

Soft Power Runs Into Popular Geopolitics: Western Media Frames

Democratic Taiwan

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Introduction

Taiwan lacks widespread diplomatic recognition, membership of international organisations and its participation in international society frequently depends on China's goodwill (Winkler, 2013). The fact and extent of Taiwan's marginalization is incongruous given its status as a liberal democracy, major world economy and trading power. It enjoys informal social and economic relations with many countries, but its lack of access to formal international interactions is unlikely to change in the short-term due to the PRC's intractable position on 'one China' and the lack of support in Taiwan for acceding to Beijing's conditions for reducing its efforts to isolate Taiwan (Glaser, 2013). Within this context, Beijing and Taipei have attempted to communicate their respective positions to the world via public diplomacy programs and externally-facing media. With its strong desire to change the status quo of Taiwan's functional autonomy Beijing has leveraged its superior economic and diplomatic resources in an omnilateral offensive to establish the 'correct' understanding of Taiwan's status as an inviolable part of one China. Taipei for its part has responded with a low-key public diplomacy program of its own with mixed results (Rawnsley, 2017). The impasse in the Taiwan Strait, which involves the national, strategic and geopolitical interests of the world's two major powers China and the US, will not be solved by external public communications, but these

efforts are significant nonetheless. ‘Soft power’, the ability to secure support for preferred outcomes based on attraction rather than coercion, is predicated on generating attention (Nye, 2004): Attractive properties must be known and acknowledged as such to have an effect. This being the case, a further component of the international communications environment also demands our attention, foreign media coverage. Narratives delivered by foreign media have superior reach in their domestic contexts than national public diplomacy programs have among foreign audiences. Despite the potentially distorting, negating, or magnifying effects on national external communication efforts, foreign media coverage has been overlooked in studies on Taiwan’s public diplomacy. Indeed, no prior academic study has sought to assess western media coverage of Taiwan in a systematic way. This gap is important. Given Taiwan’s marginalization and China’s efforts to determine global perceptions of Taiwan, it matters how foreign media frame Taiwan to their national audiences, which include voters and policymakers. For Beijing and Taipei, it matters how publics around the world perceive their different positions on Taiwan’s status. For Taipei it is especially important, because Beijing has successfully used economic and diplomatic means to dictate how international institutions and the majority of national governments treat Taiwan. Drawing on interview data with western journalists and a substantial sample of western news media reports on Taiwan, this article employs a mix of quantitative and qualitative text analytical methods to identify how a global narrative about democratic Taiwan has been constructed in the last 20 years. The article concludes with discussion of the implications of media treatment for public diplomacy and ‘soft power’ efforts.

Why Foreign Media Coverage Matters

In information environments characterized by ‘hyper-mediation’ and ‘communicative abundance’ (Chadwick, 2013; Keane, 2013), such as the ones that prevail in most advanced

economies, ‘geopolitics saturates everyday life’ (Tuathail and Dalby, 1998: 5). For publics this saturation is delivered second-hand by the ‘low’ or ‘popular’ means of the media and internet. Only a small number of elites can experience the formal aspects of geopolitics manifest in statecraft, diplomacy, and international organizations. A large body of research suggests that exposure to media reporting on foreign affairs can ‘substantially affect the audience’s knowledge, perception, and attitude toward other nations’ (Hanitzsch et al., 2013: 171). Building on the seminal work of McCombs and Shaw (1972), research on agenda-setting found that media coverage gave audiences clues about the salience of world events, with more abundant coverage increasing the perceived importance in viewers’ minds (Soroka, 2003). More recent studies have identified a ‘second-level’ agenda-setting effect where the ways in which the media cover an issue influence the way audiences perceive it (Wanta et al., 2004). By providing audiences with an ‘attribute agenda’, studies have shown ‘a clear relationship between media coverage of nations and how individuals viewed those nations’ (Wanta et al., 2004: 372). The significance of these findings has increased as ‘softer’ forms of power embodied in a favourable national image and reputation have gained importance as foreign policy goals (Gilboa, 2008: 56). Foreign media are an important mechanism in the construction and propagation of a nation’s image or brand, a concern that is no longer restricted to corporations (Anholt, 2005). As Zhang argues, ‘the news media act as referees for the credibility or legitimacy of soft power resources and as important instruments for branding the nation in public diplomacy’ (2010: 234).

Evidence of foreign news influencing policymakers is less unanimous, but is also suggestive of exposure effects. The first Gulf War marked the emergence of global media as a significant actor in international affairs (Gilboa, 2008), specifically the popularization of Atlanta-based Cable News Network, which prompted discussion of a ‘CNN Effect’ (Gilboa, 2005). The so-called ‘CNN effect’ was thought to facilitate instantaneous communication

