

China's influence and the Chinese community in the Netherlands

*English translation of the executive summary
and policy recommendations*

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Summary of key findings

The extent of influence by the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on Chinese diasporic communities and Chinese citizens in the Netherlands is at present still limited and has not led to harmful interference in Dutch society. This is not to say, however, that there are currently no developments that deserve scrutiny, as the basis for influencing the Chinese community in the Netherlands has been laid. It is therefore important to anticipate the future possibility of interference and to take proactive measures in this regard.

In the recent two decades, the ambition of the Chinese government and the CCP to wield their influence among overseas Chinese communities has grown, as have the instruments at their disposal to do so. Overseas Chinese are increasingly considered as an integral part of the Chinese nation and as an advantage that can be exploited for strategic objectives. The institutions of the so-called United Front department of the CCP play a key role in this process.

Members of the Chinese diasporic communities and Chinese citizens in the Netherlands are both a target and a (potential) instrument of Chinese influence. Diasporic leaders who have backgrounds in regions of China with long-standing traditions of emigration dominate the organizations of the Chinese communities in the Netherlands and their relations with the PRC. More direct influence is exercised over the official Chinese student association in the Netherlands. In addition, the PRC also shapes the output of media outlets produced in the Netherlands by the Chinese community, leaving little room for opinions or activities that deviate from the official Chinese narrative, particularly when it comes to China's foreign policy and sovereignty claims.

Organizations and groups that, according to the Chinese government, pursue subversive goals (such as Uighur or Tibetan activist refugees, supporters of the Hong Kong democracy movement, and also members of the Falun Gong that is banned in China) suffer the reach of the Chinese government in the form of intimidation or reprisals, or the fear thereof.

China's influence is also noticeable in the role played by some members of the Chinese diasporic communities in the Netherlands in positively presenting economic opportunities in relation to China, for example with regard to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Dutch local authorities and Dutch or Dutch-Chinese business associations and friendship organizations often play a more prominent role in these processes, however.

The Chinese authorities only seem lightly to control the use of Chinese social media (specifically the messaging platform WeChat) in the Netherlands. Administrators of WeChat groups in the Netherlands are only minimally active and not supervised from China. This also applies to the use of WeChat among, for example, the Uighur community. Members of such communities obviously are careful about what they write on Chinese social media, but still use these regularly.

The freedom, security and room for forming and expressing opinions of all Chinese diasporic communities and Chinese citizens living in the Netherlands must be safeguarded. Members of the Chinese communities need to be more closely connected with Dutch society, while a full representation of groups, opinions and interests among them should be guaranteed. This particularly applies to groups that wish to operate independently of, or to be critical towards, the PRC. However, it also applies more broadly to members of the Chinese community in the Netherlands who often choose to avoid expressions and activities at odds with the Chinese government.

The uproar over the coronavirus and the growing distrust of the PRC have contributed to many members of the Chinese diasporic communities and Chinese citizens in the Netherlands feeling marginalized and undeservedly criticized. With that in mind, it is of the utmost importance that the

Dutch government take steps to tackle threats from China. However, it is equally important that this does not alienate the Chinese diasporic communities in the Netherlands from Dutch society, which naturally also applies to the large number of people with a Chinese background who are fully integrated into Dutch society.

Policy recommendations

1. Restart the dialogue between the Dutch government and representatives of the Chinese communities in the Netherlands that came to a standstill after the end of the Dutch government's minority policy in 2011. A wide cross-section of organizations and interests of the Chinese communities in the Netherlands should be included in this dialogue. The objectives of the dialogue are the promotion of the integration, participation, diversity, and openness of the Chinese communities in the Netherlands and to alert Dutch society to influencing efforts from China.
2. Define goals for extracurricular Chinese language education (Saturday schools) in the Netherlands and facilitate the provision of teaching material that is tailored to Dutch society instead of China.
3. Strengthen the targeted assistance to Chinese communities in the Netherlands in areas like elderly care, social work, Dutch language education and legal assistance.
4. The activities of CCP members in the Netherlands must take place in accordance with clear norms and regulations. Only activities targeted at the future re-integration in China of CCP members can be allowed, as long as full transparency of these activities is provided. Covert party activities are to be prohibited.
5. Facilitate the availability of Chinese language media and media production whose content and operations are independent from media or news agencies from China. This could include a (new) Dutch broadcasting station geared towards Chinese or Asian communities in the Netherlands, Chinese language news reports by Dutch media platforms, or improving the diversity of existing Chinese language media by increasing the availability of media from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia and North America.
6. Establish partnerships with local governments in the most important areas of origin in Zhejiang, Fujian, Hong Kong and Guangdong in order to shape collaboration with China regarding the Chinese communities in the Netherlands. The interests and position of the Chinese communities should be at the core of this collaboration, instead of the superpower ambitions of the central government of China.
7. Raise cases of intimidation of Uighurs and other critics of the PRC who reside in the Netherlands at the diplomatic and political level, including during discussions and negotiations with the PRC on other topics and areas.
8. Introduce a system to monitor and detect cases of Chinese influence and interference in the Netherlands and conduct research into the nature, extent and consequences of the links between Chinese and Dutch governments and organizations that aim to strengthen the relationship and collaboration between the two countries. This system and research should cover, but not be limited to, the Chinese communities in the Netherlands. The aim of these initiatives is not to proscribe or discredit relationships and collaborations, but to uncover and counter any use of these links for interference and manipulation practices by the Chinese government and the CCP.