


REPORT
NO. 6 2023



SWEDISH NATIONAL
CHINA CENTRE



Chinese language schools in Sweden and their connections with the Communist Party of China

Frida Lindberg & Erika Staffas Edström

Summary

- This is the first report in Sweden, and to our knowledge in Europe, to examine the operations of local Chinese language schools for overseas Chinese children and youth. The focus of the study is the connections between the schools and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) or other organizations in Sweden. We identified 13 active Chinese language schools in Sweden, with approximately 2,500 students and 100 teachers between them.
- Based on our research, we present an analytical framework for possible use in the study of Chinese language schools in other countries. The framework highlights the tools used by the CCP to exercise influence over such schools: (a) imposing guidelines and standards; (b) quality assurance of teachers through training and certification; (c) subsidizing resources; (d) organizing subsidized activities; and (e) providing enhanced reputation and visibility.
- Applying this framework to Sweden, our findings show that eleven of the 13 schools have organizational connections with the CCP. Most of these schools seem to have a close relationship with and receive support from the Chinese embassy, the consulate and other organizations affiliated with the CCP. Given that the CCP is, at its core, a non-democratic organization, these connections entail a risk that elements of the Chinese language schools' operations could be influenced in an undemocratic direction.
- In addition, the study finds that Sweden's municipal schools and mainstream educational organizations (studieförbund) enable the schools' operations by offering access to premises and sometimes also to resources. There is therefore a risk that messages conveyed to students might be legitimized, and that the perception could be given that Swedish actors indirectly support the communicated narratives. It is also reasonable to question whether taxpayers' money should be used, even indirectly, to disseminate CCP propaganda in Sweden.

Four policy recommendations are derived from conclusions of this report:

1. Strengthen knowledge in central government, mainstream educational organizations, civil society, municipalities and regions on how the CCP works strategically to influence the diaspora and diaspora organizations.
2. Review current processes for approving and evaluating support provided to organizations to ensure that they do not promote non-democratic ideology or convey messages at odds with democratic values. The review should be complemented with a strategy to support schools in adhering to democratic standards. For instance, this could involve providing educational materials developed independently from CCP influence.
3. Investigate the possible effects of CCP influence on the CLSs and their students.
4. Support alternatives for individuals in the diaspora who want to learn the Chinese language free from CCP influence. This could also involve increasing resources to mother tongue instruction in Chinese in the Swedish school system and ensuring that the language education is available in all locations. If offline education is not an option, online education could be an alternative.

Introduction¹

Under the leadership of General Secretary Xi Jinping (习近平), the ambition of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to influence Chinese communities overseas in support of the party's domestic and international agenda has expanded in size and scope.¹ This effort is rooted in the CCP's aspiration to boost China's soft power abroad, as well as its increased sense of need to gain support for its policies and control its perceived opponents.² In this regard, the CCP considers "overseas Chinese affairs work" to be a crucial tool for actively shaping, controlling and influencing the identity and behaviour of the diaspora.³ Primary responsibility within the party-state structure for contact with the diaspora lies with the United Front system, which among other things refers to the United Front Work Department (UFWD) under the CCP Central Committee. It also refers to a political strategy that aims to create a network that seeks to involve organizations and key individuals in advancing CCP's interests. In addition to the UFWD, multiple party organs and organizations connected with the United Front system are involved in conducting diaspora work.⁴ In other words, the United Front could be described as the CCP's efforts to build networks with organizations and individuals outside the CCP to maintain its monopoly on political power in China.

In regard to the United Front work targeting overseas Chinese children and youth, great importance is placed on actively guiding the next generation to ensure their alignment with the CCP worldview.⁵ This work is commonly carried out through cultural activities such as Chinese language classes, which aim to nurture participants' affection for China.⁶ A recently retired Chinese diplomat, Yang Jiechi (杨洁篪), has stated that "the purpose of Chinese education is not only the dissemination and education of language, but also the inheritance and development of Chinese culture overseas", in order to "let children not only have Chinese faces, but also have Chinese brains, and understand Chinese culture and thinking".⁷ Hence, officials have referred to Chinese language schools (CLSs) as one of China's overseas communities' "three treasures", together with diaspora organizations and diaspora media.⁸ Government documents indicate that spending on CLSs is set to increase.⁹

Previous research examining the connections between the CCP and the CLSs is sparse.¹⁰ However, the subject has come under increased media scrutiny in recent years in countries with large Chinese diasporas such as Australia. One academic in Australia has warned that some of the CLSs there build on a CCP-approved doctrine, and that Australian taxpayers unknowingly subsidize these schools.¹¹ In Europe, little is known about how the CLSs operate or their potential connections to the CCP and other backers. This report seeks to contribute to existing research by examining the schools' operations in Sweden. It explores the organizational connections between the CCP and the schools, and the schools' ties to other actors in Swedish society.