between state administrations and influence leaders to change or enact policies (Robinson, 2011: 3). Numerous accounts appeared in support of international news reporting influencing American leaders to intervene in Somalia, Northern Iraq and Kosovo (Bahador, 2007). On balance, the evidence for a ‘CNN effect’ is ambiguous, but the possibility that foreign news may affect publics and policymakers increases the significance of decisions taken by journalists, editors and news organizations in their construction of coverage of other countries. These actors have the power to determine how a country is framed and the kind of information that audiences receive. Furthermore, since audiences in most countries are uninformed about foreign news relative to domestic affairs, media actors’ decisions increase in significance. With any given story there is substantial scope for news professionals to choose which issues to cover and how to present them. In terms of foreign news, editors have an important role in establishing which countries are ‘important’ (Willnat and Martin, 2012), while correspondents act as crucial intermediaries sourcing and sorting information from foreign locations (Zhang and Zhang, 2017). Research on foreign correspondents shows multiple influences on how they do their work, from individual preferences and background to work routines and the culture and organization of their news outlet (Archetti, 2010). While individual journalists have agency in the production of their reporting, they work within a profession which imposes numerous structural and normative constraints (Hess, 2005). The resources available for foreign news gathering and reporting has declined as media organizations implement cost-cutting measures in response to declining readership and challenges to their business models (Archetti, 2013). With the popularization of digital formats, the increasing speed of the news cycle, fragmented audiences and increased competition for ratings, readers and clicks in service of driving advertising revenues, have led to soft infotainment, sensationalism and the endless recycling inherent in ‘churnalism’ (Jackson and Moloney, 2016).

Media Coverage Biases

A substantial body of research shows that the media's determination of what is newsworthy is prone to negativity bias. Put bluntly, bad news sells. Media overemphasize the prevalence of violent crime (Altheide, 1997) and events involving conflict receive more media attention (Shoemaker et al., 1991). Soroka's (2014) analysis of crime news coverage and actual crime rates in the US shows an obvious negativity bias at work—crime stories are more frequently reported than the crime rate would suggest, with a tendency to exaggerate the frequency of violent crime, and to give more space in accordance with the degree of violence. Soroka found a similar dynamic at work with coverage of the economy in US, UK and Canadian newspapers: Overall one mildly negative piece of economic news produces on average two news stories, while to get one story in the paper two pieces of similarly positive information must come out (2014: 91). This focus on negativity is consequential. Altheide (1997), for instance, showed how TV news presented using the 'problem frame' highlighting distress and suffering can lead to erroneous impressions among viewers about real levels of danger and violence. Combined with media fascination with personality, human interest storylines and personal drama, Keane argues that 'the adversarial and "gotcha" styles of commercial journalism' make the world seem worse than it is and reduce public trust in politicians and institutions (2013: 41).

The choice to focus on 'bad news' is intuitive, and does not imply anything wrong with journalistic practice. For instance, there is no reason, and would be no audience, for reporting on the thousands of airplanes that land safely every day. However, journalists also have the power to determine how events are framed, i.e. the selective emphasis and de-emphasis of elements in a story used to promote a particular interpretation (Entman, 2004). Examples of media framing abound. Entman cites the example of American news coverage of the downing of a Korean Airlines plane over the Soviet Union in 1983, which 'universally portrayed the incident as a "brutal" act of murder by an evil communist power' (2008: 92). By contrast, when

the American Navy shot down a civilian Iranian plane US media focused on technical details as the 'act was dissonant with American self-images as a humane power occupying a wholly different moral universe from the heartless Soviet empire' (Entman, 2008: 93). Gans's (1979) study of American news media argued that American journalists and editors aligned their coverage of foreign events with American foreign policy. The idea that beyond considerations of newsworthiness, news media were inclined to serve national interest in their coverage of foreign affairs stimulated a critical 'popular geopolitics' approach that explicitly seeks to 'expose the inherent power relationships attached to global knowledge' (McFarlane and Hay, 2003: 212).

Geo-politics is 'a discourse and a practice engaging in the creation of geographical relationships and orders so that global space becomes divided into simplistic categories such as good/evil, threatening/safe, civilized/barbaric' (Dittmer and Dodds, 2008: 441). Rooted in this discourse and practice, popular geo-politics seeks to provide a theoretical account of how mass media and other popular cultural forms communicate global politics to their audiences. It is distinguished by a focus on 'everyday discourse and role of the media in the construction and perpetuation of dominant geopolitical understandings of events, people and places' (McFarlane and Hay, 2003: 213). Popular geopolitical discourses, or 'tabloid geopolitics' (Debrix, 2007), employ straightforward explanatory frameworks providing links between issues in 'exotic' locales, 'Other' people and audience concerns. In the hands of international media concerned with 'the big picture of power and danger within world politics' (Dittmer and Dodds, 2008: 438), popular geopolitical framings provide black and white simplicity, is crisis and conflict driven and routinely indulges in future oriented speculation. Media narratives provide 'context within which elite geopolitical texts are (re-)produced' (Sharp, 1993: 491), generating meanings and realities for audience consumption, shaping their 'geopolitical imaginaries in both the domestic and international realm' (Mawdsley, 2008: 516). The media

likewise ‘supply and entrench interpretive frameworks through which the political world is rendered comprehensible’ (McFarlane and Hay, 2003: 213), facilitating the definition and understanding of complex phenomena as ‘controllable geopolitical abstractions’ (Tuathail and Agnew, 1992: 195). Such is the routinized (re-)production of ‘established geopolitical images, metaphors and assumptions’, which they can become entrenched conventional wisdom (McFarlane and Hay, 2003: 214).

