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CHINESE MESSAGING ACROSS THE STRAIT

China-friendly Narratives and the 2020
Taiwan Presidential Election



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Table of Contents

Introduction	5
“One China” Policy and China’s Approach to Taiwan	6
The 2020 Taiwan Presidential Election	8
Taiwan’s Social Media Landscape	10
Chinese Interference in Taiwan’s Information Environment	11
Social Media Findings	12
Conclusion	24

Introduction

Taiwan has grappled with foreign interference at a scale that dwarfs the challenges faced by many other democracies. The island nation remains a flashpoint for Chinese projections of power and sovereignty that date back to the Chinese civil war in the late 1940s when the Kuomintang Party (KMT) was driven out of the mainland by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Since that time, the CCP has contended that Taiwan is a part of broader China yet to be united with the mainland, while the government of Taiwan has been caught up in a debate as to whether it represents the legitimate “China” (i.e., democratic and free) or whether it is “Taiwan” (i.e., no longer connected to China at all).¹

Chinese information operations targeting Taiwan have intensified alongside China’s more aggressive foreign policy. These operations have been conducted, in part, through the targeting and denigration of pro-independence or less China-friendly politicians within Taiwan. The 2018 local elections in Taiwan saw a range of pro-mainland, anti-independence patriotic trolling campaigns and fake personas that aligned with CCP interests and that spiked particularly during periods of geopolitical tension. The situation only exacerbated as Taiwan approached the 2020 presidential election, when social media, both Western platforms like Facebook and YouTube, as well as platforms originated from Chinese mainland like Weibo, were entangled with conspiracy theories and disinformation. Although not all of them can be attributed back to the CCP government, they align with China’s “discourse power” projection that favors China’s vision of the cross-strait relationship and criticizes politicians who challenge its authority in the region, including the presidential candidate Tsai Ing-Wen.

Echoing the experiences of other democracies, social media has made this challenge more difficult. As communities have grown more insular and opinions more entrenched, fact-based information has become harder to come by, replaced by political polarization and mutual recrimination.² For example, pan-Blue (pro-KMT) constituents are more likely to believe and disseminate negative disinformation about the current Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)

administration.³ Moreover, as awareness of Chinese information operations has grown, some social media users in Taiwan have exacerbated the partisanship by labeling any China-friendly narratives – and anyone advancing them – as Chinese in origin. This has further increased the climate of paranoia and distrust.

Despite growing Western attention on China’s interference in the democratic institutions of Taiwan, there has been limited academic research that accounts for the full scope and impact of such information operations during the 2020 Taiwan election and their effects upon Taiwan’s broader political landscape. This report identifies instances of Chinese political messaging from both official Chinese government accounts as well as unattributable accounts that promote consistently pro-China narratives that align with CCP propaganda. The DFRLab found that, while China sought to apply influence on the election through coordinated information operations on social media platforms, such operations achieved far less impact and pro-CCP sentiment than the party likely anticipated, likely thanks in part to general awareness of Chinese efforts following the 2018 legislative elections. Despite low levels of digital engagement, however, this pro-China material offers a window into the next iteration of Chinese narrative propagation.

1 For more on the understanding of Chinese government’s approach toward Taiwan, see 孙代尧, “中国共产党对台政策演变论析” (“On the Evolution of the Chinese Communist Party’s Policy on Taiwan”), 中共党史研究 6 (2006): 32-40, accessed on November 20, 2020, <http://www.cqvip.com/qk/81413x/200606/23230795.html>; Eleanor Albert, “ChinaTaiwan Relations,” Council on Foreign Relations, December 7, 2016, <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/resources/docs/CFR-China-Taiwan%20Relations.pdf>.

2 *Taiwan Election: Disinformation as a Partisan Issue*, Stanford Internet Observatory, January 21, 2020, <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/news/taiwan-disinformation-partisan-issue>.

3 杜兆倫, “謠言分藍綠? 政治傾向與社群媒體謠言傳播之關聯性研究 Pan-Blue or Pan-Green Rumors? The Relationships Between Political Preferences and Dissemination of Political Rumors in Social Media,” *Degree Thesis of National Taiwan University Journalism Research Institute*, January 1, 2018, accessed on November 20, 2020, <https://www.airitilibrary.com/Publication/alDetailedMesh?docid=U0001-0902201814560900>.

“One China” Policy and China’s Approach to Taiwan

The Chinese Civil War began in 1945 between the KMT and the CCP, splitting the military alliance they maintained throughout World War II, as the two parties sought to maintain control of the levers of government for the entire Chinese territory. Although the KMT gained military ascendancy at first with the help of the US military, the Communists later secured military victories in 1948, culminating in the KMT’s forced retreat from the mainland to Taiwan, where it retained a strategic position and industrial capacity in part because of its geographic isolation from the mainland.⁴ In Taiwan, the KMT remained the only political party on the island for an extended period. Initially, the KMT declared martial rule with an intent to prevent infiltration from CCP spies and prepare the society for a war to conquer the mainland, an aspiration that was never acted upon or realized. Several dissidents from the KMT secretly founded DPP in 1986, with the hope of creating a more democratic society that honors basic human rights and freedom for its citizens. Since the early 1990s, when Taiwan shifted to true a multi-party democratic system, the DPP has promoted a separate identity of Taiwan from mainland China, an accelerating trend since the party first claimed power in 2000. The new generation in Taiwan embraces an increasingly democratic identity, favoring Western culture, political ideals, and economic systems over Chinese culture, unlike their forebearers who had a deeper cultural and familial connection with mainlanders. Under current President Tsai Ing-wen, who was first elected president when the DPP reclaimed power in 2016,⁵ the Taiwanese government has maintained a rather hostile relationship with its counterpart across the Strait. While Tsai has officially rejected the 1992 Consensus, Chinese President Xi Jinping’s administration has responded with tough measures including restricting Chinese tourists access to Taiwan.⁶

Meanwhile, the KMT has – contrary to its origin – deepened its cooperation with the CCP based on the 1992 Consensus that initiated the “One China” policy. Both parties agree that there is only one China, but the definition is left open for interpretation. The People’s Republic of China’s “One China” policy, which sees Taiwan as an integral part of China, is a fundamental part of its foreign policy. A goal of reunification by 2049 was included in the Communist Party of China’s 2049 “National rejuvenation” centenary goals. China’s use of media and public diplomacy to further the “One China” policy targets three key audiences: local Taiwanese, as a means of building support for unification; a foreign audience, intending to isolate pro-independence Taiwan political powers; and a domestic Chinese audience, to reassure the legitimacy and ascendancy of the CCP government.⁷ While the CCP sees this as a way of temporary compromise, it has adhered to the agenda of persuading Taiwan to reunite with the CCP government as opposed to more aggressive military action. On the other hand, while the KMT government in Taiwan signed onto the 1992 Consensus with the CCP government, the DPP leadership has been an adamant opponent of the compromise and regards Taiwan as an independent country separate from the nation of China.

The key organs of CCP information operations in Taiwan are the United Front Work Department, the People’s Liberation Army, and the Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO).⁸ The first two organs set out the official guidelines for the strategy of China’s approach to Taiwan issues within the CCP. More specifically, the United Front Work Department focuses on political maneuvering through the recruitment of influential figures, collection of intelligence information, and covert activities of establishing and maintaining connections with influential individuals and organizations in targeted communities, while TAO serves as the face of

4 Amy McKenna, edit, “Nationalist Collapse And The Establishment Of The People’s Republic Of China (1949),” *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Chinese-Civil-War/Nationalist-collapse-and-the-establishment-of-the-Peoples-Republic-of-China-1949>.

5 DPP held the Taiwan presidency from 2000 until 2008 and again from 2016 until present.

6 Yeni Wong, Ho-I Wu, and Kent Wang, “Tsai’s Refusal to Affirm the 1992 Consensus Spells Trouble for Taiwan,” *The Diplomat*, August 26, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/08/tsais-refusal-to-affirm-the-1992-consensus-spells-trouble-for-taiwan/>; “中国首次暂停赴台自由行对台湾观光及政治的冲击” (“The first time China suspended free travel of its citizens to Taiwan and its influence on Taiwan tourism and politics”), *BBC News*, July 31, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-49178224>.

7 Richard Bush, *What Xi Jinping Said about Taiwan at the 19th Party Congress*, *The Brookings Institution*, 19 October 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/10/19/what-xi-jinping-said-about-taiwan-at-the-19th-party-congress/>.

8 Peter Hartcher, “Rundown of China’s spy agencies will make uncomfortable reading for some,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 14, 2020, <https://amp-smh-com-au.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/amp.smh.com.au/world/asia/rundown-of-china-s-spy-agencies-will-make-uncomfortable-reading-for-some-20200713-p55bhs.html>.

9 Takashi Suzuki, “China’s United Front Work in the Xi Jinping era – institutional developments and activities,” *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 1(2019):83-98, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/24761028.2019.1627714>. For more on United Front Work, read Michael M. Tsai/Po-Chang Huang, “China’s United Front Strategy and its Impacts on the Security of Taiwan and the Asia-Pacific Region,” *Fletcher Security Review* 3(2017):91-96 <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/fletsrev3&div=18&id=&page=91>.

publicly released information.⁹ The conventional methods of the United Front Work Department include engaging Taiwanese media, politicians, businesses, civil society, and other societal influencers. Some of the examples include organizing visits of Taiwanese politicians and chief editors from media outlets to China and emphasizing trade benefits to Taiwanese businesses operating in China.

Another branch that is key in influencing public opinion in China on Taiwan issues is the Cyberspace Administration of China, the CCP's primary organization for oversight of the internet, including monitoring public opinion, which works closely with the United Front Work Department. The goal of the Taiwan-related information influence is centered around reunification under CCP rule. As social media platforms attract increased attention and their large user base rapidly shift discussion, there has been an increasing focus on using non-CCP affiliates such as internet celebrities to deliver pro-China messaging to both Chinese and Taiwanese citizens.

The 2020 Taiwan Presidential Election

The tension of these competing narratives – China’s discourse power and the Taiwanese government’s push for continued autonomy – has redefined the traditional power dynamics in the region and came to a climax ahead of the 2020 presidential election in Taiwan. A month before the election, the legislature passed the Anti-Infiltration Act with no opposition votes, aiming at “curbing Chinese influence on the island politics.”¹⁰ The DPP administration under President Tsai Ing-wen’s leadership has had an active agenda of countering foreign interference by the CCP, both in her first term and again following her reelection.

On January 11, 2020, incumbent Tsai won a second term in a landslide victory over Han Kuo-yu, the KMT candidate for president. Tsai received more than 8 million votes and set a record for any presidential candidate in Taiwan’s democratic history.¹¹ Out of the 113 seats in the Yuan (Taiwan’s national legislative body), the DPP maintained its majority but dropped from 68 to 61 seats. Although the DPP successfully secured the presidential seat, the KMT gained an additional three seats from the prior legislative session.¹² The DPP’s presidential victory amid a legislative slide followed its substantial losses during local elections in 2018, which researchers assessed to have been influenced by disinformation operations originating from China on both Chinese and Western social media platforms that favors the winning of Han Kuo-yu in the municipal election of Kaohsiung.¹³ The 2020 presidential election victory, however, can be interpreted as a direct rebuke of KMT’s close ties with the CCP.

