

Research Article

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The Pandemic and its Repercussions on Taiwan, its Identity, and Liberal Democracy

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Abstract: The situation generated by the pandemic has meant the acceleration of the ongoing hegemonic clash between the United States and China, as well as the intensification of the anti-China narrative and a deplorable wave of Sinophobia throughout the world. In this context, Taiwan has become a strategic hot spot for the development of the rhetoric of the enemy. This study analyses some of the direct consequences of the ensuing friend/foe discourses in the Taiwanese milieu. In the context of a new Cold War, certain groups of power and their media apparatuses have embarked into a race to discursively distance the country as quickly as possible from the despised global enemy, not to be dragged down by the proximity and commonalities shared with China. Moreover, social polarization within Taiwan and contempt for the internal “enemies” pose an added challenge both for the maintenance of liberal democracy and the preservation of peace and self-government on the island. These outcomes are facilitated by underlying populist and nationalist processes of identity construction and hegemonic struggle: distinct discourses re-articulating the Taiwanese identity as an underdog people and a victimized nation.

Keywords: anti-China narrative, new cold war, discourse theory, nationalism, populism

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has given new impetus to the identity construction of Taiwan (Republic of China [ROC]) and its geopolitical contestation. Not only have the discourses within the island resorted to novel discursive strategies to build a distinct *common sense* (in a Gramscian sense), but Taiwan itself has become a contentious *floating signifier* in dispute in the hegemonic struggle between China and the United States (US). What Taiwan *is* and *means* is currently undergoing a confrontational process driven by both Taiwanese actors and outside forces. This struggle is significantly actualized and embodied through military, economic, and political gestures for the control of the Asia-Pacific region, a hegemonic struggle that concerns Taiwan and aims to construct a new “world view” that has to be analysed under the gaze of the *logic of hegemony* (see Gramsci; Laclau and Mouffe 192).¹ In this sense, the COVID-19 pandemic has represented a turning point that has accelerated the already active phase of transformation in world hegemony, highlighting the systemic confrontation between China and the US. Accordingly, the discourses within and around Taiwan have to be assessed alongside the framework of an increasingly manifest Cold War II mentality.

Of course, the identity transformation in Taiwan is not a novel event. After the democratic transition, in a process primarily promoted and led by elites, Taiwanese society has gradually detached itself from the

¹ In brief, the logic of hegemony as envisaged by Laclau and Mouffe (192), drawing heavily on Gramsci’s conceptualization of *hegemony* and the notion of *war of position*, lies on the centrality of *articulation* and the construction of *political frontiers*.

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once-monopolistic Chinese identity at the same time that the Taiwanese identity surged resting on socio-cultural elements – democracy and human rights, in a context certainly influenced by the Cold War between communism and capitalism – rather than ethnic ones, steadily evolving as the naturalized political imaginary in the island (see Chen, “Taiwan’s identity;” Chun, “Democracy;” Lin). Since then, this process has been gradually redirected by the hegemonic struggle between the two main political parties on the island, the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), heir to the dictatorship and, in the present, more prone to rapprochement with China; and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), with an unambiguous pro-independence stance and pursuing closer ties to the US. As a consequence, the political discussion has currently adopted the form of a *popular struggle* tendentially dividing society into two opposed blocs (see Laclau and Mouffe 137), giving rise to an increasingly polarized identity struggle around two antithetical political projects. However, this has not translated into a sheer polarization of *national identity* as such – insofar as a vast majority of citizens identify primarily as Taiwanese – but, rather, as a dispute around how to deal with the *status quo* and the self-government on the island.

This struggle has become particularly salient since the pandemic began, through the dilemma of approaching the US or keeping ties with China, as if both were not compatible due to the emerging Cold War II configuration. We have observed an acceleration in the re-articulation of the Taiwanese identity by redefining it *vis-à-vis* a threatening enemy that negates its very existence. This is a strategy led by the governing Taiwanese power elites to advance the rejection of China and promote the approach to the US and its political imaginary, rather than a discursive struggle to advance a Taiwanese national cultural identity that had long crystallized as a distinct subjectivity in the island. Put differently, Taiwanese identity is being *discursively transformed* through its articulation along novel dimensions that involve a clear antagonism against a proverbial enemy, embodied in a particular interpretation (construction of meaning) of the multifarious notion of *Chineseness* (see Chun, “Fuck Chineseness”). In this vein, it is herein argued that what it means to identify as Taiwanese is being discursively redefined from a previous understanding of it as the sharing of some socio-cultural elements – like support for democracy and human rights – to an understanding of the present conjuncture as a struggle between *friend* and *enemy* in Schmittian terms. For Schmitt, “the friend/enemy distinction overrides all other distinctions” (Marchart 41). It is a form of understanding the political based on strict antagonism: a struggle between enemies that try to eradicate each other in the search for homogeneity and hegemony (see Mouffe). Other discursive practices take a back seat: the essential here is the construction, dehumanization, and destruction of the perfect enemy.