Research Design

The fundamental question we are interested in is how foreign media cover Taiwan. We identify ‘foreign media’ as those who operate outside Taiwan and do not have Taiwanese as their intended audience. We distinguish between ‘foreign media’ and ‘global media’, such as CNN International and BBC World, which broadcast to a non-specific global audience. In order to circumscribe ‘foreign media’ to a manageable category, we focus first on media serving audiences in English-speaking countries and English language media in non-native speaking countries like Japan and Malaysia. We then concentrate on American newspapers. These decisions were prompted by the pre-eminence of English language media globally and the status of the US as Taiwan’s most important ‘friend’ and thus American voters and policymakers as Taiwan’s most important foreign audience. Our empirical strategy is composed of three parts: interviews with news professionals, analysis of 20 years’ worth of newspaper reports, and modelling of coverage and a selection of contextual covariates. First, we used a set of news media reports on Taiwan to identify journalists who had written or broadcast stories about Taiwan in the past five years and sent them an open-ended questionnaire. Of the 48 invitations we sent, 26 journalists and editors responded. We don’t claim that this sample is representative of all journalists and editors, but maintain that it is a sufficiently large cohort to derive useful insights from. Second, to assess coverage of Taiwan

in a systematic way we need to examine a sufficiently large sample drawn from an extended period. One empirical source that is available and directly comparable over a suitable timeframe is newspapers. To obtain materials for analysis, we used the Nexis repository to compile a dataset of major English language newspaper reports about Taiwan during the past twenty years. Our selection of 65 outlets includes respected broadsheets like the *Los Angeles Times*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Globe and Mail*, and popular or tabloid publications like the *Daily Mirror*, *The Sun* and *USA Today*. It includes outlets from across the political spectrum, from *The Australian*, *Daily Mail*, and *Telegraph* on the right to the *New York Daily News* and *The Guardian* towards the left. We searched for articles containing ‘Taiwan’ in the headline published between January 1st 1996 and June 30th 2016, the twenty-year period that covers what is generally known as ‘democratic Taiwan’.¹ The document set includes 18433 articles. Through a close reading of a sub-sample of reports we identified a battery of salient markers and applied these across the entire data set to provide estimates of the prevalence of frame indicators across time.

Third, we constructed a sub-set of newspaper reports on Taiwan from the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. Unlike the full set of 65 newspaper outlets which include numerous types of newspaper (and audience demographics), the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* are American broadsheets serving an elite audience. The ‘gatekeeping’ and ‘agenda-setting’ function of these elite outlets in the US (Graber and Dunaway, 2014) continues to exert influence even in the digital age (Meraz, 2009). We suspect that the construction of foreign news in these newspapers targeting elite audiences may have the scope for greater nuance, which we test systematically through statistical modelling, combining

¹ In choosing to focus on ‘headline articles’ we acknowledge the possibility of introducing biases- headline articles might focus on certain kinds of event for example, or stories about Taiwan might appear under different headlines. To check against this possibility, we compiled a sub-sample of 200 stories with Taiwan in the article but not in the title. In each case, Taiwan was not the major focus of the article, and in some cases, it was referenced obliquely or was listed as an example alongside many other economies. We thus have confidence that headline articles represent the most suitable corpus of text for analysis.

textual data with a battery of contextual variables relating to the political and economic situation in Taiwan across time (Lee, 2015). Our subset of 1395 reports in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* represents all headline articles on Taiwan in both newspapers from Jan 1st 1999 to Dec 31st 2016 (the period for which a consistent record of both publications was available). We formatted and uploaded the document subset into computer-assisted content analysis software and developed a dictionary of terms to apply across the document set. Specifically, we used the Yoshikoder software developed by Will Lowe and first reported in the context of Chinese language material in Sullivan and Lowe (2011). Since any one word can be an unreliable indicator of a complex concept, we designed a ‘dictionary’ (or battery of individual indicators) for the concepts ‘tension’, ‘co-operation’, ‘status quo’, ‘one China’, ‘independence’ in addition to indicators of reporting about the economy and democracy. The pre-defined dictionary approach using Yoshikoder has previously been employed in studies of PRC newspaper reports and Taiwanese presidential speeches (Sullivan and Renz, 2010; Sullivan and Sapir, 2012).