Under the pretext of the “One China” policy, China expressed its own discontent with the 2020 election results on the island. Shortly after the election, China Daily and Xinhua News, CCP-controlled official news outlets, released several commentaries on the 2020 election.¹⁴ The consensus of these op-eds was that DPP won not because of its popularity but because of the agenda-setting capabilities of the first Tsai administration, external influence from and involvement of the United States, and the KMT’s inadequate capability in uniting the disparate forces within its party.

While the landslide victory for Tsai, who campaigned on a platform of Taiwanese independence, was far from a desired result for the CCP, China is highly unlikely to give up its influence operations – following its philosophy of “discourse power” – pushing Taiwan’s residents toward pro-China political values that align with the CCP’s interests.¹⁵ Following the election, one article by Xinhua News, “The cloud will eventually fade away and reveal the Sun: how to evaluate the result of Taiwan’s ‘presidential election’” (“莫道浮云终蔽日——台湾‘大选’结果当何以看待”) was republished directly 37 times on various Chinese and overseas news outlets, mostly state affiliated news outlets.¹⁶ These narratives demonstrated the grave concern of China, which sees Tsai’s reelection as jeopardizing the possibility of reunification. Chinese official media have generally been highly critical of the pro-independence DPP and Tsai in particular, accusing them of manipulating the information environment in Taiwan by undertaking online misinformation operations.^{17,18} For example, *Global Times* and presidential candidate Chiu

10 Nick Aspinwall, “Taiwan Passes Anti-Infiltration Act Ahead of Election Amid Opposition Protests,” *The Diplomat*, January 03, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/taiwan-passes-anti-infiltration-act-ahead-of-election-amid-opposition-protests/>.

11 Cedric Sam, “Taiwan 2020 Election Results,” *Bloomberg News*, January 11, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2020-taiwan-election-results/>; Lily Kuo, “Taiwan election: Tsai Ing-Wen wins landslide in rebuke to China,” *The Guardian*, January 11, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/11/taiwan-re-elects-tsai-ing-wen-as-president-in-clear-message-to-china>.

12 Sam, “Taiwan 2020 Election Results.”

13 Josh Rogin, “China’s interference in the 2018 elections succeeded — in Taiwan,” *Washington Post*, December 18, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2018/12/18/chinas-interference-elections-succeeded-taiwan/>; “Cyber Threat Activity Targeting Election,” *Fireeye*, 2019, <https://www.fireeye.com/content/dam/fireeye-www/products/pdfs/pf/gov/eb-cyber-threat-activity.pdf>.

14 吴下阿蒙, “蔡英文当选连任·怎么看? (侠客岛),” (“What do you think about Tsai Ing-wen being re-elected? (Xia Ke Island)”), *People’s Daily*, January 13, 2020, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrhwb/html/2020-01/13/content_1966500.htm; “莫道浮云终蔽日——台湾‘大选’结果当何以看待,” (“The cloud will eventually fade away and reveal the Sun: how to evaluate the result of Taiwan’s ‘presidential election’”), *Xinhua News*, January 11, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/tw/2020-01/11/c_1125450579.htm; “蔡英文赢了选举, 和平发展与和平统一无望了吗?” (“Tsai Ing-wen won the election. Is there no hope for peaceful development and peaceful reunification?”), *People’s Daily Taiwan*, January 13, 2020, <http://tw.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0113/c14657-31545686.html>.

15 *Chinese Discourse Power: China’s Use of Information Manipulation in Regional and Global Competition*, *Digital Forensic Research Lab*, Atlantic Council, December 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/dfrlab-china-reports/>.

16 DFRLab using SerpApi on November 15, 2020. SerpApi is a tool to scrap search results from Google.

Yi from the New Party, a Taiwanese political party that subscribes to the “One China” principle, accused the DPP (and, indirectly, Tsai) of directing information operations executed by an internet army under the leadership of Slow Yang.¹⁹ Slow Yang has achieved some notoriety in Taiwan, as the Taiwanese government charged him with spreading a false story online that culminated in the suicide of one of the island’s diplomats.²⁰ The evidence *Global Times* and Chiu cited to back their claims was a contract signed between a marketing company founded by Slow Yang and the DPP in 2018 before the local election. The DPP rejected the claim, stating that the contract was for a public opinion survey to be run by the company and denying any relationship with the information operation later charged against Slow Yang.

17 “Tsai Ing-wen won the election. Is there no hope for peaceful development and peaceful reunification?” 中国台湾网, January 11, 2020, http://www.taiwan.cn/plzhx/plyzl/202001/t20200111_12231914.htm; 吴下阿蒙, “What do you think about Tsai Ing-wen being re-elected? (Xia Ke Island)””; 陈星, “2019年台湾政局回顾,” (“Review of Taiwan’s political situation in 2019”), 现代台湾研究 1 (2020): 10-17, accessed on November 20, 2020, <http://www.cqvip.com/qk/97723x/202001/7101485498.html>; 吴为, “2019年台湾政局回顾,” (“Review of Taiwan’s political situation in 2019”), 统一论坛 1(2020):21-23, <http://www.cqvip.com/qk/81541x/202001/7100968646.html>

18 While China invests significant resources in mainstream media in target locales, especially Taiwan and Hong Kong, the remainder of this paper will focus on China’s social media activities. For more on its use of mainstream media as a tool for influence, see Yimou Lee and I-hwa Cheng, “Paid ‘news’: China using Taiwan media to win hearts and minds on island,” *Reuters*, August 9, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-china-media-insight/paid-news-china-using-taiwan-media-to-win-hearts-and-minds-on-island-sources-idUSKCNIUZ014>; “One Country, One Censor: How China undermines media freedom in Hong Kong and Taiwan,” *Committee to Protect Journalists*, December 16, 2019, <https://cpj.org/reports/2019/12/one-country-one-censor-china-hong-kong-taiwan-press-freedom/>.

19 “蔡英文原来是这样操控网军的!” (“This is how Tsai Ing-wen manipulated the internet army!”), *Global Times*, December 26, 2019, <https://tech.sina.com.cn/roll/2019-12-26/doc-iihnzahk0015556.shtml>

20 Keoni Everington, “DPP influencer Slow Yang charged with spreading fake news, causing death of Taiwanese diplomat in Japan,” *Eye on Taiwan*, December 2, 2019, <https://www.eyentaiwan.com/slow-yang-charged-with-spurring-suicide-of-taiwanese-diplomat-in-japan-with-fake-news>.

Taiwan's Social Media Landscape

While China still uses traditional media to extend its sphere of influence in Taiwan, where 77 percent of the population relies on television as sources for news, 88 percent now turns to social media as a news source as well.²¹ According to a January 2020 report of selected countries from Statista, Taiwan had the second highest social media penetration in the world, at 88 percent, behind the United Arab Emirates.²² On average, Taiwan hosts 8.4 social media accounts per person.²³ According to Taiwan Network Information Center, the most popular social media platforms in Taiwan are US-based platforms Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter; Taiwan's PTT and Dcard; and China's Weibo. The most influential instant messaging apps are Japan's LINE and China's WeChat. While Facebook harbors users of diverse generations, Instagram, PTT, and Dcard attract a mostly younger audience. In the case of the latter two platforms, university students are also the primary users and content producers.²⁴

(“LINE 訊息查證”) after the user-created fact-checker bot Aunt Meiyu (“美玉姨”) went viral on the platform in late 2018. Separately, Taiwan Factcheck Center, a Taiwanese nonprofit organization, has been one of the most reliable fact-checking institutions on the island since its inception in July 2018.

Matching the high social media penetration, Taiwan has witnessed the rapid growth of platform use as users' primary source of information, especially for younger generations. According to Reuters Institute, in 2020, 83 percent of Taiwan's population preferred to read news online and 59 percent of the population received news via social media platforms.²⁵ The top social media platforms that people use for news are LINE (49 percent), Facebook (47 percent), and YouTube (41 percent).²⁶

Taiwan's relationship with its information environment is inextricably linked with a national identity based in conflict with – or fear of infiltration to diminish its sovereignty from – mainland China. According to Reuters Institute, Taiwan ranked the 28 out of 30 polities in terms of trust in media, with only 24 percent of trust in news in general.²⁷ Moreover, Taiwan suffers from rampant disinformation – both domestic and foreign. As a result, Taiwanese social media platforms have implemented measures intended to counter the influence of disinformation. For example, in July 2019, LINE launched the official LINE message verification

21 “This is how Tsai Ing-wen manipulated the internet army!”, *Global Times*.

22 “Active social network penetration in selected countries as of January 2020,” *Statista*, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/282846/regular-social-networking-usage-penetration-worldwide-by-country/>.

23 Simon Kemp, “Digital 2020: Taiwan,” *DataReportal*, February 18, 2020, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-taiwan#:~:text=There%20were%2020.51%20million%20internet,at%2086%25%20in%20January%202020.>

24 *Taiwan Internet Report 2019*, Taiwan Network Information Center and InsightXplorer Ltd., https://report.twnic.tw/2019/assets/download/TWNIC_TaiwanInternetReport_2019_EN.pdf.

25 Nic Newman, Richard Fletcher, Anne Schulz, Simge Andi, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020*, Reuters Institute, 2020, https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/DNR_2020_FINAL.pdf

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

Chinese Interference in Taiwan's Information Environment

China's information operations in Taiwan adhere to the CCP's philosophy of "discourse power," the concept that a country can attain increased geopolitical power by setting agendas internationally by influencing the political order and values both domestically and in foreign countries.²⁸ When applied to Taiwan, the principle seeks to emphasize the "One China" policy, to reassert that the CCP government is the only legitimate government for the "One China," to accentuate the close relationship between China and Taiwanese people, and to push pro-China messaging in the hopes of instilling warm sentiment toward the mainland more broadly in the residents of the island.

