

Chen Shirong 陈时荣 and the United Front Work Department

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Overview

- Chen Shirong 陈时荣 is a British journalist, entrepreneur and interpreter who has worked for the British Broadcasting Corporation and what was then the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO).
- In September 2023, Microsoft published a report alleging that a website run by Chen, Foremost4Media 英国富中传媒, was part of a propaganda network connected to the United Front Work Department (UFW) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).
- UK-China Transparency has established that Chen's relationship with the UFW and CCP has been extensive and was concurrent with his time working for the FCO. It appears to have involved repeated participation in a forum organised by the UFW, involving training courses and engagement with senior UFW officials.

UK-China Transparency (UKCT) contacted Chen in advance of the publication of this report. Chen did not respond to requests for comment. Shortly after Chen had confirmed his identity over the phone and received UKCT's message, Foremost4Media's website became inaccessible. As of 16/12/2024, it appears to have been deleted.

UKCT does not allege any illegal activity on the part of Chen Shirong. Nor does UKCT suggest that Chen misled the FCO, broke any agreement with the FCO, or engaged in any misconduct in his work for the FCO. UKCT has seen no evidence to this effect.

Foremost4Media and the United Front Work Department

According to Microsoft, "The Microsoft Threat Intelligence community is made up of more than 10,000 world-class experts, security researchers, analysts, and threat hunters analyzing 78 trillion signals daily to discover threats and deliver timely and hyper-relevant insight to protect customers. Our research covers a broad spectrum of threats, including threat actors and the infrastructure that enables them, as well as the tools and techniques they use in their attacks."¹

In September 2023, Microsoft published a report featuring Microsoft Threat Intelligence branding entitled, "Digital threats from East Asia increase in breadth and effectiveness".² The report analysed, amongst other things, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) influence and propaganda efforts.

The report included a map illustrating what it called a "A veiled global network of CCP news websites [...] Despite presenting as largely independent, unaffiliated websites catering to different Chinese diaspora communities around the globe, we assess with high confidence that these websites are affiliated with the CCP's United Front Work Department (UFW)—an organ responsible for strengthening the CCP's influence beyond China's borders: particularly by liaising with "overseas Chinese"—based on technical indicators, website registration information, and shared content."

¹ <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/security/blog/topic/threat-intelligence/>

² <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/security/security-insider/intelligence-reports/digital-threats-from-east-asia-increase-in-breadth-and-effectiveness/>

The “technical indicators” described by MTI are referenced in the report as those described in more detail in a white paper published by Microsoft’s Digital Threat Analysis Centre.³ They appear to include shared IP addresses, shared HTML code, including web developer comments embedded in that code, “the same application programming interface (API)” and “content management system from a ‘wholly-owned subsidiary’ of China News Service” 中国新闻社, which is a Chinese government-run media outlet. One of the news outlets in the network described by Microsoft is Foremost4Media 英国富中传媒.

A currently active UK company incorporated in February 2013, Foremost 4 Media Ltd, lists Chen Shirong (surname Chen) as its sole director and person with significant control.⁴

UKCT analysed Chinese- and English-language web sources dating back to 2013 which indicate clearly that Chen Shirong is 陈时荣, that he runs Foremost4Media, and that through Foremost4Media he has worked with the UFWD and Chinese state media.

A webpage published by the Chinese government in December 2013 shows Chen receiving a visit from He Yafei 何亚非, the then Vice Chairman of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO) of China’s State Council,⁵ which was then overseen by the UFWD and has since been absorbed by the UFWD entirely.⁶ A photo published on this page shows Chen with a Foremost4Media-branded standing poster which also depicts front covers from China Report 中国新闻周刊, a magazine produced by China News Service (see below, where Chen is on the left.) According to this webpage, the setting of the meeting was China Report’s office in London, the magazine’s UK edition having been launched in June of that year.



Until Autumn 2024, when Foremost4Media’s website was taken offline (see above), Foremost4Media continued to publish China Report on its website. Digital versions of China Report found online state that it is “published” by China News Service, that Chen Shirong is a “Consultant Editor” and that Foremost4Media is its “Marketing/Advertising/Subscription EMEA Office”.⁷ A dedicated site for

³ <https://web.archive.org/web/20240418040043/https://blogs.microsoft.com/wp-content/uploads/prod/sites/5/2023/02/DTAC-Attribution-Framework.pdf>

⁴ <https://find-and-update.company-information.service.gov.uk/company/08392691/officers>

⁵ https://web.archive.org/web/20240907150133/https://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2013-12/12/content_2546727.htm

⁶ <https://jamestown.org/program/reorganizing-the-united-front-work-department-new-structures-for-a-new-era-of-diaspora-and-religious-affairs-work/>

⁷ See, for example, <https://www.yumpu.com/news/en/issue/170736-china-report-132>

