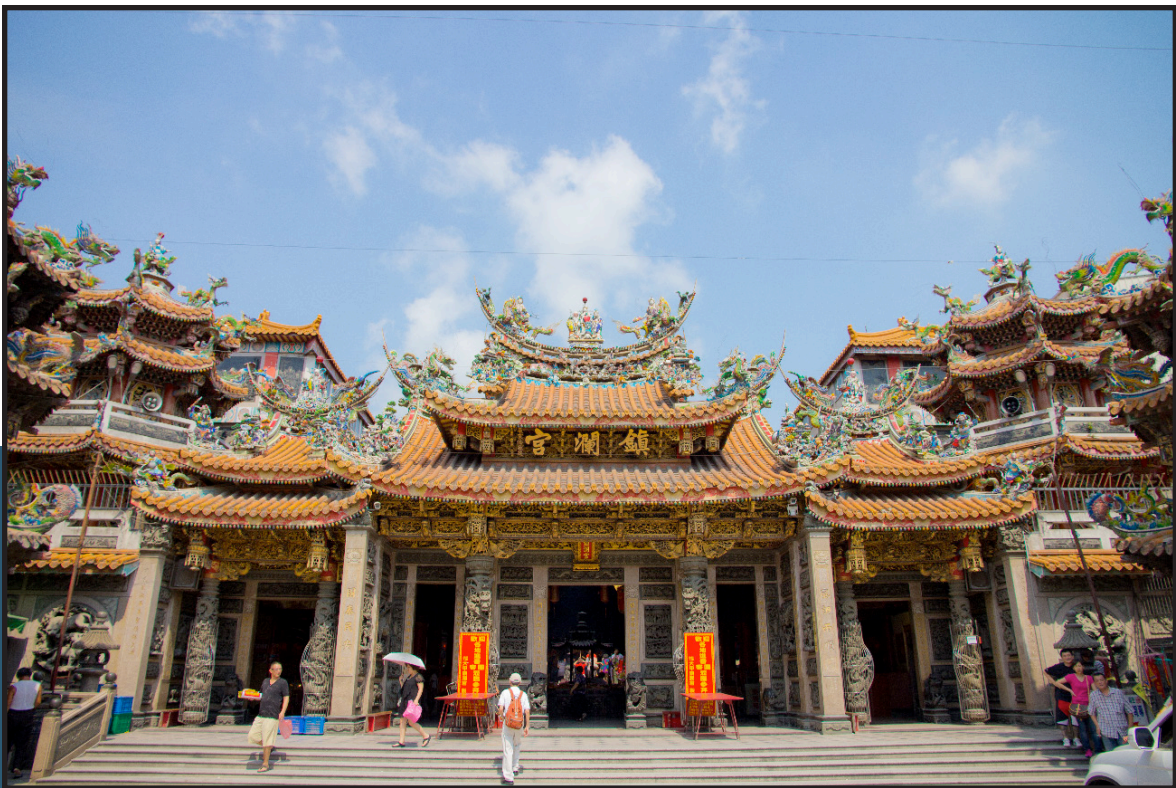


Employing Public Records to Uncover CCP United Front Networks in Taiwan's Temples



Benjamin Sando

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Introduction

The research field of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP, 中國共產黨) political warfare has suffered from a lack of open-source evidence. Because the CCP's united front political influence operations are organized at the person-to-person level, evidence of them must be gathered via individual investigations.¹ United front influence operations often involve private business interactions between CCP agents and influential elites, whereby the elites are rewarded financially for behavior that advances the CCP's interests.² Because these interactions are private by nature, open-source evidence of this political warfare has never reflected its estimated scale.³

When it comes to evidence of how influential elites are co-opted through economic incentives, the field has relied on sporadic news reports, legal proceedings, and face-to-face investigations.⁴

With only a relatively small number of new cases of CCP united front activity reported each year, some have tended to dismiss the phenomenon of CCP political warfare as esoteric or irrelevant.⁵ As a remedy, researchers of CCP united front activity may benefit from emergent software utilizing official public records. This form of business intelligence software provides extensive insights into private economic relationships between firms and individuals. Providers of this type of software, such as Sayari, have collected copious open-access corporate filings maintained by the People's Republic of China (PRC) and other countries around the world. This approach allows researchers to search for the names of individuals or entities associated with CCP political warfare campaigns and to examine for matches in a consolidated database. Official public records generally reveal the names of principals, shareholders, and legal representatives associated with a given company. They provide information regarding complex shareholder structures through which re-

searchers can understand which individuals ultimately benefit from a particular business. The data also includes addresses and origins of foreign investment which can help substantiate connections between influence actors and their benefactors. The software thus allows analysts to fill in the blanks between confirmed nodes of PRC political influence. In doing so, a researcher can turn a breadcrumb into a real investigation.