During the 2018 local elections in Taiwan, for instance, Paul Huang, a freelance reporter, traced a popular Facebook group supporting populist KMT mayoral candidate Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜) to "a [highly likely] professional cyber group from China."²⁹ Three out of six administrators of the Facebook group in question, "韓國瑜粉絲後援團必勝！撐起一片藍天" ("Han Kuo-yu Fans For Victory! Holding up a Blue Sky!"), were related to a network of 249 fake persona accounts with simplified Chinese names on LinkedIn.³⁰ Although Huang was unable to establish a connection between the information operation and the Chinese government, the vocal support for Han was in line with China's strategic goal in the region: as a China-friendly candidate, Han had a history of campaigning for and advancing policies aimed at enhancing the trade relationship between China and Taiwan as well as at stimulating Chinese tourism to Taiwan.³¹ As mayor of Taiwan's third largest city, Kaohsiung, Han's pro-China view – complimentary to the goals of Chinese discourse power – was ripe for overt and covert amplification from the mainland. They were also, however, one of the foremost

reasons why Han was successfully voted out of office in a recall election in June 2020.³²

The Ministry of Justice Investigation Bureau in Taiwan has also located disinformation stemming from China during the COVID-19 pandemic. In April 2020, World Health Organization President Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus accused Taiwanese internet users of spreading racist comments against him online.³³ While Tsai denied the accusations, a Twitter account named "自由徐州電台" ("Freedom Xuzhou Radio"),³⁴ fashioning itself after Radio Free Asia, posted "I am Taiwanese. I am extremely ashamed of Taiwanese people attacking Tedros in such a vicious manner. On behalf of the Taiwanese people, I apologize to Tedros and beg for his forgiveness."³⁵ Despite the low engagement of the post, it quickly caught the attention of the government, which then traced the account back to China, concluding that the post defamed Taiwanese people in front of the international community and dimmed Taiwan's chances of being accepted into international organizations like the World Health Organization.³⁶

Finally, recent studies on Chinese interference in the 2020 Taiwan election focused mainly on China's use of Western social media platforms. The most popular Western platforms studied were Twitter and Facebook. A study by the Oxford Internet Observatory found heavy coordination between a number of Twitter accounts posting pro-Chinese state content.³⁷ These accounts featured identical profile pictures and highly similar header images and handles, followed a similar list of other accounts, and posted 190,000 and 334,000 times during their time of operation. Another study by Stanford Internet Observatory identified two content farms that were responsible for spreading disinformation about the Tsai and the Taiwanese government.³⁸

28 DFRLab, "Chinese Discourse Power."

29 Paul Huang, "Chinese Cyber-Operatives Boosted Taiwan's Insurgent Candidate," *Foreign Policy*, June 26, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/26/chinese-cyber-operatives-boosted-taiwans-insurgent-candidate/>

30 Ibid.

31 Chris Horton, "The Taiwanese Populist Advancing China's Interests," *The Atlantic*, April 16, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/04/taiwanese-populist-han-kuo-yu-china/587146/>.

32 Chris Horton and Amy Chang Chien, "Voters in Taiwan Oust a Pro-China Mayor," *The New York Times*, June 6, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/06/world/asia/taiwan-recall-mayor.html>.

33 Will Feuer, "WHO chief addresses death threats, racist insults: 'I don't give a damn,'" *CNBC News*, April 8, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/08/who-chief-addresses-death-threats-racist-insults-i-dont-give-a-damn.html>.

34 Xuzhou is a city in northern China.

35 楊清緣, "抓到了！陸網軍假台人「向譚德塞道歉」指導文曝光," ("Caught it! Guidance Exposed on the Fake "Apologizing to Tedros" by Mainland Internet Army"), *MSN News*, April 10, 2020, <https://www.msn.com/zh-tw/news/national/%E6%8A%93%E5%88%B0%E4%BA%86%E5%B8%81%E9%99%B8%E7%B6%B2%E8%BB%8D%E5%81%87%E5%8F%B0%E4%BA%BA%E3%80%8C%E5%90%91%E8%AD%9A%E5%BE%B7%E5%A1%9E%E9%81%93%E6%AD%89%E3%80%8D%E6%8C%87%E5%B0%8E%E6%96%87%E6%9B%9D%E5%85%89/ar-BB12q5IE#image=3>.

36 "大陸網民假臺灣之名集體散布假道歉文 調查局火速溯源說明," ("Mainland internet users collectively spread false apologies by pretending to be Taiwanese; the investigation bureau quickly traced the source and announced to the public"), *Investigation Bureau of the Ministry of Justice*, April 10, 2020, <https://www.mjib.gov.tw/news/Details?Module=1&id=594>.

37 Renée Diresta, Carly Miller, Vanessa Molter, John Pomfret, Glenn Tiffert, *Telling China's Story: The Chinese Communist Party's Campaign to Shape Global Narratives*, *Stanford Internet Observatory*, July 20, 2020, <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/news/new-whitepaper-telling-chinas-story>.

38 Ibid.

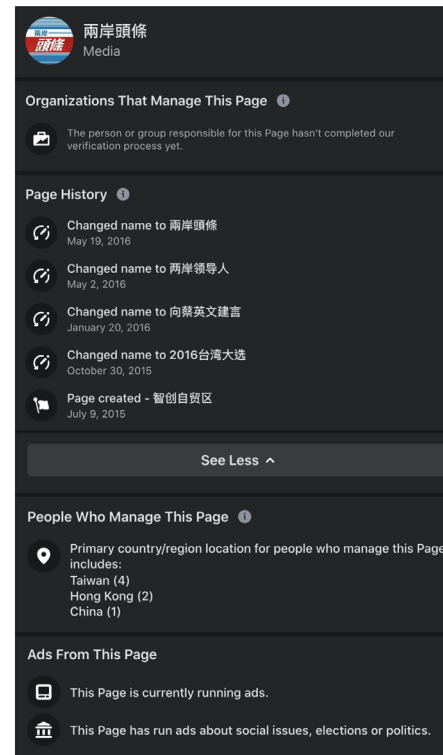
Social Media Findings

The DFRLab found influence operations producing pro-China narratives aligned with the government's "One China" policy on more open platforms, including Chinese domestic social media platform Weibo and Western social media platforms Facebook and YouTube. There was little evidence tying the accounts and pages posting the content to the CCP, but the messages being disseminated aligned with those from the party-state apparatuses. Despite the inability to directly attribute these activities to China, the proximity of the narratives to those of Chinese discourse power does warrant monitoring. For contrast, on domestic Taiwanese social media platforms PTT and Dcard, the DFRLab found no significant evidence of information operations originating from China, which is likely due to the platforms' stricter information monitoring protocols during the election.

Facebook

The DFRLab found two Facebook pages with ties to the party-state that propagate disinformation online. “兩岸頭條” (“Headlines Across the Strait”), one of the two Facebook pages, maintained 753,754 followers as of September 1, 2020. The page has undergone a series of name changes – one indicator of inauthentic behavior – since its creation in 2015; some of the previous names indicated an intention to influence politics on the island. The first name, adopted on October 31, 2015, prior to the 2016 Taiwanese election, was “2016 台湾大选” (“2016 Taiwan Presidential Election”). The page switched to another name in simplified Chinese – again, not the traditional Chinese typically used in Taiwan – “向蔡英文建言” (“Provide Suggestions to Tsai Ing-wen”) on January 20, 2016, shortly after Tsai won the 2016 election. On May 2, 2016, the name changed yet again to “两岸领导人,” (“Leaders Across the Strait”), still in simplified Chinese, before settling on its current name on May 19, 2016. The earlier name-changing process echoed political developments in Taiwan, especially around the 2016 election. Since May 19, 2016, however, the page has portrayed itself as a Taiwanese media outlet, with a name in traditional Chinese characters.

The owner of the Facebook page is 中華微視 (“China VTV” or “CVTV”), a product of 微視网络科技江苏有限公司 (“VTV Internet Technology Jiangsu Limited Co.”). According



Screenshot revealing the sequence of name changes the Facebook page (currently named) “兩岸頭條” (“Headlines Across the Strait”) has undergone.³⁹

to a search on QCC.com, an open-source platform for public information about Chinese companies, the majority shareholder of VTV Internet Technology Jiangsu Limited Co. is 亿利资源集团有限公司 (“Elion Group”), an energy company based in Erdos, Inner Mongolia, whose chairman of the board, Wang Wenbiao, is a businessman who also holds important position in the CCP’s Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, the “highest-ranking entity overseeing the United Front system.”

39 DFRLab query using CrowdTangle, performed on November 22, 2020.

40 “董事长简介,” (“Introduction of the Chairman”), *Elion Group*, accessed on November 22, 2020, <http://www.elion.com.cn/index.php?menu=232>; DFRLab via QCC, performed on November 22, 2020, <https://www.qcc.com/firm/6a81f38e173ffb92e150aae5254d33b2.html>; Alexander Bowe, *China’s Overseas United Front Work Background and Implications for the United States, US-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, August 24, 2018, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China%27s%20Overseas%20United%20Front%20Work%20-%20Background%20and%20Implications%20for%20US_final_0.pdf



Screenshot from QCC.com showing that the majority shareholder for 中華微視/中華微視 (“CVTV”), is Elion Group.⁴¹

While the official websites for CVTV (<http://www.cvtv.us/> and <http://zhonghuaweishi.cn/>) and the its channel on the Chinese mainland-facing video platform 西瓜视频 (“iXigua”) only feature a limited number of videos on Chinese culture (e.g., Chinese calligraphy, film, and festivals), its channels on Facebook and YouTube, platforms accessible to Taiwanese citizens, have a number of political commentary videos.⁴² Out of the political content on these pages, the general sentiment is anti-Tsai Ing-wen and pro-reunification. For example, the YouTube channel 中華微視 (“China VTV”) features videos with outspoken pro-China Taiwanese celebrities, including Joyce Huang, a famous TV commentator; Wang Ping-chung, a senior official with the New Party; and XiaoYu, a Taiwanese YouTuber with more than 7,520 followers who previously lived in mainland

China. Some of the channel's videos targeted the Tsai Administration with titles like 朱立倫體檢蔡英文：蔡英文執政三年，把台灣民主踩成重殘... (“Zhu Lilun's criticism towards Tsai Ing-wen: Tsai Ing-wen has been in power for three years and has greatly compromised Taiwan's democracy”) and “不祥之兆！蔡英文聖露西亞演說 升‘國旗’卻掉下來場面尷尬” (“Bad omen! During Tsai Ing-wen's St. Lucia speech, the ‘national flag’ that was supposed to be raised fell off, the scene was embarrassing”). While not directly targeting the 2020 presidential election in Taiwan, the content was likely intended to instill a negative impression of Tsai and sway potential voters away from supporting her.

The two Facebook pages for CVTV, 兩岸頭條 and 中華微視, have both promoted misleading information intended to discredit Tsai and her administration. For example, a post on July 4, 2019, included a picture of people taking pictures of a violent interaction between police and a passenger on a train. The caption said, “I saw a 25-year-old unarmed police officer killed. There were several people around watching the scene and taking pictures. This image was taken in today's Taiwanese society, in the ecstasy of ‘Taiwan value’ that Tsai Ing-wen was proud of.”⁴³

As of November 10, 2020, the post had 588 engagements, although the page's 754,831 followers would have had access to this post. While directly calling out Tsai, the post also intended to discredit the “Taiwan values” of the Tsai administration, thereby notionally linking the people in the photo with Tsai. The term “Taiwan values” was introduced by Tsai in 2018 – although the precise definition was not clear, she has used the term to refer to the importance of “Taiwan national sovereignty.”⁴⁴

The photo used in the post, however, misrepresented the actual situation. Although the police officer was killed by a passenger with mental issues, the people in the same car of the train did not stand by the situation. In a news article published by ETtoday, an online outlet owned by the popular EBC News (“東森國際”), a witness at the scene recounted what actually happened.⁴⁵ The passengers who were filming the scene were requested to do so by the train conductor, and they were also advised by the police to not

41 DFRlab via QCC, performed on November 22, 2020, <https://www.qcc.com/firm/6a81f38e173ffb92e150aae5254d33b2.html>

42 “Taiwan Headlines,” Facebook page, accessed on November 22, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/taiwanheadlines/%20%20China%20VTV%20Facebook%20page%20accessed%20on%20November%2022%202020%20https://www.facebook.com/ChinaVTV/about/?ref=page_internal9aNdZT2R7PDsS2_zMWbOSQ?e=NMDZoT&CID=9304ecc3-4d44-5285-0703-801b0015eba0; “China VTV,” *China VTV*, accessed on November 22, 2020, <http://zhonghuaweishi.cn/>; “China VTV,” YouTube video, accessed on November 22, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZIZ8IDyZxRjeBfGfBrdZ0w>.

