

Imaginaries of enmity across the Taiwan Strait: The ‘cartoon war’ between *Taipei Times* and *Global Times*

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Abstract

This article reconsiders the Taiwan Strait conflict by encouraging a deeper exploration of the construction of sociopolitical imaginaries of enmity through editorial political cartoons. It does so, moreover, by emphasizing the need to attend to the triadic China–Taiwan–US relations, rather than just focusing on cross-Strait developments. Through this study, we focus on editorial political cartoons as visual schematic elements that aid in describing and explaining overarching discursive practices. We show how the political cartoons of China’s *Global Times* and Taiwan’s *Taipei Times* analysed in this article reflect the evolving dynamics and contemporary tensions in China–Taiwan–US relations. Furthermore, these cartoons underscore the importance of visual media in co-constructing conceptions of ‘friends’ and ‘foes’ that ultimately influence those very dynamics and, at least partially, aid in explaining those tensions. We reveal the existence of several parallels between the political imaginaries represented by the cartoons of both outlets, especially concerning the construction of an ‘external enemy’: the United States in *Global Times* and China in *Taipei Times*. However, notable differences also emerge, including the contrasting representation of the US role, as well as the predominant portrayal of ‘internal enemies’ and a higher degree of dehumanization in the Taiwanese outlet.

Keywords

Taiwan Strait conflict, discourse analysis, political cartoons, enmity construction, Chinese media, Taiwanese media

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This research undertakes a discursive analysis of editorial political cartoons featured in China's *Global Times* (henceforth *GT*) and Taiwan's *Taipei Times* (henceforth *TT*) between 2 July 2022 and 13 February 2024. By considering the inherent influence of cartoons as tools for constructing meaning, this article investigates how these cartoons contribute to shaping sociopolitical imaginaries both nationally and internationally. Through a comparative analysis of the cartoons in both outlets, we investigate how they construct the identities of 'Self' and 'Other' through a variety of discursive strategies. The research focuses on two dimensions that characterize the antagonistic practices of what we refer to as a 'cartoon war' between *GT* and *TT*. The first dimension addresses the representation of Taiwan from China's perspective and vice versa. The second explores how the cartoons from both outlets portray the United States as an actor in the Taiwan Strait conflict and in broader geopolitical contexts.

Etched within the landscape of political communication, cartoons serve as an integral intersection that delivers artistic expression to audiences through politics and political communication through art. In the context of news media, political cartoons materialize as graphic editorials with a 'primary function of influencing, reflecting, or reinforcing public opinion by commenting on specific events and personalities'.¹ Turn to newspapers from Beijing to Boston, and distilled before the reader are intricate political scenarios which are captured onto seemingly simplistic and stimulating images – evoking sensual immediacy at first sight that written discourse simply cannot replicate. The cartoons prod, deride, and scorn all in the name of humour and mockery, yet their underlying meaning is deeper, and their ultimate objectives are more cunning.

On 29 July 2022, Taiwanese media outlet *TT* released a cartoon (Figure 1) depicting China as an exhausted rat attempting to halt a car labelled 'Pelosi's intended trip to Taiwan'; the driver of the car exclaims, 'You sure you can stop this? I haven't even started the engine yet.' Five days later, on 3 August 2022, China's media outlet *GT* published a cartoon (Figure 2) showing Taiwan's then-president Tsai Ing-wen unfurling a

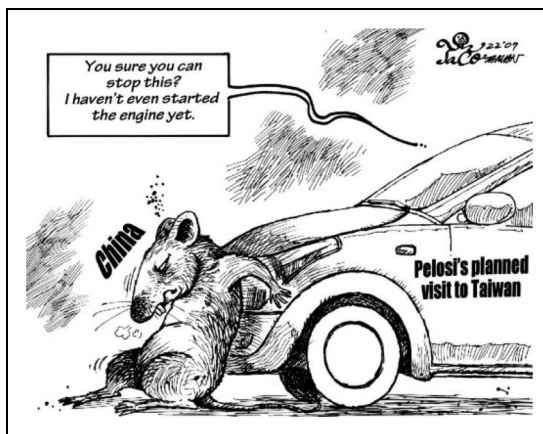


Figure 1. Cartoon by Taco, *Taipei Times*, 29 July 2022, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2022/07/29/2003782598>, accessed 16 October 2024.



