

China's Sharp Power and Taiwan's 9-in-1 Elections Subverting Democracy with Democratic Means

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Abstract

Taiwan completed its second 9-in-1 election on November 24, 2018. The result was the stunning defeat for the Democracy Progressive Party (DPP), with the DPP only obtaining the governing right for six cities and counties. While some argued that the “Nine-in-One” local elections were a midterm exam on the extent to which President Tsai Ing-wen’s administration has dealt with the economic slump, reform and enactment of policies, and an indication on what is to come in the 2020 national election, some issued a sterner warning on China’s usage of sharp power to influence Taiwan’s domestic politics for its interest. This article examines the extent to which Beijing enacts sharp power to insert itself in Taiwan’s democracy with the purpose of eventual annexation of Taiwan, and it also elucidates the fact that although China’s sharp power was visible on many occasions, there is still a need for more solid evidence to demonstrate a correlation between China’s sharp power, especially its disinformation campaign, and the result of the 2018 elections.

Keywords: Democracy, Sharp Power, Taiwan, China, Disinformation

I. Introduction

“Sharp Power”¹ is distinct from “Soft Power,” which is based on the positive allure

1. Christopher Walker & Jessica Ludwig, “From ‘Soft Power’ to ‘Sharp Power’: Rising Authoritarian Influence in the Democratic World,” in National Endowment for Democracy, ed., *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence*, December, 2017, pp. 8-26, *National Endowment for Democracy*, <<https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Sharp-Power-Rising-Authoritarian-Influence-Full-Report.pdf>>.

of a country's culture, political ideology, values and civil society that enhances a country's strength. It has been perhaps one of the most used and examined terms in the past two years in democracy and security research, and Washington, Brussels, Taipei and other centers of democratic regimes have been wrestling with the extent to which this threat should be combated and dealt with. In the last couple of decades, authoritarian regimes such as the People's Republic of China (PRC) have invested tremendously large sums of money to improve its global image through soft power. Overseas study programs, academic collaboration and outreach, culture festivals, media, even exchanges of animals, are all part of the PRC's attempt to shape the international perception in its favor. However, while some of these efforts can be considered to be efficacious in some parts of the world or in parts of a country that has limited or diverse sources of information on China, China's soft power can be described as clumsy and tacky at best. Its poster child of soft power, the Confucius Institutes, were uncovered to "function as an arm of the Chinese state" and have been infringing on academic freedom on Western university campuses. Along with other efforts to promote Chinese soft power, these undertakings are also often overshadowed by China's perceived bullying behavior in the international arena, especially recently under China's current President Xi Jinping.

As the Chinese regime has grown increasingly impatient in reaping the rewards of its quite expensive soft power endeavor, the Chinese regime is now opting to utilize sharp power to garner what it wants from the international community. According to Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, who coined the term, it "pierces, penetrates, or perforates the political and information environment in the targeted countries," with the objective to invade existing democratic regimes, their procedures, and institutions, to tarnish the general perception of democracy; to limit democratic values, such as freedom of expression; to create divisions within society; and above all, to distort the political environment within democracies.

While invoking its sharp power to project their might and influence internationally, regimes such as China and Russia have also increased their efforts to impose censorship domestically and to use manipulation, such as the systematic usage of disinformation campaigns, to sap the integrity of democracies worldwide. They take advantage of the asymmetric nature between free and unfree systems, simultaneously using a democracy's openness against itself while simultaneously limiting the influence of democracies from abroad.

In the midst of the conflict between authoritarian influence and democratic survival, Taiwan stands at the receiving end of China's sharp power. Beijing has always claimed Taiwan as its unalienable territory and is becoming increasingly impatient and agitated as Taiwanese, especially its youth, have grown further away in their identification with China. According to the identity survey from the National Chengchi University's Election Studies Center (ESC), the proportion of Taiwanese who identify themselves as Taiwanese increased from 22 percent in 1994 to approximately 60 percent in 2018. Also worth noting is a sharp decline from 50 percent to less than 40 percent among those who claim a dual identity, seeing one's self as both Chinese and Taiwanese. Most importantly, more than 90 percent of those surveyed considered being Taiwanese as part of their identity.²

