



CHINA IN CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE

## CCP and proxy disinformation Means, practices, and impact on democracies

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This paper analyses the uses of disinformation (“fake news”) and computational propaganda by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and proxy organizations in Taiwan and abroad. The authors demonstrate trends in the mechanisms used to spread disinformation, identify the purpose(s) of such activities, and assess the impact such practices may have had on Taiwan’s democratic institutions. Besides activity directly linked to the CCP, the paper includes analysis of disinformation used by proxy organizations that seek to further Beijing’s aims regarding unification/annexation. As with cyber warfare and other instruments of “sharp power,” we believe that Taiwan has often been used as a testing ground for CCP united front activities, and therefore its experience facing such intrusions can serve as a warning and provide important lessons to other targeted democracies.

### Background

In the midst of the war between authoritarian influence and democratic survival, Taiwan stands in the forefront of China’s “sharp power.” Beijing has always claimed Taiwan as an unalienable part of its territory since the beginning of history and is becoming increasingly impatient and agitated as Taiwanese, especially its youth, grow increasingly distant in their identification with China. According to an identity survey conducted by the National Chengchi University’s Election Studies Center (ESC), the proportion of Taiwanese who identify themselves as Taiwanese increased from 22 percent in 1994 to approximately 60 percent in 2018. Those who identify with a dual identity, as both Chinese and Taiwanese, witnessed a sharp decline from 50 percent to less than 40 percent, while more than 90 percent of those surveyed considered being Taiwanese as part of their identity.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>“Taiwanese and Chinese identity (1992/02 – 2018/12),” Election Study Center National Chengchi University, Jan. 28, 2019.



While never relinquishing its threat to annex Taiwan by force, as President Xi Jinping 習近平 stated in his “Message to Compatriot in Taiwan” on Jan. 2, 2019,<sup>2</sup> the CCP has been increasing its pressure on Taiwan through diplomatic isolation, pressuring Taiwanese businesses and entertainers to declare their loyalty to the “motherland,” as well as financial or social punishment, the use of local proxies to bribe or threaten targeted civilian organizations or individuals, and a disinformation campaign to influence Taiwan’s domestic politics. Even though information warfare has always been a strategy to win wars in the past centuries, the Internet age has brought information warfare to a whole new level and in ways that can be particularly detrimental to Taiwan’s democracy.

## Beijing’s information war intensifies

Towards the end of 2017 and through 2018, as tensions in the Taiwan Strait increased, various rumors and blatant disinformation saturated Taiwan’s social media and chat apps. The disinformation campaign waged by China intensified, targeting all aspects of Taiwan from government institutions, civil society to democratic values. China’s disinformation campaign tried to achieve three main goals:

- shape the narrative of the Tsai Ing-wen 蔡英文 administration and tarnish President Tsai’s image;
- attack perceptions in Taiwan in general by exploiting and exacerbating contradictions and internal conflict within society, creating the view that Taiwan’s economy is failing and its people unhappy and downtrodden (often using the “Ghost Island” meme) and engineering the need for “a new hope” and “savior” (e.g., Han Kuo-yu, 韓國瑜); and
- compel the administration to spend substantial time and energy countering disinformation and thereby overwhelm and sap resources.

Other than state-owned media such as Xinhua News Agency, *People’s Daily*, *Global Times* and the allegedly China Association for Promotion of Chinese Culture (CAPCC, 中華文化發展促進會)<sup>3</sup>-linked *China Review News* (CRN, 中國評論通訊社), China has relied on microblogging sites, chat applications such as WeChat and LINE, Weibo, as well as “content farms” (or “content mills” such as COCO01, COCO0X, Read01.com, kknews.cc (see [Figure 1](#)) and so on to spread disinformation in Taiwan. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA)-linked 311 Base on psychological warfare (61716 Unit) in Fujian Province also controls a variety of electronic media outlets. Taiwan’s popular PTT Gossip Board is also believed to have been penetrated by pro-CCP entities, and a constellation of pages promoting unification, China’s “rejuvenation,” Xi Jinping thought and political candidates favored by Beijing, has appeared on Facebook, with signs of automation or coordination ensuring maximum dissemination and reach.<sup>4</sup> Dozens of

<sup>2</sup> (现场实录) 习近平：在《告台湾同胞书》发表 40 周年纪念会上的讲话, Xinhua News Agency, Jan. 2, 2019.