Insights from News Professionals

Insights from these media practitioners reveal several factors contributing to the way foreign media outlets cover Taiwan. The first issue concerns news priorities. Given that the media are involved in ‘culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people every day’ (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009: 1), there is a necessary selectivity, and in a volatile world Taiwan is for the most part a beacon of stability. One journalist summed it up, reporting that ‘it’s very hard to get Taiwan onto the news agenda.’ The reality is that ‘Taiwan is not really a priority for any news desk’. Furthermore, ‘newsworthy’ stories in the Taiwan context tend to relate to cross-Strait relations because this is where the potential for conflict lies. As one journalist admits ‘the dominant story is still geopolitical and

rarely about Taiwan in and of itself'. Several respondents noted on the part of their editors 'an eternal desire to have stories that focus on cross-strait issues'. This influences the kind of stories that journalists are assigned to write about, and influences the kind of stories that authors pitch, especially freelancers who depend on stories being accepted for their livelihood. At least most journalists reported having substantial leeway in how they compose their stories with freedom to 'to figure out how I want to frame it' and 'the focus/angle/tone of the piece'. Although Others commented that 'there's a lot of moving parts here, including the actual subject of the article, the editor I'm dealing with and the publication that runs the article. It's always a bit different - - sometimes an article gets published as I wrote it, while other times editors step in and make changes with nothing I can really do about it'. This may include 'conventions largely adopted by the editors' relating to the 'normal diplomatic lexicon'. The major issue is 'to not call Taiwan a country, which is a correctable error per the style guide'.

A second issue is the effect of financial cuts that have decimated news organizations across the sector. Media outlets have cut back on the number of dedicated Taiwan correspondents, and indeed most of our respondents were based outside of Taiwan, or were working in Taiwan on their own without support. The upshot of financial circumscriptions is that news organizations must prioritize and marshal resources accordingly, with the result that 'most international media do not have a presence in Taiwan'. As one journalist put it, 'Taiwan's marginalisation in terms of international news value has eaten away at the number of journalists working for foreign outlets (and particularly experienced and ambitious journalists), thereby degrading the scope, quality and contextual value of news coverage'. On this point, nearly all the journalists evinced frustration, commenting on the difficulties of reporting on Taiwan from China, or the lack of resources for reporting from the ground in Taiwan. Among the few Taiwan-based respondents in our sample, the lack of specialist correspondents was a source of frustration, with comments on the 'marked lack of knowledge about Taiwan' and 'sporadic

instances of focused interest'. One journalist reflected how 'some of us in the industry use the pejorative "parachute" to describe journalists who fly in and out of Taiwan to cover a specific event but then make substantial errors or omissions in their coverage'. Another suggested that 'the problems of "writing from Beijing" by people with only mainland China experience was laid bare during the Trump-Tsai call coverage'. One journalist noted how 'a lack of understanding of the political history of relations between [Taiwan and China] and the coloured political terminology in frequent use, and Taiwan coverage quickly proves vulnerable to political skewing and an Orientalist arrogance'.

A third factor affecting coverage is the lack of space or audience demand for detailed explanations of the complexities and nuances of Taiwan's situation. Several journalists explained that their writing on Taiwan for an international audience assumed low levels of prior knowledge, to the extent that even basic facts have to be covered. As one reporter put it, 'I'm always assuming that I'm writing for someone who may not know the difference between Taiwan and Thailand'. Several respondents noted that their copy 'always requires the usual boilerplate descriptions about Taiwan'. These requirements make it 'difficult to write a story that gets into all the important details when you have space limits and most likely need to spend a paragraph or two just explaining what Taiwan is'. Combined with 'the usual caveats that must go into the story about Taiwan's political/diplomatic situation vis a vis China and the US', there is simply not much space left to provide nuanced analysis. Due to multiple structural constraints, journalists writing about Taiwan have a difficult job. And several respondents noted that their task was not made any easier by the Taiwanese government. Among the reported difficulties are that the 'press office doesn't make it easy for the international media to have access to information or spokespeople', 'military and naval access is hard' and '[President] Tsai will not give interviews'. There were also questions about access to press

passes and visas for freelance journalists, although many respondents noted that Taiwan is generally a good place to access information.

Despite the lack of permanent, specialist, Taiwan-based correspondents, and a general lack of interest and space for stories on Taiwan, respondents do perceive improvement and opportunities. Several reporters noted that ‘although a lot of the same tired Taiwan tropes still get repeated, the quality of coverage has generally improved’. Another journalist remarked that ‘there will always be more interest in China, but I do think there is pent-up demand for compelling articles from Taiwan’. Yet another reflected that ‘I think there is growing cultural interest in Taiwan and the ability for more “soft” stories as more people visit Taiwan’. The recent success of ‘progressive Taiwan’ stories relating to LGBT and lifestyle issues, and ‘quirky things’ in the vein of ‘weird Asia stories’ may serve to increase knowledge and interest in Taiwan, and to humanize and demystify a society that often flies under the radar globally. One space where stories relating to Taiwan’s ‘progressive’ society have flourished is in online media, which do not operate under the same circumscriptions as print or broadcast.