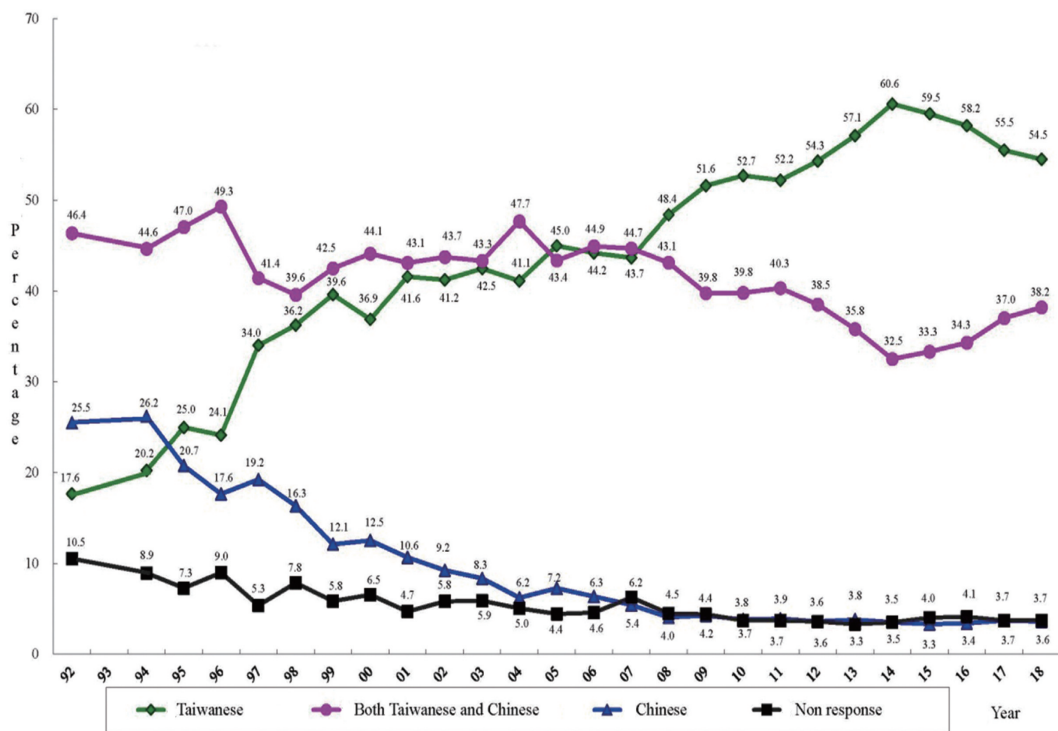


Figure 1. Taiwanese and Chinese Identity (1992/02-2018/12)

Source: Election Study Center National Chengchi University, "Taiwanese and Chinese Identity (1992/02-2018/12)."

2. Election Study Center National Chengchi University, "Taiwanese and Chinese Identity (1992/02 – 2018/12)," January 28, 2019, *Election Study Center National Chengchi University*, <<https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/app/news.php?Sn=166>>.

While never relinquishing its threat to annex Taiwan by force as stated by President Xi Jinping in his “Message to Compatriot in Taiwan,”³ the Chinese government has been increasing its pressure on Taiwan through diplomatic isolation; pressuring Taiwanese businesses and entertainers to declare their loyalty to the “motherland,” or otherwise face financial or social punishment; using its local proxies to bribe or threaten targeted civilian organizations or individuals; and above all, a disinformation campaign to influence Taiwan’s domestic politics. Even though information warfare has always been a strategy to win wars in the past centuries, the internet and social media age has taken information warfare to new level, not only in the context of cross-Strait conflict, but also to the detriment to Taiwan’s hard-earned democracy.

The local election last November was said to be one of the tests for China’s sharp power through various methods and a disinformation campaign; however, China’s disinformation campaign has been extremely difficult to substantiate, as IP addresses, fake Facebook, PPT and Twitter accounts, origins of trolling, Facebook fan pages, and websites can be easily manipulated and counterfeited. To this date, it remains extremely difficult to pinpoint the origins of disinformation. Nevertheless, the government of Taiwan should be more proactive in not only investigating but also in releasing information on China’s disinformation campaign, in order to arm its citizens with critical thinking and tools to weather China’s sharp power.