Figure 2. Cartoon by Liu Rui, *Global Times*, 3 August 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202208/1272144.shtml>, accessed 16 October 2024.

red carpet for the former Speaker of the United States House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi, clutching dynamite and a burning torch of liberty. At the end of the red carpet, there is a cliff with a vertical drop. These two single cartoons raise pressing questions to consider: are there similarities, patterns, or any form of association between the editorial cartoons published by *GT* and *TT*?; how are the identities of Self and Other discursively constructed by cartoonists in Beijing and Taipei?; what artistic mechanisms are employed to enemize the other side?; and where does the portrayal of the United States sit within these cartoons?

While the study of cartoons has commonly focused on how cartoons construct the Other in isolation,² this research interrogates how the combined analysis of the political cartoons published in China's *GT* and Taiwan's *TT* provides insight into the intermingled discursive dynamics from which the identities of Self and Other emerge. This detailed examination, particularly through visual devices, has not previously been undertaken in the context of China–Taiwan–US relations. Our nuanced analysis seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the discursive processes and strategies employed, thereby offering broader insights into the relationship between media narratives and international relations. The study of this cartoon war serves as a relevant window to the discursive struggle between competing practices striving for hegemony on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. Furthermore, by incorporating the China–US rivalry into the analysis of *GT* and *TT* cartoons, we highlight the necessity of looking beyond regional cross-Strait relations and considering the overarching China–Taiwan–US triangular relations to comprehensively understand the complexities of the Taiwan Strait conflict.

This article will hereafter be divided into five sections. The initial part reviews the literature on cartoons and explains why their study is relevant for a better grasp of the Taiwan Strait conflict. The second section outlines the research questions guiding the analysis and introduces Discourse Theoretical Analysis as the methodological foundation, integrating the ontological principles and theoretical concepts from Discourse Theory alongside key concepts from the literature on cartoons. In the third and fourth sections, we conduct a mixed quantitative and qualitative analysis of the chosen cartoons by categorizing them into specific topics pertaining to the broader

theme of China–Taiwan–US relations and examining the mechanisms at play to calcify notions of Self and Other. The final part of the article discusses our main findings, responds to our research questions, and offers the final conclusions.

This research unravels the existence of multiple parallelisms between the political imaginaries represented by the cartoons of both *TT* and *GT*, despite the respective outlet's positionings under different political regimes. These similarities include the depiction of 'internal enemies' and traitors; the presence of an Other as an imperialist entity hungry for hegemony; the indication of economic and/or technological factors weakening the Other due to its ideological inferiority; the enemy's hypocrisy and lack of values; the portrayal of the opposing camp as violent or as a military threat; and the enemy's instrumentalization and/or abuse of its allies and other international actors/organizations. However, there are also important differences. While *GT* cartoons depict the United States negatively as a conniving, harmful, and malevolent power which is the primary adversary of Chinese and global interests, *TT* predominantly portrays Washington as a commendable global police force, a powerful leader tasked with keeping China in check. Both crucially and interestingly, we found that *TT* exhibits a heightened level of enmity construction in comparison to *GT*. This is evidenced by its frequent employment of extreme dehumanization in the cases of both internal and external enemies when compared to the cartoons of *GT*.