Progressively, the emotional investment that aggregates citizens of the ROC around this novel *Taiwanese* subjectivity is not so much what *positive* elements they have in common but the fundamental *negativity* that jeopardizes their very identity. This antagonized “Other” is discursively articulated around the referents of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) – China as a power bloc – and the Chinese nation as a whole. In this sense, we find two distinct axes of antagonism, two political logics (see De Cleen and Stavrakakis; Laclau) being articulated within the discursive strategy of the DPP, the US, and its various allies – journalists, scholars, politicians – within Taiwan and abroad. On the one hand, we observe a populist logic constructing the idea of an underdog “people” being abused by an evil “elite” in the shape of the CCP and the KMT, envisaged as external and internal enemies. As such, it becomes a vertical antagonism configured along a down/up dimension. In this vein, the “people” unite leaving aside their heterogeneous particularities because they must unite against this common, powerful power bloc. On the other hand, the nationalist logic makes itself evident in the discourses that divide society among those in favour of the protection of the Taiwanese nation and those who suppose a threat to this goal: the Chinese nation and its double agents in Taiwan: those politicians, intellectuals, journalists, artists, or any random Taiwanese citizen who is not considered real *Taiwanese* but Chinese at heart, traitors and spies, *unionists*, becoming a burden and a threat towards the construction of the idyllic Taiwanese nation-state. In this case, we are referring to an opposition along a horizontal in/out dimension. Of course, these two dimensions are in this particular case largely interconnected and the diverse antagonisms are often the product of the discursive intersection of both logics. Let us examine some of the most relevant developments in this regard.

This study will pay particular attention to arguably the two main Taiwanese media outlets publishing in English, *Taipei Times* and *Taiwan News*, the first papers to consistently make a distinction in their politico-

discursive practices between “China” and “Taiwan,” supporting a clear pro-independence and pro-DPP ideological line (Lams). *Taipei Times* belongs to the *Liberty Times Group*, a powerful industrial/press conglomerate, and it is the only daily paper in English currently alive in Taiwan, existing both in paper and digital formats and often simply reproducing the Taiwan-centric editorial line of the parent paper *Liberty Times*, the most read media in the country. For its part, *Taiwan News* declares as its mission to make aware foreigners in Taiwan of local developments (Lams 1858), demonstrating an interest in shaping international opinion about Taiwan, as well as influencing Taiwanese and foreigners overseas. Thus, these media, their news, and journalists – both foreigners and local Taiwanese – have to be observed as part of the anti-China propaganda machinery related to the hegemonic struggle to fix meaning in regards to the Cross-Strait conflict.

The Pandemic of Sinophobia

On 2 September 2020, the government of Taiwan introduced a new design for its passport cover. It was not an anecdotal change, but rather a bold declaration of intent, as evidenced by the fact that it was presented by numerous personalities at a press conference with plenty of photographers. The change meant a significant increase in the size of the word “Taiwan” and a reduction of the name “Republic of China” until it virtually disappeared. To put this change in historical perspective, it was not until 2003, 54 years since the KMT found shelter in the island, that the word Taiwan was included in the passport for the first time. In that event, the Taiwanese Foreign Minister alleged that “since the beginning of the *Wuhan pneumonia* outbreak this year *our people* have kept hoping that we can give more prominence to Taiwan’s visibility, avoiding people mistakenly thinking they are from China” [my emphasis] (“Taiwan to change”). On the one side, “our people,” innocent, unfairly mistaken as those on the other side, the real culprits of the “Wuhan pneumonia,” from which we have to differentiate ourselves as soon as possible so that they do not drag us in their fall. The urgent need to adopt this change was soon seconded and justified by the media ideological apparatuses of the DPP in Taiwan.

Taiwanese media outlets offered accounts of Taiwanese citizens who had been stopped at European airports after being mistaken for Chinese nationals, lamenting how “*frustrating* and *embarrassing* for *Taiwanese people* [is] to be treated in such a way when arriving in a country. It is profoundly wrong that they should be *inconvenienced* and *humiliated* because of the myriad of failings of their *totalitarian neighbour*” [my emphasis] (Spencer), an article stated. This defence of the honour of the own “people” exuded a tacit acceptance and an implicit legitimation of the racism suffered by citizens of China. A dangerous precedent is accepted here: the wrong thing is not racism *per se*, but that racism is wrongly directed against “us” instead of against those who really deserve it. A dichotomic world is here depicted: a totalitarian neighbour whose proximity causes us frustration, embarrassment, and humiliation. Another editorial in the *Taipei Times* (Su and Yeh) advised of the needed passport change a few months after the pandemic started. It mentions that “amid rising anti-Chinese sentiments [...] Taiwanese travellers would do well without the word ‘China’ on their passport.” Then, to justify the urgent need for passport change, the editorial continued with a grotesque emotional manoeuvring: “Imagine a Taiwanese in the middle of a racial imbroglio desperately struggling to save himself in a potentially violent attack. He could not flash his passport to prove that he is Taiwanese when the word China is on it.” In an obscene act of cynicism, the authors argue that if a group of violent racists is going to beat a Taiwanese up, he could merely get his passport out and convince them that, despite looking and talking exactly like a Chinese, he is not but a Taiwanese, a beloved ally against the common enemy that, hence, deserves to be spared. In these discourses, other countries and their Sinophobia are not to blame: only China is. Because of the actions of the Chinese, Taiwanese are suffering Sinophobia.

