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The China-Taiwan dilemma: Uncovering the truth in cross-strait rhetoric through
analysis of political cartoons in China and Taiwan

In the last fifteen years, Taiwanese politics have undergone pivotal changes: the lifting of martial law in 1987, the institution of unprecedented presidential democratic elections in Taiwan in 1996, and the eventual inauguration of a president with native Taiwanese descent. The move towards democracy, however, has brought up the burning issue of Taiwan's independence. Mainland China has been steadfastly striving for peaceful reunification since the 1950's while the current Taiwanese government is taking a meandering path towards independence. Currently, populations on both sides of the strait are emotionally charged over the issue. There are numerous resolute supporters of reunification or independence and this rift is constantly being reflected in the media as seen in figure 1 and figure 2 both taken from online news sources:



Figure 1: Protesters against Taiwan's Independence in Hong Kong. Translation: "To want peace is to need unification; oppose violence, oppose Taiwan independence." –PeopleDaily.com



Figure 2: Proponents of Taiwan's independence peacefully protesting in Taipei, Taiwan. – Peter Ma, EtaiwanNews.com

In figure 1 are vehement believers of a unified China; they go as far as equating violence with the struggle for independence. Yet, in figure 2 are supporters of independence in a candle-lit peaceful protest. Why are people so emotional and polarized over the independence issue and what spurs their anger? Are the opposing governments really that outrageous? In fact, the political cartoons found in Mainland China and Taiwan's media misrepresent both the PROC and the ROC on the issue of Taiwan's independence; in effect, the media is contributing to the unnecessary acrimony existing between supporters of reunification and supporters of independence. This study examines how Chinese and Taiwanese political cartoons create skewed opinions in their audience in the hopes of clarifying the distortions of each government contrived by the pervasive visual media.

Introduction to Chinese History and Politics

To fully comprehend the political drama that plays out between China and Taiwan today, it is imperative to look back half a century to where it all began. It can be said that China's civil war gave birth to the quasi-state of Taiwan. After expelling the Japanese from China during WWII, the Communists led by Mao Zedong and the Nationalists (Kuomintang or KMT) led by Chiang Kai-shek and supported by the United States became entrenched in a civil war. Due to lack of popular support, the Nationalists lost the war on China's mainland and retreated their government, the Republic of China (ROC), to the island of Taiwan viewing "the move as temporary; maintaining that it alone was the legitimate government of all China" (Rawnsley, 6).¹ The Nationalists placed Taiwan under martial law and actively planned to re-invade mainland China.

¹ Corruption infested the KMT bureaucracy and thus severely damaged its popularity.

With each passing year, the Communist government, the People's Republic of China (PROC), strengthened its hold over greater-China, while the Nationalists scrambled for international recognition and support especially from the United States. To the frustration of the Nationalists, there never emerged a favorable moment in which to launch an attack on the Mainland Communists. The ROC, with the help of the US, was only able to ward off an attack from the Communists instead of retaking all of China.¹ As time passed, the cry for a second war died down, and in the international community, the ROC gradually lost its recognition as the legitimate government of all China.² At the same time, the division between China and Taiwan solidified. Stranded on Taiwan, the KMT "dominated the political process on the island, [still] claiming that their refugee regime was China's only legitimate government" (Chan 19). New cries eventually emerged under the repressive rule of the Nationalist regime; cries of democracy and independence would put Taiwan and China in the current era of political tension.

Media in China and Taiwan and the Arrival of Political Cartoons

Like the governments, the Chinese and Taiwanese media have developed and evolved separately. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), like any totalitarian institution, maintains control over China's media. During the nascent years of the PROC, Mao Zedong, China's most prominent communist ideologist, proclaimed the concept that "A journalist's first duties were to carry out revolution in the name of the party" (Chang, 41). Decades later during the 1980's, the PROC still adhered to the notion that the media's

¹ The United States never supported the KMT in retaking China. Instead, The US adhered to its Containment Policy in restricting the spread of China's communism.

² Once it became apparent that the PROC had a stable foothold in China, many countries broke ties with the ROC and formed diplomatic relations with the PROC out of practicality.

primary function was a political organ; "...journalism [still] exists to educate, to mobilize the masses, and to achieve party objectives" (Chang, 41). Only in the last decade has the CCP reluctantly loosened (but not fully released) its grip over the media.¹ However, criticism of government policies on sensitive topics such as China's rule over Hong Kong, Tibet, and Taiwan are forbidden (Hazelbarth).² Likewise, Taiwan's media has also experienced an initial period of repression and eventual liberalization. In 1947, the Constitution of the Republic of China promised to all citizens the "freedoms of speech, teaching, writing, and publication" (Taiwan's Media, sec. 1 par. 1). However, the KMT, being a one-party regime, oppressed these freedoms much in the same way the CCP held its iron grip over the Chinese media.³ It wasn't until the lifting of martial law in 1987 that the Taiwanese people began enjoying their promised rights. Over the last decade, Taiwan's media has undergone extensive liberalization. In the words of Taiwan's current government, "ROC citizens enjoy the same degree of press freedom as people in any other advanced, democratic nation" (Taiwan's Media, sec. 1 par. 10).

