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War of Narratives: A Concentric Dissection of China's Taiwan Policy

Zhengyi Zhang

This paper explores the intricate strategic narratives that China employs in its policy towards Taiwan. Through concentric analyses, it dissects China's narratives towards Taiwan at three levels: system-level narratives, identity narratives and issue narratives. At the systemic level, China's narrative aims to position Taiwan's status under the broader goal of national unity and territorial integrity, emphasising the one-China policy and opposing external intervention. Identity narratives delve into shared history, culture, and nationalism to reinforce claims to Taiwan as part of China's inherent identity and destiny. Issue narratives, on the other hand, focus on interpreting specific events, portraying reunification with Taiwan as legitimate, inevitable and a matter of national pride. This paper also mentions counter-narratives in Taiwan that emphasise Taiwan's democratic values, unique identity and the challenges posed by China's hard-line policies. The analysis reveals how these narratives contribute to increasing China's international influence, undermining Taiwan's legitimacy, and fuelling domestic nationalism, while also potentially influencing strategic responses across the region and around the world.

Introduction

Taiwan, officially known as the Republic of China (ROC), represents a complex and enduring issue in the geopolitics of East Asia. Established by the Kuomintang (KMT) following their retreat in the aftermath of the Chinese Civil War, Taiwan has stood as a symbol of resistance and a challenge to the People's Republic of China's (PRC) claims of sovereignty. The historical and strategic significance of Taiwan has placed it at the centre of a longstanding diplomatic and ideological struggle between the PRC and the ROC, which continues to impact regional stability and international relations.

The question of Taiwan's status has persisted as a thorny issue for successive generations of Chinese leadership, the widening power

gap between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait only serves to complicate the matter further. For decades, Chinese leaders have oscillated between strategies of peaceful reunification and forceful annexation, deploying a range of strategic narratives to assert their claims over Taiwan. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, there has been a noticeable shift in Beijing's approach, marked by an apparent loss of patience and an intensification of efforts to assert sovereignty over Taiwan.¹ This paper delves into the multifaceted nature of China's strategic narratives towards Taiwan, dissecting them across three distinct levels: system-level narratives, identity narratives, and issue narratives. These narratives serve multiple purposes: bolstering the PRC's international standing, undermining the legitimacy of the ROC, negating Taiwanese identity in favour of a unified Chinese identity, portraying Taiwan negatively, and fuelling domestic nationalism in the PRC. It will also mention Taiwan's counter-narrative, as reflected in the promotion of democratic values, the construction of its unique identity, and its response to the mainland's economic and military-diplomatic offensive. Due to Taiwan's important strategic position, the strategic narratives across the Taiwan Strait have had a great impact on the East Asia-Pacific strategies of countries around the world, and it is worthwhile to analyse these strategic narratives in detail.

The Geopolitical Intricacies and Post-Civil War History of the Taiwan Issue

After the defeat of the Kuomintang in Taiwan, the Taiwan Strait became a natural barrier, as the People's Republic of China, lacking a navy, was unable to defeat Taiwan, which was then a relatively strong maritime power, at sea. And, due to the island's strategic importance, Taiwan, which has been called "the second unsinkable aircraft carrier", played a vital role in protecting US assets in the Western Pacific.²

1 Suisheng Zhao, "Is Beijing's Long Game on Taiwan About to End? Peaceful Unification, Brinkmanship, and Military Takeover," *Journal of Contemporary China* 32, no.143(2023): 706.