This nationalist victimhood narrative helps construct a new *common sense* in Taiwanese society. First, the way is paved by performative discourses which ideas, repeated day after day, becoming naturalized; then, the government adopts measures without risk of these being considered as disruptive. The name

change in the passport, which perhaps before the pandemic would have been difficult to explain, is now pushed as an urgent response to the wave of Sinophobia that makes crucial a clear-cut separation from a threatening negativity: the antagonized Chinese nation. The distinctive manoeuvre in these discourses is that they avoid criticizing the acts of Sinophobia or showing empathy for the victims of racism. On the contrary, the articulation of the Taiwanese nation is not merely based on the argument that Taiwan is a different nation from the despicable “world enemy,” but that, in fact, Taiwanese, as victims of the actions of the Chinese, deservedly hate this enemy as much as the rest of the world. That is, the discourses do not simply state that “We” are different from “Them,” but that “We” are struggling against the same “enemy” as you do, we hate Chinese even more than you do, so you should understand that we are nothing but an ally.

Neither Taiwanese authorities nor its supporting media have offered much condemnation of this deplorable wave of Sinophobia when it affected China proper. The paradox does not exclusively lie in the cruel and absolute lack of compassion for the mistreated neighbours, or in the null defence of human rights by a country that portrays itself as a safeguard of democracy. The biggest inconsistency resides in the lack of condemnation of racism against individuals who share the same ethnic traits as the majority of Taiwanese do. The attempt to avoid the wave of racism by wearing the card of belonging to a different country is futile and naive, as shown by the fact that Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, or even Filipino citizens have suffered racist attacks abroad after being mistaken for Chinese by uneducated racists unable – or unwilling – to distinguish one Asian from another. The anti-China sentiments and the subsequent Sinophobia are not new phenomena neither in Taiwan nor anywhere else in the world, but the degree of acceleration and intensity of such anti-Chinese rhetoric after the pandemic is alarming, because these discourses are not merely decorative but rather performative, transforming identities, reshaping military alliances, and altering the geopolitical hegemonies in East Asia and beyond.

In this vein, the problem is also diplomatic. As measures against China emerge everywhere, the dilemma of including Taiwan as a province of China is becoming more and more pressing. For example, when Chinese citizens were barred from obtaining visas and access to numerous countries, Taiwanese citizens suffered the same veto even though the island never suffered a serious outbreak of the virus: they were simply included in the ban as a province of China. In any case, the passport redesign can neither be reduced to a simple administrative decision to facilitate the travel of Taiwanese around the world and avoid racism nor even to a diplomatic advance towards international recognition of independence. Its implications are much deeper and dramatic, embedded as part of the dichotomic friend/enemy dialectic in which Taiwan and the rest of the world have embarked in the wake of the pandemic. The change in the passport, therefore, becomes a strategic element of discourse, a tool towards the construction of political meaning. Once the elites in power in Taiwan have decided to join a *side* in the fight, the challenge for Taiwan is not so much to achieve a quiet international recognition of the self-government that it already enjoys but to loudly distance itself as much as possible from the despised global enemy, not to be dragged down by the common elements shared. Starting with the word “China” included in the official names of their nations. Thus, the important history, culture, and ethnic traits that Taiwan shares with China have to be downplayed or progressively eliminated from the nationalist imaginary, so as not to confuse the interlocutor, to whom an image of radical difference from the oppressive enemy has to be unambiguously offered. This is to say that it is a problematic of the order of discourses and hegemonic struggle, rather than a sheer diplomatic one.

