

Everyday Infiltration: CCP Cognitive Operations and Their Electoral Influence in Taiwan

Yu-Hsi Liu

Associate Professor, Department of Communications Management, Shih Hsin University

Chien-Yuan Sher

Associate Professor, Department of Business Management, National Sun Yat-sen University

Abstract

As geopolitical risks intensify, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is increasingly resorting to cognitive warfare as a lower-cost pathway to control Taiwan. Unlike Russia, China tends to begin with in-person engagement to build interpersonal networks that later serve as conduits for disinformation and narrative persuasion. These hybrid tactics allow cognitive operations to escalate into a “narrative war,” embedding themselves deeply into daily life. Econometric analysis and field studies conducted by the authors of this paper reveal that these infiltration efforts have had a statistically significant impact on Taiwan’s elections, with a magnitude capable of changing the final outcomes. The infiltration channels include religious organizations, local political brokers such as village and borough chiefs, media platforms, and economic dependencies. While relationships with proxies may begin with economic incentives, the CCP’s successful engagement with grassroots communities has expanded beyond material interests to include a sense of identity and a misperception of reality. However, there are also positive findings: democratic Taiwan possesses an inherent capacity to resist Chinese infiltration. Communities with stronger resilience prove more difficult to penetrate. To build a resilient society, Taiwan must deepen connections among its citizens while also forging alliances with other democracies that face similar Chinese influence.

Keywords: Chinese Infiltration, Anti-Infiltration, Electoral Intervention, Cognitive Warfare, United Front

I. Introduction

Amid escalating geopolitical risks, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) strategy toward Taiwan has expanded well beyond military deterrence and economic coercion, as it seeks lower-cost pathways to seize control of Taiwan. Increasingly, the CCP is turning to cognitive warfare, which combines physical contacts and misinformation to infiltrate Taiwanese society, erode the public will to resist, and fracture the country's political cohesion and social consensus.

While authoritarian regimes often share similar tactics, China's methods of infiltration differ from those of Russia. Whereas Russia relies heavily on large-scale disinformation campaigns, the CCP typically begins with physical contact, using exchanges and face-to-face interactions to build interpersonal networks.¹ These contact channels include religious visits and collaborations, grassroots politics involving actors such as village and borough chiefs, and economic dependencies in business networks such as cross-Strait agricultural and service trade.

Compared with coordinated disinformation campaigns on social media, messages delivered through these in-person channels are more precisely targeted at Taiwanese audiences and exert a stronger influence on Taiwan's voters. These contacts may originate from agents' economic incentives, but they have since expanded beyond material interests to encompass narrative persuasion among grassroots citizens.

These infiltration strategies reflect a reorientation in the CCP's policy toward Taiwan. Before the Sunflower Movement of 2014, the CCP typically relied on politically influential individuals in Taipei to act as proxies for implementing its united front initiatives. However, after the Sunflower Movement and the Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP) 2016 presidential victory, the CCP aimed to expand its direct influence at the grassroots level in Taiwan. Beijing launched the "Three Centers, One Youth" (san zhong yi qing, 三中一青) policy in 2015 to court grassroots voters,

1. The Security Information Service of the Czech Republic, "Annual Report of the Security Information Service for 2021," 2021, *BIS*, <<https://www.bis.cz/public/site/bis.cz/content/vyrocnizpravy/en/ar2021en.pdf>>.



Figure 1. CCP Cognitive Warfare

Source: Depositphotos.

particularly in areas traditionally supporting the DPP. This strategy evolved into the “One Generation, One Frontline” (yi dai yi xian, 一代一線) initiative in 2017, targeting village heads and small- to medium-sized temples in central and southern Taiwan. These infiltration efforts allow cognitive operations to appear less overtly political while embedding themselves more deeply into daily social and economic life.

This study distinguishes itself from other efforts in quantifying the outcomes of China’s infiltration and cognitive warfare. We concretely map cognitive warfare in three-dimensional space to identify its actual impact on local communities. In our published papers,² voters residing near Mazu temples exhibited a statistically

2 Chien-Yuan Sher, Chung-Pei Pien, Colin O’Reilly, & Yu-Hsi Liu, “In the Name of Mazu: The Use of Religion by China to Intervene in Taiwanese Elections,” *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 20, No. 3, July 2024, orae009.

significant shift from supporting the DPP to the Kuomintang (KMT) in elections. Our other paper also shows that in the 2021 anti-ractopamine pork referendum, voters whose borough chiefs participated in pro-China organizations were significantly more likely to vote against ractopamine pork imports.³ The empirical strategy of these papers utilizes the aforementioned policy shifts that occurred in 2016 in the CCP's united front work toward Taiwan.