Cartoons as discourse

Political cartoons have long existed to ridicule politics and highlight power relationships in both the domestic and international setting.³ Today, the study of political cartoons remains as pertinent to the understanding of political discourses as ever. Indeed, due to new technologies allowing the fast dissemination of cartoons, such as through memes or social media posts, these visual representations maintain their political transformative potential in influencing discourse, much as politics continuously shapes the content and reception of cartoons. In this sense, these images play a performative role: they do not only document a particular reality but also co-construct it through the discourses they create or support, engaging with reality and transmitting a particular *common sense* to the audience.⁴

Examining sociopolitical realities through cartoons proves highly effective because cartoons synthesize 'the entire universe of discourse on the given topic' into a single frame.⁵ In this regard, political cartoons serve as a window to the existing political imaginaries of the society where they arise. Readers can quickly and easily interpret cartoon messages 'due to the presence of metaphors and symbols that represent and simplify ideas'.⁶ For cartoons to be persuasive and understood, their symbolic resources must be available in the cultural and sociopolitical context where they appear, so that the viewer can be familiar with the political imaginaries transmitted by the cartoonist and the images can be decoded. In the words of Martin Medhurst and Michael Desousa, for a cartoon to 'work' the cartoonist has to know the audience enough to be confident that most readers will arrive at the intended conclusion: 'The artist must know and utilize the beliefs, values, and attitudes of his audience if he or she is to be an effective persuader'.⁷ Put differently, the cartoonist and the audience must share a 'communal

consciousness or consensus'.⁸ Accordingly, cartoons both build upon and foster or calcify sentiments already felt by heterogeneous social groups.

Moreover, editorial cartoons enjoy 'the advantage of perceived legitimacy' by virtue of their appearance on the editorial page, the 'part of the newspaper reserved for serious discussion of public policy, becoming, for all intents and purposes, editor in charge of graphic opinion'.⁹ This grants them a 'journalistic identity' even if they are distinct from news articles.¹⁰ Although they are widely understood as 'visual representations of opinions', not mere entertainment, they represent a particular type of opinion that neither pretends to be objective nor is expected to be so, because it is evaluated under a different standard.¹¹ Since cartoons must condense the messaging into a single frame and are not constrained by deontological principles, they portray the ideological line of the media outlet perhaps more freely and concisely than any other journalistic piece, including editorial articles.

Furthermore, cartoons are useful for influencing both local and international public opinion, especially within the contemporary communication landscape where these sorts of images gain traction across social media platforms. Considering that both *GT* and *TT* use English to attract both Chinese and Taiwanese diasporic populations along with global audiences, we anticipate that they will commonly, if not predominantly, emphasize international affairs and foreign policy over local issues.

'Bottom-up' versus 'top-down' cartoons

What about the power dynamics passing from pen to paper? Who is speaking in the name of the public media? And who ventriloquizes the narrative of cartooning? Editorial cartoons have long played into power struggles and the inherent journalistic construction of crises, enemies, and heroes, shaping public perception through a sequence of threats and reassurances.¹² Throughout history, cartoonists, acting as 'heroic' myth debunkers, have utilized cartoons as a form of free expression to expose the actions of those in power to the scrutiny of the governed.¹³ It was the very accessibility of newspaper cartoons, in both a cognitive and economic sense that made them a proletariat's medium of choice that triumphed over the usual barriers of illiteracy and cost. Consequently, cartoonists themselves often see their work as a weapon against the abuses of power.¹⁴

However, editorial cartoons often reflect the influence of corporate entities who own or exert economic leverage over newspapers, as well as state interests, particularly in the case of state-owned outlets. These top-down influences invariably result in editors and publishers having control over the content of their cartoons and the cartoonists they hire.¹⁵ On the one hand, it is widely acknowledged that media organizations subject to state control have the capacity to utilize cartoons as a means to advance their agenda or interests.¹⁶ Accordingly, it is anticipated that the cartoons in *GT* align with the interests of the Chinese government, given its characterization as a Chinese state media platform or propaganda vehicle that defends the nationalist narrative of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).¹⁷