<sup>3</sup>The CAPCC is a key platform of the Political Work Department (中央軍委政治工作部) under the Central Military Commission (CMC) headed by Xi Jinping. It is actively involved in the promotion of a cross-strait “peace accord” and “re-unification.”

<sup>4</sup>For example, “Love and Peace Qipao Society Taiwan Federation” (愛與和平旗袍會台灣總會), “Chinese Revival Forum” (中华复兴论坛), “The Descendants of the Yan and Yellow Emperors Rise United



泛藍社群中，那些痛批蔡政府的文章，多半都能引發高度迴響。其中雖然不乏聯合新聞網、中時電子報等主流媒體的內容，然而卻有不少文章竟是導向蓄意更改標題、賣弄眼球的「內容農場」網站，同樣引發熱烈迴響。致使泛藍社群反倒淪為有心人士操弄對立情緒，大賺流量財的「金礦」。

資料來源：今周刊〈看不見的黑手？泛藍社群遭「內容農場」攻陷〉、維基百科〈內容農場〉

## “注意，這些是假新聞的網站！”

▶ 什麼是內容農場？

透過合法、非法手段製造大量品質低劣、不具參考性的新聞，透過聳動的標題吸引讀者點閱，以賺取點閱率和網路流量為目的。

▶ 哪些網站是內容農場/假新聞？

- aboutfighter.com (奮鬥者)
- bldaily.com (美麗日報)
- Bomb01.com
- BuzzHand
- cocohk系列
- cocomy.net (COCO大馬)
- damaday.com (大馬加油)
- ezp93.com
- funnyanecdote.com (新政聞)
- foyuanvip.com (佛道)
- gigacircle.com
- happytifyhome (笑趣聞)
- happtify.cc (歡享網)
- hotstartabloid.com (STAR星聞)
- imama.tw (媽媽)
- kknews.cc (每日頭條)
- ptt01.cc (PTT01 娛樂新聞)
- read01.com (壹讀)
- teepr.com (趣味新聞)
- twgreatdaily.com
- www.contw.co

Figure 1: Suspected Chinese-linked “content farms”

new online media, controlled by Taiwan-based individuals who have participated in cross-Strait “new media forums” in China, have also appeared in recent years. Meanwhile, the generation of disinformation aimed at Taiwan has gradually become more refined, with CCP organs reportedly hiring Taiwanese to create content for various Facebook pages and content farms. By doing so, agents of disinformation have gradually removed linguistic idiosyncrasies (e.g., use of simplified Chinese, local terms, etc) which often alerted the targeted audience to the exogenous nature of the information.

Taiwanese authorities have struggled to provide concrete evidence proving that disinformation originated in China or was generated by CCP proxies based in Taiwan or elsewhere; IP addresses, fake Internet pages, PPT and Twitter accounts, the managers of Facebook fan pages and web sites can easily be manipulated and counterfeited.

Traditional media in Taiwan have also helped amplify and “legitimize” information in Beijing’s favor. In April 2019, the *Nikkei Asian Review*, using company filings, revealed that a major Taiwan-based conglomerate, which operates companies in China and Taiwan, had received as much as NT\$15.26 billion (US\$495 million) in subsidies

to Build the Chinese Dream” (炎黃子孫團結奮起共築中國夢), and “What the government doesn’t dare to let you know” (政府不敢讓你知道的事).