Naturally, these developments in the media of China and Taiwan affect the nature of the political cartoons presented to the public audience. Taiwanese editorial cartoons were nonexistent until the year 1987 (Wu Feng-shan, 5). The cartoonist Yu Fu (whose cartoons later appear in this study) was perhaps Taiwan's first professional editorial cartoonist. His unprecedented drawings in the Independence Morning Post immediately drew attention, approbation, and criticism from his Taiwanese audience (Kuan, 6).

¹ Budget cuts and commercialization have forced the CCP to reduce the depth and scope of its vigilance over the media (Hazelbarth; Kalathil).

² The British returned Hong Kong to China after 100 years of colonial rule. Currently, Tibet's religious leader, the Dalai Lama, is in exile from his homeland campaigning for the liberation of Tibet from China.

³ The Taiwanese government claims it restricted many of the freedoms due to national security concerns. The spread of communist propaganda especially terrified the government (Taiwan's Media, sec.1 par. 4).

Unlike in Taiwan, political cartoons in China are scarce. The dearth of politically oriented cartoons is not surprising, considering the CCP's ever-present grip over the Chinese media. In fact, I gathered mainland political cartoons exclusively from online news sources— usually the more liberalized media in China. (Kalathil, par. 3).¹ The relatively late arrival of political cartoons in China and Taiwan's media made them even more powerful in affecting their audiences. In order to comprehend this statement, one must step out of mainstream Western media where political cartoons are a tradition. For example, in the case of Yu Fu's cartoons, many of the inexperienced readers took the cartoons too literally and the "uglified" images of political figures shocked them (Kuan, 6).

The media, and thus political cartoons, is a powerful entity not only representing public thought, but also a steering thought in the sea of public opinion on the Taiwan Question.² Especially in China, the political cartoons (and the media in general) are completely one-sided. The media often directs the audience toward misinformation or exaggerations so that the audience forms harsh and vitriolic opinions of Taiwan's government or supporters of independence in general. Likewise, in Taiwan, political cartoons are an indicator of Taiwan's opinion toward mainland China. The situation is more complicated in Taiwan than in China, where virtually everyone believes in unification.³ The freedom of ideas has allowed the Taiwanese population to become divided between those who want independence, the status quo, or reunification. I chose to examine political cartoons that supported independence because they were the most

¹ China does have humor cartoons and a few international political cartoons. However, no cartoons concerning the government were found in printed form for this study. The mainland Chinese cartoons used in this study were taken from Chinese Internet news sources.

² The issue of Taiwan's reunification or independence is often simply referred to as the Taiwan Question.

³ The Chinese population's unified view toward Taiwan can probably be attributed to the one-sided media.

prevalent and scathing cartoons. Like their mainland counterparts, these cartoons often falsely or misleadingly portrayed the opposition and furthered the existence of outdated stereotypes and resentment. In the subsequent sections, both Chinese and Taiwanese cartoons will be broken down to their kernels of truth hidden beneath layers of deception and traditional stereotypes.

Mainland China's Devious Political Cartoons

It isn't uncommon for Chinese political cartoons to misrepresent the Taiwan government's policies or the current Taiwanese president Chen Shui-bian.¹ In the following cartoon titled "Land of the Lost" (figure 3), the cartoonist CoCo is criticizing Taiwan's "Go South Policy" in which the Taiwanese government urges Taiwanese businessmen to invest in Southeast Asian countries "with a view to cooling their [the businessmen's] craze for investing in mainland China" (Sofia Wu, par. 5). A caravan labeled as Taiwanese business is led by a shepherd who is pointing at a wasteland and exclaiming, "Look! Paradise!!" The sign with perching vultures labels the direction of the desert as the "Go South Policy." The shepherd with his glasses is of course Taiwan's president, Chen Shui-bian.

Figure 3: "Land of the Lost"
(流密之地)
The prophet points and
exclaims, "Look Paradise!"
--CoCo 黃永楠



¹ In the 2000 elections, the Taiwan people elected Chen Shui-bian and Annette Lu as Taiwan's first pro-independence president and first female vice-president.