In the past, there has only been limited discussion in Swedish media of local organizations influenced by the CCP in receipt of subsidies from Swedish entities.¹² In 2023, however, the Swedish Worker's Educational Association (ABF), an NGO and the largest mainstream educational organization in Sweden, withdrew its support for a Russian diaspora organization after it expressed undemocratic values. Our report's findings are also relevant to the ongoing debate in Sweden about independently operated charter schools (friskolor)

1 The authors would like to thank Alexis von Sydow, former intern at the Swedish National China Centre, for his valuable support during the information gathering process.

with ties to organizations with undemocratic ideologies. Previously, this debate was largely focused on schools accused of having links to Islamist extremism.¹³ In a recent report, the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) raised the possibility that states with great power aspirations might attempt to integrate themselves into the Swedish educational system in order to shape public opinion.¹⁴ Currently, charter schools do not have to abide by the principle of public access to information, which means that they are exempt from having to register with the Swedish Company Registration Office (Bolagsverket). This makes it difficult for the Schools Inspectorate to map a school's organizational structure, and thereby limit the ability of authoritarian actors to influence education.¹⁵

Definitions, method and limitations

This report examines the schools as a means of CCP's diaspora work. It therefore uses the party's wider definition of the term "overseas Chinese" (华侨). It also uses "diaspora" interchangeably with this term. The CCP divides overseas Chinese into three categories: (a) *huaqiao* (华侨), referring to Chinese nationals living abroad, including people from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan; (b) *huaren* (华人), Chinese naturalized abroad; and (c) *huayi* (华裔), people born outside China of Chinese descent but with another citizenship. The CCP treats all three as "overseas Chinese", and members of the Chinese nation.¹⁶ Since the CCP believes that a person's ethnicity is determined by bloodline and heritage rather than citizenship, all foreign nationals with Chinese ancestry are eligible to be considered members of the Chinese nation.¹⁷ Thus, an individual with Swedish citizenship whose relatives have lived in Sweden for generations, but is to some extent of Chinese descent, can be counted as part of the Chinese diaspora. Naturally, this does not mean that these individuals perceive their own identity in the same way as the CCP.

The schools that are the focus of this study mainly cater to overseas Chinese, although some also offer classes for foreigners interested in learning Chinese.¹⁸ These schools offer weekend classes in return for a tuition fee. In addition to teaching the Chinese language, many of the schools organize Chinese cultural activities, such as singing competitions and poetry recitations.¹⁹ This report focuses on the organizational connections between the CLSs and the CCP. Hence, mother tongue instruction in Chinese as part of the Swedish school system, Chinese language education targeted at foreign nationals, Confucius Institutes and language schools connected to Taiwan are excluded from the study.

In the report, we have identified 13 active CLSs in Sweden. A school is treated as active if there are repeated, or at least recent, references to it in open sources or it has a recently updated website. The source material indicates that there could be more schools or other informal associations conducting Chinese language education catering to the Chinese diaspora in Sweden. However, some of these do not have their own websites, and sometimes only single references were found online, occasionally from several years ago. Therefore, these schools are not included in this study. The report only analyses schools with confirmed connections with the CCP. For a connection to be established, at least one of the tools of CCP influence discussed in this report must have been identified.

The report is based on a selection of open sources in English and Chinese, which include previous research, news articles, as well as information published on CLS websites or the platforms of the Chinese authorities, such as the Chinese embassy in Sweden and the

UFWD's Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO). We have also gathered data in phone and email conversations with Swedish municipalities, and from mainstream educational organizations and actors listed as partners on CLS websites in order to identify how these actors view the alleged partnerships, although not all of them responded to our inquiries. We also attempted to reach the CLSs in larger cities to learn more about their financial ties to local actors, but only a few such schools replied.

Mother tongue instruction in Sweden

According to the Swedish National Agency for Education, primary school principals are required to set up mother tongue instruction in a language that is not one of the national minority languages if at least five students at the school are entitled to be taught that language, the students want to be taught the language and a qualified instructor is available. Similar criteria are set up for mother tongue instruction in senior high school. Pre-schools in Sweden are required to help children learn and use their mother tongue language but not required to provide mother tongue instruction.²⁰

Chinese language education for overseas Chinese

This section presents an overview of the CCP's efforts to educate the Chinese diaspora in the Chinese language. It also describes the CLSs' operations as well as criticisms that have been directed at the schools in other countries.

