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IN A SAVVY DISINFORMATION OFFENSIVE, CHINA TAKES AIM AT TAIWAN ELECTIONS

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KEY FINDINGS

- When Taiwanese face important elections, China's efforts to influence voters become especially fierce.
- Ahead of the January 13, 2024, election, China wants to thwart the campaign of Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate Lai Ching-te (賴清德), who stands for an autonomous Taiwan.
- China uses a sophisticated, multi-pronged approach to influence public opinion, far beyond fake news, with AI posing an ever-growing threat. Research shows China is involved in massive influence operations.
- The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) makes use of non-party or non-government organizations such as religious groups, businesspeople, influencers, pop stars or students to advance its agenda.
- Taiwan is just the tip of the iceberg – examples of China attempting to influence other jurisdictions will likely evolve in the future. With its growing global ambitions, Beijing feels the need to create an information environment that is more favorable to its agenda.
- But even sophisticated disinformation campaigns can backfire. In the past, military threats have driven Taiwanese voters to support candidates Beijing did not want to see elected at the time.

In a savvy disinformation offensive, China takes aim at Taiwan election

The days before Taiwan's presidential and legislative election on January 13 will be a critical time, says Liu Wen-Ping,¹ a 40-year veteran of Taiwan's Ministry of Justice. Liu investigates how China tries to influence Taiwan's political process. Whenever Taiwanese face important elections, China's attempts to influence them become especially fierce. "I worry that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will launch a very complex fabricated video or deep fake just two days prior to the election," says Liu. "This will not give us enough time to fact check and respond to it."

Dramatic events or revelations just before elections have in the past shaped their outcome – sometimes changing the minds of Taiwanese voters at the very last minute. Liu remembers the mayor's election in Kaohsiung in 2006, where frontrunner Huang Junying of the Kuomintang (KMT) lost by a margin of only 1,014 votes after his contender accused him of vote-buying in a press conference the night before. Police investigations later revealed that, while supporters had handed out cash, neither Huang nor his campaign team knew anything about it.²

While this case was not linked to any Chinese disinformation operation, Liu worries that the CCP might fabricate disinformation that could have a similar effect – discrediting a popular candidate.

Since Taiwanese voters elected their president for the first time directly in 1996, they have observed the CCP's attempts to sway voters. "Geostrategically important democracies or regions at war are often prime targets for information manipulation by neighboring authoritarian states," writes Taiwanese sociology professor Lin Thunghong. "The more strategically important the geostrategy, the greater the scope for disaster in fake news."³

According to the Digital Society Project of the Swedish Organization V-Dem, Latvia and Taiwan are the countries most affected by disinformation spread by a foreign country, but whose own governments spread almost no disinformation at home.⁴ Regarding Taiwan, the CCP embraces a multi-faceted approach called "cognitive warfare" (認知戰).⁵

Cognitive warfare "integrates cyber, information, psychological, and social engineering capabilities to achieve its ends. It takes advantage of the internet and social media to target influential individuals, specific groups and large numbers of citizens."⁶ In Taiwan, the CCP makes use of military threats, economic coercion, cyberattacks and United Front (統戰) operations – a strategy by which the party makes use of non-party or non-government organizations such as religious groups, businesspeople, influencers, pop stars or students to advance its agenda.

CCP DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS IN TAIWAN ARE BECOMING MORE SOPHISTICATED

The CCP has a clear preference for next year's election. It would like to see the failure of Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate Lai Ching-te (賴清德), a man Beijing regards as a "separatist." Lai has vowed to maintain the status quo, stressing that formally declaring independence would not be necessary, as "Taiwan is already a sovereign, independent country."⁷ These are words Beijing does not like to hear, much less that Lai has in the past called himself a "pragmatic worker for Taiwan independence."

Lai's party, the DPP, has been in power since 2016. It takes a more cautious approach towards China, stressing deterrence and close ties to Washington. Beijing expects his contenders Ko Wen-je (柯文哲) from the Taiwan People's Party (TPP) and Hou Yu-ih (侯友宜) from the Kuomintang (KMT) to be more accommodating to its agenda. While neither Ko nor Hou would actively strive for unification – the overwhelming majority of Taiwanese citizens support the status quo – they favor much closer ties with China.