English-Language Newspaper Coverage of Democratic Taiwan

As intimated by our journalist respondents above, when it comes to coverage by foreign news media some countries are more ‘newsworthy’ and demand greater coverage than others. As demonstrated by Chang (1998), powerful ‘core’ nations consistently receive coverage from U.S. news media, while small ‘peripheral’ nations remain largely uncovered except in extreme (usually disastrous) circumstances. The good news for Taiwan is that our document set shows that foreign media newspaper coverage of Taiwan during the past 20 years is substantial. Headline stories on Taiwan in 65 major English language newspapers generated more than eighteen thousand articles. By comparison, using the same search parameters, South Korea, a country with similar characteristics, garnered one third less attention than Taiwan. On average,

Taiwan has generated around 900 articles per year over the past two decades (see Figure 1). Foreign media interest in Taiwan increases in presidential election years, notably in 1996, the first direct presidential election, and 2000, when the DPP's surprise victory led to almost double the average number of articles per year. However, these election year spikes mask an overall decrease in attention to Taiwan, with a notable decline starting a year into Ma Ying-jeou's first administration. As we will show, one of the foreign media's main interests in Taiwan is the capacity for tension, crisis or conflict with China, the potential for which appeared to recede with Ma's first-term détente policies. Interest in Taiwan increased moderately since Ma's re-election in 2012, but neither the Sunflower movement nor Tsai Ing-wen's election victory in 2016 raised attention levels to the earlier period when uncertainties and the potential for conflict in cross-Strait relations were arguably greater. One interpretation of this relative decline in interest, despite major political developments in Taiwan during the past decade, is that other global events, such as civil war in Syria and the increase in terrorist attacks, demand more column inches. Furthermore, the potential for a 'newsworthy' crisis in the Taiwan Strait has arguably declined since the missile crisis in 1995/6 and the uncertainties surrounding the first DPP administration at the beginning of the 2000s. In the intervening period, economic integration via trade and investment, and social interaction via the movement of people and various dialogue mechanisms have substantially reduced the possibility of military conflict. In this sense, a relative declining interest in Taiwan is a sign of the stability of cross-Strait relations.

[Figure 1 here]

The next task is to measure the frequency of select terms appearing in the set of articles. Doing so illustrates the foreign media's major preoccupations with Taiwan (see Figure 2). First and foremost, China is integral to western media coverage of Taiwan, to the extent that China is referenced in nearly 80% of headline articles about Taiwan. To a lesser extent, the US is also central to coverage of Taiwan, being present in nearly half of headline stories. The popular geopolitical frame used to deliver news on Taiwan is frequently 'tension, crisis and conflict'—which appears in nearly one third of articles. This is a noted feature of domestic and foreign news coverage generally (Cottle, 2006; Hoskins and O'Laughlin, 2010), and the result is that Taiwan is frequently portrayed as a site of conflict and tension with China. Worse still for Taipei, because China has been so effective in setting the frame of reference for understanding cross-Strait relations, Taiwan is sometimes portrayed as the *source* of conflict and tension. This may strike many Taiwanese as ironic, given that Beijing reserves the 'right' to use force against Taiwan and has 1800 missiles based in Fujian, and it is consistent with narratives in Chinese state media. The prevalence of references to 'independence' (in one quarter of all articles) indicate the major source of potential conflict, a frame that implicitly supports Beijing's argument that the real status quo is 'one China' and that 'independence' is illegitimate and dangerous. The fact of Taiwan's self-governing, functional autonomy is rarely noted, appearing in just over 1% of articles. The democratic achievements that Taiwanese are rightly proud of, and Taipei would like to emphasize as a defining part of its narrative, are mentioned in 11% of articles. Additionally, elections are mentioned in nearly one quarter of articles, although this form of domestic political competition is again often perceived through the lens of China, the US and the potential for conflict.

[Figure 2 here]

The dominant association of Taiwan with China is consistent over the twenty years since the first direct election of the president (see Figure 3 below). The percentage of headline articles on Taiwan mentioning China ranges between 70% in 2002 and 84% in 2004 5, the year China passed its anti-secession law in response to Chen Shui-bian's re-election. Unlike China, mentions of the US have declined over time, notably during the Ma era, reaching a low of one in three articles in 2014. From 1996 to 2008, mentions of the US tracked those of China, albeit at a lower level, reflecting the framing of Taiwan as a point of contention in Sino-US relations. As cross-Strait relations warmed under Ma, the potential for the US to become involved, or to involve itself, decreased, at least in the media construction of Taiwan stories. Figure 4 gives an indication of the division of labour in headline Taiwan stories, between conflictual and consensual relations reflected in the dichotomy of 'tension' and 'trade'. Tension was the major story during the Lee and Chen eras (mentioned in nearly half of headline articles in 1996 and 2004), giving way to trade under Ma. Spikes in stories on trade in 2010 accompanied the passing of the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement and the aborted Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement which precipitated the Sunflower movement in 2014. In anticipation of Tsai Ing-wen's victory in 2016, the proportion of headline articles on tension and trade converged, reflecting the international media's understanding of the implications of a DPP victory for cross-Strait relations.

[Figure 3 here]

[Figure 4 here]

Reflecting the broader interest in conflict, ‘independence’, the pursuit of which Beijing explicitly equates with war, is much more frequently mentioned than ‘unification’. During the Chen era, ‘independence’ was mentioned in up to one in two headline articles, a preoccupation of the period that was not restricted to foreign media (Sullivan and Lowe, 2010). Under Ma, interest in ‘independence’ declined to 11% in 2013, rising substantially again in 2016 with Tsai’s victory, despite her steadfast message of adhering to the ‘status quo’. For much of the period after 2000, there has not been much foreign media interest in unification, which accurately reflects its declining salience in Taiwanese political discourse (Sullivan and Sapir, 2013).