This report intends to demonstrate the capacity of this software to enhance CCP political warfare and united front research, using a case study from the author's research area: Taiwanese temples and organized crime.⁶ The demonstration intends to en-

courage other researchers to employ this kind of software for open-source intelligence work regarding CCP united front influence operations.

This report intends to demonstrate the capacity of this software to enhance CCP political warfare and united front research, using a case study from the author's research area: Taiwanese temples and organized crime.

Taiwanese Temple Donations and PRC-based Businesspeople

Temples have long been centers of political influence in Taiwan. Among the many functions they serve, temples are hubs for the distribution of patronage towards local communities.⁷ Splendid festivals held at Taiwanese temples feature cash giveaways and the distribution of free food and supplies. For those with money to spare, the events offer unparalleled opportunities to ingratiate particular causes or political candidates with local communities. Certain temples, such as Jenn Lann Temple (鎮瀾宮) in Taichung County, are known as centers for political activism in support of engagement policies with the PRC.⁸

Jenn Lann Temple, like many such sites across Taiwan, is also allegedly linked to organized crime. Studies have examined how local gangsters took control of temples as a method to gain legitimacy, enter politics, or barter with politicians for access to local communities.⁹ The chairman of the Jenn Lann Temple board, Yen Ching-piao (顏清標), has been convicted of crimes including graft and firearms possession and has twice served time in prison.¹⁰ At the same time, he has used his chairmanship—as well as alleged leadership roles within organized crime—to gain enormous influence over local politics in the Taichung area. As Jacob Tischer

has documented, Yen championed the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA, 海峽兩岸經濟合作架構協議), a trade initiative led by former President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) that promoted engagement between the PRC and Taiwan.¹¹ He later stumped for Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜), the Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨) candidate in the 2020 presidential election and current speaker of the Legislative Yuan (LY, 立法院).¹² As the 2020 KMT presidential candidate, Han Kuo-yu advocated for “peaceful win-win” relations with Beijing and cross-strait negotiations that would allow Taiwan to enter major regional trade agreements.¹³

Like many alleged gang bosses, Yen has many business links to the PRC—particularly in Fujian Province that is closest to Taiwan. Yen's name can be directly searched on the PRC's National Enterprise Credit Information Publicity System (NECIPS, 國家企業信用信息公示系統), a corporate public records database accessible through Sayari. NECIPS reveals that Yen and his son Yen Kuan-heng (顏寬恆), an LY legislator, were at one time directors and part-owners of a Fujian Province-based company called Xiamen Min-Tai Agriculture and Fishery Operation Co, Ltd (廈門閩台農漁業經營有限公司). The company, which counted the Xiamen Mu-



Image: A chart revealing the Xiamen municipal government's ultimate beneficial ownership of the now-closed Xiamen Min-Tai Agriculture and Fishery Operation Co, Ltd (廈門閩台農漁業經營有限公司), which counted Yen Ching-piao (顏清標) and Yen Kuan-heng (顏寬恆) as directors (Image Source: Sayari)

municipal People's Government as the majority ultimate beneficial owner, was opened in 2008 but later closed down.

In his renowned 2003 book *Heijin*, Rutgers University's Ko-lin Chin (陳國霖) described how Taiwan's alleged gangsters forged relationships with business people both in Taiwan and overseas.¹⁴ In the book, Chin chronicles Yen's involvement in an alleged 1996 brawl at a shareholder's meeting of the company San Teh Enterprise (三德集團). That Yen was bold enough to engage in violence at a shareholder's meeting might suggest that he had substantial involvement in the company. It therefore serves as a good place to start for an investigation into the links between Taiwanese companies, temples, and organized crime.

News reports featuring Yen's name and San Teh Enterprise suggest that in 2017, a San Teh representative named Gao Pan Jinfeng (高潘錦鳳) distributed NTD 300,000 (USD 10,000) in

cash at a community event at Yen's Jenn Lann Temple.¹⁵ A search of Gao Pan's name in NECIPS records reveals several individuals associated with San Teh subsidiaries based in the PRC. Gao Pan is listed as a supervisor of Nantong San Teh Pipe Industry Co., Ltd. (三德管業[南通]有限公司) based in Jiangsu Province. Municipal records of PRC government procurement contracts outline a 2018 pipe-laying deal between Nantong San Teh Pipe Industry and the Suzhou Yongqiao District People's Government in Jiangsu Province, worth RMB 3.45 million (USD 500,000). These records illustrate an individual involved in PRC government contracts distributing cash in local Taiwanese communities.

