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2 More than sharp power

Chinese influence operations in Taiwan, Hong Kong and beyond

Wu Jieh-min

Long before the West discovered China's sharp power play, Taiwan and Hong Kong had encountered the cutting edge of an ascendant China, but their stories were rarely reported in depth. The new concept of 'sharp power' has provided a timely framework for rising global vigilance against China's interference in democratic countries, transforming the epistemic perspective from which China's external behaviors are evaluated. Instances of what might have been seen as 'soft power' are now re-construed as 'sharp power': Confucius Institutes across the world, for example, once welcomed as a form of amicable public diplomacy (Kurlantzick, 2007) but more recently stirring up suspicions of interference in academic freedom in host countries, have been deemed 'malignant' in a report by the National Endowment for Democracy (Walker and Ludwig, 2017). Revelations of Chinese interference in Australia and New Zealand seem to have awakened the West overnight (Brady, 2017; Hamilton, 2018). These troubles, however, pale in comparison with those afflicting Taiwan and Hong Kong. This chapter uses both locales to build a roadmap for a comprehensive analysis of China's sharp power in a broad sense.

Beijing has long been fiercely devoted to a form of media warfare it calls 'great foreign propaganda' (dawaixuan), aimed at directing international media outlets to 'tell China's story well' (Lim and Bergin, 2018). In the wake of the coronavirus outbreak in 2020, Western governments came to realize that China's propaganda offensive had met with success in their various nations. Studies and in-depth reports inspired by the sharp power perspective have primarily focused on disinformation and its application to electoral intervention. This study will demonstrate that by examining Hong Kong and Taiwan we can identify types of influence operation beyond those which the sharp power approach has informed.

Situated at the epicenter of China's attempts at influence, Taiwan has had to endure Beijing's coaxing, threats and interference. Still, it has made efforts to expose China's impact, operating as it does undercover, polarizing societal attitudes toward the mainland—a rift which Beijing has further widened through disinformation and manipulation. What Beijing has undertaken in Taiwan and its East Asian peripheries has exceeded the scope of sharp power as defined by the NED report (Cardenal et al., 2017). In particular, Taiwan and Hong Kong have been 'canaries in the coal mine' for Beijing's repertoire of interference.

To achieve its political goals in what it calls 'offshore territories'—including foreign countries, special administrative regions and claimed sovereign territories—Beijing has mingled economic statecraft, coercive measures, united-front tactics and ideological warfare (Wu et al. 2017).

2.1 Commercialized united-front strategy

The quintessential feature of Beijing's influence operations is providing material incentives to local collaborators (or co-operators) in return for political ends, often in the guise of innocuous commercial exchange. This conceals Beijing's political motives.

First of all, Beijing has to build economic leverage. Over the last three decades China has attracted a large amount of Taiwanese capital and expatriates, helping to drive its economic development. China accounted for 38.5 percent of Taiwan's total global investment during the 1990s, ramping up to 60.4 percent under President Chen Shui-bian (2000–2008) and peaking at 69.2 percent under Ma Ying-jeou (2008–2016). Many Taishang (Taiwanese enterprises and businesspeople) initially entered China to take advantage of cheap production costs (labor and land) and re-export products to Western markets, but more and more Taishang were gradually drawn into Chinese domestic markets and became involved in a deeper interplay of connections with local government. The concentration of Taiwan's external investments in China is reflected in its particularly high degree of export-market dependence. China accounted for 41 percent of Taiwan's total exports in 2017 (albeit with a substantial proportion of re-exports). Consequently, trade with China made up 31.9 percent of Taiwan's GDP. Such a high degree of dependence on China is second only to Hong Kong, and higher than South Korea. Taiwan's asymmetric structure of dependence is susceptible to political manipulation.

Beijing has deftly utilized the openness of the market and democracy in Taiwan; it has molded the structural dependence of Taiwanese businesses into one aspect of a grand strategy aimed at integrating Taiwan into the PRC. Close ties between Taishang and Chinese officials have become a useful asset in cultivating pro-China lobbies in Taiwan through cross-Strait business networks. Authoritarian Beijing has long taken advantage of the free-market economies in Taiwan and Hong Kong, leveraging smaller, open societies with the ostensibly mutual benefits of free trade to construct a structure of dependence. The relationship being highly asymmetric, the cost to those smaller economies of withdrawing from it is consequently much higher, while such a withdrawal would also meet with opposition from entrenched local interests. Beijing has, for example, nurtured scores of politicians, lobbyists and associations by way of tour operators in Taiwan and Hong Kong (see Tsai and Yeh's chapters, respectively). Whenever Beijing has threatened to reduce the flow of tourists, such CCP collaborators have spoken up for Beijing with its refrain of 'doing business for the common benefit of the people'. This strategy is not limited to tourism but also infects agriculture, manufacture, media, entertainment and even the cultural and religious spheres. And

Beijing has employed this strategy of 'using business to steer politics' in other countries, such as Australia and New Zealand. I shall refer to this modus operandi as the 'commercialization of united-front work', where by 'commercialization' I mean the general principle of embedding political motives in business activities. In practice, such activities are modified into a variety of subtypes. Such business measures permeate China's influence operations, enabling it to transform the structure of people's preferences so as to manipulate the political process. This study will show how material incentives provided at both the macro and individual level serve as the base for Chinese sharp power.

2.2 Chinese influence operations

China sees Taiwan and Hong Kong as lying within the radius of its 'core interest', and it practices blatant political manipulation of both. Taiwan and Hong Kong share similarities in this tug-of-war with Beijing: both are huaren shehui (Chinese societies), where Beijing can take advantage of the 'same language, same race' discourse. Both are adjacent to and economically integrated with the mainland. Exploiting such traits, Beijing can easily embed cooperative agents in both places. In the shadow of the 'China factor', however, the two differ significantly in political structure. Taiwan has a consolidated electoral democracy, a robust civil society, and enjoys de facto independence from the PRC; Hong Kong, under PRC jurisdiction, is striving for genuine universal suffrage, while a unique Hong Kong identity is still embryonic; Beijing claims Taiwan only nominally, but tightly grips Hong Kong within its sovereign control. The condition of 'stateness' is of critical positive consequence for Taiwan (Linz and Alfred, 1996). Such dissimilarities explain the different responses and outcomes in defense of freedom and autonomy against China's control attempts. Nevertheless, weaknesses in Taiwan's social and political structure have enabled Beijing to cultivate collaborative agents and meddle in domestic affairs.