[Figure 5 here]

Coverage of Taiwan in *New York Times* and *Washington Post*

The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* are American newspapers with elite audience demographics, superior resources and a reputation for nuanced political analysis. We anticipate that these factors may influence their coverage of Taiwan, specifically we suspect that coverage should be more nuanced than the diverse range of outlets analysed above. To test this assumption, we test whether contextual variables related to economic and political situation in Taiwan is reflected in coverage. Compared with the broader set of outlets, there is an obvious difference: the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* increased their coverage of Taiwan during the Ma era. Although there is substantial variation illustrative of periodic spikes in interest coinciding with major events like the Sunflower movement, the decision to cover Taiwan is not driven by elections to the same extent (see Figure 6).

[Figure 6 here]

Having generated textual data as described above, we now seek to model the focus of coverage. In the models below, our dependent variable is the number of mentions of 'Taiwan' in each newspaper article. Our main independent variables are a count of references to nine conceptual categories in each newspaper article: 'U.S.', 'China', 'one China', 'status quo', 'independence', 'tension', 'cooperation', 'democracy', and 'economy'. We then control for eight variables related to the political and economic context in Taiwan at the exact time that each article was published. First, we account for whether presidents are from the *Kuomintang* (KMT) or the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) by giving *ideology* '1' if presidents are from the DPP, and '0' otherwise. Second, we control for *age of democracy*, which is the number of years since Taiwan's democratic transition. Third, we include *admin year* as a control, which is the number of years since the president's inauguration. The fourth control variable, *electoral cycle*, measures the number of months left until the end of the president's current term of office. The fifth control variable, *presidential popularity*, is a measure of the incumbent president's popularity among the electorate. We use presidential approval ratings from monthly public opinion surveys conducted nationwide by TVBS.² The variable, ranging from 0 to 1, is the aggregate proportion of respondents who answered 'very satisfied' and 'somewhat satisfied' to the following survey question: 'How satisfied or dissatisfied you are in the performance of (a president's name)?' The sixth control variable, *legislative support*, measures a president's partisan powers based on their ability to shape or dominate the policymaking process that emanates from the president's standing in relation to the party system (Shugart and Mainwaring,

² <http://other.tvbs.com.tw/other/poll-center/>. The missing months were extrapolated from actual records of approval ratings.

1997). As a measure of a president's partisan strength, we employ the proportion of seats occupied by the president's party in the Legislative Yuan. We also account for *inflation* using the monthly change in the consumer price index as a proxy measure (following, for example, Martínez-Gallardo and Schleiter, 2015).³ Finally, we control for the total number of words in the newspaper article as it should be positively associated with our dependent variable (the number of mentions of Taiwan). Table 1 provides summary statistics for the independent and control variables included in the analysis.

[Table 1 here]

Our sample includes significant variation in the number of mentions of ‘Taiwan’ in articles across and within administrations, thus we constructed models with fixed and random effects. This enables us to assess whether our independent variables predict differences not only across administrations but also within them. This modelling decision increases the robustness of our results by holding the administration context constant. To estimate the frequency of ‘Taiwan’ mentions we use Poisson regression models consistent with the distribution of the data. Table 2 sets out the estimated coefficients of our independent and control variables from the multivariate regression analysis. In the fixed effects models, Model 1 examines our findings without controlling for the political and economic contexts of Taiwan, while Model 2 includes all these factors in the model specification. In the random effects models, Model 3 and 4, Model 3 includes independent variables only, while Model 4 accounts for all contextual variables. Since the coefficients from the Poisson models in Table 2 are not

³ <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/statistics/Consumer-Price-Index-CPI>.

straightforward to interpret, we estimate the predicted probabilities of an increase from the observed mean to the maximum values for independent variables that attained statistical significance.

[Table 2 here]

The systematic analysis set out in Table 2 largely confirms that *New York Times* and *Washington Post* coverage is formulated in similar ways to the 65 outlets covered in the broader document set. With a high degree of confidence, we can say that mentions of Taiwan are statistically associated with indicators representing the categories 'China', 'U.S.', 'one China', 'independence', 'tension', and 'economy'. Taiwan is less likely to be mentioned in relation to indicators of 'cooperation'. In Model 2, the estimated coefficients of the former group of terms are positive and statistically significant, but the coefficient of 'cooperation' is negative and statistically significant. The substantive effects of these variables on the frequency of 'Taiwan' mentions in *New York Times* and *Washington Post* articles are as follows: for an increase from their observed mean to their maximum values, there is an expected increase of 27.2 times ('one China'), 18.4 times ('independence'), 13 times ('economy'), 11 times ('tension'), 9.3 times ('China') and 7.5 times ('U.S.'), holding all other variables constant. For terms associated with 'cooperation' there is an expected decrease of 16.2 times. We did not find a statistically significant relationship between 'Taiwan' and terms relating to 'the status quo' or 'democracy'. Several control variables relating to the political and economic context in Taiwan reached statistical significance. In Model 2, for instance, we find that the effects of *ideology* and *admin year* are negative and statistically significant. Thus, Taiwan tends to be mentioned less under DPP governments than during KMT administrations, and less towards the end of the

president's current term than in their first year in office. Figure 7 demonstrates the marginal effect of indicators representing the conceptual categories as well as contextual variables on the predicted frequency of mentions of Taiwan in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* articles. The horizontal axis for each plot indicates observed values of continuous variables that are statistically significant in Model 2, and the vertical axis indicates the frequency of mentions of Taiwan. Figure 7 showing the marginal effect of indicators representing categories and contexts and the predicted frequency of mentions of Taiwan clearly illustrates the positive or negative associations across different indicators and variables.