The Communist Party's objectives for Chinese language education for overseas Chinese

Ever since the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949, the CCP has promoted Chinese language education for overseas Chinese.²¹ Over the years, this work has been used by the CCP, for instance, to disseminate propaganda about China, to influence the Chinese diaspora and to promote a "peaceful unification".²² The CCP uses the term peaceful unification to refer to what the CCP views as Taiwan's "inevitable" future incorporation into the PRC.²³ Using its diaspora for political ends is not unique to China, but China's diaspora strategies stand out in comparison with those of other states, even among authoritarian countries, for being well-organized, comprehensive and firmly embedded in the state apparatus. For example, Iran lacks an overall diaspora strategy and mostly views this group as a threat to the state, while Russia is to a large extent focused on including and co-opting rather than repressing the diaspora, although repressive tactics are also used.²⁴

Among the goals of China's efforts to influence Chinese language teaching abroad have been to ensure that the schools are PRC-friendly and to replace the previously Taiwan-dominated system of overseas Chinese language schools.²⁵ This has been made possible by the purchase of schools, subsidizing their operation, promoting the use of CCP-approved textbooks and encouraging the hiring of pro-CCP overseas Chinese leaders as teachers. Previous research has also identified mobilizing support for China to shape the host country's foreign policy in a way that benefits the CCP as a further goal of Chinese language teaching for overseas Chinese. The CCP considers promotion of the Chinese language and China's culture to be a central part of its goal to increase the party's global influence.²⁶ Educating

the diaspora in Mandarin enables the dissemination of officially promoted interpretations of China's history, as well as participation in patriotic activities, which are essential to "re-Sinicizing" overseas Chinese.²⁷

Chinese language schools around the world

CLSs have traditionally been concentrated in the countries of Southeast Asia. In recent decades, however, the concept has spread to other parts of the world.²⁸ Official Chinese sources claim that there were about 20,000 CLSs worldwide in 2018, "with hundreds of thousands of Chinese teachers and millions of students".²⁹ Chinese sources also state that more than 50,000 students were enrolled in 400 CLSs in Europe in 2021.³⁰ As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and probably also in an attempt to reach out more widely, some schools also started to provide online Chinese language courses.³¹ As a consequence of increased competition, however, many schools ceased to exist. For example, in 2017, the Netherlands officially had approximately 40 CLSs with more than 6,000 students and 300 teachers.³² Four years later, however, the number of CLSs had reduced to between 20 and 30.³³

In recent years, the schools' activities have been subjected to criticism in Western media. In 2023, the Australian media reported how children in CLSs were being exposed to CCP propaganda through their textbooks. Among the criticisms were the fact that the CCP was credited as producer of the books, and that party officials were credited as editors.³⁴ In the state of Victoria, more than 80 percent of the Chinese community language schools were using textbooks that the Chinese embassy or consulate had developed and given to schools free of charge. In addition to "praising the motherland", these textbooks described history and international politics from the CCP's point of view, such as describing Taiwan as "China's largest island".³⁵

This was viewed with concern as, through these textbooks, the CCP was able to foster a positive perception of the Chinese government among Chinese-Australian children by, for instance, leaving out certain events, such as the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989. In 2022, parents of children enrolled in the Melbourne CLSs approached the Department of Education in Victoria, asking for the textbooks to be replaced. Some parents reportedly also took their children out of the schools.³⁶ Lin Bin, a political scientist in Australia, has emphasized the connections between the CLSs in Australia and the CCP:

I know some teachers have still got the membership of the CCP, so they will tell the children to be loyal to the motherland, loyal to China. (...) Even though you have Australian nationality, the Australian passport, you're told you still have to be loyal to the Chinese government.³⁷

The Communist Party's tools for exerting influence over overseas Chinese language schools

This section presents the tools used by the CCP to exert influence over the CLSs. Such tools include: imposing guidelines and standards; quality assurance of teachers through training and certification; subsidizing resources; organizing subsidized activities; and providing enhanced reputation and visibility. A framework has been developed for this study to bring transparency to the empirical analysis of the organizational connections between the CCP and the CLSs. We identified these tools during the information gathering as important and recurring in the CCP's efforts to influence the schools. Nonetheless, the list should not be seen as exhaustive.