The cartoon makes two misrepresentations. The fact that Chen is portrayed as a prophet leading his flock to a wasteland is a ploy by the cartoonist to damage the ethos of Chen. The cartoon accuses Chen of misleading the people or at least not recognizing the needs of the people, especially the businessmen. Interestingly, the KMT government implemented the “Go South Policy” before Chen became president (Sofia Wu, par. 5). Although president Chen supports the policy, the cartoon gives the image that Chen is the mastermind of it. The second misrepresentation is the depiction of the “Go South Policy” as a lost cause. It is true that the efficacy of the “Go South Policy” is waning under Chen’s presidency; Taiwanese investments in Southeast Asia have actually dropped over the last few years (“Investments”). However, it is largely due to China’s intervention. The business world has become very political, and China has threatened Southeast Asian countries that refrain from the “One China Policy” and attempt to form economic relations with Taiwan (Latieule).¹

A cartoonist supporting reunification certainly has the motives for making these erroneous representations. Chen is the poster-child of Taiwan’s independence movement. As head of a political party leaning toward independence (the Democratic Progressive Party), attacking the credibility of Chen is a constant effort.² Furthermore, China is increasingly benefiting from Taiwanese investments. By directing Taiwanese investments away from other regions, China accomplishes two goals: more Taiwanese investments fuel China’s economy and Taiwan’s economy develops a dependency on China’s market—a step towards reunification.

¹ Mainland China’s “One China Policy” states that there exists only one China and that Taiwan is a part of the aforementioned China (People’s Republic of China).

² The DDP was the first party other than the KMT to win the presidency. Unlike the KMT, which favors eventual reunification, the DDP looks at independence as a probable course for Taiwan. Not surprisingly, mainland China supports the KMT over the DDP as “the lesser of two evils.”



Figure 4: “Nuclear Warfare” (核武戰略)
 The words on the missiles form the phrase “nuclear warfare.”
 --Li Qing 李青

The friction between China and Taiwan in the business world is only an extension of the tension found in national security policies. In the following political cartoon titled, “Nuclear Weapons Warfare” drawn by Li Qing (see above figure 4), not only is Taiwan’s president misrepresented again, but also Taiwan’s military capabilities and its relationship with the United States are distorted. In the cartoon, the words on each missile spell out, “Nuclear Warfare,” and one of the missile is labeled with “US.” The sign with the skull and crossbones warns, “Danger. Do not enter.” In the middle of the missiles is Taiwan’s president vacationing in blissfully unaware of the sharks offshore representing tension in the region or the weapons of mass destruction beside him.

The cartoon’s main argument is that the relationship Taiwan has maintained with the US—specifically, in the acquirement of arms—is a threat to China. The US was one of the last major powers to recognize Communist China as the one and only China;

however, the US reaffirmed its support of Taiwan through the Taiwan Relations Act passed in 1979 (Chan 107).¹ The legislation made Taiwan a permanent US interest. Since then, mainland China, like Li Qing's cartoon, has criticized the U.S. Government "[of its] continued...arms sales to Taiwan, interference in China's internal affairs and obstruction to Taiwan's reunification with the mainland" (People's Republic of China). Adhering to the act, the US has sold various arms to Taiwan from fighter jets to naval equipment. The cartoon goes as far as asserting that the US has sold Taiwan nuclear missiles.

In the end, the audience is left with the distorted image that the US and president Chen are colluding in creating tension in the region. The mere thought of neighboring Taiwan having nuclear missiles evokes fear and thus is a play on the emotions of the audience. Again, the ethos of Chen Shui-bian is damaged; by placing Chen in the focus of the cartoon, the cartoonist names him as the culprit in creating political and military tension. The manner in which Chen is portrayed only serves to create the false impression that he enjoys the turmoil in the region or that he is protecting his own interests at the expense of others.² Chen, a carefree and careless man, is armed to the teeth with weapons—the resulting picture evokes distrust and paranoia in the Chinese audience.

In reality however, the threat of Taiwan should be downplayed. The Federation of American Scientists has determined Taiwan to be lacking in any nuclear weapons

¹To the dismay of many Taiwanese, The United States formally switched recognition from the ROC to the PROC in 1979. The Taiwan Relations Act was passed to ensure continued cultural and commercial ties between Taiwan and the US. The act allows the US to aide Taiwan militarily among other things even though the US does not officially recognize the Taiwanese government.