43 Taiwan Headlines, “I saw a 25-year-old unarmed police officer killed. There were several people around watching the scene and taking pictures. This image was taken in today's Taiwanese society, in the ecstasy of ‘Taiwan value’ that Tsai Ing-wen was proud of.” Facebook post, July 4, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/taiwanheadlines/photos/a.853898308065031/2296908357097345/>.

44 “柯文哲：想知道蔡總統的台灣價值是什麼” (“Ko Wen-je: I want to know what does Taiwan value means for President Tsai”), Central News Agency, January 23, 2018, <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/firstnews/201801230117.aspx>; 蕭婷方, “當著柯文哲面 蔡英文說明「台灣價值」” (“In front of Ko Wen-je, Tsai Ing-Wen explained Taiwan Values”), *Liberty Times*, January 26, 2018, <https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/breakingnews/2323764>

45 鄭鎮宇, “影／勇警遭殺乘客全圍觀？女乘客「淚PO全程」訴真相：怎麼救？你教我” (“Passengers did nothing on the scene of the murdered police? The female passenger posted the whole story in tears, telling the truth: how to save the police? you tell me!”), *ETtoday*, July 11, 2019, <https://www.ettoday.net/news/20190711/1486908.htm>

come close to the conflict.⁴⁶ Even so, passengers across the carriage were trying to help in different ways, including helping the police and finding first-aid tools.⁴⁷

YouTube

YouTube is a popular source for news among Taiwanese citizens, and the platform contains posts of pro-China disinformation that attempt to discredit Taiwan's independent government as well as Tsai's presidency.

Previous researchers found that Chinese influencers use YouTube to shape narratives around Taiwanese affairs with varying degrees of success. Influence operations researcher Puma Shen observed advertisements recruiting Taiwanese YouTube influencers posted by organizations affiliated with the United Front Work Department.⁴⁹ One widely studied YouTube channel is “Xida speaks on Taiwan at the foot of Yushan,” which features videos of Chinese National Radio journalist Zhang Xida speaking Mandarin with a Taiwanese accent and attacking Tsai, her administration, and the DPP broadly.⁵⁰ China National Radio is state-owned media in close contact with the CCP and often features videos targeting a Taiwanese audience, indicating the party-state's intention of directly influencing Taiwanese citizens. Included among these operations, Zhang's YouTube channel – now removed – spread disinformation about Tsai, accusing her of “selling Taiwan” to Japan and jeopardizing national interest while supporting the claim with unrelated evidence of legitimate international trade.⁵¹ As of November 11, 2020, “XiDA Speaks on Taiwan at the foot of Yushan” had removed all of its data and changed its name to “吵新聞” (“Loud News”), but an associated Facebook page with much fewer followers was still operating. Created in 2014, the YouTube channel acquired around 5,910 subscribers by August 2020.

With unclear links to the party-state, unlike Zhang's channel, another channel 点亮历史【真相解密 最新史料 欢迎订阅】(“Light up the history [the truth is deciphered; the latest historical materials; welcome to subscribe]”) spreads similar disinformation about Tsai and promotes narratives about China's assertiveness toward reuniting with Taiwan, including discussing possible military interventions.



The screenshot of the post (top) by Taiwan Headlines with the caption “I saw a 25-year-old unarmed police officer killed. There were several people around watching the scene and taking pictures. This image was taken in today's Taiwanese society, in the ecstasy of ‘Taiwan value’ that Tsai Ing-wen was proud of.” The bottom two photos, on the other hand, showed that two passengers tried to help police officers control the situation.⁴⁸

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Taiwan Headlines, “I saw a 25 years old policeman killed,” 鄒鎮宇, “Passengers did nothing on the scene of the murdered police?,” “勇警遭捅流血緊抱壓制嫌犯...送醫命危 網看影片超心疼” (“Brave police was stabbed and hugged tightly to restrain the suspect...He was sent to a doctor and his life was in danger.”), *SET News*, July 3, 2020, <https://www.setn.com/news.aspx?newsid=564691>

49 Brian Hioe, “Fighting Fake News and Disinformation in Taiwan: An Interview with Puma Shen,” *New Bloom*, January 6, 2020, <https://newbloommag.net/2020/01/06/puma-shen-interview/>.

50 “【台語成紅色滲透利器】連台灣人都認不出來！中共官媒記者當起台 YouTuber，每週發影片穿插台語散播假消息,” (“Taiwanese becomes the weapon for ‘red infiltration’ Even Taiwanese people cannot recognize the accent! Journalist from Chinese state-controlled media is now a YouTuber who posts videos of disinformation with Taiwanese dialect every week”), *Buzz Orange*, October 25, 2019, <https://buzzorange.com/2019/10/25/china-journalist-youtuber/>.

51 玉山腳下, “蔡英文賣台證據前，實錘！到底誰在愛台灣？誰在害台灣？！” (“With the evidence of Tsai Ing-wen selling Taiwan, solid proof! Who loves Taiwan? Who is harming Taiwan?!”), Facebook Video, August 23, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2480426898881897>; the YouTube video is no longer available. See “「蔡英文賣台」影片竟是統戰手法 調查局：轉傳恐觸法” (“Tsai Ing-wen selling Taiwan’ video is united front work; Investigation bureau: reposting the video can violate the law”), *Apple Daily*, October 21, 2019, <https://tw.appledaily.com/local/20191021/25CAUG6O7HIDYF7GXU5AG4TS6Y/> for factchecking.



An archived screenshot of Zhang Xida's YouTube channel on August 18, 2020, before it removed all of its data.⁵²

The channel garnered 160,367,730 views and more than 256,000 followers between when it first joined YouTube on September 28, 2018, and November 11, 2020. Some of the video titles, posted in the lead up to the January 2020 presidential election, included “北京放话了：统一后台湾可以拥有这10项权利。台民众大吃一惊！” (“Beijing announces: Taiwan can have these 10 rights after reunification. The people in Taiwan were surprised!”), which had garnered 3,320 likes as of November 11, 2020, and “刚刚蔡英文又来忽悠：大陆很穷的。北京：全面叫停！” (“Just now, Tsai Ing-wen fooled the citizens again: the mainland is very poor. Beijing: Full stop on Chinese Tourists to Taiwan!”), which had garnered 583 likes as of November 11, 2020.⁵³



A screenshot of a video posted to the “Light up the history” YouTube channel on August 1, 2020, with the title of “Just now, Tsai Ing-wen fooled the citizens again: the mainland is very poor. Beijing: Full stop on Chinese Tourists to Taiwan!”⁵⁴

Despite his outspoken pro-China political lean, the channel also attacked former Kaohsiung mayor Han Kuo-Yu, including after he announced the “20-Words Slogan” (the slogan: “國防靠美國，科技靠日本，市場靠大陸，努力靠自己,” which translates to “National defense depends on the United States, technology depends on Japan, the market depends on the mainland [China], and efforts depend on ourselves”).⁵⁵ In a video titled “韩国瑜捅了马蜂窝！习近平点名怒骂：吃里扒外！” (“Han Kuo Yu stabbed a hornet’s nest! Xi Jinping called out Han for being hypocritical, benefiting from China yet helping the enemies”), the narrator criticized Han for relying on Japan and the United States, China’s two biggest geopolitical rivals, while

asking help from China.⁵⁶ If this narrative had some source in CCP messaging, it would represent a turnabout for China, which is documented to have covertly supported Han’s successful mayoral campaign in 2018. Similarly, this would signal to any notionally pro-China Taiwanese politician that shifting away from reunification as an objective would not just lose them China’s support, but instead would subject them to its criticism and attacks.

52 玉山脚下, YouTube, archived on August 18, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200818150004/https://m.youtube.com/channel/UCyx-N7RptKcBH9dDVm9RZDQ/featured>.

53 Light up the history [the truth is deciphered; the latest historical materials; welcome to subscribe], “Beijing announces: Taiwan can have these 10 rights after reunification. The people in Taiwan were surprised!”, YouTube video, March 5, 2019, accessed on November 11, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bOn6u-gwoDM>; Light up the history [the truth is deciphered; the latest historical materials; welcome to subscribe], “Just now, Tsai Ing-wen fooled the citizens again: the mainland is very poor. Beijing: Full stop on Chinese Tourists to Taiwan!”, YouTube video, August 1, 2019, accessed on November 11, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2X792s_XhA&t=256s.

54 Light up the history, “Tsai Ing-Wen fooled the citizens again.”

55 “韩国瑜：國防靠美國 科技靠日本 市場靠大陸 努力靠自己,” (“Han Kuo Yu: National defense depends on the United States, technology depends on Japan, the market depends on the mainland [China], and efforts depend on ourselves”), *Yahoo News*, April 11, 2019, <https://tw.news.yahoo.com/%E9%9F%93%E5%9C%8B%E7%91%9C-%E5%9C%8B%E9%98%B2%E9%9D%A0%E7%BE%8E%E5%9C%8B-%E7%A7%91%E6%8A%80%E9%9D%A0%E6%97%A5%E6%9C%AC-%E5%B8%82%E5%A0%B4%E9%9D%A0%E5%A4%A7%E9%99%B8-%E5%8A%AA%E5%8A%9B%E9%9D%A0%E8%87%AA%E5%B7%B1-O23407925.html>

56 Light up the history, “Han Kuo Yu stabbed a hornet’s nest! Xi Jinping called out Han for being hypocritical, benefiting from China yet helping the enemies,” YouTube video, April 28, 2019, accessed on November 11, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3OxKEXPiZ8&t=7s>.