Numerous investigations have shown that Beijing is engaged in massive influence operations. In August, Meta took down what it claimed was "the largest known cross-platform covert influence operation in the world."⁸ The sprawling network of fake accounts that Meta dubbed "Spamouflage" pushed pro-CCP talking points and attacked critics of the Chinese government. It involved 7,704 accounts and 954 pages active on more than 50 apps and online groups.⁹ "Although the people behind this activity tried to conceal their identities, our investigation found links to individuals associated with Chinese law enforcement," write the Meta researchers. "Their behavior suggested that they were operated by groups who may have worked from a shared location, such as an office. Each cluster worked to a clear shift pattern, with bursts of activity in the mid-morning and early afternoon, Beijing time, with breaks for lunch and supper, and then a final burst of activity in the evening,"¹⁰ write the Meta researchers.

Google, which owns YouTube, has shut down more than 100,000 associated accounts, while X, formerly known as Twitter, has blocked hundreds of thousands of Chinese "state-linked" accounts.¹¹ The Chinese government denies any involvement.

In the past, the CCP's disinformation efforts have often been rather clumsy, operating, for instance, with simplified characters used in China but not in Taiwan. Fake accounts could be easily identified by looking into their profiles, says Ethan Tu from the Taiwanese NGO AI Labs.¹² With the use of generative AI, however, many of them have become much more sophisticated. The CCP has achieved mastery in directing and manipulating public opinion in China itself, carefully shielding its population from outside influence.¹³ Public opinion analysts (网络舆情分析师) are required to "have the accuracy of a weather forecaster in predicting public opinion" (像预报天气一样的预报舆情), helping to channel and redirect public dissatisfaction away from the party.¹⁴

EMOTION ABOVE INDOCTRINATION: THE CCP HAS ADAPTED ITS COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Under Xi Jinping, notes Taiwanese political scientist Titus Chen, a new tone of mass communication has taken over in China, often replacing the old formulas of indoctrination, and generating a more market-driven, audience-friendly and emotion-laden vibe.¹⁵ Analyzing social media posts, Chen found that non-official Chinese patriotic media have posted far more content touting official nationalism than official ones, mocking, rebuking and discrediting the party-state's adversaries. He observes a division of labor in China, where official media mainly focus on "feel-good" propaganda, offering emotion-rich "soft" content,¹⁶ something he calls "chicken soup for the mind" (心靈雞湯), a quintessential Chinese soul food.

This pattern can also be observed abroad. While official Chinese accounts disseminate more positive and upbeat messages, non-official or individual "wolf-warrior" diplomat accounts deliver much more critical tones.¹⁷ With its growing global ambitions, Beijing feels the need to create an information environment that is more favorable to its agenda. It is doing so in a variety of ways – running overseas media operations, investing in foreign media institutions, sharing content, training international journalists, etc.¹⁸ For a long time, its disinformation operations mainly aimed at overseas Chinese, but the CCP now seems to be broadening its scope.¹⁹ While in the past Chinese disinformation campaigns focused on issues relevant to China's immediate or domestic interests, they have now become more global.

Ethan Tu currently observes a large, coordinated effort to influence Mandarin-speaking audiences' opinions on the Israel-Hamas war. In African countries, the Chinese satellite provider Star Times amplifies Russian disinformation about Putin's invasion of Ukraine.²⁰

TAIWAN CAN HELP EXPLAIN CCP ADVANCES ELSEWHERE

Taiwan therefore provides a valuable example to understand the CCP's possible future advances elsewhere. Beijing quickly learned that its attempts to project a positive image were not as successful as intended. The Taiwanese appetite for unification has fallen to a historic low – less than six percent of citizens could imagine unification at some point in the future.²¹ Chinese dramas, shows and pop culture have lost much of their former appeal ever since China's cultural world has entered the stage Australian sinologist Geremie Barmé describes as "the empire of tedium"²² – thanks to Xi Jinping prescribing patriotic content to the industry, aiming to instill nationalism and self-sacrifice in young audiences.²³

Sowing distrust proves to be much more effective. In many corners of the internet, it sounds as if China is not the one threatening Taiwan, but rather the US. Take the video circulating on TikTok and Facebook in which photos of war and destruction are accompanied by piano music and the solemn voiceover: "Anyone can see that the US has been pushing Taiwan to the brink of war and Ukrainizing Taiwan. The people of Taiwan

are discovering that a horrific scenario is taking shape: The United States is preparing to make Taiwan a battleground, a wasteland in the war against China.”²⁴

Another story even made headlines in July in both the Taiwanese newspaper *United Daily*²⁵ and the Chinese *Global Times*.²⁶ Both reported leaked minutes from a secret US-Taiwan government meeting in which the US asked Taiwan to run a secret lab for making biological weapons. Given the similarities between Chinese and Taiwanese DNA, this could be the groundwork for a war against China, the reports assert. The story, however, was completely fake.²⁷ The attentive reader could have noted that the alleged government minutes used the term “the party” synonymously with “the government,” an expression that is popular in China but not in Taiwan.