At this point, it is relevant to mention that mainstream Taiwanese media is one of the few, together with the most radical press in the US and the gang of Donald Trump, commonly naming the pandemic as “Wuhan coronavirus” or “Wuhan pneumonia,” instead of COVID-19. When asked if this perseverance was creating anti-China sentiments, the Taiwanese Premier replied that it “was not meant to pass judgment but solely to describe the geographic origin of the virus,” in the same way that other illnesses and even new strains are named by the purported place of origin (Chen, “Taiwanese Premier”). What the Premier and many other in Taiwan seem – or want – to ignore is the pejorative nationalist nuance that is connoted around the notion of the “Chinese virus,” in contrast with the neutral tone when the “UK variant” or the “UK strain” is voiced. Whereas in the latter case it is just an informative label, in the case of China it involves accusations and a smear campaign against Chinese intentions. Not surprisingly, this is done at the same time that the possibility of acquiring Chinese vaccines is repeatedly denied due to their alleged

unreliability and lack of popular trust in them. The discourse effectively penetrates society and anything – information, people, or goods such as vaccines – coming from China is instantly wrapped in a halo of doubt, of conspiracy.

The use of language in regards to how to call the virus should not be taken naively. There is no doubt that some sectors in Taiwan celebrate and look to benefit from the anti-China sentiments spreading around the world as China is blamed for the pandemic. This stance can be understood as a short-term tactic to benefit diplomatically and economically by highlighting the exemplary management of Taiwan in contrast to the negative image of China and its products – fake masks, fake vaccines, unreliable technology, and so on. Such a craving to take advantage of the situation to promote the image of Taiwan is certainly understandable and even politically legitimate. However, from an ethical stance, it is also a discourse with serious moral implications that displays loyalty to the anti-China coalition and contributes its grain of sand to the crystallization of China as the common global enemy, feeding the *myth* of an orientalist, mysterious, irredeemable, and immanently evil China.

As soon as one calmly analyses the data and facts on the pandemic there is little doubt that the anti-Chinese narrative prevailing around the world is not the result of cold impartial analysis, but a consequence of the monopoly of public opinion through the press and cultural hegemony of the anti-China propaganda apparatus, led by the US and aided by its henchmen, including Taiwan's government and its related media. As Chomsky contends, power shapes “the ideological framework that dominates perception, interpretation, discussion, choice of action [...]” including in free societies. The discursive machinery of the neoliberal hegemony has defined a playing field where everything China does is evil and everything China says becomes a lie. This rhetoric for the construction of an enemy has been clearly articulated during the pandemic and deserves an in-depth analysis by those who, following the light shed by authors like Victor Klemperer, accepting the risk of resisting the tide of events and exposing the performative power of the hegemonic language.

Only by making these chains of equivalence present can it be explained that the levels of distrust towards China and racism towards the Chinese have reached astonishing historic highs in many countries during the pandemic (see Silver et al.). It is the accumulation of details, of almost imperceptible nuances sometimes apparently irrelevant, but whose constant repetition is installed in the subconscious social imaginary. As a way of illustration, let us see this statement in a *Taiwan News* article: “the coronavirus continues to rage across the globe, with the odd exception of China, where local infections have been *allegedly* brought down to ‘zero’, the perception by outsiders of the world’s most populous country has rapidly deteriorated” [my emphasis] (Everington, “Negative”). Here, the word “allegedly” is relevant in the discursive strategy of doubting China, a nuance of disbelief always present whenever some information coming from China is deemed positive, imprinting in this manner a shadow of a doubt. This does not happen when negative speculations are suggested about a diversity of topics, such as the situation of the Uyghur in Xinjiang, the protests in Hong Kong, or the origins of the pandemic. To spread negative accusations towards China in those cases there is no need for solid evidence: mere suspicion is enough, even if contradictory or always proceeding from the same suspiciously partisan sources. If something cannot be proven, it is not because the original supposition is untrue, but because of China's opacity. That China is evil becomes an immanent truth so, if there is no proof, it is simply because China rejects to provide it and corroborate the obvious (see Sachs and Schabas). In this context, the deontological principles of contrasting information and sources are reasonably sacrificed as unnecessary. Therefore, to perceive this political imaginary we must place Taiwanese opinion builders in the larger picture, as supporters of a hegemonic discourse in which Taiwan has been embedded as a central signifier, supporting the anti-China narrative together with Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet.

The Discursive Construction of the Origins of COVID-19

If the pandemic of Sinophobia defined the antagonistic discourses primarily in nationalist terms, the pandemic of COVID-19 also brought about discourses articulating the populist logic. Since the pandemic emerged, a discursive struggle has developed around its origin, the role of the CCP, or the repercussions

that it would have in China and the world, consciously establishing the racist notion of the “Chinese Virus” and, by an act of osmosis, articulating the CCP as a danger for the “free world”: China as the global enemy of choice. At the beginning of the pandemic, when it was virtually only affecting Wuhan and the death toll had gone over 1,100 Chinese citizens, Western media such as the *Washington Post* (Tharoor) or the *Financial Times* (Anderlini) started calling the outbreak “China’s Chernobyl.” The Diplomat (Topaloff), by the beginning of March, when the pandemic was still largely limited to China, insisted that despite there were “plenty of differences,” the similarities between the USSR and Chinese governments should make Xi worry that the pandemic could “represent a Chernobyl-like historic turning point for the Chinese leadership.” Others, like *Asia Times* (Hutt), still kept using this metaphor as far as the end of April, symbolizing the premonition that the pandemic would mean the beginning of the end of the CCP.