[Figure 7 here]

Foreign Media Narratives and Taiwan's Public Diplomacy Program

Due to the complexities and ambiguities of its status, and Beijing's proactive efforts to determine global understandings of Taiwan's status, establishing Taiwan's 'national brand' is hindered by marginalisation in international society, including an international knowledge deficit. Our analysis of foreign media coverage of Taiwan over the past two decades suggest that the narratives being communicated to foreign audiences are also inconsistent with the emphases that Taipei would like. The PRC's economic and diplomatic strengths, and its strategic advantages in many other spheres including increasing attempt to influence foreign media, have helped Beijing establish 'one China' as policy for most states in the world. However, through the promotion of Taiwan as a stable and open democracy, with a diverse and progressive society committed to liberal values, Taiwan has the potential to generate a 'soft power' repertoire as a bulwark against Chinese pressures to increase Taiwan's marginalization and to generate popular support for Taiwan's participation in international society. These are the tasks of external communications and public diplomacy programs, since 'attraction requires

the effective use of global communication to persuade public opinion around the world to support one's causes' (Gilboa, 2002: 731). In this competition, Beijing has outperformed Taipei.

Once the PRC's economic reforms bore fruit, Beijing adopted a program of 'soft power' initiatives in response to negative reactions to its rising economic power and intensifying global engagement (Ding, 2008; Li, 2008). Taiwan only developed a 'soft power' repertoire only after China introduced the idea of 'comprehensive national power' in the mid-1990s (Wang and Lu, 2008: 426). Despite its attraction for policymakers, the connection between 'soft power' initiatives and the capacity to influence public opinion and behaviour has yet to be definitively established (Xie and Page, 2013). The results of China's 'soft power' programs have been incommensurate with government expectations and the level of investment. Beijing's huge investment in tools designed to generate soft power (international TV channels, Confucius Institutes etc.) have not won hearts and minds in Taiwan nor much of the developed world (Hartig, 2015; Sun, 2009; Zhang, 2010).⁴ China's increasing economic and political influence continue to feed into discourses readily taken up by nations concerned for the implications of a 'rising China', in terms of a purported 'China threat' (Broomfield, 2003; Roy, 1996), a Chinese 'grand strategy' (Johnston, 1995; Swaine et al., 2000), and Chinese nationalism (Deng, 2008; Gries, 2005). Images of China in foreign media have been constructed using multiple negative frames that seek to establish China as 'different' and a 'threat' (Sullivan and Renz, 2011; Yang and Liu, 2012). With its authoritarian political system and 'rational' foreign policy, China is often portrayed as operating in a different moral universe to western democratic countries (Mawdsley, 2008), while the idea of a 'rising China' and 'China threat' have become common reference points in the media, public opinion surveys and political discourses (Stone

⁴ The return on China's soft power initiatives in the developing world appear to be greater, although there remains difficulty in disentangling cause and effect and the refraction of economic power (Hartig, 2012; Kurlantzick, 2007)

and Xiao, 2007; Yang and Liu, 2012). Notwithstanding the PRC's many advantages in other spheres, in terms of 'soft power' resources Taiwan appears relatively well endowed.

After peaceful and consolidated democratization processes, Taiwan possesses the base materials to construct a narrative invoking liberal values, commitment to democracy, human rights, rule of law and good governance. In these areas, the juxtaposition with the PRC is obvious. Taiwan has numerous potential sources of 'attraction', from traditional Chinese culture and a hybrid distinctly Taiwanese culture, to liberal creative and media sectors and a dynamic civil society. As a successful former newly industrialized economy, Taiwan's economic achievements and reputation for cutting edge high-tech manufacturing and innovation, global trade and investment, substantial international aid programs and high standards of living, are a major 'soft power' resource. However, there is an obvious mismatch between Taiwan's attractive values and its gains in international society, including basic knowledge about what Taiwan is. While it is the PRC's 'hard power' that is largely responsible for Taiwan being 'financially rich, diplomatically poor' (Chan, 1997: 37), Taipei's own efforts to project its own narrative internationally are also culpable to some extent.