Besides her professional roles at San Teh subsidiaries, Gao Pan is the wife of Gao Xinping (高新平), one of the eleven children of the original founder of the San Teh Enterprise in Taiwan.¹⁶ Gao Xinping passed away in 2014. According to his obituary on the San Teh Foundation website, he belonged to

Taiwanese Businesspeople in China (Taishang, 台商)

In the last available count of 2021, there were some 163,000 Taiwanese working in China.⁵¹ Taiwanese conducting business in China are known by the shorthand *Taishang* (台商). After the PRC began liberalizing its economy and the KMT government of Taiwan lifted restrictions on travel to China in 1987, the CCP began targeting *Taishang* as an important vector for political influence operations against Taiwan. As the CCP did with other united front targets, it offered *Taishang* that aligned with CCP political objectives enhanced networking or *guanxi* (關係) opportunities with PRC government officials and prominent businesspeople. This *guanxi* facilitates CCP authorities' approval and support of *Taishang's* business initiatives in China.⁵²

The CCP prefers a corporatist model for rallying political support and dispensing benefits, relying on outreach to groups rather than dispersed individual relationships.⁵³ The CCP's most prominent vehicles for organizing political support have been the Chinese People's Political Consultative Committees (CPPCCs), which exist at every level of the party-state.⁵⁴ CPPCCs are elite networking communities, where membership is contingent on acts of political loyalty to the CCP. The CCP has been largely unable to employ CPPCCs to rally and reward support from *Taishang*, since Taiwanese are prohibited by the Republic of China's (ROC) *Cross-Strait Act* from joining such organizations.⁵⁵ As a consequence, the CCP relies on a constellation of other PRC-administered groups and organizations to manage support from Taiwanese businesspeople in China, such as the Association of Taiwan Investment Enterprises on the Mainland (ATIEM, 全國台灣同胞投資) and others.⁵⁶ Taiwanese citizens' membership of ATIEM is not illegal under ROC law.

one of the 10 richest families in Taiwan before emigrating to Singapore to establish a San Teh offshoot. From there, Gao Xinping founded a network of firms in China. Gao was most prominent in Xiamen in Fujian Province. His obituary states that he started China's first Taiwan Business Association (台協會) in Xiamen, which later grew into the large network of CCP United Front-linked Taiwan Business Associations seen across China today. Gao was apparently an acquaintance of CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping (習近平) while the latter was serving in various official roles in Fujian Province.¹⁷

Gao's family members appear across San Teh subsidiaries in PRC. One of his Singapore-based sons, Mike Kao Chuan Trong (高銓壯), is a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) of Longyan city in China.¹⁸ CPPCCs are a network of consultative bodies located at every level of the PRC government, which gather together influential persons for the purpose of rallying elite support for the CCP in China and overseas.¹⁹

NECIPS lists the late Gao Xinping and his son as representatives of a Fujian-based company, titled San Teh Xing Real Estate (Fujian) Co., Ltd. (三德興置業[福建]有限公司). Alongside the pair is another individual bearing the Gao family name, Gao Tianhao (高天浩), whom NECIPS tags as a Taiwanese national. Since at least 2021, Gao Tianhao has also been a part-owner of the company through an investment firm titled China Taiwan Gao Tianhao (中國台灣高天浩). Gao Tianhao is a longtime associate of Gao Xinping, serving in 2007 as a supervisor of a Xiamen-based San Teh subsidiary led by the latter.²⁰ Online reports suggest that Gao Tianhao and the late Gao Xinping regularly participated in international gatherings of the Fujian-origin Gao clan.²¹ In all reports, Gao Tianhao is described as hailing from New Taipei City in Taiwan.²²

Meanwhile, PRC news reports dating as late as 2016 state that Gao Tianhao is a member of the Quanzhou Municipal CPPCC and a "specially invited member from Taiwan."²³ The reports are evidence

