses,” Congressional Testimony, July 13, 2023, Craig Singleton, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, before the House Education Committee, Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Development. <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/07/13/exposing-the-dangers-of-the-influence-of-foreign-adversaries-on-college-campuses/>

³ U.S. Department of State. *The Chinese Communist Party on Campus: Opportunities & Risks.* (2020). <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/CCP-on-campus-FINAL.pdf>

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Chris Buckley. The New York Times. *China Says Its Students, Even Those Abroad, Need More 'Patriotic Education'.* (2016). <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/11/world/asia/china-patriotic-education.html>

⁶ Anastasya Lloyd-Damnjanovic. Wilson Center. *A Preliminary Study of PRC Political Influence and Interference Activities in American Higher Education.* https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/prc_political_influence_full_report.pdf

⁷ *Id.*

has shown they often serve as extensions of China’s party-state.⁸ They “can be co-opted into foreign government appendages” that intimidate and monitor Chinese overseas students while shaping favorable public perceptions of Beijing foreign policies.⁹ Of particular concern are the Chinese government’s efforts to “infringe on the academic freedom and personal safety” of persons at American universities.¹⁰ Some CSSAs receive guidance and funding from, and routinely coordinate with, Chinese consulates in the United States, while attempting to conceal these government ties.¹¹

There are many examples across the country. At the University of Miami, the CSSA is the only campus organization “authorized by the Chinese Embassy.”¹² The George Washington University’s (GWU) CSSA has publicly acknowledged that it was “directed by” and “works with” the Chinese Embassy.¹³ Similarly, a University of Connecticut webpage states its CSSA is supported by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) Consulate in New York.¹⁴ The president of the University of Pittsburgh’s CSSA publicly disclosed on a Chinese social media platform that a Chinese consulate allocated \$6,000 to the organization annually, but later deleted the post.¹⁵ The Southwestern CSSA—a coalition of 26 CSSAs in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Hawaii—revealed on its website that the Chinese Consulate in Los Angeles must approve all Southwestern CSSA presidential candidates.¹⁶

CSSAs reportedly are not open to all students with Chinese ethnicity, but rather only to citizens of the PRC. This is a “violation of the principle that student organizations not discriminate based on nationality,” as noted in a 2020 State Department fact sheet.¹⁷ At the University of Tennessee CSSA, members are obligated to “fervently love the motherland” and “protect the motherland’s honor and image.”¹⁸ Membership eligibility hinges on unwavering commitment to “support [China’s] national reunification” and “recognize the ‘One China’ principle.”¹⁹ Furthermore, “CSSA chapters actively inhibit debate and interactions with non-Chinese peers” and, at the direction of PRC government officials, “disrupt lectures or events that question CCP ideology or views.”²⁰ For example, the Brandeis University CSSA organized a coordinated campaign to disrupt an online discussion on the genocide of Uyghurs, featuring human rights activist Rayhan

⁸ U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation. [Unclassified] *National Security Concerns for Study Abroad Students*, 26 February 2016.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Lloyd-Damnjanovic, *A Preliminary Study of PRC Political Influence and Interference Activities in American Higher Education*.

¹¹ Alexander Bowe. U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. *China’s Overseas United Front Work: Background and Implications for the United States*. (2018).

https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China%27s%20Overseas%20United%20Front%20Work%20-%20Background%20and%20Implications%20for%20US_final_0.pdf

¹² University of Miami Campus Lab. *Chinese Student and Scholar Association*. <https://miami.campuslabs.com/engage/organization/chinese-student-and-scholar-association>. The official University of Miami website (Welcome.Miami.edu) directs you to the campus labs page for information about its clubs.

¹³ Bowe, *China’s Overseas United Front Work: Background and Implications for the United States*.

¹⁴ UConncontact. *Chinese Students & Scholars Association (CSSA)*. <https://uconncontact.uconn.edu/organization/CSSA>

¹⁵ Bowe, *China’s Overseas United Front Work: Background and Implications for the United States*.

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ U.S. Department of State, *The Chinese Communist Party on Campus: Opportunities & Risks*.

¹⁸ Bowe, *China’s Overseas United Front Work: Background and Implications for the United States*.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ U.S. Department of State, *The Chinese Communist Party on Campus: Opportunities & Risks*.

Asat.²¹ The event was “Zoombombed” by uninvited attendees, who shared inappropriate content and played the Chinese national anthem during the panel presentation.

Troubling communications from CSSAs have been reported at U.S. universities. For example, a graduate student at the University of Colorado-Boulder told her professor that the CSSA president had called late at night to inquire about the department faculty's work on Tibet.²² In another case, a Chinese national who was a former University of Wisconsin-Madison graduate student said he received a “deluge” of abusive CSSA emails accusing him of “being a traitor to [China], including one death threat,” after expressing belief that a CSSA list-serv email proposed racist and inappropriate slogans to protest a visit by the Japanese Prime Minister.²³ A China expert and professor at the University of California-Riverside stated that CSSAs are a “tool of government’s foreign ministry.”²⁴ He added that “[t]he effect of that surveillance is less that certain people are caught and punished and more that virtually all Chinese students know they could be reported, and, therefore, watch what they say in public fora.”