If we set out to create a ledger of Chinese influence operations, we find three modes—external, internal, and borderline—in terms of socio-political space. We can further define three ideal types. Foremost is external coercion: the degrading of Taiwan's statehood and delimiting of its space for international activities (Figure 2.1). Methods of external coercion include diplomatic blockades, military intimidation and symbolic sovereignty warfare. Beijing and Taipei have long engaged in a diplomatic contest, ever since the Cold War. Starting in the 1970s, the Republic of China (ROC) gradually lost its formal recognition by the major world powers. Beijing has forced Taipei to sever its official relations with five countries since the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) took office in 2016. On the military front, Beijing has stepped up intimidation on a regular basis, even launching missiles to try to disrupt Taiwan's first direct presidential election in 1996. The National People's Congress enacted an Anti-Secession Law in 2005, intended to deter any Taiwanese independence movement. In recent years, the Chinese air force and navy have conducted patrols which have threateningly encircled Taiwan, intending thereby to effect a psychological threat. Beijing

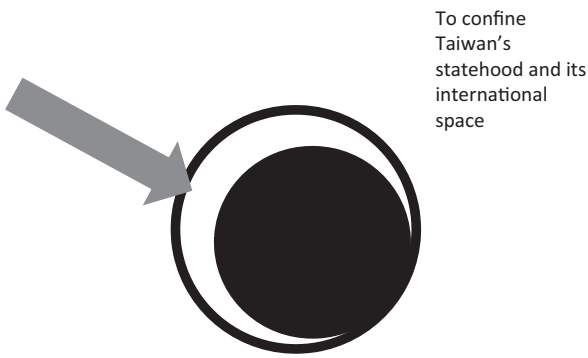

Figure 2.1 External coercion

has also restricted Taiwan's participation in international organizations by any means possible. It allowed Taiwan to attend the World Health Assembly (WHA) under a *Kuomintang* (KMT) government, but only on the premise of the 'one-China principle', which defines Taiwan as a province of China. This pattern came perilously close to the Hong Kong model of PRC sovereignty, with Beijing claiming that Taiwan voluntarily attended the WHA as a constituent province.

Beijing has constantly engaged in a battle over the 'proper naming' of Taiwan. Most recently, Beijing has requested of global companies—from hotels to fashion brands to airlines—that they change the way they refer to Taiwan online, not allowing Taiwan to be listed as a country in drop-down menus and even rendering taboo the very term 'Taiwan'. Virtually all such enterprises have caved in. This new round of symbolic sovereignty warfare by way of coercing private companies has proved effective. Its purpose has been to deny Taiwan's statehood. Not unique to Taiwan, this mode of influence operation has also been applied to Tibet and Hong Kong. Mercedes-Benz has apologized for 'hurting the feelings of the Chinese people' for quoting the Dalai Lama on its official Instagram page. Hong Kong's democrats, nativists and nationalists have all suffered severe political punishment after accusations of disloyalty to the PRC. But compared with Tibet and Hong Kong, Taiwan of course stands out as Beijing's principal target because of its self-rule and democratic government. Such control requires cooperation from third parties, usually kowtowing to China for simple economic reasons.

Beijing's second mode of influence is penetration from within—the cultivation of local collaborators in Taiwan (Figure 2.2). Besides exerting external pressure, Beijing wields both 'carrot and stick'. This mode conflates in part with sharp power, but its scope is much broader. What is most significant in the case of Taiwan (and Hong Kong) is that Beijing can achieve its goals by way of locally embedded 'collaborative agents'. How does Beijing achieve this? From the start, it has utilized cross-strait business networks to organize pro-China lobby groups and set up political forums in conjunction with the KMT. Beijing launched the

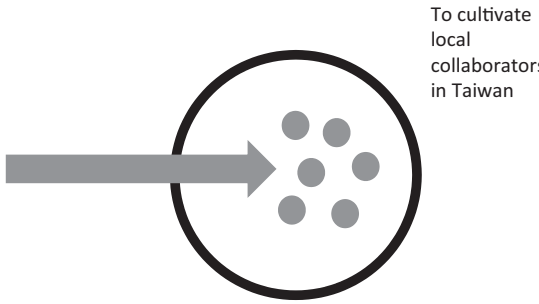

Figure 2.2 Penetration from within

'CCP-KMT cooperation platform' in 2005, during the DPP government of 2000 to 2008. Back in power from 2008 to 2016, the KMT swiftly enacted its pro-China policies by signing free-trade agreements with Beijing and opening the door to Chinese officials. With the help of local media, both sides quickly portrayed an atmosphere of 'peace and prosperity' in which Chinese officials went straight to the grassroots and built up island-wide patron-client relations. Zheng Lizhong, deputy director of the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, entered Taiwan more than 20 times, meeting with all trades and professions and boasting of his 'tour all over the province'.

And so Beijing's sphere of influence has advanced from economy to politics to almost every corner of society, so much so that several 'pro-unity' political parties were formed and one mafia boss even organized a China Unification Promotion Party (CUPP). It is in this mode that 'commercialization of the united front' has become the dominant strategy, involving, if necessary, ideological incentives: economic calculations have intermingled with persuasion and preference transformation. A stream of politicians, business tycoons and even Buddhist masters have paid pilgrimage to Beijing, while entertainers, local party machines and custodians of temples have embarked for the mainland as if for a gold rush. These notables and celebrities have become an army of reservists for the China lobby, beating the drum for the 'China opportunity'. The majority of mainstream media have depicted the people in defiance of Beijing's united-front work as 'Sinophobic' or of a 'closed-door mentality'.