The fact that many Taiwanese are skeptical about the United States (疑美論) and wonder whether the US is a reliable partner is not only the fault of Chinese disinformation – and not all information surrounding “US skepticism” is disinformation. There are, however, many conspiracy theories evolving around this topic. Many of these originate from Taiwan itself, writes Yu Chihhao from the Taiwan Information Environment Research Center. “PRC actors tend to ‘join in’ and spread existing narratives of US skepticism rather than creating new ones.”²⁸ For disinformation to be successful, it has to find fertile ground – in this case, a deep fear of abandonment, something Yu calls Taiwan’s “orphan mentality.”²⁹

There are various drivers of this fear – the deepest trauma going back to October 25, 1971, when the UN General Assembly accepted the People’s Republic of China into the United Nations. On this day, Taiwan lost all its seats in UN organizations. Today, only 12 countries and the Holy See officially recognize Taiwan as a country.³⁰

The fear of abandonment can easily be triggered in Taiwan – for example, when US troops withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021. After Putin started his all-out invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, many Taiwanese lost confidence that the US would send troops in the event of a Chinese attack as it only supported Ukraine indirectly³¹ – a confidence that was partly regained after then-speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in August 2022.³² According to a current poll, only 34 percent of Taiwanese regard the US as trustworthy – a drop of more than 11 percentage points since 2021.³³

PRC PROPAGANDA IN TAIWAN APPEALS TO THE EMOTIONS

In contrast to the US, which is presented as a false friend, PRC propaganda offers “Taiwanese compatriots” the warmth of true family.³⁴ This is exemplified by emotional appeals, asserting that “the two sides of the Taiwan Strait are one dear family” (两岸一家亲), “blood is thicker than water” (血浓于水), and integration should be promoted by benefits but also by love and affection (以惠促融、以情促融)³⁵ PRC propaganda paints a picture of a glorious future of life after unification, where “Taiwanese compatriots will have a harder back and more confidence in the international arena, will be safer and more dignified, and share the glory of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”³⁶

This is contrasted with depictions of a sorry state of affairs under what the PRC calls “DPP authorities” (民进党当局): “DPP authorities have been in power for the sake of their party’s

self-interests. They ignore people's livelihoods and the endless stream of news about their corruption and fraud is ever increasing. While the DPP is getting fatter and fatter, the people of Taiwan are suffering."³⁷

Chinese disinformation operations amplify grievances about issues like an egg shortage earlier this year.³⁸ They also make up conspiracies like one that Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen was already rehearsing her escape during Taiwanese military exercises³⁹ or that she has had numerous abortions because of her affairs with pro-independence activists.⁴⁰ They skillfully exploit the nature of open societies where citizens are allowed to criticize their governments. By amplifying these criticisms, they create the impression that everyone agrees the government is doing a bad job.

The secret to this is repetition, reinforcing a similar message again and again via different kinds of media. China does not have a Saint Petersburg-style troll farm; its disinformation operations are more decentralized. In fact, one should be careful not to equate Chinese and Russian disinformation operations. While both countries have been working in tandem to influence public opinion,⁴¹ Beijing is acting from a much more powerful position and therefore often does not have to resort to disinformation. As it aspires to become a future world leader, it is also more preoccupied with its moral image.⁴²

In China, several party and government organizations on different administrative levels churn out masses of disinformation that are picked up and disseminated by content farms, nationalistic bloggers, YouTubers, Taiwanese influencers, users on all kinds of social media, and sometimes even Taiwanese commercial media.⁴³ Some Taiwanese media outlets have financial interests in China, report in a very China-friendly way and have repeatedly presented disinformation as news.⁴⁴ Before elections, disinformation in Taiwan increases by around 40 percent, says Billion Lee, founder of Cofacts, a fact-checking organization.⁴⁵ Often it is difficult to trace the disinformation back to China, as information laundering is so widespread and can be very sophisticated. It could be concealed as Western media reports, be embedded in websites offering medical or health advice or be presented as Taiwanese content with the help of local collaborators or by hacking into Taiwanese accounts.⁴⁶ Sometimes hackers buy or hack into popular Facebook, Instagram or TikTok accounts of influencers who post about music, fashion or culture and then turn it political.