II. The 2018 “Nine-in-One” Local Elections and the DPP’s Defeat

The second Nine-in-One local elections in Taiwan were held on November 24, 2018. The result have been described as to be one of the most significant and historic defeats for the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) since its founding. The *New York Times* reported that Taiwan’s political landscape had been “shaken by voters who delivered a sharp rebuke to President Tsai Ing-wen’s governing Democratic Progressive Party.”⁴ November 24, 2018 was also the first nation-wide election since Taiwan’s

3. Duncan DeAeth, “Xi Jinping to give New Year’s speech addressing Taiwan,” *Taiwan News*, December 31, 2018, <<https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/3607629>>.

4. Chris Horton, “Taiwan’s President Quits as Party Chief After Stinging Losses in Local Races,” *New York Times*, November 24, 2019, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/24/world/asia/taiwan-election-results.html>>.

Referendum Act was amended in December 2017, where the thresholds for proposal and passage were lowered. It is worth noting that in previous elections, Taiwan never had more than two referenda proposed in one election, and in 2018, there were ten referenda presented to the voters.

In these local elections, the landslide victory of the DPP in 2014 was reversed. The Kuomintang (KMT) won 15 of the 22 counties and cities, compared to six in 2014, while the DPP won only six in 2018, compared to 13 cities and counties in 2014. The DPP's most shocking loss was the defeat in Kaohsiung City, the second largest city in Taiwan that had been in DPP control for the past 20 years. The KMT candidate, Han Guo-yu, won by 9.1 percent over the DPP candidate, Chen Chi-mai.⁵ In addition, 29.6 percent of the voters in the DPP's stronghold of Tainan cast their protest vote for a third candidate: the DPP mayoral candidate won with 38% of the overall vote, compared to the 73 percent of the former DPP mayor, William Lai, in 2014. The DPP also lost by roughly 14 percent in Taichung and New Taipei Cities, traditionally more KMT favored cities and counties.⁶ Overall, the elections can be seen as more of a rejection of the DPP administration than an overwhelming endorsement for the KMT. While the DPP lost votes nearly in all cities and counties, the voters did not uniformly cast their vote for the opposition. Instead, they voted for third-party or independent candidates, or for non-traditional candidates like Han Gou-yu.

5. "Results of the 9-in-1 election: the large shift of Blue and Green districts," *Central News Agency*, November 25, 2018, <<https://www.cna.com.tw/news/firstnews/201811250031.aspx>>.

6. Central Election Commission, "Election results on 2018 9-in-1 election," November 24, 2018, Accessed, *Central Election Commission*, <<http://db.cec.gov.tw/histMain.jsp?voteSel=20181101B1>>.