But Beijing projected sharp power into Hong Kong earlier and even more profoundly than in Taiwan. Since the handover, the Chinese have directly deployed all sorts of control devices via state and party apparatus and almost without inhibition. Beijing has coopted local entrepreneurs through political appointments, usually membership of the People's Congress and Political Consultative Conference (Fong, 2014). It has also offered overseas Chinese businesspeople opportunities for rent-seeking in China (Wu 2019a). Through such measures, Beijing has controlled (or maintained a good relationship with) a number of media companies. Recently, the founder of the online trading giant Alibaba bought the *South China*

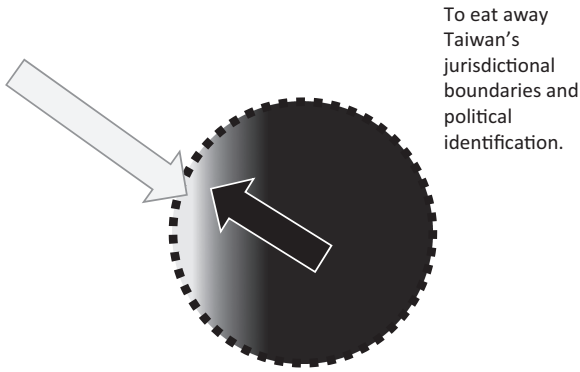

Figure 2.3 Eroding political boundaries

Morning Post, while the Shanghai-based CMC Group made a bid for TVB, a major television company, moves seen as closer censorship of Hong Kong's media by Beijing. In addition, many so-called 'patriotic groups', similar to their counterparts in Taiwan's 'uncivil society', have been encouraged to establish amid heightened political tension, only adding to a widening social schism.

The third mode is eroding political boundaries—the eating away of Taiwan's jurisdiction and political identification, a strategy that combines external pressure and internal penetration (Figure 2.3). The Taiwanese can stand resilient in the face of PRC sharp power because of their clear-cut 'stateness' and distinct and separate political identity. Beijing knows this well, and has tried hard to chip away at these two points. During the 2012 presidential election, for instance, Beijing mustered dozens of Taiwanese tycoons to support the '1992 Consensus'—the equivalent of the PRC's 'One-China Principle'. After President Ma Ying-jeou won reelection, he immediately sent an envoy to Beijing to make a statement on 'One Country, Two Areas', the concept by which Taiwan is not an independent entity but instead an area under the ROC Constitution that claims sovereignty of the mainland. This move was a major concession to Beijing's irredentist claim, and a retreat from President Lee Teng-hui's 1999 'Two-States Formula'. According to a leading expert in international law, the problem for Taiwan in achieving formal recognition lies not merely in that the powerful PRC denies Taiwan's statehood, but also in that Taiwan does not definitively assert itself as an independent state (Crawford 2006). Ma's statement, therefore, tilted mainland policy closer to the One-China Principle and weakened Taiwan's stateness. Beijing's attempt to undermine Taiwan's political boundaries received effective assistance indeed from a collaborative KMT government.

Since 2016, Beijing has accelerated its attacks on this front. A Taiwanese NGO activist, Lee Ming-tze, was arrested in China in 2017 and sentenced to five years in jail and loss of political rights for two years. Lee, an enthusiastic online advocate of Chinese democracy, was the first Taiwanese citizen charged with

'subversion of state power' and, spectacularly, Beijing punished him as if he were a citizen of the PRC. Many Taiwanese suspects arrested in third countries have been extradited to China under Beijing's insistence that the PRC has jurisdiction, an action which has raised fears of a withdrawal of Taiwan's sovereign jurisdiction over its own citizenry.

An overwhelming majority of Taiwanese identify themselves as such in polls, a trend which has so worried Beijing that it suppresses expressions of Taiwanese political identity whenever possible. Popular entertainers have thus become a target for manipulation. As early as 2000, when the aboriginal singer Kulilay Amit performed the ROC national anthem at the presidential inauguration of Chen Shuibian, Beijing banned her from the Chinese market for four years. Chou Tzu-yu, a popular Taiwanese singer based in South Korea, was forced to apologize for posing with the ROC flag on the eve of Taiwan's 2016 election (see Liao's chapter in this volume). Taiwanese singers, actors and directors have one after another had to disavow or distance themselves from the cause of *Taidu* (Taiwan independence) or affirm their Chinese identity under considerable duress. Recently, a Taiwanese café chain with a large stake in China was forced to apologize and pronounce its support of the 1992 Consensus simply for serving President Tsai Ing-wen at a branch in Los Angeles.

In August 2018, Beijing launched a new round of hostilities against identity politics, announcing a new policy of issuing 'residence cards' to Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwanese expatriates on the mainland on a voluntary basis. The function of this residence card resembles that of the identity card issued to all Chinese nationals. As everyone knows, citizens of Hong Kong and Macao are already under PRC sovereignty, and, accordingly, those Taiwanese who apply for a residence card will be treated as Chinese nationals. Beijing claims that this is merely preferential treatment, for the convenience of the Taiwanese, aiming to win the hearts of compatriots. In effect, of course, it has helped Beijing to propagandize over Taiwanese voluntarily embracing PRC citizenship.

These three ideal-type operations can be deployed separately or in conjunction. Beijing has applied all to Hong Kong and Taiwan. Yet with Hong Kong's sovereignty already tightly in its grip, the external coercion mode is somewhat unnecessary. Amid steadfast and even militant civil resistance, the center has claimed its right to exercise its 'comprehensive governing powers' in Hong Kong, a step closer to the cancellation of 'One Country, Two Systems'.

2.3 China's control mechanism in five issue areas

In this section, I will use case studies to illustrate Chinese influence mechanisms in five issue areas: elections, media, tourism, religion and entertainment. In each area, I will specify the PRC's political goals vis-à-vis Taiwan, the leverage and tools employed to push for them, Beijing's local collaborative agents, and the incentives provided by China. Such incentives are offered to individuals, groups and parties in the form of material and non-material gains (Table 2.1). I will also compare Hong Kong and Taiwan wherever applicable.