Imposing guidelines and standards

China's work with its diaspora comprises coordinated efforts at various levels of the party and state administration through diplomatic channels and NGOs.³⁸ The responsibility for maintaining contact with and providing support to the CLSs within the Chinese government lies primarily with the OCAO.³⁹ The Ministry of Education's Department of International Cooperation and Exchanges is responsible for formulating and coordinating education policy and the regulation of Chinese language teaching abroad.⁴⁰

One tool for communicating the CCP's priorities to the CLSs is conferences arranged by the OCAO together with UFWD-affiliated organizations.⁴¹ During these conferences, priorities are communicated through seminars and discussions on the introduction of directives and policies, and topics such as "China's great rejuvenation", a nationalist slogan favoured by Xi Jinping. For instance, a standard for CLSs was presented in 2017 to fundamentally change the previous "loose situation" in which schools were able to "do things independently". Implementation included standards for school management, curriculum setting, teacher selection and syllabuses.⁴² Propaganda material is also displayed during the conferences.⁴³ One example is the video "Loyalty repays the hometown: Chinese education revitalizes China", produced by the state-controlled Xinhua News Agency, which was shown at a conference in 2014.⁴⁴ The video starts with a boy stating: "We are overseas Chinese only by studying Chinese can we obtain a soul".⁴⁵

Another tool is the designation and promotion of Chinese language "model schools" (示范学校) for other CLSs to emulate. The aim is to promote an acceleration of the development of Chinese language teaching abroad. Candidates are first suggested by embassies and then selected by the OCAO, and announced during the above-mentioned conferences. In order to be chosen, schools need to meet certain criteria in terms of a school's size, the effectiveness of the teaching, teacher qualifications and student results.⁴⁶ According to a letter from the Chinese consulate in Sydney obtained by an Australian news channel, the criteria include supporting the One China policy and opposing "anti-Chinese government" organizations and behaviour of any kind.⁴⁷ Apart from enhanced status for the schools and their personnel within diaspora communities, schools also receive resources from the OCAO. The schools also have the opportunity to establish cooperation with China's so-called educational bases (华文教育基地). This phrase refers to universities selected by the OCAO to be responsible for research and development on overseas Chinese education and materials, root-seeking activities, and training for teachers.⁴⁸ In 2021, there were 55 model schools in Europe.⁴⁹

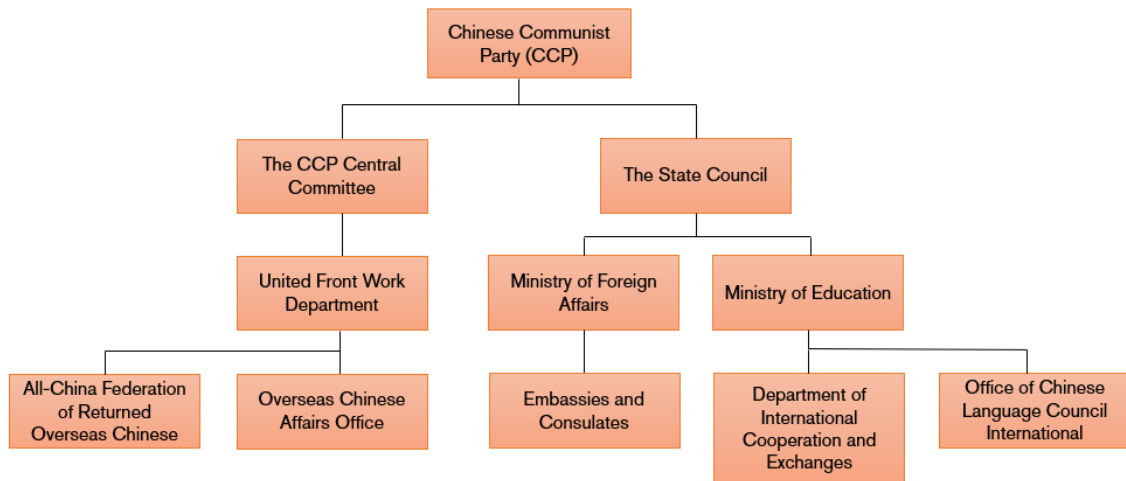


Figure 1. Simplified overview of branches of the party-state structure in contact with CLSs⁵⁰