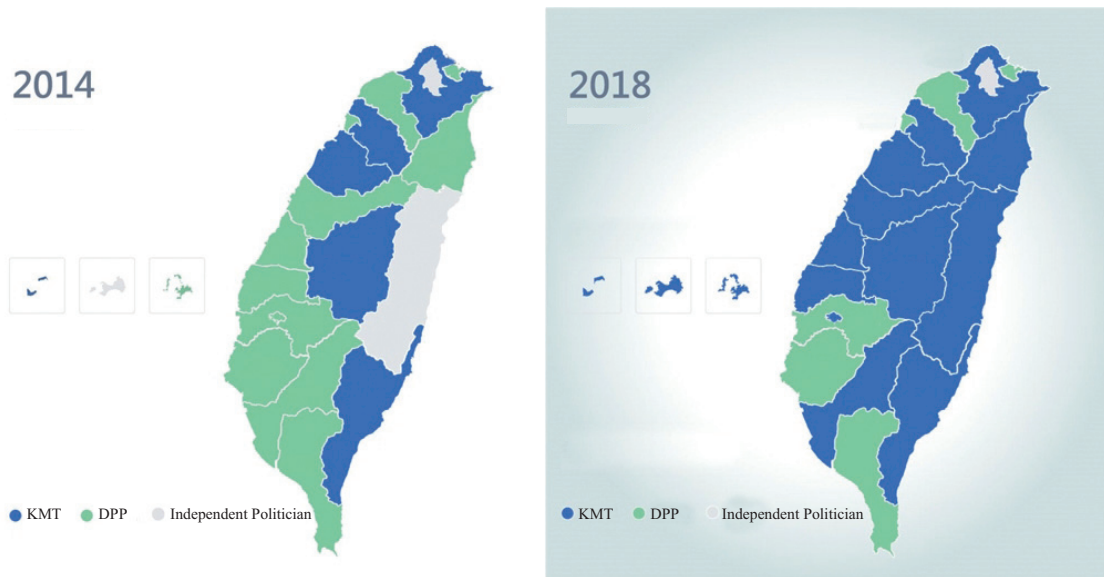


Figure 2. Results of 2018 9-in-1 Local Election

Source: “Results of the 9-in-1 election: the large shift of Blue and Green districts.”

III. Chinese Influence in Taiwan’s Elections

While scholars and observers have suggested that the local election can be seen as the Tsai administration’s midterm exam on local issues, the economy, policy reform and the constituent satisfaction on the DPP administration’s accomplishments between 2016 and 2018,⁷ many academics and watchers of Taiwan have warned of China’s attempt to interfere with Taiwan’s democracy through meddling with elections by various means, including a large disinformation campaign. Prior to the local election of 2018, the National Police Agency (NPA) revealed that within the last month leading up to the local election, it had received 64 reports on disinformation and fake news. The NPA has sent 40 cases to the prosecutor and found the IP addresses of fake news and disinformation to be located in the United States and Singapore. The chief of Ministry of Justice’s Investigative Bureau (MJIB) also testified in the Legislative Yuan that the Bureau was currently investigating 33 cases of political candidates

7. Vincent Wei-cheng Wang, “A ‘Blue Wave’ or a ‘Green Flop’? Making Sense of Taiwan’s 2018 Local Elections,” November 30, 2018, *Taiwan Insight*, <<https://taiwaninsight.org/2018/11/30/a-blue-wave-or-a-green-flop-making-sense-of-taiwans-2018-local-elections/>>.

receiving funds from China. Through different means, China has been cultivating support for its favorite candidate while tarnishing the reputation of politicians, including President Tsai Ing-wen, to serve its ultimate purpose of annexing Taiwan. The following section will address several means and areas where Chinese influence was very significant.

IV. Bribes, Bets and Corruption

According to MJIB Director General Lu Wen-jong, China offered funding to Taiwan's political candidates and was actively supporting candidates in the 2018 local elections. The MJIB has been conducting investigation for an extended period of time on such matters and is continuing its investigation at the writing of this article. It was also reported in local media that in 2017, an association with the name of "Chinese Taipei Village and Borough Chiefs Association (中華台北村里長聯合總會)" was formed with the purpose of cultivating membership from borough chiefs in Taiwan.⁸ Through offering travel junkets and tourism to China, the association would serve as a platform for China's cultivate support from the village and borough chiefs to work on behalf of favorable political candidates.⁹

Other than garnering support from local village and borough chiefs, Taiwan's local media and political commentators have also pointed out the absorbent amount of funds being funneled into bets and gambling on local elections. According to a report from *Mirror Media*, the elections in New Taipei City and Kaohsiung were garnering the most bets and funds. *Mirror Media* and other political commentators also reported approximately NT\$35 billion gambled in Taiwan, a 75 percent increase compared to the NT\$20 billion gambled in 2014. Businesspeople from Shanghai were also involved in placing bets on Taiwan's election.¹⁰ According to the NPA's Deputy Director General Chiu Feng-kuang, up to the week prior to the local elections, the

8. Lee Tai-yi, "China offers Borough Chiefs High Class Travel Junket for Unification Purpose," *Storm Media*, July 11, 2017, <<https://www.storm.mg/article/297027>>.