² Chen is often accused of furthering his own cause for independence without regard to the effects it has on the Taiwanese people. Chen's steps towards independence usually antagonize China. The threat of war destabilizes the economy and businessmen lose profits.

much less the ownership of a US provided nuclear weapon (“Nuclear Weapons,” par. 1). Furthermore, the retaking of China from the Communists is a lost cause no longer broached in modern Taiwan. On the contrary, Taiwan is on the defensive against a mainland invasion and it is for this reason arms sales have been made to Taiwan. Like in the previous cartoon, it is an oversimplification to exclusively credit president Chen with straining relationships across the strait. Every time Chen leans toward independence, he undeservingly draws criticism from *both* sides of the strait for threatening the stability in the region even though it can be counter argued that China’s intimidation significantly adds to the volatility of the situation.

These cartoons in conjunction form the perverted image of Taiwan as a dangerous renegade province led by an inept president who willfully generates tension in the region. Of course, this mudslinging is reciprocated in Taiwan’s cartoons.¹

Political Cartoons in Taiwan Reply with Traditional Stereotypes

Not surprisingly, many political cartoons in Taiwan explicitly depict the concept of reunification with the Mainland. In the next two cartoons (figure 5 and figure 6), Yu Fu and Ma Tin respectively present the hypothetical scenario of reunifying with mainland China. In the cartoon titled “Unification Is Arranged Marriage At Birth; Independence is Free Love,” Yu Fu illustrates the idea of reunification metaphorically as a traditionally arranged marriage. The former mainland Chinese leader Deng Xiao Ping is portrayed as a physically unattractive groom deadly serious about his arranged marriage as seen by his dagger.² On the right is Lee Teng Hui, Taiwan’s previous KMT president, drawn as the

¹ The term “mudslinging” is used in politics to refer to the childish name-calling or vilification often found in political propaganda.

² Deng Xiaoping (1902-1997) was one of China’s most influential leaders. He was chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

nervous father of the bride-to-be.¹ The woman standing in the center is the wife of the father; she suggests to her husband, “Honey, he comes to demand marriage. Can you tell him unification is arranged marriage at birth; independence is free love?” Of course, the faceless bride being married off is no one else but the people of Taiwan. Similarly, Ma Ting’s cartoon “One China Principle” depicts a forceful reunification situation. Mainland China is represented by a military figure with a dagger by his side enthusiastically calling out, “Come! Come! My Taiwanese brethren, all you have to do is submit to the One China policy and we can talk about anything...”² An empty chair situated under a trap labeled “One China Principle” is designated for Taiwan.



Figure 5: “Unification is Arranged Marriage at Birth; Independence is Free Love”

(統一，指腹為婚；獨立，自由戀愛)

The wife voices to her husband, “Honey, he comes to demand marriage. Can you tell him unification is arranged marriage at birth; independence is free love?”

--Yu Fu 魚夫, Taiwan without Martial Law



Figure 6: “One China Principle” (一個中國原則)

The military figure shouts, “Come! Come! My Taiwanese brethren, all you have to do is submit to the One China policy and we can talk about anything...”

--Ma Ting 馬丁

¹ Lee Teng-hui was vice president during Chiang Ching-kuo’s presidency. When Chiang Ching-kuo, the son of Chiang Kai-shek, suddenly passed away in 1988, Lee rose to the position of president. Lee was elected in to the presidency in 1990 and democratically elected again in 1996. After the 2000 elections, Lee broke from the KMT (and at the same time, the KMT disowned him) and formed his own party, the Taiwan Solidarity Union. (ROC Chronology)

² Taiwan refuses to hold talks with mainland China if it has to recognize the One China policy.

Both cartoons give the false impression that reunification with mainland China incontestably involves the use of China's armed forces. In reality, the Mainland government has strived to accomplish its "Peaceful Unification; One China, Two Systems" policy formulated as early as the 1950's (People's Republic of China). In such a policy, Taiwan would be able to maintain its current form of government and be given a high degree of autonomy. China's government has reserved the right to use military action if necessary but highly recommends the use of peace negotiations in implementing its policy of "One China" (People's Republic of China). Individually, Ma Ting's cartoon rashly argues that any negotiation under the "One China" policy is a trap. The military figure's unctuous manner in soliciting for dialogue hurts his ethos as a credible person. The audience is then left with a deep mistrust in China's seemingly innocuous calls for peace talks. It is also interesting to note that Yu Fu's cartoon was drawn in 1987 (just after martial law was lifted in Taiwan), thirteen years earlier than Ma Ting's cartoon. The recurring image of mainland China possessing a dagger in both cartoons shows the great extent in which Taiwanese society is ingrained with the image of China as militaristic. Many Taiwanese feel that they are irreproachable for thinking China militaristic; for instance, many cite China's missile threats in 1996 as justification for breaking off any form of dialogue with the Mainland.¹ It takes a heart full of courage to have trust in such a situation, but any form of reconciliation begins with trust.