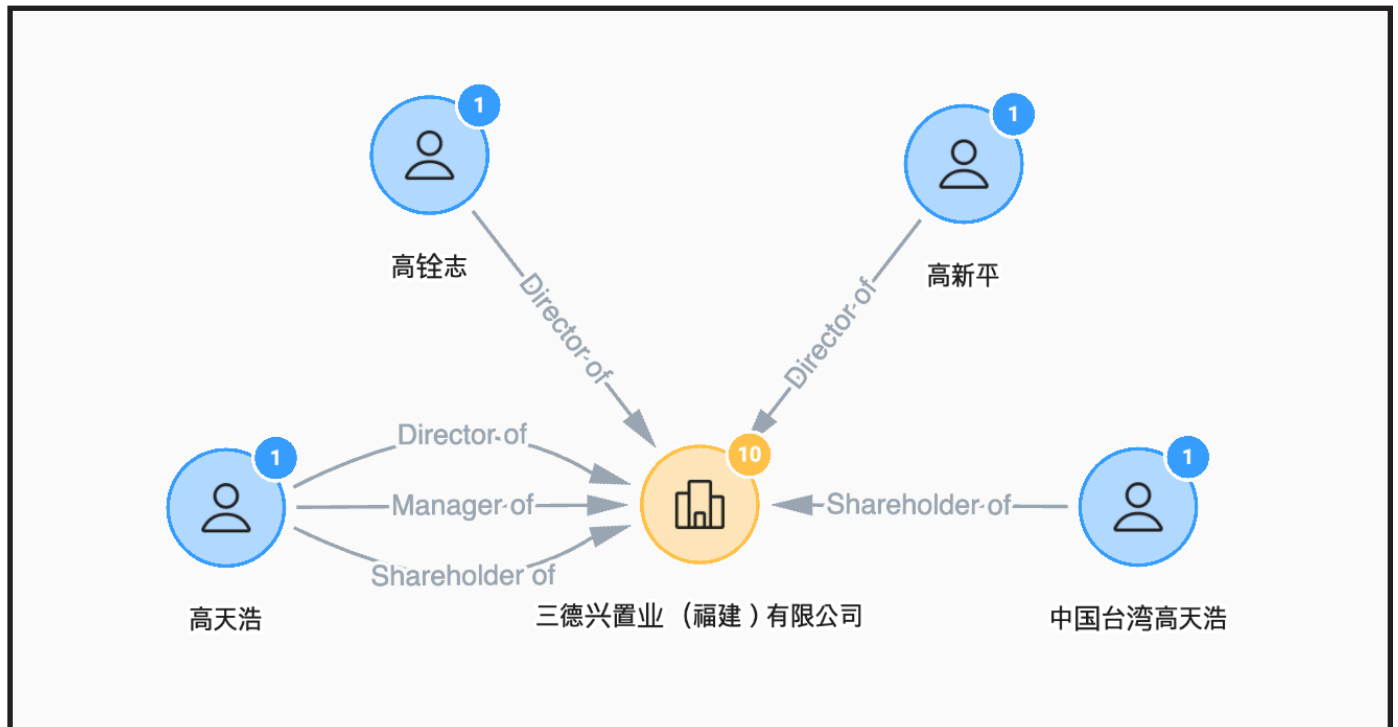


Image: A chart revealing the shareholders of San Teh Xing Real Estate (Fujian) Co., Ltd. (三德興置業[福建]有限公司), which include the late Gao Xinping (高新平) and Gao Tianhao (高天浩) (Image Source: Sayari)

that Gao Tianhao is violating Taiwan's *Cross-Strait Act*, which forbids Taiwanese citizens from serving in any CPPCCs. An article by *Taiwan.cn*, a news site managed by the PRC's Taiwan Affairs Office, suggests that Gao Tianhao attended a 2018 tea tasting event organized for 40 Taiwanese businesspeople in Anxi County.²⁴ The event was organized by the Organization Department and Taiwan Work Office—a united front institution—of the CCP's Anxi County Party Committee. During the event, Gao shared how he had first come to Anxi County 20 years prior before investing in a San Teh hotel. The reports suggest that the Taiwan-based Gao Tianhao is actively engaging in CCP united front activities aimed at integrating Taiwanese businesspeople into PRC society.

in Suzhou and personal relationships with CCP officials in Fujian Province. San Teh representatives, including the wife of San Teh entrepreneur Gao Xinping, and a Taiwanese Quanzhou CPPCC member, Gao Tianhao, have engaged in political influence activities through grassroots donations in Taiwan and united front exchanges in China. OSINT software demonstrates that in certain cases, wealthy *Taishang* influence actors are only one degree of separation away from the PRC government.



Image: Gao Tianhao (高天浩) attends a Quanzhou Municipal CPPCC session (Image Source: mnw.cn)

News reports and corporate records point to a political influence network connected to the San Teh Corporation and a Fujian-origin Gao family clan, spanning Taiwan, the PRC, and Singapore. San Teh affiliates in the PRC are deeply involved with the CCP, such as through a large government contract

Cheng Ming-kun and Mazu Goddess-related Development Projects in China

Besides relationships with Taiwanese business people in China, Jenn Lann Temple is the locus for another kind of connection to the PRC: religious exchanges.²⁵ The vice chair of the Jenn Lann Temple board and right-hand man of Yen Ching-piao, Cheng Ming-kun (鄭銘坤), concurrently serves as the chairman of the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship (台灣媽祖聯誼會).²⁶ Cheng has his own connections to Taiwan's criminal underworld, having served prison time for smuggling and vote-buying.²⁷ As the chairman of the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship, Cheng is responsible for facilitating religious exchanges between a network of over 150 Mazu goddess temples in Taiwan and their counterparts in the PRC.²⁸ Even as other forms of tourism have dried up in the era of tension between the CCP and the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨)—exacerbated by the COVID pandemic—pilgrimages have remained a straightforward way for Taiwanese and Chinese to visit each other across the Strait.²⁹

For almost all Taiwanese participants in these religious exchanges, the activity is an act of devotion to a deity whose origin lies in Fujian Province in Chi-

na. For a narrow few, these exchanges offer material benefits.³⁰ In the PRC, CCP officials command the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship's counterpart, the Chinese Mazu Cultural Exchange Association (CMCEA, 中華媽祖文化交流協會).³¹ The CMCEA oversees 150 Mazu temples and organizations in China, and facilitates pilgrimages of Taiwanese devotees. It is a facet of the CCP's united front system in China. Until 2024, the CMCEA's chairman was the late Zhang Kehui (張克輝), a Taiwanese who settled in Fujian Province during the Chinese Civil War and became the Vice Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)—the nationwide echelon of the CPPCC system that assembles the most influential of PRC elites for united front political warfare.³²