2 Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, "*Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security. Cambridge Studies in International Relations*", (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 138-140; Sheryn Lee, "The Defining Divide: Cross-Strait Relations and US, Taiwan, China Strategic Dynamics," *Security*

As a result, the US-Taiwan alliance shaped the regional landscape in the early post-war period, and Taiwan existed in the world as a legitimate China. This state of affairs lasted until 1971, when the United Nations recognised the People's Republic of China as the sole legitimate representative of China and the Republic of China was expelled from the UN.³ Taiwan's declining international status led to a growing number of countries establishing formal diplomatic relations with China and severing formal diplomatic ties with Taiwan, leaving it in diplomatic isolation.⁴ With the election of pro-independence Lee Teng-hui as president in the late 20th century and the victories of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) in 2000 and 2004, Taiwan demonstrated a growing tendency towards independence, in response to which China introduced an anti-separation law in 2005, confirming that force would be used if Taiwan became independent.⁵ This tense situation has continued to the present day, with China's patience running thin and Taiwan's independent tendencies growing stronger, as mentioned before.

The Definition of Strategic Narratives

Before moving on to the three main sections of the article, a definition and explanation of strategic narratives is necessary to help with the specific analyses that follow. According to Miskimmon et al., strategic narratives are representations of a series of events and identities, as well as the government's efforts to achieve its goals by assigning defined meanings to the past, present, and future.⁶ Simply put, strategic narratives aim to influence other actors' responses to events, shaping their identities as well as their thinking, in the short and long term.⁷ It has been categorised into three chief concentric levels, with system-

Challenges 7, no.1(2011): 88.

3 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). *Restoration of the lawful rights of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations* 2758:XXVI (1971): 2.

4 Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, 149-151.

5 Sheryn Lee, *The Defining Divide*, 80.

6 Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, "*Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*", (New York: Routledge, 2013), 57-58.

7 Lawrence Freedman, "Strategic Communication," *Adelphi Paper* 45, (no.379, 2006): 78.

level narratives on the outermost layer, identity narratives on the middle layer, and issue narratives at the innermost core. First, system-level narratives explain how the international structure has changed over time and are the cornerstone of other strategic narratives. Identity narratives define how states, organisations and other actors perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others in the international arena. Issue narratives influence how specific international issues are understood and debated, often mono-thematic.⁸ These theories can be applied to China's strategic narratives on the issue of Taiwan, and their use has gradually increased in frequency and taken on a radicalising character since Xi Jinping's rise to power, which is also closely related to the power contrast between China and Taiwan.⁹

The system-level of strategic narratives

The system-level dimension of strategic narratives, which is a larger framework out of the three, occurs at the national level and takes the form of a grand strategy. At this level, China's strategic narrative depicts the Taiwan issue as one of national unity and territorial integrity, rather than one of legitimacy between two equal regimes. China emphasises that Taiwan is an integral part of its territory, a renegade province that must eventually be brought back under its control, and that any attempts at Taiwan independence are a violation of its sovereignty.¹⁰ Moreover, China places the one-China policy under its own strategic narratives, describing the Taiwan issue as its question of own national security, and that "the resolution of the Taiwan issue is an internal affair of China and should be resolved by the Chinese people themselves without resorting to foreign forces".¹¹

8 Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, "*Strategic Narratives*", 10-11.

9 Yi Edward Yang, "China's Strategic Narratives in Global Governance Reform under Xi Jinping," *Journal of Contemporary China* 30, no.128(2021), 300-301.

10 Mingfu Liu, "*The China dream: great power thinking & strategic posture in the post-American era*", (New York: CN Times Books, 2015), 227, 323-324.

11 State Council of PRC. "The one-China principle and the issue of Taiwan", 2000, accessed 4 Jan 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zt_674979/dnzt_674981/qtzt/twwt/twwtbps/202206/t20220606_10699030.html.

It is not sufficient to achieve the strategic narratives described above, but rather to build on a larger system-level strategic narrative in which China seeks to establish a balanced, multipolar world order. For example, it has emphasised in the past Zhou Enlai's elegant diplomatic gestures and his Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, demonstrating that China maintains a friendly position of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.¹² Furthermore, China's foreign policy has often displayed counter-hegemonic tendencies, opposing the dominant influence of both the Soviet Union and the United States during and after the Cold War.¹³ This stance is partly a response to the "century of humiliation" China endured, where it suffered under foreign domination and intervention. This has shaped China's current approach to international relations, where it positions itself as a champion of national sovereignty and an opponent of hegemonic practice. The narrative of China's "peaceful rise" is another critical component of this strategy, designed to counter fears of China's emergence as a global power and to reassure the international community of its peaceful intentions.¹⁴ This narrative has helped China cultivate a friendlier international image and bolster its credibility as a nation that respects the sovereignty of other countries and opposes interventionism.¹⁵ The peaceful rise narrative is a strategic tool in China's diplomatic arsenal, intended to assuage concerns about its growing power while advancing its interests and influence on the global stage.