Quality assurance of teachers through training and certification

The OCAO works proactively to influence the content of curriculums by instructing CLS teachers to ensure that their teaching is conducted in line with its guidelines. In 2011, the OCAO established a certificate for overseas Chinese language teachers to ensure that “teachers have a clear understanding of the laws of ethnic language and cultural education and have the knowledge, quality and ability to engage in Chinese language teaching and culture dissemination”.⁵¹ In addition, the OCAO organizes trainings and study trips to China for teachers who wish to obtain the certificate.⁵² By 2018, more than 20,000 teachers had participated in these courses.⁵³ Trainings where teachers travel to China, or where teachers from model schools in China are sent to educate CLSs abroad, are also arranged by other organizations affiliated with the United Front.⁵⁴ During the COVID-19 pandemic, such trainings were held online.⁵⁵

Subsidizing resources

The OCAO provides CLSs with material, personnel, and financial resources. Its support has been described by at least one Chinese scholar as essential for the continued existence of the schools.⁵⁶ Such support includes overseeing the development and dissemination of localized Chinese language textbooks. In 2017, the OCAO stated that more than 13 million Chinese language teaching materials had been sent to CLSs in more than 50 countries.⁵⁷ Dissemination is also conducted online. One of the major platforms in this regard is the OCAO-sponsored website, “Overseas Chinese Language and Culture Education Online”, where teachers can find teaching materials, training exercises, OCAO work related to CLSs and promotional material for culture-enhancing activities.⁵⁸ Some embassies and consulates also have their own education offices, and these can provide financial support to CLSs, such as scholarships and donations.⁵⁹

Organizing subsidized activities

The OCAO organizes and sponsors activities for CLS students, notably so-called root-seeking trips. These are subsidized trips to China, during which participating schools and students attend classes on language and culture, as well as lectures on topics such as the Belt and Road Initiative, and make sightseeing visits.⁶⁰ The first trip was organized in 1999, and in 2019 official sources claimed that more than 300,000 people had participated.⁶¹

Since COVID-19, many activities have been held online. One of the more popular activities is the online series, “Love for China: I will tell you a story”, organized by the UFWD-affiliated All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (ACFROC). Camps are often organized together with regional ACFROC organizations.⁶²

The OCAO considers these trips an important tool for strengthening the diaspora’s sense of belonging to China, and for “nurturing their patriotic spirit”.⁶³ During the camps, participants are encouraged to spread Chinese culture and become “ambassadors for friendship” between China and the countries where they live. How successful the CCP is in this mission is contested. One Chinese official has stated that after attending such camps, “many children who were [previously] unwilling to acknowledge their Chinese descent firmly told their parents, ‘After participating in this event, I am proud of being a member of the Chinese nation’”.⁶⁴ Others argue that the results are limited. One Chinese scholar has claimed that while root-seeking trips to some degree contribute to strengthening Chinese cultural identity among the Chinese diaspora, this identity remains shallow and “does not automatically transform into motivation for broadcasting a positive image of China”.⁶⁵

Providing enhanced reputation and visibility

The OCAO regularly organizes competitions and examinations for non-native speakers, including overseas Chinese, to encourage continuing Chinese language learning.⁶⁶ These activities are usually organized with local facilitators such as the CLSs. This can enhance the reputation and visibility of the schools and may also result in access to resources and support from Chinese government entities.⁶⁷ Perhaps best known are the annual speaking and performance competition, the Chinese Bridge, and the standardized tests in Chinese (HSK tests) organized by the OCAO and the Ministry of Education’s Office of Chinese Language Council International, also known as the Confucius Institute Headquarters.⁶⁸

Summary of analytical framework		
<i>Methods</i>	<i>Examples</i>	<i>Goals</i>
Imposing guidelines and standards	Implementing standards and promotion of model schools	Defining how the CLSs should operate, and setting examples for other CLSs to follow
Quality assurance of teachers through training and certification	Issuing the “Overseas Chinese Language Teacher Certificate”	Increasing control over teachers and their teaching methods
Subsidizing resources	Offering free educational materials that convey a CCP-approved narrative	Ensuring that only a CCP-friendly narrative is taught and discussed in classrooms
Organizing subsidized activities	Organizing root-seeking trips	Improving the image of China and co-opting participants to become friendship ambassadors
Providing enhanced reputation and visibility	Working together with the CLSs to organize competitions and exams	Encouraging Chinese learning and a CCP-approved version of Chinese culture