Interestingly, on the other hand, in today's liberal democracies editorial cartoonists are not only guided by their freedom of expression but also increasingly 'work for oligopolistic newspapers and laugh at politics on behalf of business, which by buying advertising

space has become the major patron of the newspaper'.¹⁸ In this sense, whilst political cartoons act as a social watchdog, these messages are not from the powerless to invoke or instigate change but, more often than not, from the powerful to maintain the status quo.¹⁹ As private media outlets can be equally controlled by elite actors in connivance with power, their cartoons can similarly replicate the narratives of power elites and the state despite their existence in a context of a free press. Indeed, in the case of *TT*, the outlet has been criticized for offering an unambiguous pro-independence and thus pro-government stance since the Democratic People's Party (DPP) reached power in 2016.²⁰ It is worth mentioning that *TT* is the English 'brother' of the *Liberty Times*, which is 'the mainstream DPP-supporting newspaper' and the Chinese-language newspaper with more diffusion in Taiwan.²¹ Therefore, we expect both *GT* and *TT* to shelter their respective governments and the interests of the elites supporting them from any of the criticisms in their cartoons.

Methodological framework

This research adopts a mixed quantitative and qualitative method approach for the comparative study of the editorial political cartoons in the news outlets *Global Times* and *Taipei Times*, interrogating how these depict China–Taiwan–US triangular relations. Our aim is to elucidate the mechanisms by which the identities of friends and enemies are discursively constructed in these cartoons. We present four research questions:

1. What distinctions and parallels exist in the topics explored within the theme of China–Taiwan–US triangular relations?
2. Through which mechanisms do cartoonists construct the identities of Self and Other?
3. What subject positions are articulated as those of friends and enemies in the editorial cartoons of *GT* and *TT*?
4. To what extent and how is the United States portrayed?

Firstly, the study performs an initial quantitative analysis of the corpus by categorizing cartoons into specific sub-themes and topics related to the dynamics of China–Taiwan–US relations. In this section, we quantify the representation of diverse subject positions in the cartoons to discern the objects of interest for each outlet. Secondly, a critical qualitative analysis of how discourses crystallize our common sense is crucial for understanding the ability of certain political practices to alter attitudes and perceptions. Editorial political cartoons, as argued in the preceding, are a significant element in the discursive construction of sociopolitical imaginaries and identities. To examine the relationship between cartoons and the discursive struggle surrounding the Taiwan Strait conflict, this research draws upon Discourse Theory to adopt an interdisciplinary methodological approach that integrates discourse-theoretical concepts and logic with theoretical concepts relevant to the discursive analysis of cartoons.

Discourse Theory, with its constructivist, non-essentialist and non-reductionist premises as well as its associated concepts and logics, can capture multifaceted and transversal processes that cut across traditional divisions of knowledge better than other approaches to discourse analysis.²² The adaptation of this theory into a methodology for Discourse

Theoretical Analysis, as formulated by Nico Carpentier and Benjamin De Cleen,²³ aims to describe and explain the emergence, functioning, disruption, and transformation of different discourses as well as the social identities and social orders/structures generated in the process.²⁴ As Discourse Theory decisively pays attention to the non-linguistic assumptions, values, and power dynamics embedded in discursive struggles, it serves as a particularly apt approach for the analysis of cartoons, where language assumes a secondary role to imagery itself. Accordingly, a Discourse Theoretical Analysis framework adopts a 'macro' perspective that places great emphasis on discourses extending beyond language, considering everything, including ideology, as part of the discourse.²⁵ This Discourse Theoretical Analysis framework is guided by two clusters of theoretical concepts and logics constituting a 'grammar' with which 'we can both explain and criticize the practices and regimes that constitute our concrete objects of analysis'.²⁶

In the first place, Discourse Theory examines how discourses display the logic of hegemony to articulate heterogeneous subject positions into a common identity crystallized through chains of equivalence linking their multifarious demands (e.g. $a + b + c = D$).²⁷ For such a process to be effective, a simultaneous phenomenon of construction of frontiers is required: for the crystallization of an 'Us' able to represent heterogeneous groups, this identity has to be discursively constructed as at risk due to the existence of a menacing Other.²⁸ Put differently, only when 'we' feel jeopardized can we become conscious of the need to unite against that antagonized 'enemy', which also represents diverse subject positions linked through chains of equivalence. Indeed, while on the one hand the enemy is a divider between Self and Other; on the other hand, it is a sturdy bonding agent for the grouping of Us. Moreover, discursive practices articulate privileged signifiers whose meaning is transformed in the process, with the goal of instituting a particular system of meaning as hegemonic.²⁹ Eventually, a political project becomes hegemonic when it succeeds in *partially* and *contingently* universalizing its system of meaning as the socially accepted common sense.³⁰