However, China's internationalised portrayal of the one-China policy is to some extent its own side of the narrative, and although China claims that its principles are the general consensus of the 181 countries or territories with which it has diplomatic relations, only 51 have actually maintained a position on the one-China principle that is

12 Hongying Wang and Yeh-Chung Lu, "The Conception of Soft Power and its Policy Implications: a comparative study of China and Taiwan," *Journal of Contemporary China* 17, no.56(2008): 429.

13 Mingfu Liu, "*The China dream*", 80-81.

14 Yiwei Wang, "Public Diplomacy and the Rise of Chinese Soft Power," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no.1(2008), 263.

15 Mingfu Liu, "*The China dream*", 50-54.

consistent with that of China.¹⁶ In response, Taiwan's counter-narrative emphasises its commitment to democratic values in the context of global democracy, and claims that its allies - Europe and the United States - have their own, one-China policies that are at odds with China. But China's rapid rise has made the option of economic diplomacy more effective, and in other cases even forcing countries to back down through power politics.¹⁷ As China's economic diplomacy expands its rhetoric beyond the economic sphere to shape international opinion about Taiwan, Taiwan's counter-narrative has become increasingly difficult and its voice is diminishing in the international community.

China's system-level strategic narratives on Taiwan thus form part of a larger story about China and the international order that unfolds in terms of China's role as a peacefully rising global power, a defender of a world order in which national sovereignty is inviolable, opposes the hegemonic and interventionist rhetoric of the Global North and advocates the establishment of a multipolar, balanced and harmonious world order. In this narrative, Taiwan is portrayed as an integral part of China's territory, divided by historical eras such as colonialism and the Cold War. The story also underscores the notion of the "one-China" policy, which is positioned as the basis for maintaining global stability and respect for international norms, as an increasingly powerful China sees it as the key to establishing diplomatic relations. Through such logically self-referential strategic narratives, China can thwart external interference as an expression of its internal affairs and its defence of the world at large, which enhances the legitimacy of its claim on Taiwan.

The Identity Narratives

Within the larger framework of system-level narratives, the legitimacy

16 Wei-Feng Tzeng, "China's Comprehensive Approach to Shaping the Narrative on Taiwan," in *Unpacking Beijing's Narrative on Taiwan*, ed. Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy (Institute for Security & Development Policy, 2023), 15.

17 Chong Ja Jan, "The Many "One Chinas": Multiple Approaches to Taiwan and China," *Carnegie China*. 2023, accessed Jan 5, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/02/09/many-one-chinasmultiple-approaches-to-taiwan-and-china-pub-89003>.

of China's claim to Taiwan is strengthened, but there is still a need for strategic narratives from the social, individual perspective, that is, the creation of identity narratives. This strategic narrative consists of three main components: history, culture, and nationalism. There are strong links between the three, as Chinese nationalism easily draws strength from its history and culture due to the country's long history and, as will be mentioned below, its cultural continuity, and the founding of the People's Republic of China relied heavily on domestic nationalism, with its founding father, Mao Zedong, for example, being a staunch nationalist.¹⁸ Firstly, Chinese diplomats happily refer to their 5,000 years of imperial history, although the first 1,000 years are to some extent untested, while Taiwan was discovered by the Chinese regime in 230 AD and incorporated during the Qing Dynasty, which reinforced the historical unity between the two sides.¹⁹ Its subsequent occupation and colonisation by Japan in 1895 for 50 years and then by the Kuomintang regime after 1945 has been described as a bitter, unnatural division, and one that will inevitably lead to the reunification of China as a matter of historical necessity.²⁰