9. "EDITORIAL: Safeguarding Democracy by Voting," *Taipei Times*, November 13, 2018. <<http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2018/11/13/2003704109>>.

10. 〈六都賭盤風雲 350 億瘋狂下注 六都首長選舉成賭場〉, *Mirror Media*, October 24, 2018, <<https://www.mirrormedia.mg/story/20181023soc002/>>.

police confiscated NT\$9.73 billion from individuals suspected of taking illegal bets.¹¹ In addition, according to the *United Daily News*, similar to *Mirror Media's* report, the Kaohsiung Mayoral election attracted the highest sums and largest numbers of bets of all the local elections in 2018, especially when KMT candidate Han Guo-yu began to obtain increasing support in the polls.¹² By inserting funds into the gambling black market of, the Chinese government is able to shape the local rhetoric as to which candidate the citizens favor and further influence voting decision of local voters.



Figure 3. Al Jazeera Investigative Report on China's Local Proxies in Taiwan

Source: Lynn Lee, "Taiwan: Spies, Lies and Cross-straits Ties," *Al Jazeera*, September 6, 2018, <<https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/peopleandpower/2018/09/taiwan-spies-lies-cross-straits-ties-180906054720310.html>>.

11. "EDITORIAL: Safeguarding Democracy by Voting."

12. Liao Bing-chi & Chang Hung-yeh, 〈今年六都選舉賭盤 高雄市長最激烈〉, *United Daily News*, November 10, 2018, <<https://udn.com/news/story/11315/3473518>>.

V. Local Proxies for the Chinese Community Party

On September 6, 2018, *Al Jazeera* published an investigative report titled “Taiwan: Spies, Lies and Cross-Strait Ties.” The report, through undercover investigation into a local organization and political party promoting a unification agenda, the Concentric Patriotism Alliance and the China Unification Promotion Party (CUPP), revealed the fact that organizations such as the Concentric Patriotism Alliance and the CUPP, obtain their funding from the Taiwan Affairs Office of the PRC and, according to the head of the Alliance, “pro-unification Taiwanese businessmen” with businesses in China.

The CUPP made their presence known during the Sunflower Movement in 2014. In a rally called the “New May Fourth Movement,” members of CUPP gathered on Ketagalan Boulevard, according to the Party, to demonstrate their support for law enforcement officers and to protest the illegal occupation of the Legislative Yuan, but to also advocate their political aim of unifying Taiwan with China.



Figure 4. Chinese Unification Alliance at the New May Fourth Movement.

Source: Photograph by Ketty W. Chen, May 4, 2014.

According to Taiwanese national security agencies, the waves of increasingly violent protests against President Tsai Ing-wen leading up to the local elections

regarding pension reform were influenced by China.¹³ Chinese elements involved in political disturbances played a role in spreading disinformation about President Tsai's pension reform through digital media. Local organizations such as the 800 heroes, Blue Sky Alliance, and the "Headquarters for the Pulling-Up of Tsai" (全民拔蔡總部), would then follow the lead to protest against President Tsai Ing-wen wherever she attended public events. This included the recent Regional Religious Freedom Forum organized by the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy and the American Institute of Taiwan on March 11, 2019. As Taiwan's local proxies follow President Tsai and created disturbance wherever she goes, they ultimately inconvenience citizens and cultivate a perception that the administration is somehow inept and incompetent. According to President Tsai, in her interview with *CNN*, she admitted that pension reform and the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan were two issues that contributed to the DPP losses in the local elections.¹⁴

VI. Disinformation and Serious Concerns for the 2020 National Election

Pension reform was not the only issue plagued by disinformation leading up to the 2018 local elections. Toward the end of 2017 and through 2018, various rumors and blatant disinformation saturated Taiwan's social media and chat applications. Amid the escalating tension in the Taiwan Strait, the disinformation campaign from China has intensified. With attempts to coerce, intimidate, and corrode Taiwan's democratic society and mutual trust, disinformation from China targets all aspects of Taiwan, from government institutions and civil society, to the democratic values that hold Taiwan together. China's disinformation campaign tries to: (1) Shape the narrative of the Tsai administration and to tarnish President Tsai's image; (2) Attack the perception of Taiwan in general, to encourage negative feelings of Taiwan's citizens toward their own country, creating the perception that Taiwan's economy is depressed and that its people are unhappy and downtrodden, so believing that a new hope and

13. Chung Li-hua & Lee Guo-jen, "National Security Agency: Anti-Pension Reform Protests Associated with China," *Liberty Times*, July 18, 2017, <<https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/focus/paper/1119633>>.