Secondly, cartoonists have at their disposal specific techniques of persuasion that differ from those available to the oral persuader. Through these mechanisms, what is a multiform reality is recast into a few simple patterns that are easy to subscribe to and understand. These mechanisms help explain political cartoons and are thus translated into concepts that will guide the subsequent discourse analysis, such as contrast (juxtaposing one element against another to invite unambiguous condemnation, for example, wealth and poverty); contradiction (showing the hypocrisy between words and deeds of those depicted); exaggeration (particularly of physiognomic features that eventually come to symbolize the enemy in the form of stereotypes); binarism (demonizing the enemy and glorifying one's own nation, leaders, people, values or traditions, thus composing a narrative of good versus evil); dehumanization (describing the enemy as an animal, a criminal, a violent brute, a beast, or, simply, as death itself); ridicule (depicting the enemy as a child, clumsy, stupid, inept, etc.); analogy (highlighting similarities between two elements); and metaphor (implying comparison between two unrelated things).³¹

In the end, assessing cartoons from a discourse-theoretical perspective becomes a matter of looking at how meaning and identities are constructed relationally by competing political practices. Employing this well-established methodological approach, we

examine how competing political projects, represented through the cartoons in *GT* and *TT*, participate in a discursive ‘war’ to crystallize disparate interpretations of US–China rivalry and the Taiwan Strait conflict through distinct strategies.

Data sampling

The research is designed as a case study that comprises the cartoons published between two events of heightened tensions in the Taiwan Strait: then US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan on 2 August 2022, and the Taiwan presidential election of 13 January 2024 – allowing for a one-month gap preceding and following these. Within this timeline, we have flagged other key issues that have played a triggering role in the escalating strain in relations, including Chinese and US military manoeuvres around Taiwan; increasing US arms sales to Taiwan and the expansion of China’s military power; and Tsai Ing-Wen’s visit to the United States in April 2023. This period provides a geographically and ideologically representative collection of editorial cartoons, covering significant events and changes that occurred in the Taiwan Strait and beyond. The study surveys 1010 cartoons, 556 of which appeared in *Taipei Times* and 454 in *Global Times*.

As partially delineated in the previous section, the selection of these newspapers primarily hinges on the following criteria: (1) both *GT* and *TT* represent elite interests in China and Taiwan, respectively, because they are ideologically aligned with the governing parties; (2) since they are mainstream and widely popular outlets, we can infer that they shed light on issues deemed of national importance to the elites – and potentially the general public – of their respective countries; (3) besides their national reach, the utilization of the English language suggests their common aim of achieving a significant global influence and interest for international issues; and (4) they publish editorial political cartoons almost daily, offering a broad range of data for comparison.

Data analysis

We found that 620 cartoons out of the original 1010 are related to the overarching theme of the triadic China–Taiwan–US relations. There is a noticeable disparity in the proportion of cartoons concerning our theme published by *GT* (80.4%) and *TT* (45.9%). On the one hand, this is explained because, as expected, *GT* does not touch on the issue of Chinese national politics except when talking about Taiwan (a national issue from the perspective of *GT*) and, instead, it focuses on international issues particularly emphasizing commentary on the relationship between China and the United States. On the other hand, since a good part of the analysis period was immediate to the presidential election in Taiwan, a high number of cartoons in *TT* were related to Taiwanese national politics without touching our theme. Nonetheless, sufficient data was obtained to cover the triangulation and saturation requirements for the subsequent qualitative analysis. The selected cartoons fit into two clear sub-themes: the Taiwan Strait conflict, with 204 cartoons, and US–China rivalry, comprising 416 cartoons (see Table 1).

As the research progressed, it became apparent that this initial set of cartoons could be categorized into five broad topics that facilitated structuring the following analysis:

international politics (236 cartoons); economy and technology (154 cartoons); national politics (112 cartoons); military and defence (94 cartoons); and health (24 cartoons) (see Table 2).