Statistical evidence of the effectiveness of Chinese influence on domestic voting has attracted international attention, as many countries face similar forms of Chinese infiltration. Accordingly, our findings recommend that the Taiwanese government and its citizens not only strengthen civic media literacy, guard against sector-specific physical penetration, and deepen community resilience, but also establish international cooperative networks to collectively address the challenges of transnational authoritarian influence.

II. Infiltration Through Religion

As a democratic country with religious freedom, religion is an important cohesive force in Taiwanese society. Folk beliefs such as Mazu worship, Taoism, Buddhism, and Christianity all have large followings in Taiwan, along with highly organized mobilization capacity. The CCP gradually influences religious leaders and their followers through measures such as funding pilgrimages, inviting temple organizations to visit China, and providing financial support. These activities are often framed as “cultural exchanges” or “civic interactions,” but in reality, they have political mobilization and united front objectives. Research indicates that some religious organizations play a key role in electoral mobilization, allowing the CCP to indirectly influence grassroots political outcomes.

Mazu, the sea goddess, has long been revered by Chinese immigrants who crossed the Taiwan Strait. Unlike Christianity, the spiritual authority of Mazu in a

3 Chien-Yuan Sher, Yu-Hsi Liu, Colin O'Reilly, Chung-Pei Pien, & Wei-Jen Cheng, “Voting on free trade: Political factors and China's influence in Taiwan's referendum proposal No. 18,” paper presented at The 5th World Congress of Taiwan Studies (Taipei: Academia Sinica, May 21-23, 2025).



Figure 2. People Take Part in the Baishatun Mazu Pilgrimage

Source: Wang Yu Ching, “Baishatun Mazu Pilgrimage,” April 11, 2021, *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baishatun_Mazu_Pilgrimage>.

Note: For the 2025 Baishatun Mazu Pilgrimage, the number of registered participants exceeded 320,000, with an estimated total of over 700,000 people taking part. President William Lai, along with other central and local politicians all attended the pilgrimage. The annual event only takes place on Taiwan proper and does not make a pilgrimage to China.

temple is believed to be derived from other established temples, with the ultimate origin traced back to China. Hence, Mazu worship includes the important tradition of annual pilgrimages to her “original temples.” Guo et al. argue that Mazu pilgrimages could play a role in the “reunification” of China and Taiwan; this is consistent with Chinese government statements.⁴ Other faiths lack such spiritual traditions, making their roles in united front efforts comparatively more indirect.

4. Yingzhi Guo, Samuel Seongseop Kim, Dallen J. Timothy, & Kuo-Ching Wang, “Tourism and reconciliation between Mainland China and Taiwan,” *Tourism Management*, Vol. 27, No. 5, 2006, pp. 997-1005.