from the People's Republic of China (PRC) since 2007.<sup>5</sup> The founder of the conglomerate, who also owns a media empire, denies that the subsidies have had any impact on his media's editorial line, stating that the two entities are legally separate. Taiwan's National Communications Commission (NCC, 國家通訊傳播委員會) has fined Taiwanese media outlets on a number of occasions on claims that they had helped spread disinformation.<sup>6</sup> Journalists and politicians who have alleged that some outlets are part of so-called "red media" in Taiwan have been threatened with defamation lawsuits. Most recently, the *Financial Times*, Taiwan's government-run Central News Agency (CNA), Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Secretary-General Luo Wen-jia 羅文嘉, and He Qinglian 何清漣, the author of the book *Red Infiltration: The Truth About the Global Expansion of Chinese Media* (紅色滲透: 中國媒體全球擴張的真相), were the object of such "lawfare."<sup>7</sup>

Tsai Eng-meng 蔡衍明, the owner of the aforementioned media conglomerate, has actively promoted exchanges with PRC-based media over the years. Since 2015, Tsai has led delegations of Taiwanese media personnel to Beijing to participate in four rounds of the "Cross-Strait Media People Summit" (兩岸媒體人峰會), where participants have been lectured by such luminaries as Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC, 中國人民政治協商會議) chairmen Wang Yang 汪洋 and Yu Zhengsheng 俞正聲. As many as 70 participants from Taiwan from the television, publishing, new media, film distribution, PR and academic sectors, took part in the May 10, 2019, summit in Beijing, up from 34 in 2015.<sup>8</sup> According to the *China Times*, participants signed a number of bilateral cooperation agreements during the session, and were told that it was their "responsibility" to promote "peaceful reunification," the so-called "1992 consensus" and the "one country, two systems" formula.

## Sample case studies

China's disinformation campaign against Taiwan's government took a fatal turn in 2018 when Typhoon Jebi hit Japan's Kaisai region. Propaganda from several state-affiliated outlets in China, in its effort to attack and undermine senior Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) members and Taiwan's representative to Japan, Frank Hsieh (謝長廷), claimed that the Chinese Consulate in Osaka had arranged 15 buses to exclusively evacuate stranded tourists from China, as well as Taiwanese who "admitted they were citizens of China."<sup>9</sup> Evidence later demonstrated this to be false, as the buses were arranged by the Japanese government. However, talking heads, politicians from the opposition and traditional media in Taiwan propagated the disinformation and aimed their criticism at Hsieh and Taiwan's representative offices. Before clarification from the Japanese and Taiwanese governments could be widely distributed, the

<sup>5</sup>Kenji Kawase, "Chinese subsidies for Foxconn and Want Want spark outcry in Taiwan," *Nikkei Asian Review*, April 30, 2019. See also J. Michael Cole, "An Analysis of Possible Chinese Influence Operations Against Taiwan: The Want-Want Case," *Prospect Foundation Newsletter*, May 6, 2019.

<sup>6</sup>創紀錄 NCC 對中天新聞台做出七種處分、開罰百萬, *Commonwealth Magazine*, March 27, 2019.

<sup>7</sup>Chen Yun and Jake Chung, "Want Want China Times to sue 'Financial Times'," *Taipei Times*, July 20, 2019.

<sup>8</sup>兩岸媒體人峰會肩負社會責任, *China Times*, May 11, 2019. See also J. Michael Cole, "More Than 70 Participants From Taiwanese Media Industry Attend 4th Cross-Strait Media Summit in Beijing," *Taiwan Sentinel*, May 11, 2019.

<sup>9</sup>淹成这样, 没想到, 中国领事馆来接人了! 台湾同胞问....., *guancha.cn*, Sept. 5, 2018.



head of Taiwan's Osaka Office, Su Chii-chen 蘇啟誠 committed suicide.<sup>10</sup> Japanese media later reported that Su's suicide was related to pressure from the disinformation.<sup>11</sup> An investigation revealed that the fake content posted on social media came from IP addresses located in Beijing.<sup>12</sup>

Another attempt to create negative perceptions of the Tsai administration targeted agriculture products and trade associated with southern regions of Taiwan, where the majority of DPP supporters reside. Fabricated stories and photos showed tens of thousands of pineapples dumped in a dam with a photo caption, "After the DPP came to power, there is no quality governance. China refused southern Taiwan's 'independent fruit and vegetables.' Poor farmers worked hard for nothing! Very sad!" Taiwan's Council for Agriculture (COA, 行政院農業委員會) clarified that the photo included with the message were taken in China.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the disinformation successfully caused a drop in pineapple prices and linked this to President Tsai's refusal to accept the so-called "1992 consensus" and the ruling party's overall China policy. Disinformation targeting Taiwan's agricultural products again arose during by-elections in March 2019, this time involving pomelo.<sup>14</sup>