Table 2.1 China's Influence Mechanisms

Issue area	*China's political goals vis-à-vis Taiwan*	*Leverage and tools*	*CCP collaborators in Taiwan*	*Incentives provided by the Chinese*
Interference in elections	Manipulate election outcomes, contain pro-independence and anti-China forces	Military threats, cross-Strait business networks, fake news, propaganda through media agencies	Business elites, pro-China politicians, local factions and party machines	Economic privileges, political support, 'concessionary policies'
Media control	Censorship and self-censorship, disinformation, pro-China propaganda	Equity ownership control, paid news, advert orders, social media, troll farms and cross-border computing	Media owners, journalists and editors, YouTubers	Advert and embedded-marketing revenues, economic exchanges in China
Tourism	Construct economic reliance, use tourism to pressure DPP government	Supply chains of tourism, control supply of tour groups	Tourist interest lobbies, employees in tourism, pro-China politicians	Material gains for Taiwanese tourist agencies and lobbyists
Religious exchanges	Strengthen ethno-cultural ties, promote Chinese nationalism, co-opt religious leaders and brokers.	Cross-Strait religious sphere	Religious leaders, temple custodians, local factions, local political bosses	China's religious market, economic gains, land and real estate interests
Entertainment industry	Mass-culture penetration, press entertainers for 'One-China' propaganda	Chinese entertainment market, co-production	Actors, singers, producers, directors, TV channel owners, agents and PR companies	High remunerations and profits

2.3.1 Meddling in elections

The world's media closely observed Taiwan's 2020 presidential race—a campaign reduced, in a way, to a vote about China. As was widely reported, China used cyber operations to sway voters in favor of pro-China KMT candidates, something which China's Taiwan Affairs Office spokesman sternly denied: 'Everyone knows that we have never interfered in elections in Taiwan.' Ample evidence contradicts this claim. As early as 1996, China had launched a missile test aiming (but failing) to interrupt Taiwan's first direct presidential election. In 2000, it shifted its strategy to one of propaganda warfare through mass media. China's state TV channel broadcast a statement by the then premier Zhu Rongji, who warned the Taiwanese in no uncertain terms of the danger of electing the DPP's Chen Shui-bian. One new tactic for meddling in Taiwan's elections has since been to 'organize' and 'encourage' Taiwanese expatriates to return home to vote. Voluntarily or not, Taishang associations in China have continuously helped in the task. The above-mentioned '1992 Consensus' campaign is another tour de force in which Beijing has mobilized Taiwanese business to help promote its favored candidate. Though such blatant interference is widely known about in Taiwan, it is rarely reported in international media—Western media have tended to expect to see in Taiwan what they see in their own countries, that is, disinformation used as electoral intervention.

Some international media have looked (unsuccessfully) for a 'smoking gun' of Chinese influence operations in Taiwan, but Beijing has not simply reproduced the Russian-style campaign they might have expected (Horton, 2018; Howard et al., 2018; DiResta et al., 2018). Though China has applied cyberwarfare to mold public opinion, it has still relied heavily on conventional media such as print and TV, and such operations have become embedded in Taiwan's media ecology. Beijing has long cultivated an echelon of collaborative media outlets, with the Want Want Media Group and United Daily News (UDN) the most oft-cited (Chang and Chen, 2015; Wu, 2016; Diamond and Schell, 2018). During election years, news coverage first inundated social media—Line, YouTube, Facebook and others—and then fed back to the mainstream media, forming a cycle of reinforcement (Lin, 2018). This style of sharp power differs from Russian.

Over the years, Beijing has alternately tried military threats, coaxing business elites, and propaganda and disinformation to help achieve its goals in Taiwan's elections. In return, CCP collaborators have obtained personal economic privileges, political support and 'concessionary policies'. What distinguished the 2020 presidential election is that China's Xi Jinping delivered a call-for-unification address to Taiwan to kick off the race in early 2019, handing Tsai Ying-wen ammunition to fight back at what was a low point for the DPP. When Beijing's favored candidate, the KMT's Han Kuo-yu, visited Hong Kong to meet with the director of the Liaison Office, Beijing's fortunes quickly turned, and its overt interference led to a KMT defeat.

2.3.2 Media control

China seeks to intervene in foreign media to effect censorship. In Hong Kong and Taiwan, it primarily employs three types of control: equity (ownership) control, buyer's commercial control and cross-border online censorship. Beijing had penetrated the Hong Kong media even before the 1997 handover, with the Chinese owning outlets such as Wen Wei Po and Ta Kung Pao. Beijing has accelerated its efforts since 2014 in the wake of the Umbrella Movement and nativist revolts. Alibaba Group bought the South China Morning Post in 2015. That same year, Shanghai-based China Media Capital (CMC) acquired a controlling stake in TVB, Hong Kong's largest television station. CMC's chairman used to be a high-ranking CCP official in charge of the state-owned Shanghai Media Group (Pu, 2018: 77-89). In Taiwan, as early as 2008, Want Want China Holdings Ltd, a Taiwanese-invested food company, returned to Taiwan to purchase the China Times, CTI Television and the China TV Company. Want Want was generating more than 90 percent of its revenues in China and had secured enormous subsidies from Beijing (GK Dragonomics, 2013). This news group has since become a mouthpiece for Beijing's policies.

After equity control, China also influences media behavior via advertisements, paid news and other commercial measures. Hong Kong media bosses have reminded reporters that 'There won't be food to feed you without Chinese tourist groups' and asked editors to caption reports on the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) and such tourist groups with phrases like 'Central government offers big gift' (S. Lee, 2015). Media outlets fear canceled advertising orders; Apple Daily and am730, which reported on the Occupy Central Movement during 2013–14, were duly punished. Moreover, Beijing has disciplined journalists by setting up 'red lines' and even threatening personal safety (see Chan Chi Kit's chapter).