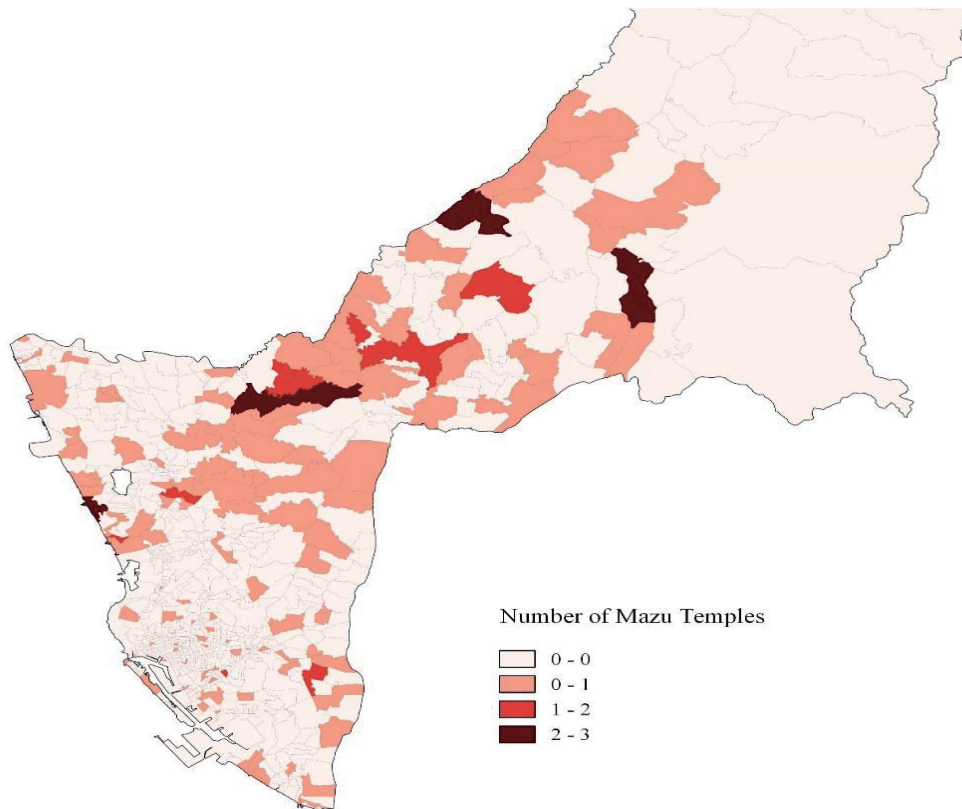


Figure 3. Distribution of Mazu Temples in Kaohsiung

Source: The authors.

Note: Although Mazu temples are popular, not every village has one. It allows us to examine the differences in voting behavior between villages with and without Mazu temples. We mapped the geographical locations of Mazu temples and used spatial regression to analyze their influence on their nearby communities. The unique feature of our research is that it concretely maps cognitive warfare onto three-dimensional space to identify its actual impact on local communities.

Our field studies have found that the CCP has sponsored Mazu pilgrimages to China and used those to build in-person connections with followers. After a pilgrimage, the CCP distributes misinformation through LINE groups. One of our interviewees noted that the initial messages were neutral and non-political. However, as relationships deepened and the election drew closer, increasingly political content was shared to sway devotees to their side. Notably, it is CCP officials, not temple leaders, who disseminate the misinformation directly to the Taiwanese.

Our research statistically measures the impact of religious infiltration and cognitive warfare. We first developed a model of voter behavior and then aggregated the data into an econometric framework to explain election outcomes at the village level. In Kaohsiung, voters residing near Mazu temples exhibited a statistically significant shift from supporting the DPP to the KMT across the 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2020 elections.⁵ According to the spatial regression model employed in this study, each additional Mazu temple infiltrated by China is associated with approximately 925 votes shifting from the DPP to the KMT across Kaohsiung. The number of votes may not seem large, but in a closely contested race, it can be enough to tip the election outcome.

Table 1. The Direct, Indirect, and Total Impacts of Two Types of Mazu Temples

	Direct impact		Indirect impact		Total impact	
	dy/dx	S.E. ^b	dy/dx	S.E. ^b	dy/dx	S.E. ^b
Mayoral election:						
Ln(U-MazuD)	-0.036	(0.018)*	-0.300	(0.069)**	-0.036	(0.072)**
Ln(A-MazuD)	-0.002	(0.016)	0.137	(0.075)	0.135	(0.078)
Ln(GuandiD)	0.004	(0.014)	0.104	(0.072)	0.107	(0.075)
Ln(OT-TempleD)	2.61×10^{-4}	(0.006)	-8.34×10^{-4}	(0.015)	-5.74×10^{-4}	(0.016)
Presidential election:						
Ln(U-MazuD)	-0.017	(0.015)	-0.213	(0.055)**	-0.213	(0.057)**
Ln(A-MazuD)	-0.040	(0.013)**	0.057	(0.060)	0.017	(0.062)
Ln(GuandiD)	-0.015	(0.011)	0.013	(0.058)	-0.002	(0.060)
Ln(OT-TempleD)	-0.004	(0.005)	-0.015	(0.012)	-0.019	(0.013)

Source: Chien-Yuan Sher, Chung-Pei Pien, Colin O'Reilly, & Yu-Hsi Liu, "In the Name of Mazu: The Use of Religion by China to Intervene in Taiwanese Elections," orae009.

Note: We found that urban Mazu temples (U-MazuD) have a significant overall impact on both presidential and mayoral elections, leading to reduced support for the DPP among nearby voters. However, Mazu temples in rural areas (A-MazuD) did not have the same level of significance.

5. Chien-Yuan Sher, Chung-Pei Pien, Colin O'Reilly, & Yu-Hsi Liu, "In the Name of Mazu: The Use of Religion by China to Intervene in Taiwanese Elections," orae009.