Puma Shen, former chairperson of Doublethink Lab, recalls a popular Tsai Ing-wen Facebook Group. For months, its members lauded the president, but suddenly in the midst of the pandemic, one user started to post conspiracy theories blaming the government for the crisis. Doublethink Lab's research showed that not only was this user from China, but the entire Facebook group was also set up by China in the first place. They spent months trying to win the confidence of Tsai Ing-wen supporters, then, based on that trust, attempted to turn them around.⁴⁷

Confronted with massive disinformation for years, one might assume that social media in Taiwan is heavily regulated. This, however, is not the case. After decades of martial law, everything that smacks remotely of censorship is met with fierce resistance by the Taiwanese. A law to regulate Taiwan's social media was buried earlier this year,⁴⁸ and while Chinese apps are banned on government devices,⁴⁹ so far Taiwan has not pushed to

ban apps like Weibo, WeChat or Douyin, China's domestic version of TikTok, both owned by China's ByteDance.

In trying to control disinformation, Taiwan follows what sociology professor Lin Thunghong calls an "ABC" approach: Raising **awareness**, **balancing** disinformation by presenting other views and fact-**checking**.⁵⁰ Much of this is provided by Taiwan's lively civil society via organizations such as Cofacts, Taiwan FactCheck Center, Doublethink Lab, Taiwan Information Environment Research Center and others. While different political camps accuse each other of spreading disinformation, civil society is regarded as trustworthy by society at large.

AI TECHNOLOGIES MIGHT HELP CHINA REFINE ITS DISINFORMATION CHANNELS

But will civil society be overburdened in the future? Experts fear that advances in generative AI will multiply the dangers of disinformation. They are not only concerned that AI will be able to produce very realistic deep fakes⁵¹ or fake audio files, but they worry that it will generate droves of realistic but inauthentic online human personae – masses of fake online friends who act just like humans. This could lead to revolutionary improvements in "astroturfing," where masses of fake accounts create the appearance of broad social consensus on specific issues. This could subvert the democratic process, write the experts of a new Rand Corporation report.⁵²

When he recently travelled to Ukraine, says Wu Min Hsuan, also called Ttcat, co-founder of Doublethink Lab, he learned that the most dangerous disinformation would not even target Taiwan but would be "directed at countries willing to come to Taiwan's aid in the event of a Chinese attack."⁵³ With the widely popular TikTok app, the CCP potentially would have the perfect tool for that – its parent company ByteDance's headquarters are located in Beijing.⁵⁴ This is also a policy issue European lawmakers should direct their attention to.

Disinformation is not the only means by which the CCP tries to sway Taiwanese voters. As China is Taiwan's biggest trading partner, the economy is a useful bargaining chip. On the one hand, the CCP lures "Taiwanese compatriots" with preferential policies,⁵⁵ while on the other, it scares them with export bans of Taiwanese goods – mainly agricultural and fishery products.⁵⁶ On the eve of the election, Beijing will announce the results of what it calls an investigation into Taiwan's trade barriers.⁵⁷ And when PRC authorities recently announced a tax probe into Foxconn, former presidential hopeful Terry Guo's company, many in Taiwan saw this as an attempt to push him out of the presidential race.⁵⁸

The CCP also uses religion to create inroads into Taiwanese society. For instance, the sea goddess Mazu is extremely popular in Taiwan and originates from China. The temples run by Mazu associations play a very important political-societal role in Taiwan. In 2019, China's National People's Congress declared Mazu culture should take on the task of "resisting Taiwan independence" and "promoting the cause of unification of the motherland."⁵⁹ With the help of its United Front Work Department, the CCP tries to woo

different groups within Taiwanese society, such as village chiefs,⁶⁰ young and aboriginal people, or Taiwanese businesspeople operating in China, offering discounted air tickets for their flight back to Taiwan in hopes they will vote for China's preferred candidate.⁶¹

One of the most effective tools of China's cognitive warfare, however, are military maneuvers. According to polls, nearly 80 percent of Taiwanese would prefer independence if they didn't fear invasion by China.⁶² Because of the threats, however, only 4.5 percent support independence as soon as possible.⁶³

The CCP has learned to use this tool with caution, as it can yield adverse effects. When Taiwanese voters approached their first presidential election in 1996, China threatened them by amassing 100,000 soldiers in the Chinese coastal province Fujian. It conducted extensive air and naval exercises and fired missiles near Taiwan's port cities Keelung and Kaohsiung. These threats, however, seem to have driven many Taiwanese voters to support Lee Teng-hui – precisely the candidate Beijing did not want to see elected at the time.⁶⁴ The same dynamic seems to have unfolded with Tsai Ing-wen's landslide win in 2020.⁶⁵ That is the problem of any influence operation. It can always backfire.

ENDNOTES

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