Figure 2. Overview of the CCP’s tools for exerting influence over CLSs

Communist Party work to influence Chinese language schools in Sweden

This section examines the ties between the CCP and CLSs in Sweden based on our analytical framework. To determine that a connection exists, only one of the tools presented in the framework must be present. We found connections with the CCP in eleven of the 13 active CLSs identified in Sweden. The schools are concentrated in the larger cities. There are four schools with confirmed connections with the CCP in Stockholm, among which one primarily offers online education, two in the Malmö/Lund area and two in Gothenburg. The schools range in size from many hundreds of students to at most 20 students. Based on the material, we estimate that there are around 2,500 students and 100 teachers in Sweden. The core curriculum in all the schools comprises weekly Mandarin Chinese classes for schoolchildren, but many schools also offer classes in calligraphy, dance and painting. At least one school also offers classes in Cantonese and some offer Chinese language classes for adults. A typical fee for weekly Chinese classes is 1,500 SEK per semester.⁶⁹

Imposing guidelines and standards

The source material indicates that there is a connection between many of the CLSs in Sweden and the OCAO, as well as with the Chinese embassy and consulate. One school explicitly states that it is under “the care of the OCAO and the Consulate General”.⁷⁰ The embassy also declares that it is “a constant important supporter” of another school’s development.⁷¹ It is also listed as a partner on one school’s website.⁷² One school states that it was founded as a result of “the advocacy and strong support” of former ambassador Gui Congyou (桂从友).⁷³ It has also been possible to identify connections between the CLSs and UFWD-affiliated organizations in Sweden, which often founded the schools or support them financially.⁷⁴

The findings also show that the Chinese authorities work actively to communicate the CCP’s priorities to the CLSs. For instance, school representatives often attend events organized by the Chinese embassy and consulate, during which Chinese officials speak on topics such as the importance and outcomes of the National Congress of the CCP.⁷⁵ Similar phrasing is used in official speeches made by embassy and consulate representatives at events organized by the CLSs. At one event, former ambassador Gui defined the schools as a “non-governmental envoy” of friendship and a “bridge connecting the Chinese dream with the world dream”.⁷⁶ The “Chinese dream” is a nationalist slogan closely associated with Xi Jinping. The Chinese Consul General in Gothenburg has given lectures to CLS students.⁷⁷

The Chinese authorities also seem to have used CLSs to disseminate their narrative. For instance, in 2022, the consulate credited a school for its strong support in organizing a symposium about the 20th National Congress of the CCP. During the event, participants “studied the spirit of General Secretary Xi Jinping’s important speech”, reviewed the party’s and country’s “historical achievements” of the past decade and viewed an exhibition in support of the CCP.⁷⁸ In 2020, another school, together with the consulate general and other UFWD-affiliated groups in Sweden, organized a celebration to acknowledge the founding of the PRC.⁷⁹ Furthermore, five of the CLSs in Sweden have been appointed model schools by the OCAO.⁸⁰ In one case, a principal and a teacher were presented with awards by the OCAO for their contributions to Chinese language teaching.⁸¹

Quality assurance of teachers through training and certification

There are multiple examples of CLS representatives in Sweden participating in Chinese government-sponsored trainings. In 2019, at the launch of a training event organized by the OCAO, another school's principal stated that the training provides an “effective solution for the growth of overseas Chinese teachers, which is conducive to the further rooting and development of Chinese culture in Sweden”.⁸² A former Chinese Consul also participated in the launch. CLSs have also hosted OCAO-sponsored teacher groups who offer lectures for both teachers and students.⁸³ In 2019, nearly 60 CLS teachers from schools from different regions of Sweden gathered to meet with a teachers' group from China.⁸⁴ School representatives have also participated in OCAO-led conferences in China, such as on the topic of how education could be more standardized and how to promote the “excellence of Chinese culture”.⁸⁵ CLS teachers have also participated in trainings to obtain the OCAO teacher certificate. In 2019, participating teachers told the Consul General in Gothenburg that the knowledge obtained from the training provided great guidance for their future teaching.⁸⁶

Subsidizing resources

Another way in which CLSs in Sweden receive support from the embassy is through scholarships. For instance, one CLS states that the development of the school has been “inseparable from the full support of the Chinese embassy and the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office”.⁸⁷ In 2017, the Chinese embassy established the “Chinese Ambassador Scholarship” in order to “encourage students in Chinese schools to learn Chinese well”. The scholarship was introduced in a speech given to celebrate the 40th anniversary of one of the CLS's, which was reported on in China's *People's Daily*.⁸⁸ This CLS received the first scholarship.⁸⁹ In 2021, another school in Stockholm hosted a Chinese Ambassador Scholarship Award ceremony during which more than 10,000 yuan was handed out to recipients.⁹⁰ CLSs have also arranged activities that were sponsored by the embassy.⁹¹