China Report, www.chinareport.co.uk, was part of Foremost4Media’s umbrella site, which also contains webpage version of China Report articles.⁸ Foremost4Media offered China Report subscription packages on its main website. It also claimed to have organised events for China News Service and another Chinese government media outlet in the UK, and offered a range of consultancy services for private clients.⁹

Since 2011, Chen has made visits to China to attend the biennial “Global Chinese Language Media Forum” 世界华文传媒论坛 (the ‘Forum’). Over the years, Chinese-language coverage of the Forum and its associated touristic ‘days-out’ includes textual reference and photographs of Chen. China News Service itself has also published lists of names of attendees for some years. These various sources suggest that Chen attended the 6th Forum in 2011,¹⁰ the 7th in 2013,¹¹ the 8th in 2015,¹² the 9th in 2017,¹³ and the 10th in 2019 (see image below, in which Chen appears on the far right).¹⁴ UKCT could find no evidence of Chen attending the 11th Forum in 2023 (it was delayed due to COVID-19). Chen also attended a “Global Chinese Media Qinghai Tour” 世界华文媒体青海行 in 2014.¹⁵



In October 2019 Xu Yousheng 许又声, then head of Overseas Chinese Affairs (*qiaowu*, 侨务) at the UFWD, gave a speech at the opening ceremony of the Forum. This speech has been reproduced on a UFWD website. According to this reproduction, Xu described the role of the UFWD in organising the Forum and praised “Overseas Chinese compatriots” for their efforts “resisting separatist forces” – a reference to advocates of independence for Taiwan, Tibetan political rights activists, and other banned political groupings. He described “Overseas Chinese media” as a “unique and special international public opinion force”, calling on those present to “increase their influence, win public credibility, and together create a favourable international public opinion environment”.¹⁶

⁸ <https://web.archive.org/web/20180120020305/http://www.chinareport.co.uk/>

⁹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20240204231712/https://foremost4media.com/our-service/>

¹⁰ <https://web.archive.org/web/20240910190440/https://www.chinanews.com.cn/kong/2011/08-26/3287279.shtml>

¹¹ <https://www.franceq.com/article-30046-1.html> - Please note this URL resists being archived using the Internet Archive; however, UK-China Transparency can provide a PDF version. Please email info@ukctransparency.org if you would like to be sent one.

¹² https://web.archive.org/web/2024000000000*/https://www.chinanews.com.cn/m/kong/2015/08-12/7463048.shtml

¹³ <https://web.archive.org/web/20240907150741/https://www.chinanews.com.cn/m/hr/2017/09-06/8324061.shtml>

¹⁴ See <https://web.archive.org/web/20240907123456/https://hmguojiribao.com/18666/>, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240907123426/https://hmguojiribao.com/18725/>, and <https://web.archive.org/web/20240907123551/https://hmguojiribao.com/18600/> (this final link is the source of a photo of Chen part of which is reproduced above.)

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¹⁶ <https://web.archive.org/web/20240910190527/http://qwgzyj.gqb.gov.cn/bqch/208/3166.shtml>

The same year, in May, according to photos published by Chinese state media, Chen attended the closing ceremony of a separate event, the (17th) “Advanced Training Course for Overseas Chinese-language Media”. At the ceremony, Tan Tianxing 谭天星, a minister of the UFW, gave a speech. Senior leaders of China News Service and other UFW officials were also present. Chen was reportedly one of the participants who came on stage to give an account of their learning experience.¹⁷ UKCT found no evidence of Chen taking part in other iterations of this training course.

Work for the Foreign & Commonwealth Office

UKCT was told by a former colleague of Chen’s from the BBC’s Chinese Service that Chen has worked for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) as an interpreter for meetings and events involving Chinese delegations to the UK.

The FCO was renamed the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) in 2020. Contacted for comment, the FCDO offered only general background information about FCDO practices – and no specific information about Chen Shirong.

UKCT understands that the FCDO does not routinely comment on the employment history of those who work for the FCDO, whether they be permanent staff or contractors, and that contract translators only have low-level security clearance.

Some public evidence suggests that Chen did indeed work in interpretation for the FCO. In October 2015, Chen was pictured accompanying a delegation of Chinese government and private enterprise figures from industry on a trip to a UK Power Networks’s Smarter Network Storage project at Leighton Buzzard;¹⁸ he was also pictured at a high table with Xi Jinping during the closing event of the CCP General Secretary’s visit, at a dinner in Manchester (see image below, Chen on far left).¹⁹

UKCT does not intend to suggest that Chen misled the FCO, broke any agreement with the FCO, or engaged in any misconduct in his work for the FCO. UKCT has seen no evidence to that effect.



¹⁷ <https://web.archive.org/web/20240907123621/https://hmguojiribao.com/14950/>

¹⁸ <https://web.archive.org/web/20240908180214/https://blogs.fcdo.gov.uk/hollywhite/2015/10/29/science-and-innovation-in-the-golden-era/>

¹⁹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20151025204423/http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/cnleaders/xjp201510/photos.htm>