14. Matt Rivers & Steven Jiang, "Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen will run for re-election in 2020," *CNN*, February 19, 2019, <<https://edition.cnn.com/2019/02/19/asia/tsai-ingwen-taiwan-2020-intl/index.html>>.

savior is de sperately needed. Interestingly, Kaohsiung Mayor Han Guo-yu's initial campaign rhetoric was to also create the image of Kaohsiung as old and poor and that there was, therefore, a dire need for him to save Kaohsiung by selling local products to China; and (3) To tie the administration up in having to respond to and debunk countless false stories, so that officials are unable to do what they are originally appointed to do.

Websites, social media and chat applications such as LINE have been used to disseminate disinformation about President Tsai and her administration. There was also confirmation that the information originated from China, according to a report in the *Liberty Times*.¹⁵ China's state-run media, such as *Global Times* and *China Review News*, serve as platforms to exacerbate and respond to disinformation, as well as government-linked Weibo accounts. The People's Liberation Army-linked 311 Base on psychological warfare and 61716 Unit in Fujian Province also have control of media outlets. The Tsai administration's response to last summer's flooding in southern Taiwan was one of the prime examples of disinformation.



Figure 5. Cropped Photo of President Tsai Visiting Flood Victims

Source: Wang Yu-chung & Huang Kuo-liang, 〈十大罪狀...「討厭民進黨」變全台最大黨〉, *United Daily News*, November 10, 2018, <https://udn.com/news/story/6656/3471993?from=udn-hotnews_ch2>; Chen Hung-mei, 〈一張「英皇水災出巡圖」竟傳出 PO 臉書就遭刪除?〉, *China Times*, August 27, 2018, <<https://www.chinatimes.com/realtimenews/20180827001263-260407?chdtv>>.

15. Chung Li-hua & Lee Guo-jen, “National Security Agency: Anti-Pension Reform Protests Associated with China.”

Tragically, China's disinformation campaign against Taiwan's government took a fatal turn last year when Typhoon Jebi hit Japan's Kaisai region. Propaganda from several state-affiliated outlets in China, in its effort to attack and undermine senior DPP member and Taiwan's representative to Japan, Frank Hsieh, claimed that the Chinese Consulate in Osaka had arranged 15 buses exclusively to evacuate stranded tourists from China, and Taiwanese who admitted they were citizens of China.¹⁶ The fact was the buses were arranged by the Japanese government authorities. However, Taiwan's talking heads, politicians from the opposition and traditional media focused on the story and aimed their criticism at Frank Hsieh and Taiwan's representative offices. Before clarification from the Japanese and Taiwanese governments could be widely distributed, the head of Taiwan's Osaka Office, Su Chii-cheng committed suicide. The media in Japan reported that Su's suicide was due to the pressure from disinformation.¹⁷ Later, it was found that the fake content posted on social media came from IP addresses in Beijing.¹⁸

16. Wang Ke-ron, 〈淹成这样，沒想到，中國領事館來接人了！臺灣同胞問……〉, *Observer*, September 5, 2018, <https://www.guancha.cn/international/2018_09_05_470949.shtml>.

17. 劉彥甫, 〈大阪駐在の台湾外交官はなぜ死を選んだのか関空での対応で論争、きっかけはSNSだった〉, *TOYOKEIZAI*, September 19, 2018, <<https://toyokeizai.net/articles/-/238262>>.

18. 〈抓到了！關西機場6日淹水關閉 北京帳號湧 PTT 帶風向〉, *Liberty Times*, September 16, 2018, <<https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/politics/breakingnews/2553205>>.