Like the mainland Chinese cartoon "Land of the Lost" in figure 3, the following Taiwanese cartoon represents the extension of the political conflict into the economic/business world. This cartoon also drawn by Ma Ting and titled "APEC Park in

¹ In 1996, mainland China "test-fired" missiles off the coast of Taiwan in response to Taiwan's first democratic presidential elections. ([ROC Chronology](#))

Shanghai” (figure 7) shows the crudely dressed Chinese foreign minister Tang Jianxuan blocking a formally clothed Taiwanese diplomat from entering an APEC (Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation) summit meeting held in Shanghai. Every year, various countries gather at APEC to discuss various economic and social issues. The sign to the side of the door reads: “Taiwan and dogs not permitted to enter.”¹



Ma Ting’s cartoon has a valid point to argue; however, at the same time, he unnecessarily foments anger in his audience and insults the mainland Chinese as outdated. Taiwan is officially part of APEC but is always under the constant pressure of China from sending high-ranking officials such as current or past presidents or vice presidents. As an additional means of downplaying Taiwan status as a sovereign nation, China states that Taiwan must attend APEC under the name “Taipei, China”. When APEC was hosted by Shanghai, China in 2001, Taiwan’s delegate, Li Yuan-Zu, was barred from

¹ In Chinese culture, degrading anyone to the level of a dog is perhaps the worst insult.

attending because he was deemed too political by China's foreign minister Tang Jianxuan (McMillan).¹ As a way of "getting back" at China, Ma Ting first draws anger from his Taiwanese audience by saying China is equating Taiwan to a dog when it bars Taiwan from attending APEC. Then, Ma Ting goes on to stereotype China as an outdated country—an act previously mirrored in Yu Fu's cartoon in figure 5. Referring to Yu Fu's cartoon, the notion of reunification by force is regarded as an outdated idea (much like arranged marriages in imperial China) formulated by a backwards China. In effect, Yu Fu is suggesting that modern democracy should be used in answering the Taiwan Question. A decade later, Ma Ting again attempts to portray China as archaic and below Taiwan's level of economic success. In reality, though, Shanghai is the worst city to portray as outmoded; its tall, nouveau skyscrapers and bustling economy (enjoyed by countless Taiwanese businessmen) are proof of China's rapid and successful modernization. The idea that China is outdated is itself outdated. Like the fox that assumed out-of-reach grapes were sour, Ma Ting unreasonably degrades the Shanghai APEC summit because Taiwan was not allowed to attend.² Taiwan certainly has a right to feel frustrated and insulted, but does it justify the mudslinging seen in Ma Ting's cartoon?

From these three cartoons, a clear set of traditionally biased views can be seen to exist in the Taiwanese audience: China is militaristic and outdated. Both are inflated if not groundless stereotypes used by cartoons to instill anger, paranoia, and a sense of superiority in the Taiwanese audience.

¹ Li Yuan-Zu was a former vice president of Taiwan during Lee Teng-hui's 1990-1996 presidency.

² The fox and grapes are an allusion to one of Aesop's fables in which a fox salivates over a bunch of grapes. Because the grapes are too high for it to reach, the fox assumes the grapes are sour.

The Need for Reconciliation

Political cartoons are usually exaggerations and distortions of the truth, and any person of sound mind would be aware of the pitfalls in reading a cartoon too literally. Nonetheless, a good political cartoon (like any type of propaganda) draws on and builds on the thoughts and emotions already harbored in the minds of its audience. Political cartoons found in Chinese and Taiwanese media are no exception; they hint at and sometimes outright lie to their audience about the political situation surrounding the issue of reunification/independence. All too often, proponents and opponents of Taiwan's independence use the biased media as a source of simple but flawed reasons to justify reunification or independence. Many of these diehards have built themselves pedestals out of baseless impressions and inflated stereotypes to stare down at one another while unaware of the true complexities of the situation. In the end, finding a solution to the Taiwan Question becomes like the senseless mudslinging contest often seen in political cartoons. It saddens my heart to see a people who share thousands of years of tradition and culture to be so bitterly divided. For once, people need to step down and out of their preconceptions and examine the issue of Taiwan's independence from all perspectives and become responsible activists for reconciliation not rash reactionaries. Only then will they see the true problems plaguing the issue and only from here can meaningful and effective dialogue be initiated.

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