In Taiwan, Chinese 'easy money' has led to rampant pro-China paid news and self-censorship. Top managers of some media groups have become 'gatekeepers' for China's political concerns rather than guardians of press freedom. According to one case study, Beijing officials routinely telephoned editorial desks of a media group in Taipei to intervene, in what was tantamount to external censorship (C. Lee, 2015). The China Times and CTI Television, among others, have turned into loudspeakers for China and the KMT, both agencies putting enormous efforts into endorsing the populist Han Kuo-yu. Exchanges between Taiwanese media companies and China have taken place mostly offshore, rendering it challenging for the Taiwanese government to prove the existence of deals done in smoke-filled rooms in a different jurisdiction. In May 2018, the president of the UDN led a delegation to China to meet with Wang Yang, head of the People's Political Consultative Conference, the pinnacle apparatus of united-front work. Wang Yang expressed the hope that the UDN might 'stand at the peak of the general interests of the Chinese nation […] oppose 'Taiwanese independence' [and] fulfill [our] spiritual affinity'.[1]

Cross-border online censorship also looms large in China's growing share of the global cyber market. Taiwan's younger citizens have been heavily exposed

to Chinese online media such as WeChat (a multi-purpose social media app), iQiyi (an online video platform) and TikTok (a media app for short videos) as well as e-commerce such as Taobao (Alibaba). Xi's regime has stressed internet sovereignty. The influx of Chinese audiovisual websites into Taiwan has brought about political consequences as the audiovisual industry has been ensnared by 'commercial capital engraved with a gene of censorship' (Lee, 2017). iQiyi has already effectively removed an online mini TV series which allegedly covered the Sunflower Movement and the idea of Taiwanese independence. Even more conspicuously, Beijing has used cross-border cloud computing to disseminate disinformation with the help of collaborative media outlets. For instance, when in fall 2018 a typhoon ravaged Kansai Airport in Japan, Beijing seized upon the chance to wage a propaganda war against Taiwan, whose diplomats in Japan were depicted as unresponsive and incompetent, compared to their 'Wolf Warrior' Chinese counterparts. This disinformation precipitated a political storm, cost the life of a diplomat, and helped strike a body blow to the ruling DPP in local elections (Chiang and Wu, 2020). In this particular mode of influence, offshore cloud computing dovetailed with local co-operators to create a model of sharp power distinct from the Russian.

2.3.3 Tourism

Tourism is another sector that China has utilized to put pressure on targets including Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and South Korea. China has regulated an 'all-in-one' organization of foreign tour groups—a vertical integration of the tourism supply chain (TSC) from allocation of tour groups to transportation, lodgings, food, excursions and shopping. A substantial proportion of the hotels, restaurants and stores involved are run or jointly owned by Chinese or Hong Kong capital. It is estimated that 15 Hong Kong-invested travel agencies cover 60 percent of tour group business. 'No guanxi (connections), no business', goes the phrase, and there are hurdles to jump to win those connections (Lin, 2019). Oligarchic control of TSCs leaves Chinese tour operators occupying the upstream and reaping the greatest rewards, while the Taiwanese side sees far fewer profits: Chinese tourism to Taiwan only serves the interests of privileged travel agencies. Skillfully wielding buying power, Beijing can easily manipulate its supply of tour groups for political ends, as all-in-one TSCs have created a local constituency relying on a stream of Chinese tourists.

As early as 2009, Kaohsiung's municipal government hosted a film festival scheduling a documentary about the exiled Uighur activist Rebiya Kadeer, whom China regards as a rebel. The Taiwan Affairs Office demanded Kaohsiung withdraw the film, threatening to cut off the supply of tour groups to the city. When the mayor rejected the idea, Beijing ordered a tourism embargo. One official in Kaohsiung explained the impact:

> The Chinese tourists perhaps occupy less than one percent of local GDP, but they feed many people in the trade of hotels, traffic, tour-group restaurants,

> and shopping malls. Many serve in low-end jobs and earn low wages. They have been accustomed to this pattern of 'all-in-one' tourism. If the Chinese aren't coming, people will cry out loudly. They are voters. We have to take care of their living, and we need their votes. Who can bear losing them?[2]

As Tsai (in this volume) points out, China's Taiwan tourism policy attests to:

> how a large authoritarian polity could work through apparently free economic markets to progressively penetrate a small democratic society. How it could start from what looks like a commercial activity that is voluntary and of mutual benefit, and progressively grow to constitute a relationship of dependency – so that the cost for Taiwan to withdraw is higher and higher, and return to the original condition is less and less likely.

When President Tsai Ing-wen took office in 2016, Beijing manipulated the issue once again, mobilizing public opinion and pressing her to accept the 1992 Consensus. Tsai did not bow to such a demand, so Beijing began to reduce the supply of tour groups. Standing firm, the Taiwanese government tried to diversify sources of foreign tourists and subsidize the local tourist industry. This 'abstinence policy' gradually paid off. Several months before the 2020 elections, Beijing further cut tourist groups to Taiwan to a minimum level. Immediately following the elections, the coronavirus pandemic broke out, and cross-Strait travel dwindled to almost nothing. Momentarily at least, tourism is no longer a useful weapon.

2.3.4 Religious exchanges

Temples have long been local political centers in Taiwan. Under the control of local factions and religious notables, many become targets for candidates seeking campaign support, especially those with large numbers of devotees such as Fo Guang Shan in Kaohsiung and the Zhenlan Temple (Jenn Lann Gong) in Taichung. Religious exchanges, predictably, have become another route for Chinese influence operations. Chinese officials are forever paying visits to famous monasteries and temples to establish connections, gearing up with local factional networks and accessing followers.