This quantitative classification provides a guiding framework while acknowledging the inherent complexity of cartoons, which may not always neatly fit into distinct categories. It offers a general assessment of the direction taken by cartoonists and identifies the various topics that serve as common ground for both *GT* and *TT*, so that we can then contrast how these similar issues are represented through distinct discursive lenses by their competing discourses. Relevant conclusions can already be distilled from these numbers. For example, *GT* editorial cartoons predominantly centre on the rivalry between the United States and China, with a lens that potentially frames the Taiwan Strait conflict within this broader dynamic. In contrast, *TT* places greater emphasis on the Taiwan Strait conflict itself, highlighting the actors involved in that specific context. Also, as can be seen from the quantification of subject positions represented in the cartoons (see Table 3), *GT* cartoons concentrate on depicting the United States as the main antagonist of China and criticize the United States' role in the world,

Table 1. Distribution of cartoons by theme and sub-themes.

Outlet		<i>Global Times</i>	%	<i>Taipei Times</i>	%	Total	%
Corpus		454	100	556	100	1010	100
Theme	China-Taiwan-US relations	365	80.4	255	45.9	620	61.4
Sub-themes	Taiwan Strait conflict	22	6	182	71.4	204	32.9
	US-China rivalry	343	94	73	28.6	416	67.1

Table 2. Distribution of selected cartoons by topics.

Outlet		<i>Global Times</i>	%	<i>Taipei Times</i>	%	Totals	%
Topics	International politics	158	43.3	78	30.6	236	38.1
	Economy and technology	108	29.6	46	18.0	154	24.8
	Military and defence	74	20.3	20	7.8	94	15.2
	National politics	10	2.7	102	40	112	18.1
	Health	15	4.1	9	3.5	24	3.9
Total		365	100	255	100	620	100

Table 3. Quantification of subject positions represented in the cartoons.

Outlet		<i>Global Times</i>	<i>Taipei Times</i>
Subject positions	China	16	191
	US	363	22
	Taiwan	4	30
	Internal enemies	9	132

mirroring the focus of *TT* on portraying China as the enemy and condemning its global role. In other words, the United States is to China in *GT* what China is to Taiwan in *TT*: the pivotal 'external enemy'.

One notable contrast between these two outlets is the focus on the articulation of 'internal enemies', a theme that is considerably more prominent in *TT* compared to *GT*. In *TT*, out of 182 cartoons related to the Taiwan Strait conflict sub-theme, 132 portrayed Taiwanese opposition parties and politicians as internal enemies co-opted by and collaborating with China. However, in *GT*, references to the Taiwan Strait conflict (22 cartoons) include only nine instances where Taiwanese authorities are depicted as treasonous internal enemies serving US interests. Put differently, Taiwanese 'traitors' to Taiwan are depicted in *TT* as internal enemies mirroring the portrayal of Taiwanese 'traitors' to China in cartoons published by *GT*.

Discourse Theoretical Analysis

The ensuing analysis is guided by the Discourse Theoretical Analysis framework described in the methodology section, focusing on how cartoonists construct identities through their work and what mechanisms are employed to generate social orders and structures of meaning. The analysis of the discursive practices in the selected editorial political cartoons indicates the construction of social frontiers across two distinct dimensions. Firstly, the cartoons in both *TT* and *GT* construct China and the United States, respectively, as the antagonized external enemy. Secondly, both outlets articulate a roster of internal enemies through a chain of equivalences that links them with the aforementioned external foes. In the subsequent sub-sections, we sequentially delve into these two distinct narratives.