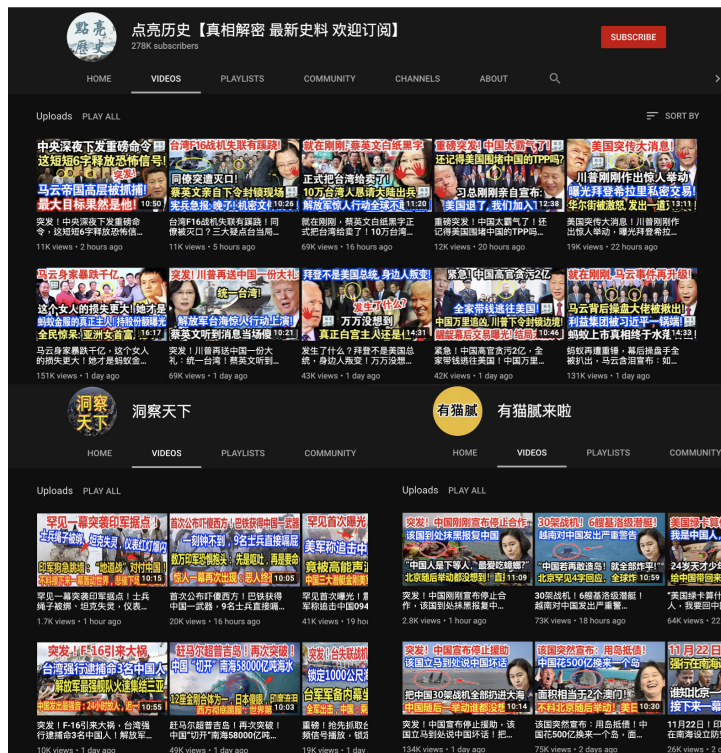


A screenshot of the video posted on August 1, 2020, with the title of “Han Kuo Yu stabbed a hornet’s nest! Xi Jinping called out Han for being hypocritical, benefiting from China yet helping the enemies.”⁵⁷

YouTube users in Taiwan have also contributed to a list of channels, named “大外宣” (“External Propaganda”), that compiles channels deemed to be responsible for spreading pro-reunification narratives, propagating China’s soft power, and criticizing Taiwanese politicians.⁵⁸ While there is no evidence directly connecting the fifty-nine channels in the list to each other, they all contain videos with long titles and title pages formatted similarly to those on “Light

up the history,” though the content is different for each channel. YouTube users in Taiwan have also contributed to a list of channels, named “大外宣” (“External Propaganda”), that compiles channels deemed to be responsible for spreading pro-reunification narratives, propagating China’s soft power, and criticizing Taiwanese politicians.⁵⁸ While there is no evidence directly connecting the fifty-nine channels in the list to each other, they all contain videos with long titles and title pages formatted similarly to those on “Light up the history,” though the content is different for each channel.

Among these similar seeming channels, only four of them exclusively focus on Taiwan, including a channel called 我愛台灣 (“I love Taiwan,” in traditional Chinese), which has over 18,100 subscribers, and another channel called “健康與健康生活” (“Health and Healthy Life”), with 22,900 subscribers. A third channel, 台湾新闻 Today (“Taiwan News Today”), had 804,978 views as of November 11, 2020, but did not disclose the number of subscribers on the page, and a final channel, “更新新聞” (“Update News”), had over 54,300 subscribers. The layout of the videos differed a bit from the previous style but followed similar patterns of adding emotive news headlines in large fonts to the video title page and narrators appearing in voice only (i.e., not showing their faces). The remaining thirty-seven YouTube channels that touched on Taiwan’s politics also propagated narratives on other adversarial powers, including the United States, pro-independence Hong Kong activists, and India. These narratives also aligned with the official tone of the Chinese government.



Screenshot of the videos page for YouTube channel “Light up the history [the truth is deciphered; the latest historical materials; welcome to subscribe]”⁵⁹ (top), side-by-side with two other YouTube channels, 有猫腻来啦 (“There is something hidden,” bottom left) and 洞察天下 (“Insight into the world,” at bottom right), that feature similar video formats and propagandistic themes.⁶⁰

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

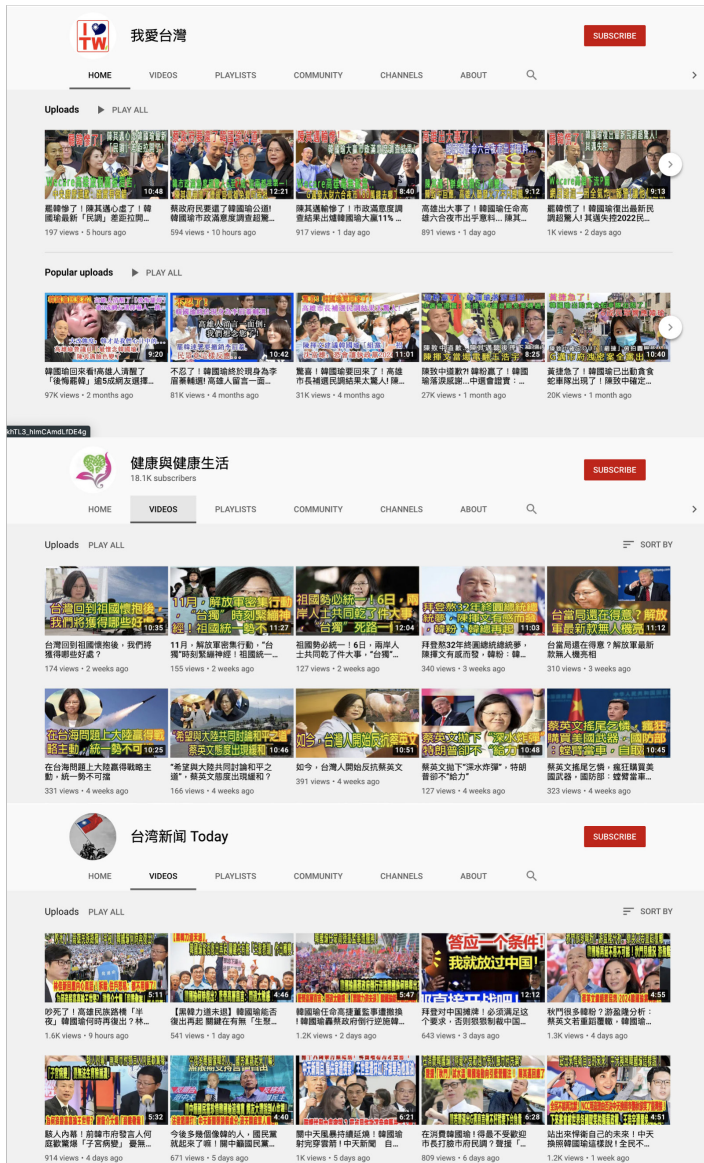
59 “大外宣,” YouTube List, <http://youtube.board.tw/rank.php?tagid=15>.

60 “Light up the history,” YouTube channel, accessed on November 11, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvYes_0afVM6GeTTFzELW4Q.

any other subject of interest on over 20,000 bulletin boards.⁶³ Founded in 1995 by a college student at National Taiwan University and run by a student organization named Electronic Bulletin Board System Research Group, National Taiwan University, it is one of the most popular social media platforms in Taiwan among the younger generations, with over 560,000 users in Taiwan as of 2016.⁶⁴ PTT also attracts overseas users from the United States, China, Japan, and Hong Kong. The platform plays an important role in organizing protests, revealing political scandals, and stoking vehement debate around political issues.⁶⁵

Prior to 2019, the platform was notorious for spreading disinformation, including from China and domestically from Taiwan. For example, in May 2019, a claim that Honduras was considering breaking diplomatic ties with Taiwan was spread on the platform by a content farm based in China.⁶⁶ The Su Chii-cherng incident, perhaps, provides a more ignominious example of the platform being used to spread misinformation.⁶⁷ Following the Osaka typhoon in 2018, internet users on PTT started to single out Taiwan's lead diplomat, Su Chii-cherng, in the city for a failure to successfully evacuate tourists from the island after the typhoon. An unsubstantiated – and ultimately false – claim that China, and not Taiwan, had assisted in the evacuation went viral, picking up mainstream media attention, which led to attacks on Osaka-based Taiwan officials. The claim was initially traced back to a Chinese IP address in Shanghai, but the Taipei District Prosecutor's Office found that the pro-DPP “Green Camp Internet Army” leader Slow Yang was responsible for fueling its spread on PTT. The incident, which culminated with Su's suicide, prompted the platform to suspend registration for a year and a half.⁶⁸

Throughout the entire 2020 presidential campaign in Taiwan, PTT did not accept new users and actively monitored its existing users, especially suspicious activities from shared IP addresses, reports from other users, and obvious bot-like behaviors. It actively executed a strict set of rules – adapted from previously established rules – on content moderation during the election period. Among the preexisting rules included that a newly registering user would have to verify their employers and schools prior to completing registration; on the “Gossip” board, a new user is required to log onto the platform for a total of 700 days before he or she can post to the board; on the same board, a user is only allowed to post one piece of news per day and, if he or she is to post a news item older than three days, there needs to be a newly written introduction over 20 words, thereby preventing the simple copying and pasting of the news; and the board owner has the ability to shut



Three screenshots showing the videos page for YouTube channels “I Love Taiwan,” “Health and Healthy Life,” and “Taiwan News Today.” The title page for the videos are mostly similar to the others in the list and to the “Light up the history” page.⁶¹

PTT

Besides Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, US platforms that are well-studied, China also targets Taiwan on social media platforms that are primarily used by Mandarin speakers. These platforms include the micro-blogging and bulletin board platforms PTT, Dcard, and Weibo.

PTT is a nonprofit bulletin board system in Taiwan on which anonymous users discuss politics, anime, gossip, or

61 “There is something hidden,” YouTube channel, accessed on November 11, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UChcKM-XUrL4AjzFJOYEgdQQ>; “Insight into the world,” YouTube channel, accessed on November 11, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMrOWtXrYPXtpTv9TQW8CiQ>.

63 “BBS-themed movie stirs up campuses,” *Taiwan Today*, June 8, 2020, <https://taiwantoday.tw/news.php?unit=10,23,45,10&post=16736>.

64 “帶風向？做新聞？政府和媒體在PTT的行為數據大解密！,” (“Setting the Trend? Working on the News? The government and the media deciphered PTT behavioral data.”), *Big Data Group*, April 5, 2016, <https://group.dailyview.tw/article/detail/975>

65 吳學展, “【解構 PTT】有自己的法律、法院和貨幣, 沒被臉書淘汰的 PTT 是台灣民主化的重要推手” (“[Deconstruction of PTT] It has its own laws, courts, and currency. PTT, which has not been outcompeted by Facebook, is an important driving force for democratization in Taiwan”), *Buzz Orange*, November 12, 2015, <https://buzzorange.com/2015/11/12/ptt/>