When Taiwanese pilgrims arrive at the CMCEA-administered Mazu temples in China, they are met with splendid ceremonies and itineraries that include visits to shopping centers and scenic sites. During the pilgrimages, some Taiwanese participants report being added to LINE or WeChat-based group chats that share information critical of the

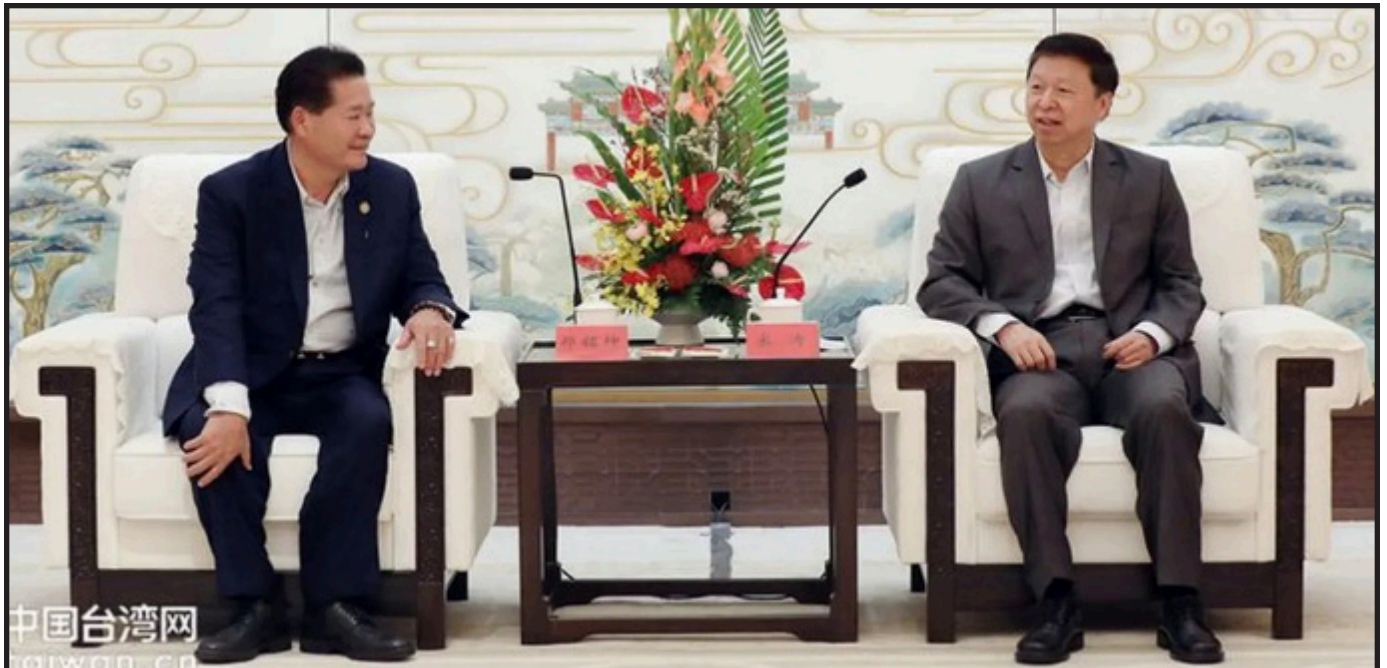


Image: Cheng Ming-kun meets with Song Tao, director of the Taiwan Affairs Office, during a 2023 visit to Beijing (Image Source: [Taiwan Work Office of CPC Central Committee](#))

Taiwan's Temples and CCP United Front Work

Many of Taiwan's temples trace their origins to China. When Taiwan was governed by the Qing Dynasty between 1683 to 1895, settlers from provinces close to the Chinese coast migrated in numbers to Penghu and the main island of Taiwan. Travelling in communities, these migrants often brought the idols of their local gods to their settlements in Taiwan.⁵⁷ Communities that survived the voyage to Taiwan, as well as the challenges imposed by Taiwan's hostile territory, heralded their gods as successful guardians. Gods, and the temples that housed them, thus became the focal points of Taiwan's settler communities.