The enduring legacy of China's long history is deeply intertwined with its rich cultural heritage and the use of ideographs, a distinctive aspect of Chinese civilisation.²¹ The official narrative propagated by the Chinese government emphasises the shared linguistic, cultural, and historical connections that span the Taiwan Strait, with a particular focus on traditional Confucian values. This narrative is not just a mainland phenomenon but is also echoed in Taiwan's strategic narratives. Taiwan, through its use of traditional Chinese characters and its promotion of traditional Chinese culture, positions itself as the authentic custodian of these ancient traditions.²² This cultural alignment serves as a bridge between the two territories, reinforcing

18 Henry Kissinger, *On China* (Beijing: China CITIC Press: 2012), 97.

19 Consulate General of PRC in Busan, "Taiwan has been part of China since ancient times," 2010, accessed 30 Dec 2023, http://busan.china-consulate.gov.cn/zt/zgtw/201004/t20100428_5781266.htm.

20 Suisheng Zhao, "Is Beijing's Long Game on Taiwan About to End? Peaceful Unification, Brinkmanship, and Military Takeover", 706.

21 Neil Munro, "China's Identity through a Historical Lens," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies Strategic Culture*. (2022), 37.

22 Hongying Wang and Yeh-Chung Lu, "The Conception of Soft Power", 433.

a sense of shared heritage. However, in recent decades, leaders from Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) have made concerted efforts to cultivate a distinct Taiwanese identity, distinct from the traditional Republic of China (ROC) identity. This move is seen as an attempt to differentiate Taiwan from the overarching one-China strategic narratives that Beijing espouses. Despite these efforts, the Chinese identity narrative, deeply rooted in thousands of years of shared history and culture, persists as a form of resistance to the Taiwanese push for a unique identity, although its influence appears to be waning in the face of Taiwan's evolving national consciousness.²³

The identity narratives about history mentioned above also contribute greatly to nationalist identity narratives in China, these narratives often juxtapose the past glory of China's imperial era with the tumultuous and painful period known as the "century of humiliation," during which China experienced significant external aggression and internal turmoil.²⁴ This historical framing plays a critical role in shaping contemporary Chinese nationalism, particularly in the context of the Communist Party's leadership, which is often credited with enabling the Chinese people to 'stand up' and reclaim their national dignity. Especially after Xi Jinping's rise to power, China's official 'Chinese Dream' narrative has gradually emerged, the concept of the 'Chinese Dream,' a central theme in Xi's vision for the country, encapsulates this resurgence of national pride and ambition. The perceived incomplete reunification of China, with Taiwan remaining outside of PRC control, is often portrayed as a glaring obstacle to the fulfilment of the Chinese Dream. As study notes, the recovery of Taiwan is thus not merely a territorial concern for China but is imbued with deep symbolic significance, it is seen as a critical step towards erasing the lingering scars of the past and achieving the comprehensive national rejuvenation that is at the heart of the Chinese Dream²⁵. This narrative intertwines historical, nationalistic, and political elements, highlighting the complexity of the Taiwan issue in China's domestic and foreign policy.

23 Ibid., 434, 437

24 Neil Munro, "China's Identity through a Historical Lens", 36.

25 Mingfu Liu, "*The China dream*", 227, 340.

Thus, the identity strategic narratives of China towards Taiwan begin with the story of a glorious civilisation torn apart by internal conflict and external aggression, symbolising a period of weakness and division in China known as the Century of Humiliation. The story then shifts to the present, where a revived and powerful China is striving to right the wrongs of history and realise its long-cherished dream of national reunification. Taiwan is portrayed as a lost sibling, separated by the waves of history but destined to be reunited with the mainland. This narrative aims to resonate with the Chinese people's sense of national pride and historical mission. It helps to create a strong identity link between the Chinese people and the Taiwan question, viewing reunification not only as a political end but also as a moral imperative and a crucial means towards restoring China's rightful place in the world.