CHINESE MESSAGING ACROSS THE STRAIT

Channel Name	Translation	Subscriberes	Views	Creation Date
健康與健康生活	Health and Healthy Life	18.1k	1,650,765	Oct 31, 2006
美国时事	American Societa; Affairs	64.3k	33,272,450	Jan 5, 2007
我愛台灣	I love Taiwan	22.9k	525,741	Feb 6, 2007
新闻联播247	News Broadcast 247	N/A	5,373,219	Jul 23, 2007
AC世界新聞頻道	AC World News Channel	N/A	3,567,261	Dec 5, 2014
今日中国NEWS【热点时事,深度解读】	China Today NEWS【Hot social affairs, in-depth interpretation】	11.1k	1,418,125	Mar 24, 2015
百态中国	All Facets of China	N/A	8,802,657	Mar 8, 2016
台湾新闻 Today	Taiwan News Today	N/A	819,892	Jul 28, 2016
政治概况	Political Overview	59.9k	8,359,892	Nov 15, 2016
热点新闻【更新中国美国情况】	Hot News【Update China and the United States】	48.4k	22,122,533	Nov 22, 2016
更新新聞	Update news	54.5k	8,051,324	Mar 11, 2017
大国演义	Great Kingdoms	N/A	30,020,559	Apr 4, 2017
中国梦时代【深度时事 每日更新 欢迎订阅】	China Dream【Daily Updates on Social Affairs; Welcome to Subscribe】	121k	1,179,008	Jun 11, 2017
厉害了我的国	Awesome My Country	182k	85,834,588	June 26, 2017
江湖百晓生	Society Man-Knows-Everything	112k	90,544,010	Dec 25, 2017
朝闻天下	Morning News on the Globe	N/A	44,485,968	Aug 14, 2018
有猫腻来啦	There is something hidden	N/A	44,710,137	Sep 5, 2018
点亮历史【真相解密 最新史料 欢迎订阅】	Light up the history【the truth is deciphered; the latest historical materials; welcome to subscribe】	278k	169,584,155	Sep 28, 2018
兴仔说中国	Xingzai Talks About China	N/A	38,864,542	Oct 12, 2018
時政焦點	Contemporary political focus	60.9k	23,989,416	Oct 28, 2018
中国新观察	China New Watch	130k	18,288,593	Nov 16, 2018
環球諜報	Global Spy News	N/A	46,139,525	January 2, 2019
时政快报	Social Affairs Express	56.2k	11,334,785	Feb 23, 2019
洞察天下	Insight into the world	N/A	2,371,929	Mar 1, 2019
新聞凌波	News 007	N/A	11,092,152	Mar 5, 2019
今日资讯	Today's Information	N/A	5,098,822	Mar 13, 2019
环球观察	Global observation	142k	50,150,538	Apr 4, 2019
龙之声	Voice of the Dragon	N/A	24,551,084	Apr 19, 2019
中华振兴	China Revitalization	144k	14,111,582	May 31, 2019
龙腾大中国	Dragon Great China	94k	35,876,360	Aug 6, 2019
深度军事	Deep into military	50.3k	12,921,628	Aug 15, 2019
东方资讯 -【天下热闻 一手掌握】	Oriental News-【World Hot News Within Reach】	N/A	22,739,626	Sep 8, 2019
了不起我的中国	Great my china	163k	69,832,183	Sep 28, 2019
热点时局 Hot News【官方频道 每日更新 欢迎订阅】	Hot News【Official Channel Daily Updates Welcome to Subscribe】	150k	83,319,017	Oct 17, 2019
利刃观察	Sharp observation	N/A	21,429,357	Oct 17, 2019
尖端军事Focus on Military【官方频道 每日更新 欢迎订阅】	Focus on Military【official channel daily update welcome to subscribe】	N/A	27,147,519	Oct 17, 2019
环球瞭望	Global Lookout	N/A	15,418,095	Dec 8, 2019
宋将点兵	Commander Talks About the World	N/A	22,299,346	Dec 8, 2019
龙腾瞭望号	Dragon Lookout	N/A	2,001,412	Mar 12, 2020
新潮民	New Trendy people	187k	32,340,865	Mar 28, 2020

The full list of channels in the YouTube network described above that propagate pro-China narratives with similar cover page layout and narrating styles.⁶²

62 “I love Taiwan,” YouTube channel, accessed on November 11, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWseNYILVeLyGDgU6gZtiUg>; “Taiwan News Today,” YouTube channel, accessed on November 11, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCRAnkVn_Y67LUA-bmHc-ytg.

off an account for a designated period of time if the user is found to violate the rules.⁶⁹

After the suspension of account registration, the Global Taiwan Institute and users on PTT speculated that the Chinese government was buying PTT accounts.⁷⁰ According to the Global Taiwan Institute, PTT accounts were sold on multiple platforms, including Taobao, the Chinese equivalent of eBay, for a price as high as NTD 200,000 (approximately USD \$6,500). The price of the accounts increased with the length of time the account had been active on the platform, which makes the account more readily usable for posting on popular boards with larger traffic.⁷¹

There is no clear evidence, however, of large-scale information operations linking back to the Chinese party-state on PTT during the 2020 presidential election period, as investigators from Graphika, Institute for the Future's (ITF) Digital Intelligence Lab (DigIntel), the International Republican Institute (IRI), among others, have as yet not identified any.⁷² The actual influence upon the platform by the purchased accounts is not likely to be as significant as the speculation by the Global Taiwan Institute suggested. As apparent by the platform's announcements, it actively removes individual accounts used by multiple persons, networks of accounts with fake personas run from the same IP addresses, accounts that have been repeatedly reported by other users, and accounts that are marketed as for sale on and off the platform. In 2019, the platform posted 1,380 announcements of such removals, marking a 64.87 percent increase from 2018 and a 77.83 percent increase from 2017.

Concurrent with the removals, there is an increasingly robust awareness among PTT users of “網軍” (“internet armies”) operating out of China or Taiwan and the detrimental impact of disinformation, which helps create more resilience against both. According to the PTT fandom site, the 2019 catchphrases of the platform included “1450” and “March,” the former referred to the pro-DPP “Green Camp Internet Army,” while the latter was a reference to the information

flooding of “Di Ba” as well as Han Kuo-yu supporters on the internet.⁷³ The DFRLab found that it is common for users to question the political affiliation of a user after they post a politically controversial opinion to the bulletin board. The focus on the intention of the user has better equipped other users to generally view all posts on the platform with a more critical eye.

Dcard

Dcard is a for-profit, anonymous bulletin board system that is only accessible to college students and attracts those who prioritize privacy. Unlike PTT, where popular topics are politically related, Dcard is an anonymous platform that allows users to share candid thoughts without concern of attribution. Account profiles can only publicly reveal the school and gender of the user, and individuals often hide their schools by using “淡水大學” (“Danshui University”), a nonexistent university, as their school name. Besides the intimacy the platform has cultivated, however, anonymity is problematic as information posted to the platform can be hard to validate, given the extremely limited information required by the platform. Popular topics on Dcard include makeup products, clothing style, and relationship issues.⁷⁴ As of 2016, the platform had 8 million active unique users monthly.⁷⁵

To add security to the anonymous discussion among the users, Dcard requires them to not only supply an email address affiliated with an educational institution but also requires the users to provide personal information – not for public release – for the platform administrators to review on a periodic basis.⁷⁶ The strict rules of registration help in limiting non-Taiwanese users and covert influence campaign on the platform. No users are allowed to post more than five original posts in a single day (though they can comment on other posts freely), reducing the possibility of flooding information and organized, inauthentic information operations.⁷⁷ Unlike PTT, which only allows users to like

66 66 許銘洲, “國安單位: PTT竟成北京撕裂台灣的假新聞登陸堡壘” ©民報 2018-10-22 National Security Unit: PTT has become Beijing's fake news landing point and has torn Taiwan apart ©Min Bao 2018-10-22,” *Taiwan Justice*, October 22, 2018, <https://www.taiwanjustice.net/2018/10/22/國安單位：ptt竟成北京撕裂台灣的假新聞登陸堡壘>.

67 Ko Tin-yau, “How fake news led to suicide of Taiwan representative in Osaka,” *Ejinsight*, September 19, 2018, <https://www.ejinsight.com/eji/article/id/1947349/20180919-how-fake-news-led-to-suicide-of-taiwan-representative-in-osaka>

68 Everington, “DPP influencer Slow Yang;” 陳民峰, “民進黨基層要求開除楊蕙如黨籍外傳楊已於上週六齣境” (“The grassroots of the DPP demanded expulsion of Yang Huiru from the party and rumor has it that Yang left the country last Saturday”), *RFI*, October 12, 2019, https://www.rfi.fr/tw/%E6%B8%AF%E6%BE%B3%E5%8F%B0/20191210-%E6%B0%91%E9%80%B2%E9%BB%A8%E5%9F%BA%E5%B1%A4%E8%A6%81%E6%B1%82%E9%96%8B%E9%99%A4%E6%A5%8A%E8%95%99%E5%A6%82%E9%BB%A8%E7%B1%8D%E5%A4%96%E5%82%B3%E6%A5%8A%E5%B7%B2%E6%96%BC%E4%B8%8A%E5%91%A8%E5%85%AD%E9%B-D%A3%E5%A2%83?fbclid=IwAR31lgxytubilA99jrrhF_tCPMIIItcbiAy2SB7P5kVaqyWrw_QF2xQyvKOI&ref=fb_i

69 吳學展, “[Deconstruction of PTT],” 勞倫遜, “PTT遭控是關西假新聞源頭? 懶人包抄懂: 消息為何越錯越離譜” (“PTT accused of being the source of fake news in Kansai? For the laziest people to understand: why the more wrong the message, the more ridiculous”), *Daily View*, September 18, 2018, <https://dailyview.tw/Popular/Detail/2722>

70 Gary J. Schmitt and Michael Mazza, *Binding the Enemy: CCP Interference in Taiwan's Democracy*, Global Taiwan Institute, October 2019, globaltaiwan.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/GTI-CCP-Interference-Taiwan-Democracy-Oct-2019-final.pdf

71 “選舉近了創天價? PTT帳號登入5500次要賣10萬元” (“The election is closeby and the prices have skyrocketed? PTT account with 5500 login times market for 100,000 TW Dollars.”), *Liberty Times*, November 12, 2018, <https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/breakingnews/2610114>; 勞倫遜, “PTT accused of fake news in Kansai.”

72 Nick Monaco, Melanie Smith, and Amy Studdart, *Detecting Digital Fingerprints: Tracing Chinese Disinformation in Taiwan*, Institute for the Future's Digital Intelligence Lab, Graphika, and The International Republican Institute, August 2020, https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/detecting_digital_fingerprints_-_tracing_chinese_disinformation_in_taiwan_0.pdf.

73 According to PTTpedia, the name “1450” came from an accusation that the Council of Agriculture hired four editors on a budget of 14.5 million Taiwan dollars in March 2019, under the DPP's administration, in order to enact some control over . Meanwhile, “Green Camp Internet Army” is a reference to the DPP, which is known as “green” to the KMT's “blue.” See also: “1450,” *PTTpedia*, <https://pttpedia.fandom.com/zh/wiki/1450>; “PTT鄉民百科” (“PTT Wiki-pedia”), *PTTpedia*, <https://pttpedia.fandom.com/zh/wiki/%E5%87%BA%E5%BE%81>; “神回顧/辣個男人也沒缺席! 「真鄉民才懂」的PTT年度10大流行語揭曉!” (“Review/He didn't miss out! [Real PTT Villagers Would Know] PTT Top 10 Catch Phrase for Last Year”), *Daily View*, January 1, 2020, <https://dailyview.tw/Daily/2020/01/01?page=2>.

CHINESE MESSAGING ACROSS THE STRAIT

or dislike a post, Dcard allows for a broader spectrum of reactions, with users being able to select emojis demonstrating love, surprise, laugh, amazement, and anger; this diversity facilitates a better understanding between author and viewer, as a simple like-dislike binary choice does not convey sentiment as clearly. Ultimately, Dcard is a less polarized, more restricted, and less politically involved community than PTT.

It is also hard to validate information operations on Dcard because of its anonymous user base. Unlike PTT, where there is an open library of users' IP addresses and archives of their past activities, it is hard to distinguish between different users on Dcard, because, as mentioned, only gender and, if desired, school are listed for a given user. The Dcard community, like PTT, is active in removing reported or misleading content, which makes it hard to track information operations on the platform.