The construction of external enemies

International politics Within the subject of international politics, both *GT* and *TT* portray the external foe as sinister, deceitful, and aggressive. Emphasis is placed on dehumanizing or ridiculing the said enemy and, as a result, crystallizing dichotomic imaginaries based on a stringent friend/enemy opposition. To commence, with regard to exaggerated or dehumanized physiological taunts, *GT* typically portrays the United States in a disparaging light, representing it as an elderly (Figure 3) or wicked 'Uncle Sam' (Figure 9), while *TT* frequently portrays China as a greedy 'communist bandit' wearing Mao-era clothing (Figure 4) or as a thief (Figure 14). Subject positions infused with pejorative connotations, as we will observe later on, are linked through chains of equivalences to the signifiers 'United States' and 'China', thus constituting the identity of the enemy. Invariably, these negative identities are articulated as constitutive of a dangerous power bloc that posed a threat to the respective identities of China and Taiwan in the narratives of *GT* and *TT*, respectively.

The external enemy is often constructed as threatening the world or particular areas such as Taiwan or the South China Sea. The artistic mechanisms used to produce these discourses regularly rely on animalization and physical exaggeration. Such is the case in *GT* when depicting American hegemonic ambitions across the world as an octopus



Figure 3. Cartoon by Liu Rui, *Global Times*, 9 July 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202307/1293999.shtml>, accessed 16 October 2024.



Figure 4. Cartoon by Taco, *Taipei Times*, 14 September 2023, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2023/09/14/2003806194>, accessed 16 October 2024.

figure grasping or destroying planet Earth (Figure 5). Similarly, *TT* cartoons regularly present dragons, octopuses, rats and various other monstrous figures as metaphors to illustrate the malicious nature of China. For example, in one cartoon, the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ is depicted as an octopus with its tentacles wrapped around and drowning people identified as ‘Laos’, ‘Sri Lanka’, and ‘National sovereignty’ (Figure 6).

We also find metaphors used to construct the enemy as a puppet master manipulating global actors or affairs, or as an oppressive ruler exploiting the world or even its own allies for personal gain. In *GT* cartoons we can observe how Uncle Sam is a puppeteer controlling pawns ranging from South Korea, Canada to the G7. For its part, *TT* presents China as a dehumanized half-dinosaur, half-boar monster dancing with French President Macron standing on the creature’s feet, with Macron portrayed as a small child – declaring his excellent dancing skills (Figure 7). Interestingly, on the very same day, *GT* released a



Figure 5. Cartoon by Liu Rui, *Global Times*, 3 January 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202401/1304730.shtml>, accessed 16 October 2024.

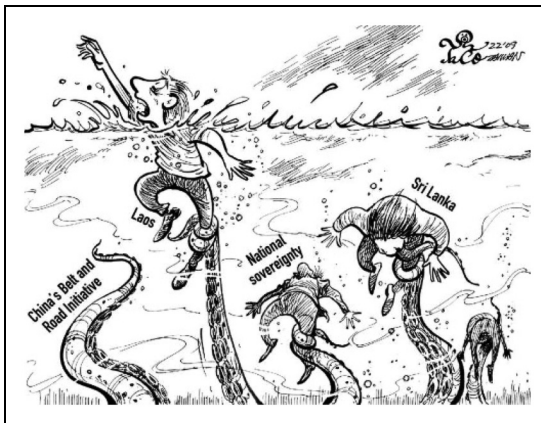


Figure 6. Cartoon by Taco, *Taipei Times*, 13 September 2022, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2022/09/13/2003785208>, accessed 16 October 2024.

cartoon portraying Macron courageously severing the strings held by an enraged Uncle Sam puppeteer who struggles to control him (Figure 8). This opposed articulation of ‘Macron’ clearly illustrates a discursive struggle to define the place that such particular subject position attains in the social common sense.