The Issue Narratives

After the system-level narratives as well as the identity narratives in the larger framework, issue narratives can function by explaining particular events and combining them with the first two strategic narratives. On the one hand, China's issue narratives are largely aimed at convincing international community that the recovery of Taiwan is legitimate. For example, after the outbreak of COVID-19, the Taiwanese authorities attempted to leverage COVID-19 to make themselves a member of the WHO as a sovereign state, because Taiwan is unable to participate in the international system by establishing diplomatic relations with other countries and joining international organisations, this ability is severely limited by China's use of international influence.²⁶ But this does not mean that Taiwan is excluded from WHO, they are just not a sovereign participant.²⁷ China claimed to have been cooperating with Taiwanese experts and helping Taiwan fight the pandemic since the outbreak, a move that could be considered "ungrateful" by China,

26 Richard C Bush, *Untying the Knot: Making Peace in the Taiwan Strait* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), 6.

27 Yonghong Tang, "Tsai unscrupulously exploiting epidemic". *China Daily*. (2020), accessed 5 Jan 2024, <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202002/14/WS5e45d5cea3101282172776ad.html>.

not to mention ‘blood brotherhood’.²⁸ Taiwan has not only leveraged this incident as an opportunity to seek independence, but elsewhere, such as in the manufacturing sector, it has also printed the ‘Made in Taiwan’ label on its products, a practice that is not uncommon, Taiwan is not only using this event as an opportunity to seek independence, but elsewhere, such as in international arena, it is also using the name *Taiwan*, rather than *Taiwan, China*.²⁹ Through such narratives, China combines them with domestic nationalism to incite public anger at home and utilise them as its own weapon; at the same time, at the international level, because China’s system-level narratives package the Taiwan issue as its own internal issue under the one-China policy, it can make the international community less supportive of the Taiwan independence by using its soft power. In addition, China is reducing the legitimacy of the Taiwanese government by spreading information that reduces the credibility of the government and is tinged with conspiracy theories.³⁰ Research shows that during Taiwan’s local and presidential elections from 2020 to 2022, China, through its proxies, disseminated news and images of ‘democratic failure’ in Taiwan, mainly in terms of the ruling party’s loss of credibility, the government’s incompetence in governance, and including that ‘Taiwan is just a tool of the US’, ‘the US hollowed out TSMC’ and other statements.³¹ It has created division and distrust among the Taiwanese people and increased the legitimacy of China’s recovery of Taiwan.

On the other hand, China can also make the international community believe that the recovery of Taiwan is inevitable by explaining certain news and events. Firstly, China has always suppressed Taiwan’s international space through economic inducement and diplomatic coercion. For example, the number of countries with which Taiwan has diplomatic recognition has been reduced to 14 by 2021, with the

28 Ibid.

29 Xing Dong, “First pineapples, now sugar apples: Taiwan threatens to take China to WTO over new fruit import ban”. ABC News, (2021) accessed 5 Jan 2024. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-09-21/china-taiwan-fruit-ban-may-jeopardise-application/100479612>.

30 Poyu Tseng, “Taiwan-China and the ‘Battle of Narratives’” in *Unpacking Beijing’s Narrative on Taiwan*, ed. Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy (Institute for Security & Development Policy, 2023), 41-42.