Religious faith is by definition spiritual, but in reality temporal desires can taint piety. This phenomenon appears to be all the more so in Buddhism, Taoism, and folk religion in Taiwan. When applying united-front work to religion, China has often subtly applied a secular logic—that is to say, appeals to profit and fame—to achieve political ends. Ku and Hong (2017) have explored the phenomenon of 'doing Mazu (Matsu) worship across the Strait' and found that ostensibly civil religious exchanges have political implications and economic outcomes. They discovered a 'political-economic nexus' alongside the spiritual. The cult of Mazu originated in coastal Fujian, so, for the Chinese, Mazu as (literally) Mother Ancestor is an embodiment of the 'same language, same race' doctrine.

Worship of this same goddess provided an ideal case for official Chinese nationalism. In 2001, the Zhenlan Temple organized Taiwan Mazu Fellowship. Though a religious organization, it openly supported the KMT and sponsored a campaign rally for Ma Ying-jeou, all the while maintaining a good relationship with the Chinese government. In 2004, China set up a Chinese Mazu Cultural Exchange Association, and a cross-Strait Mazu worship circle was established for 'pilgrimage mobilization', with religious leaders helping transform pilgrimages to Fujian into political propaganda (Ku and Hong, 2017: 315). Pilgrimage mobilization has opened up a means for the Chinese government to drill right down to the grassroots. Religious affinity has rather magically paved the way for Chinese officials to tour Taiwan establishing patron-client relationships with local political machines:

> During the 2015–16 presidential election, on the surface, the Chinese government did not directly interfere in it, but the director of China's Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits (ARATS) Chen Deming visited Taiwan several days before the ballot day. He went straight to Zhenlan Temple and convened a secret meeting with twenty-nine neighborhood heads in the district. Then he visited other Mazu temples […] Although Chen did not say whom he supported for the presidential campaign, he urged people 'to consider the cross-Strait relations and make the best choice'.
>
> (Ku and Hong, 2017: 316)

What is the payback for such active collaboration? Local bosses have reaped a 'religious bonus', most significantly in huge land-development profits (Ku and Hong, 2017: 318). Tianjin's municipal government, for instance, cooperated in 2016 with the Zhenlan Temple on a colossal Mazu Cultural Park, boasting the world's tallest Mazu statue.

Religion has become an ideal testing ground for Chinese manipulation of a strategy combining cultural identity and material incentives. The Zhenlan Temple case is just one typical of countless daily exchanges, but the secular logic of pilgrimage mobilization applies to other religions and sects. Religious activities are the epitome of how China has promoted its official ethno-nationalism by co-opting religious leaders and brokers. In the process, it has created a cross-Strait religious sphere in which Buddhist masters have gained access to China's religious market, enjoyed spiritual power and brokered political linkages, while temple leaders and local political machines have fulfilled their religious and economic functions.

2.3.5 Entertainment industry

China's growing clout in the entertainment industries—TV, film, music and online audiovisual and digital gaming—has brought significant influence to bear globally. In Hong Kong, co-production with Chinese film companies has meant immense opportunity for profit but also caused the decay or even demise of local character and brought the pain of censorship (Wang's chapter in this volume).

Chinese entertainment capital made inroads into Hong Kong in 2003 with the signing of the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) with Beijing, which aimed to rejuvenate the economy. Co-production offered a vast market for the rather downcast Hong Kong film industry, but in the meantime ushered in concerns of 'mainlandization'.

Taiwan has similarly faced mainlandization of its entertainment industry. As early as 2000, one pop star was banned from the Chinese market for singing the ROC anthem at the presidential inauguration. Since then, such censorship has been incessant. As a result, Taiwanese showbiz has become a target for witch hunts. Liao (in this volume) points out that China has encouraged the production of 'main melody' (zhu xuanlü 主旋律) films featuring patriotism and Xi Jinping's 'China dream', with 'fighting Taiwanese independence [Taidu] and promoting unification' as major themes. Further, entertainment capital both state-owned and private has taken advantage of state policy and offered co-production with Taiwanese companies and purchased TV programs produced in Taiwan. The censorship mechanism was thereby brought into the process. Finally, an expanding domestic market has cultivated a taste for patriotism, and the internet boom has engendered an army of patriotic netizens accusing Taiwanese singers, actors and directors of supporting Taidu and pressing the authorities to respond. Thus is China able to exploit its netizens to bring Taiwan's entertainment industry to heel, and Taiwanese celebs have lined up to express loyalty to China.

Nevertheless, netizen witch-hunt culture is but one side of the story—many in the profession are ready and willing to conform. Co-production is an irresistible lure for channel owners, producers and directors; so is high remuneration for actors, singers and their agents and PR companies. In one notorious case, the Chinese government allowed a pan-Green TV station to sell its drama series; in return, the station had to replace a popular pro-independence talk-show host. Over the years, Beijing has applied the commercialized united-front work strategy so well that it has effectively harnessed its markets to gain foreign political control.

The long shadow cast by China across the entertainment sector has grown ubiquitous in both Hong Kong and Taiwan, yet there is a subtle difference between the two. For a Hong Kong under Chinese sovereignty, Beijing intends to eliminate local character or prevent the birth of a distinct cultural identity. For Taiwan, a breakaway province to be conquered, Beijing wants to deter a surging national sentiment or, at the very least, to apply a crowbar to existing Taiwanese-Chinese identity cleavage—a standard operation of sharp power.

2.4 Preliminary comparison of China's global influence

In what ways are the lessons of Chinese influence operations in Taiwan and Hong Kong applicable to other countries? Well, the united-front work that Beijing has applied globally is not fundamentally different from that tested in Taiwan and Hong Kong. The first lesson we can draw is that overseas Chinese communities provide the first point of contact. The primary task for united-front work operatives is to sniff out who might be the co-operators in a local community. It is not

difficult to find would-be local confederates to cooperate with the 'motherland' in Hong Kong and Taiwan and, conceivably, in Singapore and Malaysia with their large ethnically Chinese populations. Beyond these places, 'racial linkage' still provides a basis for influence operations. In recent years, as stories about Beijing's activities have gained attention in Australia, New Zealand and Canada, common themes such as aiguo huaqiao (patriotic overseas Chinese) and zuguo (motherland) have been seen to surface. The PRC exploits xueyuan (consanguinity) discourse in contacts with Chinese communities and uses cultural affinity to deploy networks for exchange. The Third Bureau of the Ministry of United Front Work has used huaqiao to construct a global Peaceful Reunification of China Association (Tongcuhui) so as to wage war on Taiwanese independence. The term 'patriotic overseas Chinese' has come to define the distinction between friends and enemies.