Weibo

Weibo, a Chinese platform, plays a unique role in the Taiwanese social media space, given its national origin. With its oversight over the platform, the Chinese government overtly dominates the narratives related to Taiwan. It is also popular among a small but significant number of Taiwan internet users, thus exposing them to the CCP's narrative control. As of January 2020, 16 percent of internet users ages 16 to 64 in Taiwan reported that they use Weibo.⁷⁸ One example to illustrate China's approach to promote its desired discourse and limit discussion of topics deemed nationally harmful occurred after a November 13, 2019, TAO press conference when a related hashtag made it to the most popular lists on both Weibo and DouYin China.⁷⁹ The hashtag, #国台办回应蔡英文涉港言论# (“#Taiwan Affairs Office Responding to Tsai Ing-wen's Hong Kong Remarks#”), spiked to the ninth place on the trending list of Weibo, with 74,013 searches on November 13, 2019.⁸⁰ As of August 29, 68 original posts using the hashtag had generated 2,136 engagements with 43.7 million views. Similarly, the hashtag spiked to the third place on DouYin on the same day with 5,410,779 searches.



Screengrab of the array of reactions available to Dcard users.

74 曾纘, “5年打造每月800萬不重複訪客, 社群新星Dcard如何崛起?” (“In five years, there are over 8 million non repetitive visitors. How did Dcard make it?”), *Business Next*, May 10, 2017, <https://www.bnext.com.tw/article/44423/how-social-media-dcard-reaches-millions-users>; “口碑行銷 | PTT VS DCARD 兩大論壇綜合比較” (“Brand Marketing|PTT VS DCARD Comprehensive Comparison of the Two Platforms”, *GE Marketing*, May 4, 2020, <https://www.gemarketing.com.tw/relatnews/research/ptt-dcard/>

75 刘志远, “说说Dcard, 聊聊台湾最火的大学生匿名社交” (“Dcard, Taiwan's popular college student anonymous social media”), *Woshipm*, July 20, 2017, <http://www.woshipm.com/it/723144.html>

76 @membersecurity, “卡友您好, 這裡是 Dcard 帳號安全小組,” (“Hello fellow Dcarders, this is Dcard Member Security Group.”), Dcard, December 26, 2019, <https://www.dcard.tw/f/trending/p/232763711>

77 @dcard_support_1, “時事板板規 #2020/04/27 更新,” (“Politics Board Rule #2020/04/27 Update”), Dcard, August 29, 2019, <https://www.dcard.tw/f/trending/p/231960367>

78 Simon Kemp, “Digital 2020: Taiwan.”

79 “国台办新闻发布会辑录(2019-11-13)” (“Taiwan Affairs Office Press Conference Compilation (2019-11-13)”), *Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council PRC*, November 13, 2019, http://www.gwytb.gov.cn/m/speech/201911/t20191113_12217901.htm.

80 “#Taiwan Affairs Office Responding to Tsai-Ing Wen's Hong Kong Remarks#”, Weibo hashtag, accessed on November 13, 2019, <https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=%23%E5%9B%BD%E5%8F%B0%E5%8A%9E%E5%9B%9E%E5%BA%94%E8%94%A1%E8%8B%B1%E6%96%87%E6%B6%89%E6%B8%AF%E8%A8%80%E8%AE%BA%23>

国台办回应蔡英文涉港言论

抖音

最近一次上榜时间:2019/11/14 18:30

前72小时累计在榜:21小时40分

热搜历史最高排名: 3

搜索量: 5410779

国台办回应蔡英文涉港言论

微博

最近一次上榜时间:2019/11/13 20:40

前72小时累计在榜:2小时50分

热搜历史最高排名: 9

搜索量: 74013

A search using Enlightent showed that the hashtag #国台办回应蔡英文涉港言论# (“#Taiwan Affairs Office Responding to Tsai Ing-wen’s Hong Kong Remarks#”) went viral on DouYin and Weibo.⁸¹

The hashtag’s propagation did not involve organic discussion among ordinary users but instead predominantly consisted of promotion by government-affiliated accounts. Sixty-six out of the sixty eight original posts were created by accounts belonging to central and local government institutions as well as government-operated media. These accounts did not hide their identities, as the ownership of the accounts was verified by Weibo. The “host” of the hashtag was the account for People’s Daily, the official public media in China. On Weibo, an account can “host” a hashtag, allowing its operator to write an introduction to the hashtag at the top of the hashtag’s page that, in turn, sets the tone for the discussion and the guiding narratives for using it. A host can also manually adjust the recommendation feed of both posts and users and limit certain users from posting.⁸²

Moreover, as the hashtag attracted attention because of inauthentic traffic used to amplify it, another hashtag, “#3名台湾居民涉嫌危害国家安全被查#” (“3 Taiwanese residents arrested for jeopardizing national security”), referring to a less CCP-friendly topic brought up at the same press conference, was downplayed by the government. The discussion under the latter hashtag had a mere five posts that generated a total of sixty engagements and attracted 886,000 views.⁸⁴ The entire pool of posts under a search query for a keyword version of the hashtag (i.e., minus the “#” at the front and back) “3名台湾居民涉嫌危害国家安全被查” yielded 126 posts and generated many fewer engagements than the hashtag concerning Tsai.⁸⁵ Although similar to the



A screenshot from the hashtag page of #国台办回应蔡英文涉港言论# (“#Taiwan Affairs Office Responding to Tsai Ing-wen’s Hong Kong Remarks#”) showed that the host of the topic is People’s Daily’s verified account on Weibo (red box). Under this hashtag, the introduction explained at length how “DPP authorities have been using the situation in Hong Kong to make political maneuvers” and encouraged a specific response from users.⁸³

81 DFRLab via Enlightent, performed on November 13, 2020.

82 “Topic Host Introduction”, Weibo, <https://huati.weibo.com/about/host>.

83 DFRLab search of #Taiwan Affairs Office Responding to Tsai Ing-wen’s Hong Kong Remarks# on Weibo, accessed on November 23, 2020, <https://s.weibo.com/weibo/%2523%25E5%259B%25BD%25E5%258F%25B0%25E5%258A%259E%25E5%259B%259E%25E5%25BA%2594%25E8%2594%25A1%25E8%258B%25B1%25E6%2596%2587%25E6%25B6%2589%25E6%25B8%25AF%25E8%25A8%2580%25E8%25AE%25BA%2523?topnav=1&wvr=6&b=1>, archived link can be found here, <https://archive.is/dXS8U>.

84 “#3 Taiwanese Residents arrested for jeopardizing national security #,” Weibo hashtag, accessed on November 13, 2020, <https://s.weibo.com/weibo/%23%25E5%2590%258D%25E5%258F%25B0%25E6%25B9%25BE%25B1%2585%25E6%25B0%2591%25E6%25B6%2589%25E5%25AB%258C%25E5%25BD%25E5%25AE%25B3%25E5%259B%25BD%25E5%25AE%25B6%25E5%25A8%25E8%25A2%25AB%25E6%259F%25A5%23>.

85 “3 Taiwanese Residents arrested for jeopardizing national security,” Weibo keyword search, accessed on November 13, 2020, <https://s.weibo.com/weibo/%23%25E5%2590%258D%25E5%258F%25B0%25E6%25B9%25BE%25B1%2585%25E6%25B0%2591%25E6%25B6%2589%25E5%25AB%258C%25E5%25BD%25E5%25AE%25B3%25E5%259B%25BD%25E5%25AE%25B6%25E5%25A8%25E8%25A2%25AB%25E6%259F%25A5%23?topnav=1&wvr=6&b=1%22%20>.

first hashtag where a majority of the traffic came from government-affiliated accounts, *People's Daily*, or other government-owned media, those same party-state entities chose not to host the topic, demonstrating government disinterest in bringing media or popular attention to the topic. This motivation aligns with the discourse power philosophy of the CCP, which outlines a need to divert attention from potentially negative content regarding the CCP or the direct challenge of its actions.

The overseas effect of Weibo information operations

These mainland-oriented information operations are intended to produce a more patriotic audience convinced by China's official narratives and who would spontaneously amplify propaganda around "One China" policies on foreign platforms, to shape the discourse overseas. Previously, after the 2016 Taiwan presidential election, a Baidu Tieba (Chinese Bulletin Board System or BBS platform) branch named Di Ba, comprised of Chinese internet users famous for trolling in other BBS platforms, launched an organized operation aiming to flood Facebook comments of pro-independence politicians and media outlets with harsh criticism, including Tsai, SET News Channel, Apple Daily (News). Di Ba motivated its followers to flood Tsai's Facebook page with a clear division of labor under the umbrella themes of socialism guidelines, symbolic poems and songs that trigger homesickness, as well as the national anthem of China that tells of the CCP victory in 1949, a direct rebuke to the Taiwan's KMT origins. Di Ba also encouraged its followers to use memes and non-violent words extensively during the "march."⁸⁶

Although the behavior of Di Ba showed no direct link to the CCP or its leadership, it was positively received on domestic Chinese social media platforms, with several government accounts including the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League, applauding the information operation.⁸⁷ The administrators of Di Ba later established social media accounts on various Western social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter. Moreover, official media outlets including *People's Daily* and *Global Times* also published several op-eds commenting on the "rising discourse power" of the millennials on the international stage.⁸⁸

Yet these organic propaganda operations on foreign platforms do not always achieve what is intended. Taiwanese citizens who witnessed large-scale operations expressed emotions of sarcasm across platforms (Facebook, PTT, Dcard), seeing these internet users as mouthpieces of the CCP and as forces that further alienate Taiwan from mainland China. As a matter of fact, one of the posts that received the highest engagement rates under the topic of "Di Ba March" on Facebook was a news article in *Liberty Times*, one of the most popular news outlets in Taiwan, that reported on a British internet user's efforts to garner 10,000 signatures for a petition that the British Parliament recognize Taiwan as a separate country; links to the article received more than 15,000 likes.⁸⁹

Similarly, in the lead-up to the Taiwan presidential election in January 2020, Chinese internet users also attempted to influence foreign political perspectives on Taiwan. For example, in August 2019, Coach, Givenchy, and Versace were attacked on Weibo because they listed Taiwan as a country on either their clothes or their websites. They received vehement responses both on Weibo and Instagram, where the three fashion brands released apologies to Chinese citizens and were forced to express clearly that they agreed with the "One China" policy.⁹⁰ Patriotic Chinese trolls flooded the comments under the Coach apology and subsequent posts, holding firm to the narrative that Taiwan is a part of China.

While China focused most of its messaging around Taiwan on its domestic audience, it nevertheless promoted that same messaging in a way that it might also persuade Taiwanese viewers to respond favorably to the narratives. Although the posts were sugarcoated in a "benevolent tone" and discussed political and economic benefits for the Taiwanese people, similar to the 2016 "Di Ba" incident, the narratives were met with significant backlash in Taiwan, provoking more anti-China and pro-independence sentiment.