A Chinese academic article indicates that CLSs in Sweden have received donations of Chinese teaching materials from the OCAO and actively seek teaching support from state organs in China.⁹² In 2019, one CLS established what it calls a “Zhigong library”, in a reference to the Nordic Zhigong Association based in Stockholm. Together with one provincial and one municipal committee of the Zhigong party, the association donated books to the library.⁹³ The Zhigong party is part of the CCP network and functions as a bridge between the CCP and overseas Chinese organizations.⁹⁴ Some CLSs use Chinese government-approved materials in their teaching. One textbook used by at least two schools is “Standard Chinese”, which is published by a publishing house directly controlled by the PRC Ministry of Education.⁹⁵ It has not been possible to establish whether these teaching materials are provided to the CLSs free of charge.

Organizing subsidized activities

CLSs and their students in Sweden have participated in several root-seeking trips to China with the purpose of “finding their roots” and “understanding China better”.⁹⁶ In 2018, students from one school participated in such a trip arranged and sponsored by the OCAO and the education base Beijing Language and Culture University. This received “strong support” from the Chinese consulate in Gothenburg.⁹⁷ During another root-seeking trip to Shanghai, a school stated that it had “co-produced TV programmes to deeply experience the great rejuvenation

of China – congratulations on the 70th birthday of the motherland”.⁹⁸ Some schools have also participated in the above-mentioned ACFROC-sponsored event, Love for China: I will tell you a story. For example, in 2020, a CLS organized an online activity linked to other Chinese schools around Europe and “the children of overseas Chinese compatriots”.⁹⁹

Providing enhanced reputation and visibility

The embassy has initiated activities with the CLSs. In 2019, one school organized an embassy-initiated activity to celebrate “the blessing of the motherland” in connection with the 70th anniversary of the founding of the PRC. During the event, students could win 1000 SEK if they contributed to an exhibition called “Me and China”, in which students “expressed their affection” for China.¹⁰⁰ CLSs in Sweden have also hosted several competitions arranged by organizations that are a part of or affiliated with the United Front. Since 2013, one school has hosted an annual song contest for overseas Chinese run by the OCAO.¹⁰¹ In 2018, the then Chinese ambassador to Sweden, Gui Congyou, gave a speech during the contest.¹⁰² ACFROC organizations have a designated page on that CLS’s website where its activities are promoted. For instance, in 2013, a calligraphy and painting competition organized by a regional ACFROC organization was promoted and described in the following way:

The competition has built a platform for overseas Chinese youth to showcase their talents, giving them an opportunity to (...) express their feelings towards the motherland and hometown (...). No matter where they grow up, the blood of the Chinese nation flows in their bodies. This constant “Chinese love” makes the pens in their hands give rise to a “Chinese soul”, which is spread through their “Chinese dream”.¹⁰³

Collaboration between Chinese language schools and other actors in Sweden

In several cases, Swedish municipalities provide CLSs with financial and material support. One school receives annual grants from Lund municipality to cover costs connected with its operations. The school received 11,000 SEK between January and June 2023.¹⁰⁴ One Chinese association responsible for the operations of a CLS received 77,427 SEK from Malmö municipality in 2022 and a further 29,453 SEK between January and June 2023.¹⁰⁵ Another CLS has between 2019 and 2023 received in total 33,900 SEK from Örebro municipality.¹⁰⁶ In Stockholm, two CLSs with confirmed CCP connections use the municipal school Engelbrettskolan’s facilities and one CLS uses Södra Latin High School’s facilities. None of the CLSs pay rent.¹⁰⁷

Support is also sometimes provided by mainstream educational organizations, including ABF, Folkuniversitetet, Medborgarskolan, Studieförbundet, Studieförbundet Bilda för kyrka och samhälle and Studieförbundet Vuxenskolan.¹⁰⁸ Most of these organizations provide facilities for the CLSs’ operations free of charge. In addition, two organizations also provide CLSs with financial support. According to a representative of Studieförbundet Bilda för kyrka och samhälle, which one CLS collaborates with, the Swedish organization supports the school’s language classes by providing car mileage travel expenses for teachers and educational materials.¹⁰⁹ During the fall of 2022, ABF in Stockholm provided one CLS with 34,350 SEK to cover for, among other things, educational materials. ABF also paid 14,350 SEK and 18,000 SEK in speaker fees to another CLS.¹¹⁰