Beyond questioning whether this event could have meant a real turning point for the existence of the CCP if it had not been able to stop the pandemic in a matter of weeks, we can draw two conclusions regarding this historical comparison. The first one is that these initial reports contributed to the construction of an idea: that the Chinese elites are ineffective, cruel, and inferior to those of the US and its virtuous and democratic allies. Because of this, it can be understood why the opinion regarding how the CCP tackled the pandemic is so negative abroad despite being one of the few countries that utterly halted community transmission (see Silver et al.). The second issue is that the sort of comparison linking pandemic and Chernobyl has been mostly absent when it was time to describe the inability of liberal democracies to stop the pandemic, not only in its first wave but also in the second, third, and successive ones. Interestingly, the same sources that suggested the end of the CCP because of its ineptitude and disrespect for its citizens are not suggesting now parallel statements with the strength that should be expected in light of the horrific handling of the pandemic by certain liberal democracies.

The notion of China’s Chernobyl is just a wretched mix between wishful anti-China thinking and a supremacist outlook, the classic stereotyped and impulsive analysis of those eager to disdain the Chinese “Other” as a demonized object of study, the very same that reverberate a distorted vision of Tiananmen in 1989 as a valid historical analogy of whatever is happening in China today. The way things turned out, the Chernobyl comparison could be understood as an irony of fate, an innocent mistake that needs no further thought, if it were not for the fact that it was precisely this position of racist supremacy that has contributed for the rest of the world not to take seriously enough the pandemic in the first place, hindering the appropriate decisions in the face of the real dangers of a *foreign virus*, a *communist and totalitarian virus*, that could not affect developed and democratic – superior – peoples. At the top of the list of those who fell victim to their prejudices, we should place many liberal democracies where the pandemic was disparaged as something far-off, related to inferior and dirty societies led by perfidious leaders.

Against all odds, the US National Security Adviser, Robert O’Brien, top White House official, still kept defending the Chernobyl comparison as far as the month of May, mentioning that “the cover-up that they [the CCP] did of the virus is going to go down in history, along with Chernobyl” (see “Coronavirus”). At a time when the US accounted for more than 100,000 deaths by COVID-19, Trump and his entourage kept depicting an alternative reality where the problem was not the US government but China’s elite. The most reprehensible aspect of these acts of hypocrisy is that legitimized by the prevailing anti-China narrative, the news of the supposed Chinese Chernobyl was not disseminated with lament in the face of catastrophe and loss of life, but with joy, delighting in other people’s misfortunes and the deserved destiny awaiting China and its regime.

Even if China could have reacted faster, as I agree it could, after the extreme lockdown of Wuhan on 23 January 2020, no one could maintain the excuse that China was hiding the seriousness of this virus. Contrary to the perspective on the horrendous role of the CCP during the pandemic, leading experts on epidemics have offered more measured and realistic accounts, oblivious to anti-China propaganda and Manichean narratives. A significant example was provided by Richard Horton, editor in chief of the medical journal *The Lancet*, who stated that:

Despite the uncertainties about what took place in December, Chinese doctors quickly warned their government and their government warned the world. Western democracies failed to listen to those warnings. Of course, there are certain questions for China to answer, but to blame China for this pandemic is to rewrite the history of COVID-19 and to

marginalise the failings of western nations (Horton). The constant speculations and accusations about the possibility that the virus escaped from a laboratory in Wuhan, spaced in time so that they are not forgotten, are just one example of this discursive effort to always have negative news about China that blurs its successes.

The distortion of reality about the CCP's role can only be understood under the animosity that emerged once the pandemic hit other countries, whose rulers began to blame China to evade their responsibility, ineptitude, and unwillingness to adopt unpopular measures such as lockdowns. *Common sense* is that China suffered a pandemic because its leaders silenced doctors and scientists and because it acted slowly and inefficiently as communist dictatorships do. Whereas the rest of the world was affected by the pandemic because it was a completely new virus that no one was prepared against, a unique event in modern history. But the misrepresentations of the facts do not stop there. Spurred by a profound ignorance of China, clouded by mystical orientalism and exacerbated by intense antagonism against the unknown "Other," a new playing field has been shaped for the consolidation of alternative truths. The construction of "post-truth" through discourse opens a dimension of possibilities about what is feasible or not. Thus, rumours were spread that China had fabricated the virus and spread it on purpose, among multiple others. Well into the pandemic, some press in Taiwan still maintained this fantasy narrative of hatred well alive:

The unleashing of the COVID-19 pandemic, first on its own people and then on the world – whether by strategic design or cruel and reckless disregard of the consequences of its actions – has added to the gathering shame and doubts its rulers have earned (Bosco).