Our research has made another important finding: not all Mazu temples serve as effective local collaborators for China's united front efforts. Some temples remain resistant to Chinese infiltration. When a temple has a stable base of devotees, it does not rely on pilgrimages to China, and its followers' voting behavior shows no significant change. Table 1 divides Mazu temples into two types: rural temples and urban temples. Urban Mazu temples (U-MazuD) have a significant impact on both presidential and mayoral elections, leading to reduced support for the DPP among nearby voters. However, no such influence was observed at rural Mazu temples, which tend to have a stable base of devotees and robust face-to-face ties.

Temples with resilient communities are as essential to the resilience of Taiwanese society as the armed forces dedicated to countering the CCP. At present, uniting citizens is an essential element of countering CCP influence. While upholding the principle of religious freedom, Taiwan must remain vigilant and its citizens must continue to stand together in the struggle to safeguard their liberty.



Figure 4. The Baishatun Mazu Visits Taiwanese Military Personnel in 2024

Source: Baishatun Mazu, 〈2024 白沙屯媽祖進香精彩片段〉, March 21, 2024, *Youtube*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8uc4lh4-sJ0>>.

Note: Some Mazu temples and their followers continue to show their determination to defend Taiwan, making it crucial to building a resilient society through religion.

III. Infiltration Through Borough Chiefs

The CCP also exploits grassroots political leaders as a channel to sway Taiwanese voters and advance its cognitive warfare. Village and borough chiefs are the most grassroots-level political leaders in Taiwan. They are elected and receive a salary. The population size of villages and boroughs ranges from a few hundred to several thousand residents. Due to the small scale of population, they maintain close interactions with each resident on a wide range of issues, including facilities, infrastructure, sanitation, and daily affairs. Hence, they have great influence over citizens' voting behavior.

The CCP systematically co-opts village chiefs by offering them organized trips to China, fostering ties with CCP high-level officials. The CCP has even appointed some village and borough chiefs to paid positions in Pingtan, Fujian. Upon returning, the local coordinators in Taiwan assist the CCP in maintaining relationships with village chiefs. Those coordinators usually belong to specific pro-China organizations.

In another paper, we analyzed voting data from the 2021 anti-ractopamine pork referendum across 3,503 boroughs in Taipei, New Taipei, Taoyuan, Taichung, and Kaohsiung.⁶ The referendum took place on December 18, 2021. The referendum did not pass because the share of "No" votes (20.84%) surpassed that of "Yes" votes (19.86%). Neither side reached the legal threshold of 25%. Had it passed, it would have had adverse consequences for Taiwan–U.S. relations.

Our research empirically investigated the influence of Chinese infiltration through village/borough chiefs on the referendum results. The results show that the connection between pro-CCP organizations and village chiefs is a significant factor in explaining the referendum results at the village level. Moreover, our estimates suggest that when a borough chief was affiliated with pro-China organizations, the "anti-U.S. pork / pro-U.S. pork" ratio in that borough was about 4.8 percentage points

6. Chien-Yuan Sher, Yu-Hsi Liu, Colin O'Reilly, Chung-Pei Pien, & Wei-Jen. Cheng, "Voting on free trade: Political factors and China's influence in Taiwan's referendum proposal No. 18."

higher than in other boroughs. The 4.8 percentage-point gap can decisively alter the referendum outcome.

Table 2. The Impact of Results in Referendum 13 on Referendum 18

Dependent variable: Ln (A18 th /D18 th)				
Independent variables	Model A		Model B	
	Coef.	S.E. ^a	Coef.	S.E. ^a
Ln(D ^{13th} /Abs ^{13th})	1.311	0.017**	1.283	0.018**
Ln(A ^{13th} /Abs ^{13th})	-1.358	0.015**	-1.269	0.017**
Chief: KMT-Non-Pro-China Org.	0.100	0.009**	0.067	0.009**
Chief: DPP-Non-Pro-China Org.	-0.029	0.015	-0.014	0.014
Chief: Pro-China Org.	0.088	0.021**	0.048	0.019**
Chief: NCFA Non-KMT	—	—	0.021	0.015
Chief: Clan	—	—	-0.035	0.016
Chief: Fellow	—	—	6.0×10^{-4}	0.016
Chief: CDA	—	—	-4.9×10^{-5}	0.007
Chief: FA	—	—	-0.020	0.014
Chief: Temple	—	—	-0.022	0.008**
Chief: Male	—	—	-0.010	0.008
Chief: Age	—	—	-0.001	0.000
Chief: Local	—	—	-0.019	0.007**
Chief: Mainlander	—	—	0.080	0.043
Chief: Incumbent	—	—	0.013	0.008
Kid	—	—	0.383	0.177*
Old	—	—	0.869	0.100**
HighEdu	—	—	0.298	0.060**
Income	—	—	-0.001	0.000**
Constant	-0.367	0.009**	-0.380	0.048**
City fixed effects	No		Yes	
Observation	3503		3465	
Adj. R ²	0.781		0.818	

Source: The authors.