For most Taiwanese, the notion 'motherland' denotes a PRC that intends ultimately to dissolve and absorb their political identity, but overseas Chinese do not perceive their relationship with Beijing this way: the motherland discourse familiar to ethnic Chinese in Australia does not involve the threat of becoming PRC citizens. The difference is critical. Since China harbors no territorial ambitions toward them, Western societies are unwary of Beijing charm offensives launched initially among their Chinese communities as cultural and educational exchanges; once they discover that China's influence is omnipresent it is too complicated to neutralize its tentacular networks, as evidenced in the Australian and New Zealand cases.

Moreover, China has devoted resources to building world-wide dependence structures and interest linkages to steer politics. Table 2.2 lists countries on China's eastern and southern rim by export dependence on China in 2008 and 2016. As the Hong Kong and Taiwan cases show, Beijing has leveraged economic dependence for political influence. In recent years, Beijing has also gained significant political control over Laos and Myanmar, which rely heavily on China for trade, loans and investment. Despite their different geopolitical context, Australia and New Zealand seem to be in a similar situation, both increasingly relying on China's market and finding that Beijing or its proxies are penetrating their domestic politics. On the back of investment, Beijing has launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and secured relations with many countries with strategic significance in South and South-East Asia, Africa and Latin America. The success of the BRI has, paradoxically, caused anxiety in countries dependent on Chinese investments and loans, who now worry about being caught in a debt trap.

Finally, CCP collaborators benefit from economic incentives, often packaged in a discourse of reciprocal cultural exchange. In most cases, it is futile to distinguish sharp power activities from soft—all are intertwined and combined to create the most effective control measures. I will briefly discuss cases that illustrate this breadth and depth of Chinese influence operations beyond Taiwan and Hong Kong.

First, the case of South Korea involves a geopolitical confrontation between China and the US. Beijing entered into serious dispute with South Korea in 2016

Table 2.2 Export Dependence on China in Selected Countries, 2008 and 2016*

	Export dependence on China, 2008	*Export dependence on China, 2016*
Japan	16.0%	17.7%
South Korea	21.7%	25.1%
Taiwan	26.2%	26.4%
Hong Kong	48.2%	55.3%
Vietnam	7.7%	12.4%
Singapore	9.1%	13.0%
The Philippines	11.1%	11.0%
Malaysia	9.6%	12.5%
Indonesia	8.5%	11.6%
Thailand	9.1%	11.0%
Laos	10.7%	36.1%
Cambodia	0.3%	6.1%
Myanmar	4.8%	40.8%
Brunei	0.4%	4.5%
India	5.6%	3.4%
Pakistan	3.6%	7.7%
Sri Lanka	0.6%	2.0%
Australia	14.6%	32.6%
New Zealand	5.9%	19.5%

Sources: Recompiled from China Statistics Yearbooks; International Trade Center, International trade in goods statistics by country (Exports 2001–2018), https://goo.gl/PJTjTf; and IMF, Datasets, https://goo.gl/y3rzwy.
*The numbers do not include services trade. Exports to Hong Kong are not included.

over Seoul's decision to deploy America's THAAD missile system, which China considered a serious threat to national defense. Initially, Chinese officials warned that Beijing would not sit back quietly. When South Korea proceeded with THAAD, Beijing immediately executed sanctions against Korea's pop culture industry and canceled the tours of several Korean pop stars to China, much to the dismay of Korean entertainment companies, which suffered a drop in stock price. Such sanctions have also been widely used in Taiwan. The South Korean opposition party opposed the deployment, and a number of opposition MPs visited Beijing, attracting strident criticism from the ruling party. The Korea Lotte Group provided land for the deployment of THAAD, and Beijing launched a campaign of fault-finding in Chinese shopping malls in which Lotte had invested, forcing it to end business there in 2018. Beijing even launched an 'unannounced embargo' on those areas of Seongju County where THAAD was deployed, aiming to increase residents' opposition to the missiles. Sanctions struck a blow to Korean car exports to China. The South Korean government faced enormous pressures on national security (Haggard, 2017). But Chinese threats, though substantiated to a high degree, were ineffective. South Korea stood firm. Geopolitics may explain why the South Korean government withstood Chinese pressure—as an ally of the US, the country has to make tough choices and face the costs. Notably, no

orchestrated local voices emerged to request the government concede, as has happened in Taiwan. This mode of influence operation is akin to *external coercion* defined above (Figure 2.1).

Second, Western democracies are most worried about Chinese sharp power penetration and authoritarian diffusion. Many are also concerned about national security and loss of technology. As of late 2020, the West has not yet reached a unified policy toward Chinese 5G equipment supplier Huawei, accused by the US government of containing security loopholes in its equipment. But several European countries, including the UK, have decided to ban Huawei to build their 5G cellular networks. The Czech Republic—at one time swayed by the Chinese businessman Ye Jianming of CEFC China Energy, who allegedly had close ties to Xi Jinping—was the first European nation to consider blocking Huawei. A scandal broke upon Ye's arrest in China on charges of corruption.[3] His case clearly shows how a country that was formerly a beneficiary of Chinese money and favors became alert to its influence work. Before Ye's arrest, there was even a report that he was seeking influential contacts inside the Beltway.[4] The coronavirus outbreaks have reoriented the decisions of the major European countries, including Germany.