Over the past two decades Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Government Information Office, Council for Cultural Affairs and the Mainland Affairs Council have tended to focus on initiatives serving domestic political aims rather than generating soft power appeals abroad, indicating the lack of consensus in Taiwan about what Taiwan is and how to present itself (Rawnsley, 2012). Aid programs and the activities of NGOs like Tzu Chi, which often are more credible sources of 'organic soft power', have generated positive reactions, although outcomes associated with initiatives like Chen Shui-bian's 'peoples' diplomacy', are less clear. Taiwan's use of soft power instruments has been 'overwhelmingly defensive, focused on implications for relations with the mainland and concerned with sustaining US backing to offset or deter pressure from Beijing' (DeLisle, 2010: 511). Such a focus is understandable given the

political constraints within which Taiwan must operate, but this reactive strategy restricts Taiwan to the parameters set by Beijing (and followed by foreign media), namely to talk about Taiwan is necessarily to talk about China. Taiwan's external communications have failed to help it 'transit from the invisible to the visible', negating the projection of its 'soft power' potential, which 'depends on others seeing, recognizing, and responding' to Taiwan's attractive qualities (Rawnsley, 2017: 3).

Taiwan's efforts to increase awareness and knowledge, and to establish its own narrative through lobbying, the activities of trade and cultural offices, people exchanges and public diplomacy continue to be important. Given that 'soft power depends on others' knowledge of one's alluring qualities' (Mattern, 2005: 588), it is crucial that Taiwan continue its program of activities in this sphere. But, as Rawnsley argues, Taiwan needs a 'more holistic approach [which] may involve telling a political and social as much as a cultural story' (2012: 131). Because of the restrictions placed on Taiwan by Beijing, the relatively safe topic of culture has been a major vehicle for Taiwan's external communications. Under Ma the emphasis was on traditional Chinese culture, which added confusion to what Taiwan is and how it portrays itself to the world. Furthermore, culture in the sense of exhibitions and exchanges is rarely 'newsworthy', and these efforts rarely gain any traction in the foreign media. In order to have more forceful public diplomatic engagement, and to address the issue of geopolitical framing that tends to burnish Beijing's preferred understanding of the status quo, Taipei needs to consider ways to tell its story in a more multidimensional way, moving beyond culture alone. Taiwan is endowed with an abundance of material for creating a compelling national narrative, based on its history, diversity and dynamic economy, politics and society. As Rawnsley and others have argued, these base materials have not been fully leveraged, in part because there has been a degree of confusion about what Taipei wants to achieve with its public diplomacy programs. In a crowded global information environment where the PRC is

investing heavily in political communications of all kinds, Taipei requires a holistic strategy to raise awareness of Taiwan and to more strongly influence the narrative that is told about it globally. Currently, Taipei doesn't have an effective international media strategy, while Beijing invests heavily in its own international media, not only CCTV international operations but websites like Sixth Tone which publishes stories in English by native speaking journalists that often paint China in an unflattering but 'humanizing' way. Taipei meanwhile relies on stale and formal communications published in outlets like Taiwan Today, or cultural brochures. There is institutional confusion since the abolition of the Government Information Office as part of streamlining of the Executive Yuan and the transfer of its responsibilities to Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the new Ministry of Culture. A slow moving and conservative bureaucracy is unable to keep up with fast moving news and communications means that narratives are shaped long before governments and foreign ministries have agreed and approved a reaction. President Tsai has recently begun Tweeting (in English and Japanese), which is a promising development.

Conclusion

In this article we have demonstrated that western newspaper coverage of Taiwan is dominated by a focus on geopolitics and popular geopolitical framings, situating Taiwan within the context of cross-Strait relations and the broader regional political environment structured by Sino-US relations. Entrenched framing strategies frequently connect Taiwan to 'tensions' in the Strait, reinforcing Beijing's rhetorical position where the PRC's sovereignty claim is juxtaposed with subtly destabilizing forces within and emanating out of Taiwanese domestic politics. This is evident in depictions of the pursuit of 'independence', notwithstanding the almost complete marginalisation of this position in Taiwan itself. Over the course of Taiwan's democratic era, some of these framings appear to have ossified as part of a 'hegemonic regime

of representation' (Mawdsley, 2008: 510), ironically mirroring treatment of the PRC itself, which has been cast as an ideological competitor to the west and is often framed by ill-informed media stereotypes (Sautman and Yan, 2009; Sullivan and Renz, 2012). This is partly due to the structure of geo-politics and partly down to the way the media itself works. In consequence, the image of Taiwan as it is frequently conveyed to western audiences is of a geopolitical hotspot, a participant, or worse, an instigator of a potential security crisis. This crude portrayal does a disservice to Taiwan and is an impediment to creating a multidimensional, nuanced narrative about the Taiwanese 'national story'. Lack of knowledge about Taiwan among western publics creates a vicious cycle whereby news coverage is pitched at a less sophisticated level, ossifying digestible cues like 'independence seeking', 'renegade province' or 'tensions' that compound misunderstandings about Taiwan. The implications for Taiwan's national image and the success of its 'soft power' and public diplomacy programs are profound, at a time when the PRC is investing heavily in externally facing media operations and increasing its influence in the global media-sphere. The dominant 'China lens' (including Sino-US relations) in coverage of Taiwan is an obvious obstacle to the dissemination of a distinctly Taiwanese narrative, and demands a proactive, organized and holistic communications strategy to address it.

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