The *rhetoric of the enemy* has reached such a degree of domination that whichever claim is uttered against China, no matter how radical and unlikely it sounds, becomes true or at least feasible: a paradise for those who thrive in the realm of conspiracy theories, disinformation, and fake news. It has become a field of contestation without much opposition since those who defend a different standing are tarnished as China-friends (e.g. "Countering"), part of the indefensible enemy, thus leaving a very narrow space for neutrality, moderation, or discrepancy in the analysis of this conflict. This new cold war is, like the previous one was, a conflict in black and white where grey approaches are quickly demoted as suspicious or cowardice. Everything the enemy does is evil; everything the enemy says is a lie (unless it is a military threat, which cannot be a tactical hoax but only a demonstration of the true nature of the CCP).

The Militarization of the Conflict

At the same time as the pandemic progressed and China became widely recognized as the enemy of "the free world," so did increase the Trump administration's multibillion-dollar arms sales to Taiwan, the bombastic warnings of the Chinese peril, the US high-rank representatives visiting the island, as well as the military threats, drills, and incursions by both China and the US, often around Taiwan but not only. Provocation became the only way of doing politics in an environment defined by impenetrable antagonism. The anti-China narrative has become so powerful and widespread in the US that the opposition to China is virtually the only present issue in which exists bipartisan support between the parties of Trump and Biden. As a by-product of this, bipartisan support for Taiwan is not mainly rooted in shared democratic values as it is often described, but rather in the realization that China is the common enemy to fight. Only in this way it is explained that the national minorities that the US and its allies seem lately interested in protecting are the Uyghur, Hongkongers, and Taiwanese, while at the same time contribute to the oppression of Palestinians and the Saharawis, ignore the abuses in Kashmir (and Muslims in India, in general), or utilize the Kurdish to later let them down. As well, only in this way it can be explained that the US previously supported Taiwan against China at the time when the island was governed by a proto-fascist dictatorship: values do not explain US interventionism in China's orbit. Schmitt identified a long time ago the "planetary doctrine of universalist imperialism," where universal principles and values are employed as weapons for interventionism disguised as a defence of democracy and human rights, of which the US, of course, is presented

as the legitimate representative (see Brossat). Thus, the answer is to be found in the offensive to maintain the US empire in the face of the new counter-hegemonic superpower, often accompanied by a supremacist discourse that defends the legitimacy of Making – white – America Great Again, if necessary by stepping over the despicable Chinese dystopia that threatens its world dominance.

It is no news that the US sees itself with the right to put a foot on the neck of anyone who questions its imperialist control of Asia-Pacific: its hegemonic discourse permeates a tacit “universal right” to be the legitimate administrator and police of this region. Thanks to the discourses deployed in Taiwan and elsewhere, the US Indo-Pacific Command manages to justify the construction of an “anti-China [!] missile network along [the] first island chain,” including Taiwan, to prevent China from “taking action in the region and globally to supplant US interests” (Nakamura). And we are left to believe that it is simply out of the desire to preserve democracy and freedom, instead of sheer US interests. Furthermore, nobody should doubt the legitimacy of this project and China should accept this without further reaction. As Taiwanese President Tsai puts it: “The Chinese Communists must restrain themselves, and not provoke” (Blanchard). The CCP is always described as a provocative, aggressive, inhuman power entity. Of course, the US does not provoke when moving its navy vessels and air force units just a few tens of kilometres from the Chinese coast, or plant military bases in the Chinese periphery, as long as they have every right to do so: they just protect the freedom of the seas or merely exercise as “democratic police” keeping the CCP at bay.

The situation of Taiwan is precarious. The construction of the CCP as an irreducible enemy has been accompanied by the inevitable escalation of military tension on all sides. Accordingly, this justifies a massive military investment while other purchases are incessantly requested – which, naturally, benefit specific industries in the spheres of power of both Taiwan and the US. The purported necessity to stop China on its shores is also leading to the legitimization of a future military US presence in the island, which is often suggested in editorial articles (e.g. Lucy; Spencer, “New”). Through all these discursive operations, Taiwan becomes a direct threat to China’s national security and hegemonic projection, becoming a slightly disguised US advanced military bases such as Okinawa or Guam. This is mainly beneficial for the US alone, while puts Taiwan and China at great risk. It is not a matter of who would win in case China attempts an invasion – this being the favourite object of study, almost a sick obsession, of most anti-China experts. The question is that both China and Taiwan will be the main losers, and the island would suffer large economic and/or material destruction no matter the outcome of a hypothetical invasion. Even a maritime blockade or a simple military escalation paralyzing trade or investment would be fatal for Taiwan’s future.