Australia and New Zealand are among those states who have benefited from booming export trade with China but who are now on high alert. In the realm of media influence, China has usually used overseas Chinese communities' newspapers as a point of entry and thence gradually crept into other media groups. In 2016, Australia's discovery that recent Chinese immigrants and Chinese-invested companies were playing a role in political donations and media manipulation in favor of China came as a wake-up call for the West (Garnaut, 2018). Since then, Australia has moved quickly to enact new laws to close such loopholes. In New Zealand, one China expert observed:

> The organization most closely connected with the PRC authorities […] is the Peaceful Reunification of China Association of New Zealand […] The name of the organization is a reference to the 'Peaceful Reunification' of mainland China and Taiwan. However, the organization also engages in a range of activities which support Chinese foreign policy goals, including block-voting and fund-raising for ethnic Chinese political candidates who agree to support their organization's agenda.
>
> (Brady, 2017: 16)

The mode of influence applied to the Czech Republic, Australia and New Zealand is typically a penetration from within—the cultivation of pro-China co-operators in the target country (Figure 2.2).

The last type of influence involves geoeconomic cooperation. Developing nations have long appreciated Chinese loans and investments, even before Xi Jinping formally launched the Belt and Road Initiative. The BRI accelerated the policy of aggressive geoeconomics Beijing had embarked on in the early 21st century. By exporting capital and infrastructure, this policy attracted the Philippines,

Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and the like. Some of them disliked Western human rights intervention and embraced the same authoritarian values as the Chinese. Many South and Central European countries, including Greece, Portugal, Italy, Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland, also set high store by Chinese capital at a time of austerity and slack economies. But in recent years, some of these countries have come to worry about China's growing political influence, as evidenced by the case of the Czech Republic.

Beijing has extended its influence in Southeast Asia along with the development of the Belt and Road Initiative. Malaysia is a typical case. Under Prime Minister Najib Razak (2009–2018), the country played the Chinese economic card and formed a triple alliance of Chinese, huaqiao and Malaysian state capital to share the profits of infrastructure and real estate construction. Najib signed with Beijing several large-scale infrastructure agreements that brought about worries over debt problems and Chinese interference. Sino-Malaysian relations thus became a focus of the 2018 parliamentary elections (Han, 2018). Mahathir Mohamad won the elections and decided to push back against China's dominance in the economy and to address Malaysia's debt woes.

Through geoeconomic measures, Beijing has elsewhere gained control of Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. But for China, these spectacular investments and loans involve high risks and the clamoring issue of internal conflict.

2.5 Conclusion: confronting China's economic and political warfare

The world's views of China are rapidly changing. Much of China's external behaviors, once thought to be beneficial or innocuous, are now seen as clear warning signs of malign influence. Investments are suspected of technology theft and of seeking security loopholes; charm offensives such as the Confucius Institute have backfired; BRI projects in the developing world have stirred critiques of neo-colonialism. The outbreak of coronavirus in 2020 has only tarnished China's self-congratulatory image as a new model for the world. Before the West shifted its epistemological perspective, Taiwan and Hong Kong had borne such influence activities on a much broader scale than what has come to be known as sharp power and found them to pose threats to the rule of law, freedom and autonomy in both territories. Their cases provide the world with rich experience in understanding the power of Chinese influence.

We can find ample instances of 'functional equivalents' by comparing Taiwan and Hong Kong with the rest of the world. Beijing unleashed Taishang and Gangshang (Hong Kong businesspeople) to voice policies favorable to China and to arrange access to local politicians watchful at first of the CCP. In other countries, we find local business communities and newly invested Chinese companies conducting the same intrigues. The experiences of the Czech Republic reveal China's secretive and audacious workings.

Nevertheless, Beijing's collaborative devices have their limits. Its intended impact is contingent upon the response of the target polity, like a political tug-of-war. In Taiwan, a robust and unrelenting civil society has answered China with waves of collective action, such as the 2012 Anti-Media Monster and the 2014 Sunflower Movement, interrupting CCP-KMT collaboration and China's corrosive effect on democracy (Ho, 2019; Wu, 2019). In the wake of China's influence, the post-2016 DPP government has refused to accept the One-China 1992 Consensus. In the long run-up to the 2020 election, civil society expended enormous efforts in defending against China's misinformation campaign, with younger generations calling for solidarity to ward off pro-China populist mass mobilization.

Resistance has also occurred in Hong Kong. The Occupy Central and Umbrella Movement in 2013–14 demanded universal suffrage in electing the chief executive. It failed to achieve its goal, but it changed the political landscape and prepared the way for a new generation of resistance. The 2016 'Fishball Revolution', ignited by a seemingly trivial dispute between street hawkers and government regulators, resulted in a series of relentless judicial persecutions of radical nativist leaders and rank and file. Subsequently, an Anti-Extradition Movement broke out in June 2019 and continues as of spring 2020. The Hong Kong Government intended to revise the Extradition Law so that criminal suspects could be extradited to China, but instead caused deep fear and unprecedented protests. The government eventually withdrew the Bill, but too late to win back public trust or to paper over the tremendous police violence meted out. More than 9 thousand protesters were arrested during the movement; most of them were youngsters and many charged with riot. Despite the bloody crackdown, Hong Kong's people fought on, the pro-democracy camp winning an inspiring victory in district elections in 2019. In July 2020, the Chinese government imposed a National Security Law in Hong Kong, attempting to uproot social support for the movement and to cut off international connections with the democracy advocates. But the protests have persisted under such fierce oppression. Just as action begets reaction, so oppression invites resistance.

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Notes

1 'Wang Yang met with Wang Wen-shan who led a Taiwan UDN delegation', Sina, 25 May 2018. Available at: https://goo.gl/R1L8pk [Accessed 15 Dec. 2018].
2 Author's interview, February 2014.
3 'Hard-Charging Chinese Energy Tycoon Falls from Xi Government's Graces', *New York Times*, March 14, 2018, https://goo.gl/eEpYpQ, [Accessed 18 April 2018].
4 'A Chinese Tycoon Sought Power and Influence. Washington Responded', *New York Times*, Dec. 12, 2018, https://goo.gl/bDUMY8, [Accessed 20 Dec. 2018].

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