During Imperial Japan's colonization of Taiwan (1895-1945) and the KMT's martial law period (1949-1987), interaction between Taiwan and mainland China was greatly restricted.⁵⁸ Though the KMT only legally permitted cross-Strait exchange after lifting martial law in 1987, Taiwanese temple groups had already begun travelling across the Strait earlier in the decade. When cross-Strait travel was liberalized in 1987, Taichung's Jenn Lann Temple (鎮瀾宮) led the first prominent pilgrimage to Meizhou Island (湄洲島) in Fujian Province of China, in order to pay respects to the ancestral birthplace of Jenn Lann Temple's god, Mazu.⁵⁹ This visit was welcomed by CCP authorities, and precipitated a wave of exchanges between Taiwan and China, religious and non-religious.⁶⁰

As Taiwan democratized in the late 1980s and 1990s, the political power of temples grew as politicians sought appeal to devotee communities in order to earn votes. Meanwhile, the CCP began to invest in a network of PRC-based associations, such as the Chinese Mazu Cultural Exchange Association, which could allow it to control and weaponize religious exchanges between Taiwan and China.⁶¹ When the CCP and DPP began to impose mutual restrictions on cross-Strait travel during the Tsai Ing-wen Administration, religious exchanges—due in part to Taiwan's commitment to religious freedom—remained one of the few reliable sources of interaction across the Strait. During religious tours to China led by Taiwanese temple leaders, Taiwanese participants are with met with lavish welcomes from Chinese temple counterparts, and are received by CCP officials.⁶² At the same time, PRC officials have entered Taiwan under the false pretense of religious tourism, with the intention of making contact with local Taiwanese leaders for political purposes.⁶³

DPP.³³ Cheng Ming-kun, alongside other members of the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship board, personally leads pilgrimages to the PRC.³⁴ The role of tour group leader allows Cheng unprecedented access to high-level CCP officials. In a 2023 visit to Beijing, Cheng met with Song Tao (宋濤), director of the State Council Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO, 國務院台灣事務辦公室)—the highest PRC state organ responsible for relations with Taiwan.³⁵

It has long been documented that Taiwan Mazu Fellowship board members have invested in PRC-based real estate development projects around Mazu cultural sites in the PRC.³⁶ Data from NECIPS suggests that Cheng has benefited from at least one Mazu-related

development project in Tianjin in northern China. Cheng's Jenn Lann Temple has established an affiliate temple in the city, called Tianjin Tianhou Temple (天津天后宮).³⁷ The temple is a regular destination for tour groups organized by the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship. A 2022 study by Yong Zhou suggests that these exchanges have established Tianjin as the only base for cross-Strait exchanges in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region.³⁸

Completed in 2019, the Tianjin Tianhou Temple is the centerpiece of the Tianjin Binhai Mazu Cultural Park (天津濱海媽祖文化園). This "Disney-style" religious site is replete with gift shops, residential