As a consequence, once embarked in the anti-China boat, Taiwan has entered a one-way street that ties its future to the US and its will regarding the hegemonic struggle against China. The predominant pro-US approach in Taiwanese media and government discourses leaves a residue in the social imaginary, transpires to society: not in vain Taiwan is one of the few democracies in the world, if not the only one, where polls showed broad social support supported for Trump over Biden in the 2020 US election (“Taiwan remains”). The fear that Biden would be “soft” on China dominated the public debate and, paradoxically, justified the permanence of a totalitarian character like Trump as a solution to protect Taiwan’s democracy. President Tsai’s first call to congratulate Trump in 2016 already served as a warning of the strategy that was coming, which flourished with the perfect excuse offered by the pandemic. In this vein, fear towards the immanent enemy has become the major political drive. It is not democracy that principally matters, but keeping power through the discourse that portrays Taiwan as an underdog threatened by the evil CCP power bloc. The only solution to avoid this is for Taiwan to remain led by the DPP and protected by the US. In other words, it is not principally liberal democracy but rather keeping the national-popular sovereignty on *the right hands* what is at stake.

The Conflict Between “The People” and the Internal Enemies

Beyond diplomacy and geopolitics, as I already suggested, the most immediate conundrum is one of discourse and identity, which in turn threatens to create a thorny social polarization within Taiwan.

Antagonistic discourses are potentially destabilizing, particularly when emerging from – nativist/racist – hatred and biased information. Within the friend/enemy narrative deployed today in Taiwan, those in the orbit of the KMT, opposing further involvement with the US strategy of radical opposition to China and military escalation, are commonly depicted as pro-Chinese (see “The risk”), anti-democratic (see Spencer, “Taiwan’s KMT”), branded as traitors (see Yao, “Ma”) or embedded spies (see “The Liberty”), and so on. An internal division is drawn between a flawless “people” conceived as an underdog, and the treacherous scholars, journalists, and politicians considered as collaborators of the evil CCP, fifth columnist agents who have to be censored or directly disqualified from democratic participation (see Teng). This is a typical populist discourse. “To safeguard this beloved land and their free and democratic way of life, Taiwanese must be vigilant and clearly distinguish between themselves and their enemies” (Chen, “Identifying”), stated an editorial in *Taipei Times*. “The KMT is the enemy within, which if left to its own devices, would drive the nation into the sea” (Teng), mentioned another. Immersed in this dichotomic new cold war depiction of society, the political context in Taiwan is shifting from being one of pluralist discussion between supporters of diplomatic recognition of the *de facto* independence and supporters of the *status quo*, to become one based on the protection of national security by the loyal Taiwanese people against infiltrators and traitors who dare to contradict the anti-China mantra. As a consequence, democratic liberalism starts to suffer the consequences of a campaign against dissent.

As Balibar says elaborating on Carl Schmitt’s distinction between the “foreigner legitimate collective enemy” and “the illegitimate interior enemy,” the interior “bandit” becomes a source of dissension and “must be eliminated by any means necessary to preserve order and the state” (55–6). As the situation of confrontation escalates and the risk of military conflict rises, the materialization of anti-liberal measures against the internal enemies equally develops. The controversial *Anti-infiltration Act* to prevent Chinese interference in the Taiwanese media; the *Act Governing Relations Between the People of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area*, that censors Taiwanese promoting closer ties with China; or the *Investment Commission*, that ensures that companies in Taiwan cannot have Chinese controlling capital, are initial examples of a treacherous path. This intrusion of the law into the anti-China narrative poses a risk to the liberal-democratic system itself, in such a way that they create a political imaginary according to which anyone who advocates maintaining a cordial relationship with China can be branded an “infiltrator,” an act punishable by law. Paradoxically, this attitude finds its historical roots in 1949, only that by then the infiltrators were those who opposed the KMT and now are those close to that party the ones reviled as “foreign agents.” Any relation with China is sanctioned, while meddling, media connections and foreign capital coming from countries like the US is welcomed or at least allowed, favouring in this way just one interpretation of what Taiwan can aspire to be. The dominant anti-China establishment contributes to this drift by raising reactionary arguments towards not renewing media licenses to those who do not share this world view, some of which have been eventually closed (see Ruiz Casado, “Censorship”). Or proposes amendments of the legislation to forbid Taiwanese artists – and ordinary citizens – travelling to China and creating bonds with the enemy (see Chang), even alerting young Taiwanese who are purportedly paid off by China to defend political positions contrary to the DPP:

The fear is that these tactics would cause the Taiwanese to lower their guard on China, allowing it to wield greater influence here. Inevitably, this would help Beijing erode Taiwan’s democracy, by swaying people’s political positions and encouraging them to vote for *China-friendly politicians*, who could eventually sign agreements with Beijing that would see Taiwan lose its sovereignty, freedoms and way of life [my emphasis] (“Counting”).