Note: a * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$ When a borough chief is involved in a pro-China organization, the “agree/disagree” ratio in a referendum increases by 4.8%, with statistical significance. We controlled for other factors such as the village’s demographic characteristics, education level, and income level, and also considered the results to the previous referendum at each village.

To identify whether a village chief was influenced by China, we examined if they participated in the following CCP-affiliated coordinator organizations. We considered whether a chief had participated in a village chief association (里長聯誼會) and run for office as a KMT candidate. We also included the China Unification Promotion Party (統促黨), the China Zhi Gong Party (致公黨), the Tongxin Association (同心會), and the Grassroots Development Promotion Association (基層建設會). Chiefs who had been reported by the media as having visited China or as targets of Chinese influence operations were also identified. Our statistical analysis demonstrates the effectiveness of these organizations.

Despite our statistically significant results, further research is required to understand how village chiefs shape local residents' political attitudes. One interviewee mentioned that a pro-China village chief had organized free domestic trips while simultaneously promoting pro-China narratives. However, additional information and fieldwork are necessary to verify such practices. On the other hand, since pork imports are primarily an economic issue, it remains unclear to what extent industry-related factors and economic incentives influence voting behavior, and how these economic considerations intersect with Chinese infiltration efforts.

IV. From Misinformation to Narrative War

We presented evidence that two channels of infiltration, Mazu temples and village/borough chiefs, allow the CCP to establish direct interactions with Taiwanese

Table 3. The Ratio of Chiefs Participating in Pro-China Organizations

City	Total	Chief: Pro-China Org.
Taipei	456	38 (8.33%)
New Taipei	1030	26 (2.52%)
Taoyuan	504	11 (2.18%)
Taichung	625	10 (1.60%)
Kaohsiung	888	20 (2.25%)
All	3503	105 (3.00%)

Source: The authors.

Note: Taipei City has the highest proportion of borough/village chiefs participating in pro-China organizations.

society. These two infiltration cases not only undermined the DPP's electoral performance but also reshaped public perceptions through cognitive warfare and narrative contestation. It escalates from simple misinformation to a broader "narrative war," steering the public toward a cognitive framework that disregards critical facts and ultimately legitimizes the CCP's unification agenda.

In Mazu infiltration, by promoting the "Mazu Returns Home" pilgrimage, Beijing engages in a form of narrative warfare that redefines China as the cultural and spiritual motherland rather than an adversary, embedding political influence within religious practice. They technically disregard the fact that the CCP is atheist.

Similarly, in the pork import referendum, pro-China village chiefs framed the United States as a source of health risks and economic exploitation, thereby undermining public trust in Taiwan's most important security partner. Skepticism toward the United States undermines the people's will to resist China. They deliberately obscure the fact that U.S. pork meets safety standards, while Chinese pork may fall short.

In both cases, shifts in voting behavior cannot be attributed solely to economic concerns; instead, they are the product of carefully crafted cognitive operations that appeal to emotion, identity, and collective memory. While these connections may originate in the economic incentives of local proxies (temple leaders or village chiefs), they have expanded beyond material interests to encompass narrative persuasion among grassroots citizens.

V. Cognitive Warfare Through Online Media

In contrast to these types of physical infiltrations, social media is another platform for cognitive warfare. To understand how social media shapes political attitudes in Taiwan, we analyze survey data from Doublethink Lab (民主實驗室) for 2024 and 2025.⁷

7. Chien-Yuan Sher & Yu-Hsi Liu, "Shaping Minds: How Chinese Social Media Influences Taiwanese Attitudes Toward the U.S. and China," 2025, Working paper.



Figure 5. Cognitive Warfare Through Online Media to Influence the Election

Source: Depositphotos.

Both surveys were designed by DTL and conducted by market research companies, though their methodologies differed. The 2024 survey, conducted ahead of Taiwan's presidential election, relied on telephone interviews using both landlines and mobile phones.⁸ By contrast, the 2025 survey was administered online.⁹ The 2024 questionnaire focused exclusively on skepticism toward the United States, while the 2025 version expanded the scope to include not only the same three questions on U.S. skepticism but also measured pro-China attitudes. The "media" included YouTube, Weibo, Xiaohongshu (rednote), TikTok, TV channels, newspapers and so on.