Figure 6. Why is There so Much Fake News about “Preferential Treatment of Chinese People”?

Source: 劉彥甫, 〈「中国人優遇」の偽ニュースはなぜ生まれたか 関空の中国人避難問題, 一連の事実を検証〉, *TOYOKEIZAI*, September 21, 2018, <<https://toyokeizai.net/articles/-/238795>>.

Another attempt to create a negative perception of the Tsai Administration targeted agriculture products and their trade, associated with the southern regions of Taiwan, where the majority of DPP supporters reside. Fabricated stories and photos showed tens of thousands of pineapples dumped in a dam with a photo caption, “After the DPP came to power, there is no quality governance. China has refused southern Taiwan’s ‘independent fruit and vegetables.’ Poor farmers worked hard for nothing! Very sad!”¹⁹ Although the Council for Agriculture clarified that the photo included with the message was taken in China, the false news story successfully caused a drop in the price of pineapples and was linked to President Tsai’s refusal to accept the 1992 Consensus and the DPP’s China Policy. The disinformation targeting Taiwan’s agricultural products appeared again during a by-election of March 2019, with pomelo

19. Charles Yen, 〈假照片 台南鳳梨丟棄電視不敢報導？來自中國的照片和影片〉, May 24, 2018, *MYGOPEN*, <https://www.mygopen.com/2018/05/blog-post_24.html>.

the target. A pomelo farmer from Tainan made an allegation on Taiwan's local channel, *CTiTV*, that he had to dump 1.2 million kilograms of pomelo into the Zengwen Reservoir. Later, the allegation was proven to be untrue, as the Zengwen Reservoir is unable to accommodate the number of pomelo alleged by the farmer. The farmer later apologized, claiming that he had "misspoken" on the news. *CTiTV* is a news channel affiliated with the Want Want China Times Group. Its owner, Tsai Eng-meng, was the target of the Anti-Media Monopoly Movement in 2012, when university students and civil society protested against his purchasing Taiwan's cable network and inserting advertorials in the *China Times* newspaper to promote China's political agenda.



Figure 7. Photo of Pineapple Taken in China Instead of Taiwan

Source: Charles Yen, 〈假照片 台南鳳梨丟棄電視不敢報導？來自中國的照片和影片〉.

Other than the utilization of state-owned media, China has also been using microblogging sites, chat applications such as WeChat and LINE, and content farms, such as COCO01 and COCO0X, to spread disinformation in Taiwan. Taiwan's popular PTT Gossiping Board is also believed to have been penetrated by pro-CCP entities.

VII. Conclusion and Preventive Measures

Although there were grave concerns in Taiwan on the disinformation from China and China-based entities, it remains difficult for agencies to prove that the local

election in 2018 were influenced by it. Facebook fan pages, Facebook and Twitter accounts, websites, and chat applications, have become agents of Chinese influence; however, in order to effectively pinpoint an election as the result of China's sharp power requires more solid proof. Surveys of constituents and their voting choices would be the beginning of identifying influence from China via disinformation. It is noted that the National Chengchi University is currently conducting its regular survey on local elections and voter's attitudes. It would be useful if voters' choices based on news items they have read is also surveyed. It needs to be determined whether a voter voted for China's favored candidate or issue based on reading a piece of fake news generated by a Chinese entity.

It is also important for Taiwan's government agencies to share information with each other in order to develop effective methods to combat such penetration. Government agencies such as the Executive Yuan's National Information and Communication Security Taskforce could publish and share its research and reports with other government agencies. The report need not to be classified material but to make other agencies aware of what the Taskforce is currently researching. While ongoing investigations should be kept classified, MJIB could also provide briefings and reports on cases of authoritarian influence operating in Taiwan. The agencies can decide the extent to which the public can be made aware of attempts at authoritarian influence, so the public is more media literate and is aware of attempts by China to influence Taiwan's politics. As the national election draws closer, China's sharp power will only grow stronger. Whether Taiwan's democracy can weather such aggressive influence depends on the population's vigilance; the Taiwanese administration can certainly do more to cultivate that.