Working in parallel with social movements of dubious legitimacy which often overlap with pro-unification groups, disinformation believed to be originating in China or to have been generated by CCP proxies has also targeted other areas of Taiwanese society. This includes, but is not limited to, Taiwan's tourism industry after Tsai's inauguration in May 2016,<sup>15</sup> the government's pension reform program,<sup>16</sup> new environmental rules governing the burning of incense and ghost money at Buddhist temples (President Tsai "persecuting" religion),<sup>17</sup> the government's response to natural disasters,<sup>18</sup> the validity of the Taiwanese passport abroad,<sup>19</sup> as well as fake photographic evidence provided by the official PLAAF Weibo account (and then spread by content farms) showing a flyby by a H-6K PLA Air Force (PLAAF) bomber near Taiwan's Jade Mountain.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Stacy Hsu, "Osaka envoy commits suicide," *Taipei Times*, Sept. 15, 2018.

<sup>11</sup>大阪駐在の台湾外交官はなぜ死を選んだのか, *Tōyō Keizai* 東洋経済, Sept. 19, 2018.

<sup>12</sup>抓到了! 關西機場 6 日淹水關閉北京帳號湧 PTT 帶風向, *Liberty Times*, Sept. 16, 2019. Tracking IP addresses has been a challenge in itself, with IPs linked to identified Chinese individuals often moving around all over the world.

<sup>13</sup>【假照片】台南鳳梨丟棄電視不敢報導? 來自中國的照片和影片, MyGoPen, May 24, 2018.

<sup>14</sup>Shelley Shan, "NCC defends fake news probe," *Taipei Times*, March 15, 2019.

<sup>15</sup>Ben Blanchard and Faith Hung, "China, Taiwan add tourists to their squabbles," Reuters, May 12, 2016.

<sup>16</sup>Chung Li-hua and Lee Guo-jen, 國安單位: 反年改陳抗有中國勢力介入, *Liberty Times*, July 18, 2017.

<sup>17</sup>See J. Michael Cole, "Fake News at Work: President Tsai 'Persecutes Religion' in Taiwan," *Taiwan Sentinel*, July 20, 2017. The information originated on the aforementioned COCO01.net content farm and then spread via messaging apps such as LINE. Buddhist temples in Taiwan are notorious for their connections with China. One local temple, located near the authors' place of residence, has performed pilgrimages to China where the memes of "shared ancestry" and "peaceful development of cross-strait relations" were reinforced. By the entrance gate, printouts of web pages from the Taiwan Affairs Office are prominently displayed and a flat-screen TV was installed facing the sidewalk which, when turned on, plays CCTV.

<sup>18</sup>Wang Yu-chung and Huang Kuo-liang, 十大罪狀...「討賊民進黨」變全台最大黨, *United Daily News*, Nov. 10, 2018. See also Chen Hung-mei, 一張「英皇水災出巡圖」竟傳出 PO 臉書就遭刪除?, *China Times*, Aug. 27, 2018.

<sup>19</sup>網傳中國打壓出國搭機須帶身分證外交部駁斥非事實, *Liberty Times*, July 30, 2017. See also, J. Michael Cole, "Disinformation Targets Legitimacy of Taiwan's Passport," *Taiwan Sentinel*, Aug. 1, 2018. Here again, the information appeared to originate online and then spread via apps such as LINE groups.

<sup>20</sup>空軍發布疑似轟-6K 與台灣玉山合影, Read01.com, Dec. 18, 2016.



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The local elections in November 2018 were said to constitute a “testing ground” of China’s “sharp power” through various methods and disinformation campaigns, with the “lessons learned” expected to help Beijing shape its information warfare campaign against Taiwan in the lead-up to the January 2020 presidential and legislative elections.

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