8. Doublethink Lab, "2024 Taiwan Election: Pre-election Telephone Surveys — Research Data," January 19, 2024, *Medium*, <<https://medium.com/doublethinklab/2024-taiwan-elections-pre-election-telephone-surveys-research-data-23ed084fd60e>>.

9. Doublethink Lab, "2025 Taiwan TikTok User Study: Nationwide Online Surveys — Research Data," June 5, 2025, *Medium*, <<https://medium.com/doublethinklab/2025-taiwan-tiktok-user-study-nationwide-online-surveys-research-data-0ddcddea231>>.

Our analysis shows that survey respondents who rely on Chinese social media as their primary source of information are statistically far more likely to express skepticism toward the United States, even after controlling for factors such as Chinese identity, attitudes toward democracy, and demographic characteristics. Interestingly, part of this skepticism appears to be mediated by respondents' own negative assessments of how Taiwan's democratic system is functioning. The results echo our findings from the U.S. pork import referendum, showing that "U.S. skepticism" is a key target of cognitive warfare and is closely linked to confidence in Taiwan's democracy.

The 2025 survey also found that heavy consumers of Chinese media are significantly more likely to express support for the Chinese government and to view China as more livable than Taiwan. In this case, however, negative evaluations of Taiwan's democracy do not play a mediating role. Together, these findings suggest that Chinese social media influence operates through multiple channels, reshaping both attitudes toward the United States and perceptions of China itself.

VI. Conclusion

Our findings demonstrate that China's cognitive warfare, when combined with infiltration efforts, can reshape domestic political attitudes and influence voting behavior. This demonstrates that cognitive warfare has specific objectives and tangible effects, not only influencing voters' party preferences but also shaping public attitudes toward foreign policy.

Physical infiltration and cognitive warfare occur sequentially, and unlike the period before the Sunflower Movement, today's cognitive warfare not only influences local proxies but also allows the CCP to engage directly with ordinary citizens, penetrating more deeply into their daily lives.

Another challenge stems from the fact that cognitive warfare has evolved into a full-blown "narrative war." It is no longer merely a series of scattered falsehoods but a comprehensive effort to reshape worldviews, casting China as a credible and dependable homeland. It undermines the Taiwanese will to resist a Chinese invasion and lowers the potential costs of CCP-led unification.

Another challenge is that citizens targeted by cognitive warfare do not perceive themselves as “being bought.” Under the CCP’s narrative, grassroots citizens shift their political attitudes based on their sense of identity and a misperception of reality, rather than economic incentives.

However, we also have some positive findings: democratic Taiwan possesses an inherent capacity to resist Chinese infiltration. In the case of Mazu temples, communities with stronger resilience have proven more difficult to penetrate. Communities surrounding rural temples maintain stronger face-to-face networks and stable financial support, enabling them to resist both CCP-sponsored pilgrimages and the spread of misinformation. To resist the CCP, Taiwan needs to build a more resilient society that strengthens connections among citizens, with religion and village or borough networks serving as key channels.

Our quantitative findings have drawn international attention, as other democracies confront similar forms of authoritarian infiltration. Russia once used Orthodox churches as a medium to infiltrate Ukraine, aiming to influence Ukrainian attitudes toward Russia.¹⁰ The Philippines is also concerned about Chinese infiltration, which has even helped pro-China candidates win elections.¹¹ Malaysians are also concerned that China is using Mazu temples in Malaysian Chinese communities to cultivate a more pro-China environment.¹² Taiwan should expand international partnerships to confront the challenges of transnational authoritarian influence collectively.

10. Burç Eruygur, “Pro-Russian literature, forged documents found during raids on Ukrainian Orthodox Church buildings: Security service,” November 23, 2022, *Anadolu Ajansı*, <<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/pro-russian-literature-forged-documents-found-during-raids-on-ukrainian-orthodox-church-buildings-security-service/2746183>>.

11. “Philippines president says ‘heads will roll’ after wanted mayor allegedly flees country,” August 21, 2024, *The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/21/philippines-president-says-heads-will-roll-after-wanted-mayor-allegedly-flees-country>>.

12. Peter T. C. Chang, “The Xin Yimin’s Impact on Malaysia’s Social Anxieties,” August 13, 2025, *Fulcrum*, <https://fulcrum.sg/the-xin-yimins-impact-on-malaysias-social-anxieties/?utm_source=chatgpt.com>.