31 Ibid., 46.

vast majority of countries recognising the One China policy, and China has spared no effort to prevent Taiwan from attending international organisations as a sovereign state.³² Such issue narratives can create a sense that Taiwan has no allies internationally and that re-joining China is only a matter of time. Secondly, China has worked hard to describe Taiwan's dependence on itself, especially economically; China has always been Taiwan's largest, major trading partner, and despite Tsai's efforts to shed her dependence on China since she came to power, exports to China have continued unabated.³³ China has weaponised this dependence and applied it to soft power, hitting Taiwan's tourism industry by restricting mainland tourists, and coercing Taiwan through economic sanctions like raising tariffs, Xinhua propagated this as Taiwan's inability to leave the mainland and the futility of independence.³⁴ Thirdly, the issue narratives of China's recent frequent military manoeuvres in the vicinity of Taiwan and its much-talked-about forceful reunification of Taiwan, as well as the tepid reaction of the United States, can create a sense of powerlessness among the Taiwanese people and use both the hard and soft power to make the world believe that if China is determined to attack Taiwan, no country will be able to protect it, and that its reunification cause is unstoppable.³⁵ By interpreting and publicising certain events in a particular way as described above, China is attempting to make the re-annexation of Taiwan sufficiently recognisable in the world and to reduce the level of reaction from the populations of other countries.

In response to the challenges from China in issue narratives, Taiwan has also achieved a lot of counter-narratives. Firstly, Taiwan vigorously promotes its soft power, such as good governance, good economic

32 Suisheng Zhao, "Is Beijing's Long Game on Taiwan About to End? Peaceful Unification, Brinkmanship, and Military Takeover", 709.

33 Ibid., 710.

34 Reuters, "China threatens more trade sanctions on Taiwan as election nears," (2023), accessed 6 Jan 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-threatens-more-trade-sanctions-taiwan-election-nears-2023-12-27/>; Xinhua, "Taiwan Affairs Office: Facts prove Taiwan's economic development can't be separated from mainland China" (2020), accessed 6 Jan 2024, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-12/30/content_5575440.htm.

35 Suisheng Zhao, "Is Beijing's Long Game on Taiwan About to End? Peaceful Unification, Brinkmanship, and Military Takeover", 714-721.

development and stable social environment, especially for the nascent democracies in South-East Asia, which can increase their goodwill and political support for Taiwan.³⁶ Secondly, Taiwan's well-developed information industry can also be a major pillar against China's economic pressure, and through cooperation with other countries in the era of globalisation, Taiwan can set an example of economic development. Third, in the face of China's military pressure, Taiwan has held frequent military exercises, such as the Hankwang-33 military drills, and has increased military cooperation with traditional allies such as the United States and Japan, in order to advertise to the world its determination to counter China's forceful attack on Taiwan.³⁷

Conclusion

In conclusion, the strategic narrative of China regarding Taiwan is a complex and multi-faceted construct, shaped by a confluence of historical, cultural, and political factors. At its core, it encompasses system-level narratives that touch upon the norms of international sovereignty and the widely debated one-China policy, along with a strong stance against hegemony and interventionism. These system-level narratives are intricately linked with identity narratives, which emphasise historical and cultural unity, as well as the theme of national rejuvenation. In parallel, issue narratives justify the rationality and inevitability of China's policies and actions towards Taiwan, painting them as natural and necessary steps in the pursuit of national integrity and unity. On the other side of the strait, Taiwan's counter-narratives strive to establish its distinct identity, sovereignty, and democratic values. However, the effectiveness of these narratives faces challenges due to the significant power disparity between China and Taiwan. Despite the increasing international recognition of Taiwan's democratic achievements and its significant role in global

36 Wang, Hongying, and Yeh-Chung Lu. "The Conception of Soft Power and its Policy Implications: a comparative study of China and Taiwan." *Journal of Contemporary China* 17, no.56 (2008): 425-447.

37 Patrick Porter and Michael Mazarr, "Countering China's Adventurism over Taiwan: A Third Way," *Lowy Institute* (2021), accessed 30 Dec 2023, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/countering-china-s-adventurism-over-taiwan-third-way-0>.

affairs, the island's diplomatic space remains constrained by China's growing influence and assertive foreign policy.

This dynamic interplay of narratives reflects the ongoing tension and complexity of the Taiwan issue. It underscores the need for patience, strategic thinking, and comprehensive understanding from the Chinese leadership. The Taiwan question is not just a matter of territorial sovereignty; it is also a test of China's approach to international relations, its adherence to the principles of peaceful coexistence, and its ability to manage complex cross-strait relations in a rapidly changing world.

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