One example was the response to China's announcement of its "26 Measures." In December 2019, a month before the 2020 presidential election, the Taiwan Affairs Office announced the publication of "《关于进一步促进两岸经济文化交流合作的若干措施》" ("Several measures to further promote economic and cultural exchanges and cooperation across the Straits," also referred to as "26 Measures"), a document

86 李红梅, "如何理解中国的民族主义? :帝吧出征事件分析" ("How to understand China's nationalism? An analysis on Di Ba's March"), 国际新闻界 11(2016): 91-113, accessed on November 13, 2020, <http://cjjc.ruc.edu.cn/CN/article/downloadArticleFile.do?attachType=PDF&id=608>

87 共青团中央, "[90后·相信你们!][心]]#帝吧fb出征# ,可以看到中国迎来自信一代!他们自信地迈着阔步·天马行空地自由挥洒..." Weibo post, January 22, 2016, <https://www.weibo.com/3937348351/Dehp85q5d?type=comment>

88 "社评:不必夸张'帝吧出征'的两岸负效果," ("Op-Ed: Don't exaggerate the negative effect of the Di Ba March on the cross-strait relationship"), *Global Times*, January 21, 2016, <https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJTII0>; "人民日报评'帝吧出征':展现不同以往的克制与温情" ("People's Daily: Di Ba March reveals unprecedented gentleness and self-control"), *People's Daily*, January 28, 2016, <http://bj.people.com.cn/n2/2016/0128/c233086-27643686.htm>.

89 陳仔軒, "英萬人連署 促承認台灣是國家" (Hundreds of thousands of people in the UK signed for a petition to recognize Taiwan as an independent country"), *Liberty Times*, January 21, 2016, https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/paper/951152?fbclid=IwAR2WfeZ3THUI-lwKD2ezZHLhim6Zc_Dgyl-a-g8cGwL8wX-7GtJhJ8_u4FUs

90 @Versace, "I am deeply sorry for the unfortunate recent error that was made by our Company and that is being currently discussed on various social media channels." Instagram post, August 11, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B1BM54AiL7D/>; @Coach, "Coach respects and supports China's sovereignty and territorial integrity..." Instagram post, August 12, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B1DNXmVgzGF/>; Coach 蔻驰, "COACH一贯尊重并维护中国主权及领土完整...", Weibo post, August 12, 2019, https://weibo.com/1916986680/11RB0fDvT?from=page_1006061916986680_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime; Versace 范思哲官方微博, "我对我们公司近期造成的一个失误而深感抱歉,目前该事件正在社交媒体上被讨论..." Weibo post, August 11, 2019, https://weibo.com/2356563467/11K-cm9Glg?from=page_1006062356563467_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment&ssl_rnd=1606278919.6941#_rnd1606278921105, https://weibo.com/2356563467/11Kcm9Glg?from=page_1006062356563467_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1598243917757; Givenchy 纪梵希, "致各位关心纪梵希品牌的朋友..." ("To all the friends who care about Givenchy..."), Weibo post, August 12, 2019, https://weibo.com/1912136333/11SdUIBMy?from=page_1006061912136333_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment#_rnd1598243951532.

intended to demonstrate China's economic assistance to Taiwan businesses and investors, as well as political assistance the island's citizens in times of emergency.⁹¹

Following the announcement, the United Front Work Department adopted a strategy specifically for digital audiences, organizing information promotion on the “positive influence” of the 26 Measures and circulating it both to Chinese and Taiwanese media outlets and on social media platforms. As a part of this strategy, the hashtag #央视主播喊湾湾回家# (“#CCTV anchor called wanwan home#”) went viral on different Chinese social media platforms on November 5, 2019, alongside a video of a news anchor commenting on the 26 Measures.⁹² In the short video, a news anchor for China Central Television, a government-owned television channel, is seen encouraging “Wanwan” (a popular nickname for Taiwan on Chinese social media) to come home to China under the CCP. On DouYin, the hashtag trended for 2 hours and 10 minutes and ranked as high as the eighth most popular search on November 5, 2019. On Weibo, the hashtag trended for 14 hours and 40 minutes and ranked as high as the second most popular search on Weibo on November 5, 2019. Of the 194 original posts on November 5 to use the hashtag, forty-seven were produced by government-related accounts. The hashtag gained renewed attention on December 19, primarily led by the government-owned accounts. Out of the twenty-two posts published after November 30, fifteen were posted by local government-owned accounts; three were posted by the official administrator account for “Di Ba” the aforementioned Baidu Tieba (BBS) of Chinese internet users responsible for the 2016 anti-Taiwan independence information operation on Tsai Ing-wen's Facebook page.⁹³

As of August 3, 2020, 277 total original posts used the hashtag, drawing over 35,000 engagements (including comments, reposts, and likes) and 440 million views on Weibo. Seventy-one of those 277 were produced by government-related accounts, including local political and legal departments, the Communist Youth League, university administrations, and police stations; and three were local information bot accounts verified by Weibo.

Despite the positive image the Chinese government successfully pushed (in part using the “CCTV anchor called wanwan home” hashtag) around 26 Measures to its domestic audience, the video garnered vicious criticism and pushback on Taiwanese social media platforms. In November 2019, shortly after its release, the video went viral on Facebook in Taiwan, receiving total engagements of 186,664 interactions. Out of the 213 posts posted in November under the keyword search of “灣灣回家” (“Wanwan Come Home”), the sentiment was predominantly negative toward China and reunification, with some users comparing the future of reunification with what is going on in Tibet, Uighur, and Hong Kong. Other commenters used sarcastic memes and phrases similar to those the Chinese information operation used (including “Xi Xi” in referring to Tibet, “Jiang Jiang” referring to Uighurs, and “Xiang Xiang” in reference to Hong Kong) to criticize the system of “One Country, Two System.” Users also refuted the narratives by asserting that Taiwan was already home to Taiwanese citizens while China remained a foreign land. Finally, some users pointed out that “wanwan” was a phrase Chinese social media users originally used to mock Taiwanese people, alongside phrases including “井蛙” (“well frog”) and “Tai Ba Zi.”⁹⁵

央视主播喊湾湾回家

微博

最近一次上榜时间:2019/11/05 13:40
前72小时累计在榜:14小时40分

热搜历史最高排名: 2

搜索量: 97604

A search by enlighten shows that on November 5, 2019, the hashtag #CCTV anchor called wanwan home# ranked as high as the second most popular search on Weibo with 97,604 searches.⁹⁴

91 “逐条解读‘26条措施’”(“Interpretation of the ‘26 Measures’ article by article”), *Xinhua News*, November 5, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/tw/2019-11/05/c_1210341700.htm; “中國國台辦「26條」:台北指措施「名為惠台,實則利中」”(“China Taiwan Affairs Office 26 Measures: Taipei referred to it as ‘nominally benefiting Taiwan, essentially benefiting China.’”), *BBC News*, November 4, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/chinese-news-50288963>.

92 “# CCTV anchor called wanwan home #,” Weibo hashtag, accessed on November 24, 2020, https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=%23%E5%A4%AE%E8%A7%86%E4%B8%BB%E6%92%AD%E5%96%8A%E6%B9%BE%E6%B9%BE%E5%9B%9E%E5%AE%B6%23&Refer=hot_weibo.

93 Marco Huang, “Chinese Netizens Flood Tsai Ing-Wen's Facebook Page With Anti-Taiwan Independence Posts,” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 21, 2016, <https://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2016/01/21/chinese-netizens-flood-tsai-ing-wens-facebook-page-with-anti-taiwan-independence-posts/>

94 DFRLab used tool of Enlightent, performed on November 24, 2019.

95 The first is a reference to frogs inside a well who can only see the sky directly above, which is used to refer to people with limited knowledge, while the second is a defamatory term to imply that Taiwanese citizens are rednecks.



A compilation of the screenshots showing three popular memes responding to the “Wan Wan, come back home” narratives and that demonstrate negative sentiment of Taiwanese internet users in a tone similar to that of the Chinese government.⁹⁶

96 變態辣椒, “#變態辣椒漫畫 #rebelpepper ‘灣灣,回家吧!’...”, Facebook post, November 8, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/btlajiao/photos/2438742079568293>; Nagee, “【灣灣～回家吧^_^】...”, Facebook post, November 6, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/nagee.tw/photos/1015636531987312>; 迷因力量, “灣灣回家前傳+首部曲...”, Facebook post, November 6, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/memepowertw/photos/a.113314556670743/142651420403723/>.

Conclusion

The Chinese party-state has utilized various online platforms to exert influence, and the online media environment has become a fertile ground through which foreign agents like CCP propagandists – or their proxies – can exert that influence. Many Taiwanese people, especially the younger generations, rely on social media and other online sources for news, making them a primary venue for such information operations.

The DFRLab found prolific pages or channels, with or without direct ties to the party-state, on Western platforms popular in Taiwan, including Facebook and YouTube, that are used to spread disinformation and pro-China and pro-reunification narratives; they also criticized candidates that maintained a pro-independence stance, especially incumbent President Tsai-Ing Wen. Local Taiwanese platforms PTT and Dcard, with a stricter platform policy and their users' increasing awareness of foreign infiltration, have demonstrated capabilities of managing disinformation through strict policy implementation. The party-state also strengthened information control on domestic Chinese platforms like Weibo, which strictly controls the narratives that domestic Chinese citizens would see but which are also visible to Weibo's Taiwanese users. These controlled messaging efforts also have a spillover effect of encouraging like-minded Chinese citizens or diaspora communities who have access to the Western social media platforms to be more proactive in spreading pro-reunification narratives on Western platforms, including Facebook and Instagram.

The primary messaging out of China on social media platforms leading up to the 2020 presidential election in Taiwan was in line with its “One China” policy and an end goal

of reunification. The specific approaches not only bolstered China's soft power by highlighting potential benefits to the Taiwanese economy of cooperation while attacking the Tsai government's own legitimacy, but also pushed negative messaging around the presidential candidates and other politicians who disagreed with or strayed from reunification as an ideal.

These information operations appeared to be far from successful, as the increasingly influential younger generations in Taiwan remain adverse to mainland China and the CCP and are increasingly aware of the risks online information has brought to the democratic institutions in the society. Moreover, the younger generation has fewer familial ties to mainland China and increasingly consider themselves to be “Taiwanese” instead of “Chinese,” making reunification narratives appear outdated. In the end, whatever messaging the CCP tried to push regarding Taiwan and re-unification, either through official accounts or indirectly through its proxies and adherents, did not have a significant impact, as a notionally unfriendly Tsai administration won a healthy victory to stay in office.

Despite limited effect, it is unlikely that such Chinese efforts will soon subside. As the Tsai administration guards against such interference, however, special care must be given to distinguish the work of CCP propagandists from the earnestly held, pro-China beliefs of some Taiwanese citizens. The challenges of polarization and distrust that confront Taiwan go beyond the issue of foreign interference; they must be addressed in the same holistic way.

Contributors

Iain Robertson served as lead editor and contributing writer. DFRLab staff conducted principal research and writing. Romain Warnault created the cover, and Eric Baker designed the layout. Alicia Fawcett contributed additional research.



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