CSSAs also use money to wield political influence. The CSSA at Wayne State University reportedly funded travel to China for the mayor of Ypsilanti, Michigan, and three other officials.²⁵ That funding allegedly came from a Chinese consulate to promote a potential real estate project. CSSAs have also facilitated paid displays of popularity for visiting Chinese leaders. In 2012 and 2015, the Chinese Embassy funneled money through GWU’s CSSA to sponsor students who lined up the streets to welcome Xi Jinping to Washington, D.C.²⁶

The Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) requires individuals to register with the Department of Justice (DOJ) if they act at the behest of a foreign principal to influence U.S. policy or public opinion. There is clear evidence that CSSAs act as an arm of the PRC for the purpose of shaping U.S. policy and public opinion, and the United States should therefore evaluate whether they are required to register as foreign agents.

Please provide a response to the following questions no later than 30 days after receipt.

1. What actions has DOJ taken to assess whether CSSAs should register under FARA for their work on behalf of the PRC?

²¹ John Metz and Rory O’Connor, Athenai Institute. *Statement for the Record before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on “China’s Global Influence and Interference Activities.”* (March 23, 2023). https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2023-03/John_Metz-Rory_OConnor_Statement_for_the_Record.pdf

²² Lloyd-Damnjanovic, *A Preliminary Study of PRC Political Influence and Interference Activities in American Higher Education*. The interaction took place between 2009 and 2010.

²³ *Id.* The CSSA email list-serv sent suggestions for slogans the CSSA group could use to protest a surprise visit by the Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to the Yasukuni Shrine. This interaction took place in 2004.

²⁴ Stephanie Saul, The New York Times, *On Campuses Far from China, Still Under Beijing’s Watchful Eye*, (March 4, 2017) see: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/04/us/chinese-students-western-campuses-china-influence.html>

²⁵ Tom Perkins, Detroit Metro Times. *How a Bizarre \$300M ‘Chinatown’ Scandal Played Out in Ypsilanti, Beijing, and Wayne State*, (April 9, 2018). <https://www.metrotimes.com/news/how-a-bizarre-300m-chinatown-scandal-played-out-in-ypsilanti-beijing-and-wayne-state-10982295>. The source of the funds appears unclear and has been the subject of investigation; Larry Diamond & Orville Schell. Hoover Institution. *China’s Influence and American Interests*, (2019). https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/diamond-schell_chineseinfluence_oct2020rev.pdf

²⁶ Bowe, *China’s Overseas United Front Work: Background and Implications for the United States*.


2. Has DOJ sent either a letter of inquiry or a letter of determination pursuant to FARA to any CSSA chapters regarding their status? Has any CSSA ever requested an advisory opinion in relation to work done on behalf of the PRC for purposes of FARA? If so, please provide a copy.
3. What steps has DOJ taken to investigate allegations that CSSAs have engaged in transnational repression, harassment, and monitoring of Chinese nationals and diaspora in the United States? If none have been taken, please explain why not.
4. Are there authorities that DOJ assesses as more appropriate than FARA to address CSSA involvement in CCP influence operations? If so, please explain why those authorities are more appropriate, how the Department is using them, and describe supporting interagency efforts.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. We look forward to a timely and detailed response.

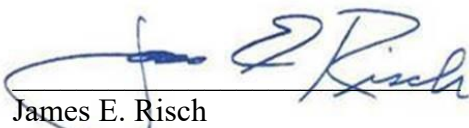
Sincerely,



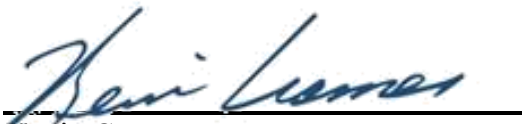
Tim Scott
United States Senator



Charles E. Grassley
United States Senator



James E. Risch
United States Senator



Kevin Cramer
United States Senator



Ted Budd
United States Senator



Mike Braun
United States Senator



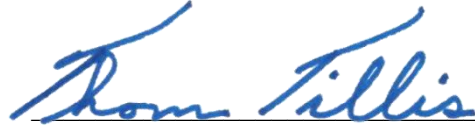
Mike Crapo
United States Senator



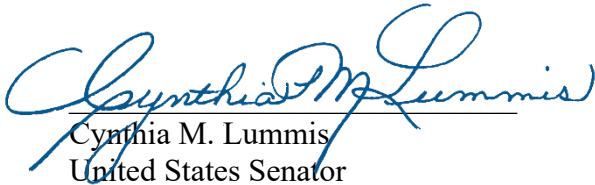
Marco Rubio
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