There are also instances where Swedish actors are listed as “collaboration partners” on a CLS’s website but seem to have a different view of the alleged partnership. For instance, one school states that it collaborates with the National Museums of World Culture.¹¹¹ However, the museums state that there has been no collaboration with the school except for its participation in a parade as part of Chinese New Year celebrations.¹¹²

Potential effects of the connections between Chinese language schools and the Chinese Communist Party

This report has identified that eleven of the 13 active CLSs in Sweden have connections with the CCP. This is a significant finding, since the CCP considers Chinese language teaching targeted at overseas Chinese as an important part of its strategic diaspora work. The findings show that the CCP is using multiple tools in its efforts to influence CLSs in Sweden, and that the schools seem to have a close relationship with the Chinese authorities and UFWD-affiliated associations. As the CCP is at its core an organization built on non-democratic values and hostile to democracy, these connections entail a risk that elements of CLS operations could be influenced in an undemocratic direction.

For example, model schools, of which there are five in Sweden, are according to the above-mentioned Australian news channel required to oppose “anti-Chinese government” behaviour of any kind. By extension, this indicates that the schools could play a role in facilitating the CCP’s desired outcome, to increase loyalty to the party among CLS students and change perceptions of China in Sweden. At the same time, there is a risk of inhibiting democratic educational ideals such as freedom of expression by limiting discussion of certain topics.

Consequently, it is important to address how municipalities and mainstream educational organizations enable CLS operations in Sweden by offering the schools financial resources and access to premises. The role of municipal and educational entities in these operations risks increasing the legitimacy of the narratives conveyed to students, and that these entities are indirectly perceived as supporting CCP-friendly messages that could be communicated by the schools. It also seems reasonable to question why Swedish taxpayers’ money is in some cases, albeit indirectly, being used to contribute to disseminating CCP propaganda. Without increased scrutiny by relevant actors of decisions to provide financial support, and better regular follow-up to ensure that the supported organizations are conveying democratic messaging, it will be difficult to counteract the CCP’s aims. It is advisable to initiate a dialogue with the relevant schools to understand their perspective on their connections with Chinese authorities. If feasible, efforts should be made to support them in mitigating any adverse influence from the CCP.

The results of the study also contribute to the ongoing debate in Sweden about independently operated charter schools that offer an education based on non-democratic values. Even though the CLSs in this study are not independently operated charter schools, and are not primarily financed by Swedish tax funds, it cannot be ruled out that charter schools with Chinese ownership might be established in Sweden in the future. This underlines the importance of knowing which actors have the potential to influence a school’s operations, to ensure that education in Sweden is based on democratic values regardless of stewardship.

There is an inherent risk of increasing mistrust of the diaspora by reporting on the CCP's influencing of it. In this respect, it is important to underline that by attending the CLSs, individuals in the diaspora are not necessarily agreeing with or feeling affected by CCP-approved narratives. Furthermore, it is important to underline that offering a diaspora a chance to study its mother tongue is not a problem per se. Language schools for diasporas have been established or supported by many governments all over the world, including the Swedish school in Shanghai and the former Swedish school in Beijing. Nonetheless, given the CCP's non-democratic nature and its extensive efforts to influence the diaspora, which include coercion and illicit means, its relationship with the CLSs is a cause for concern. Moreover, the CCP has repeatedly stated that its work with the CLSs only will increase in the future, and it is important to take its ambitions seriously.

Policy recommendations

Four policy recommendations are derived from conclusions of this report:

- Strengthen knowledge in central government, mainstream educational organizations, civil society, municipalities and regions on how the CCP works strategically to influence the diaspora and diaspora organizations.
- Review current processes for approving and evaluating support provided to organizations to ensure that they do not promote non-democratic ideology or convey messages at odds with democratic values. The review should be complemented with a strategy to support schools in adhering to democratic standards. For instance, this could involve providing educational materials developed independently from CCP influence.
- Investigate the possible effects of CCP influence on the CLSs and their students.
- Support alternatives for individuals in the diaspora who want to learn the Chinese language free from CCP influence. This could also involve increasing resources to mother tongue instruction in Chinese in the Swedish school system and ensuring that the language education is available in all locations. If offline education is not an option, online education could be an alternative.

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Frida Lindberg

Frida Lindberg is an analyst at the Swedish National China Centre.



Erika Staffas Edström

Erika Staffas Edström is an analyst at the Swedish National China Centre.

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