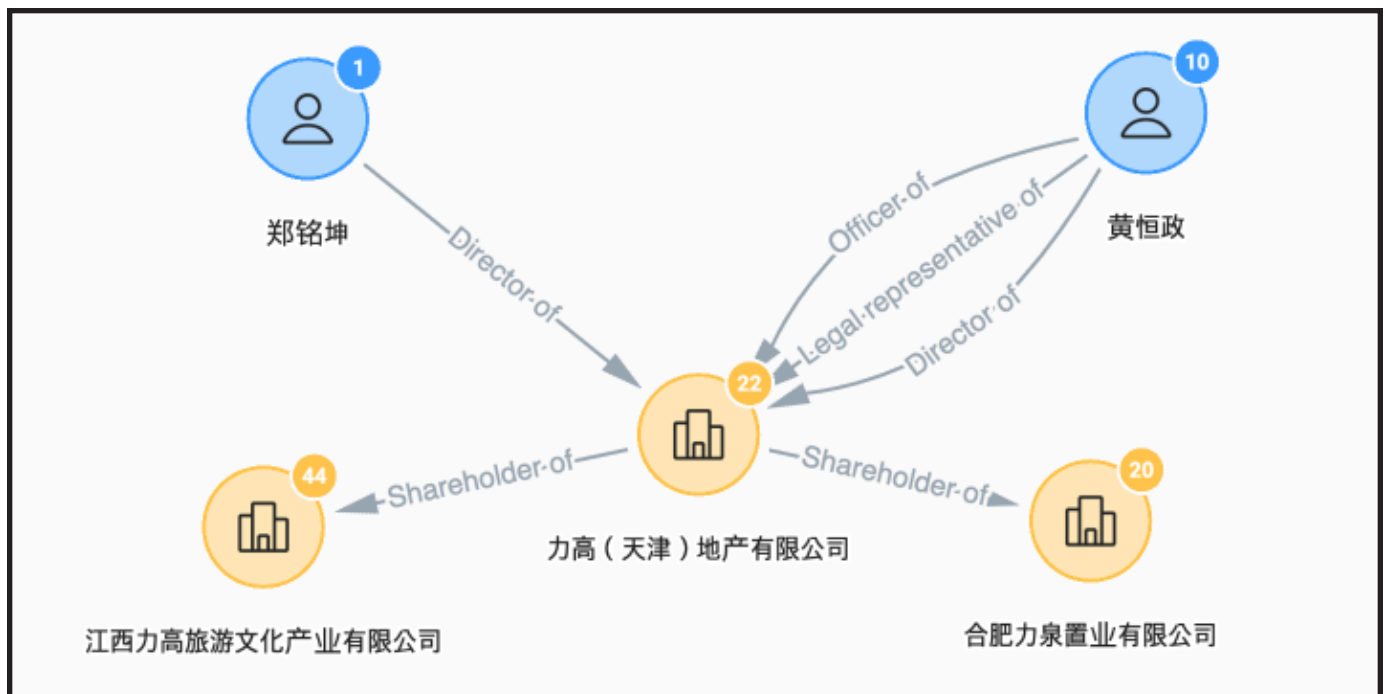


Image: A chart revealing Zheng Ming-kun's directorship of Redco (Tianjin) Real Estate Co., Ltd. (力高[天津]地产有限公司), as well as the subsidiaries of the firm. (Image Source: Sayari)

complexes, and the world's tallest statue of Mazu.³⁹ NECIPS records indicate that a Tianjin-based subsidiary of the real estate firm Redco Properties Group (力高地產集團) developed the site. Cheng himself is listed as a director of the Tianjin-based subsidiary, titled Redco (Tianjin) Real Estate Co., Ltd. (力高[天津]地产有限公司). A 2014 financial report by Redco suggests that Cheng is also a minor shareholder in another of the conglomerate's subsidiaries.⁴⁰

Open-source records thus suggest that Cheng benefits financially from the tour activity he personally directs to the Tianjin Binhai Mazu Cultural Park. Indeed, Cheng has not only played a central role in driving tourists to the religious site, but also in securing the backing of the CCP for the land development project. The Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) has facilitated Mazu-themed development agreements between PRC local governments and Taiwanese temples, such as Jenn Lann Temple.⁴¹ On July 27, 2009, Cheng met with then-TAO Director Wang Yi (王毅, who later served as the PRC's foreign minister) to discuss cross-Strait religious exchanges and the launch

of the Mazu development project in Tianjin.⁴² Two days later, both Cheng and Wang attended the 2nd Tianjin-Taiwan Joint Investment Forum, during which time the Mazu cultural park project was announced.⁴³ Under the agreement, the Tianjin Hangu District Government provided a large parcel of land for Redco's development of the Tianjin Binhai Mazu Cultural Park.⁴⁴ This deal is an example of a prototypical united front incentive structure, whereby an individual gains access to senior CCP officials in exchange for actions that advance the party's objectives. The access then leads to lucrative PRC-origin business deals.

Redco Properties Group appears to have high-level connections to the CCP. One of Redco's founders, Huang Ruohong (黄若虹), is a member of the CPPCC National Committee, which places him in the most influential networks of the CCP and PRC society.⁴⁵ He is also among the top 1000 richest individuals in the PRC with a reported 2019 net worth of CNY 4.3 billion (2019 USD 620 million).⁴⁶ Huang's cousin, Huang Hengzheng (黄恒政), is the



Image: Cheng meets with then-TAO Director Wang Yi on July 27, 2009, days before the Tianjin Binhai Mazu Cultural Park was announced with PRC government backing. (Image Source: Chinanews.com)

chairman of Redco's Tianjin subsidiary, upon which Cheng also sits.⁴⁷ Redco's founder Huang Ruohong and Cheng Ming-kun have jointly attended a meeting with CCP officials, such as a 2015 engagement with the Hefei Municipal CCP Standing Committee during which the Hefei deputy mayor called on Cheng to "introduce

more Taiwanese friends to Hefei" and "strengthen interaction, exchanges and cooperation between the two places."⁴⁸ A year later, in 2016, a series of Hefei-based real estate firms were opened under Redco (Tianjin) Real Estate Co.

The Tianjin subsidiary of Redco also part-owns Jiangxi Redco Tourism and Cultural Industry Co., Ltd. (江西力高旅遊文化產業有限公司). On NECIPS, the Jiangxi-based firm's business purpose is listed as "tourism project development."

The firm has established a Nanchang city-based development company that is part-owned by the Nanchang State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (南昌市國有資產監督管理委員會). In 2024, Cheng met with the director of the Taiwan Affairs Office in Jiangxi Province in Nanchang and discussed the "promotion of exchanges, interactions, and integration between Jiangxi and Taiwan."⁴⁹ Cheng's involvement with Jiangxi Province-based tourism development presents another possible example whereby Cheng's influence over