This sort of propaganda manifesto departs from a self-indulgent position of moral superiority in which only those who defend the frontal opposition to China are defenders of democracy and, therefore, KMT politicians deemed “China-friendly politicians” because of their will to “sign agreements” with the enemy, are considered a threat to freedom and democracy. But democracy, to be truly free, must be liberal and allow people within Taiwan to defend the signing of agreements with China if that is what the citizens decide. Progressively, the treatment given by the institutions of Taiwan to its citizens is one of not trusting their deliberative capacity, treating them as immature children, and admonishing those who do not support the “proper” side in the cold war.

The last course of action defended by the US and its henchmen in Taiwan is that the island has to become a fortress able to defend itself (by buying more US weapons) because the US does not offer any official guarantee of military defence in the case of armed conflict. In a daring suggestion, or perhaps threat, a recent editorial in the *Taipei Times* surprisingly claimed: “It is time to turn Taiwan into the anti-communist fortress that Chiang Kai-shek wanted” (Chen, “Making”). In this manner, the polarization of discourse is risking the whole social foundation of Taiwan as a democratic and open society, moving it in a direction to the old times of the anti-communist witch hunt, dangerously forgetting what this fortress meant in terms of freedom. In the end, the intensely antagonistic populist – anti-CCP and anti-KMT – and nationalist – anti-Chinese – discourses are invoking the democratic principle of majority rule while perilously undermining the liberal principle of respect of pluralism, political rights, civil rights, and other freedoms.

While China threatens Taiwan’s sovereignty, the sovereign people of the island will have to decide what discourses they support and encourage. Put another way, Taiwanese will have to decide whether the end justifies the means, whether the liberal principle of pluralism should be sacrificed to maintain autonomy, or if there are other more suitable tracks. What seems irrefutable is that the progressive construction of Taiwan’s identity within the global anti-China hegemony leads to an unavoidable breakdown of the *status quo* in the Strait, moving both sides towards an ill-fated conflict. For there to be a solution, either Taiwan or China has to give up their positions completely, which seems implausible under this Schmittian state of affairs. Let us analyse one common statement in *Taipei Times*:

In short, as long as all Taiwanese have a strong determination to resist the enemy in the face of possible Chinese military aggression, all just and righteous forces in the international community, be it military, political, or diplomatic, will continue to support democratic and free Taiwan (Yao, “Nation’s”).

On the one hand, just and righteous forces, *all Taiwanese* under a democratic and free Taiwan; on the other hand, the communist enemy, Chinese military aggression, the malign leviathan. This Manichean picture might seem naïve, but its reiteration by politicians, journalists, and academics is crystallizing a new *common sense* within the island. This discursive operation seeks a war of position linking political society and civil society, seeking for cultural hegemony to dominate the state, expressing a national-collective will united *vis-à-vis* the shared enemy. Through these operations, the ruling elite “not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules” (Gramsci 244). However, it is becoming so exclusionary and entangled with Sinophobia that it risks stepping into the terrain of nativism and totalitarianism. The antagonism to the main opposition party and its related media and organizations, often considered as foreign agents of the evil Chinese enemy, are the classic operation of despotic regimes, the undemocratic operation *par excellence* that leads Taiwanese society towards a civil war mentality where liberalism can be sacrificed in order to safeguard democracy. Case in point, discourses first legitimize the militarisation of Taiwan and the orbit of China, escalating the conflict – “Either we arm Taiwan or we die trying” (Turton) – and, then, when China responds to this direct threat, it is justified that

With the likelihood of war rising wherever China has frontiers, Washington needs to work to ensure that the party that takes power in Taipei in 2024 is not the one that aligns itself with Chinese territorial claims, and foments trouble with Washington’s allies (Turton).

There is a point, when the elaboration of the *myth* of an inherently evil China becomes a consolidated political imaginary, that a political or even military intervention can become openly proposed without raising eyebrows – and, if it does cause a reaction of rejection, it will be tainted as having obscure pro-China intentions in response. The identity of *Taiwan*, in contention between two world views in hegemonic struggle, is thus structured as synonymous of an essential part of US national security, a military outpost, a puppet state if necessary until this idea is naturalised and accepted as the *common good* in the Western bloc (in China, of course, *Taiwan* is the object of other transformations of meaning, becoming something very different: a matter of honour or humiliation, a reminder of the colonial past, a mission that must be completed no matter the cost). Where is let the *Anti-infiltration Law* when interference comes from countries other than China? Is infiltration only severe when it supports DPP’s political opposition? This new

Taiwanese identity, crystallized on the basis of a particular articulation of what *democracy* means and considering the Schmittian rhetoric of the enemy as the essence of politics, threatens to lead Taiwan into inevitable conflict both against China and within Taiwanese society itself.

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