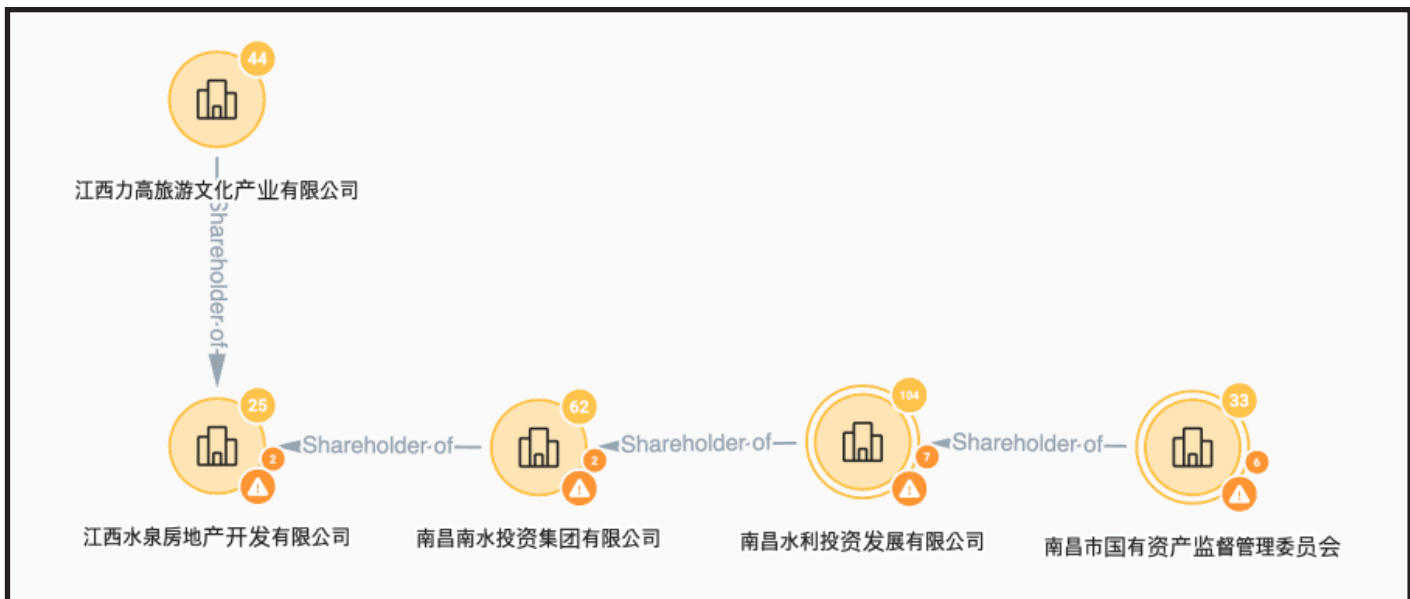


Image: A chart showing the Nanchang State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission's (南昌市國有資產監督管理委員會) ultimate beneficial ownership of a Nanchang city-based development company part-owned by Jiangxi Ligao Tourism and Cultural Industry Co., Ltd. (江西力高旅遊文化產業有限公司). (Image Source: Sayari)



Image: Cheng Ming-kun signs an agreement with the Quanzhou Municipal Party Working Committee, on behalf of his Taiwan-based construction firm Tripod Rainbow Development Co., Ltd. (鼎虹建设有限公司) (Image Source: [Sohu.com](http://sohu.com))

cross-strait exchanges fosters development opportunities involving CCP authorities and PRC firms.

Cheng and the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship have also brought Taiwanese businesses to the PRC, such as several Taichung-based firms that Cheng introduced to the Taiwan Taichung Industrial Town Cooperation Project based in Quanzhou, Fujian Province. During the 2018 signing ceremony for the firms, Cheng himself inked a real estate development deal between his Taiwan-based construction company (Tripod Rainbow Development Co., Ltd. [鼎虹建设有限公司]) and the Quanzhou Municipal Party Working Committee. Construction for the project was due to begin in six months.

Speaking for the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship, Cheng stated:

*"We hope that in the future, through the Taichung Industrial Town project platform, we can attract more and more young Taiwanese to work and settle in the Taiwan Business District. This is also the goal of our Taiwan Mazu Fellowship."*⁵⁰

Official Public Records: A Promising Tool in CCP United Front Research

Software compiling official public records offers researchers new avenues to investigate CCP political warfare and potential criminal connections. In this case study, Sayari records unveil an influence network connected to the PRC-based offshoot of the prominent San Teh conglomerate, as well as evidence of a Taiwanese national violating the *Cross-Strait Act* via membership of a CPPCC. In the area of Mazu-related cross-strait religious exchanges, PRC official public records suggest that a prominent Taiwanese temple leader, Cheng Ming-kun, is personally profiting from pilgrimages bringing large groups of Taiwanese Mazu devotees to the PRC—where they are exposed to CCP influence campaigns.

It should be noted that when using this technology, analysts must still rely on more traditional open-source investigation techniques such as the use of Chinese-language or other foreign-language news sources to corroborate findings and generate new leads. Official public records allow analysts to confirm rumored connections and uncover new ones such as shareholder or trade relationships. In order to accelerate research related to CCP united front activity, research institutions would benefit from partnerships with software companies to help illuminate critical relationships and connections buried in official public records.

In order to accelerate research related to CCP united front activity, research institutions would benefit from partnerships with [official public records] software companies.

Endnotes

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