Another manifestation of external enemies within the political realm concerns the discourse about human rights or international law more broadly. Regarding the former, the emphasis seems to be placed on both sides committing human rights abuses, targeting the other whilst failing to inwardly reflect. In *GT*, there are many instances in which the United States’ double standards are critiqued, notably concerning the country’s history of slavery, its domestic barriers to equality, and its condemnation of war whilst funding the global arms trade. Meanwhile, *TT* shows China driving a convertible sports car with the logos of BMW, Mercedes, and Volkswagen, running at full speed

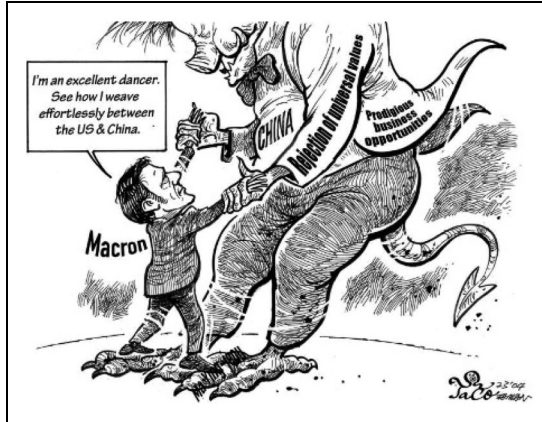


Figure 7. Cartoon by Taco, *Taipei Times*, 14 April 2023, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2023/04/14/2003797901>, accessed 16 October 2024.



Figure 8. Cartoon by Carlos Latuff, *Global Times*, 14 April 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202304/1289156.shtml>, accessed 16 October 2024.

over ‘Uighur rights’, portraying people being run over. Concerning international law, both *GT* and *TT* respectively criticize the United States and China for abusing ‘long-arm jurisdiction’: *GT*’s cartoon depicts a sinister Uncle Sam carrying a wooden club with spikes, called ‘long-arm jurisdiction’, with which it threatens the globe (Figure 9), while *TT* depicts the United States as a strong ship captain that cuts the tentacle of an octopus with his axe – the octopus is labelled as China, whilst one of the tentacles is labelled ‘long-arm jurisdiction’ (Figure 10).

In yet another interesting pairing, both *GT* and *TT* ridicule Uncle Sam and Xi Jinping as being led astray or mentally disordered, exhibiting signs of delusion or paranoia. In *GT*, Uncle Sam is captured walking in circles into a dark room, blinded by VR goggles labelled as ‘Cold War’ whilst the sun shines outside (Figure 11). Similarly, in *TT*, we see Xi looking behind him whilst frantically working out which ‘anti-China



Figure 9. Cartoon by Liu Rui, *Global Times*, 6 February 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202302/1284933.shtml>, accessed 16 October 2024.

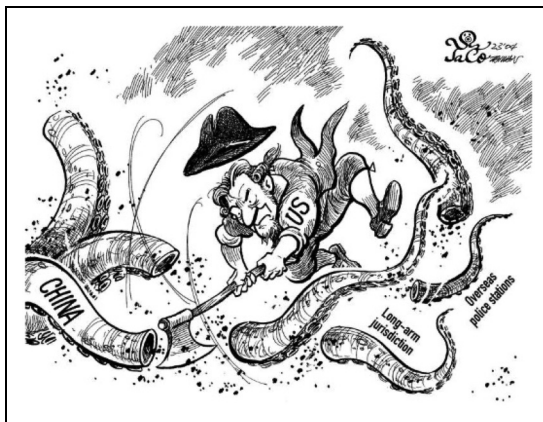


Figure 10. Cartoon by Taco, *Taipei Times*, 24 April 2023, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2023/04/24/2003798494>, accessed 16 October 2024.



Figure 11. Cartoon by Liu Rui, *Global Times*, 18 July 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202307/1294609.shtml>, accessed 16 October 2024.

countries' are conspiring to have him followed, ignorant that what he sees are his own footsteps symbolizing his 'authoritarian system of government' (Figure 12).

Both outlets also portray conflicting perspectives on the idea of 'one China'. *GT* commonly criticizes Washington's stance on the one-China policy/principle. In one example, binarism is used to demonize a mask-wearing Uncle Sam who is breaking through a fence called 'One-China Principle' and threatening an anthropomorphic panda, symbolizing China, which looks with displeasure at the assailant (Figure 13). For its part, a cartoon in *TT* also uses contrast and binarism when portraying a righteous US Secretary of State Antony Blinken holding a shotgun called 'One China Policy' that he fires against a scared thief named 'Beijing's "One China Principle"' (Figure 14).

Military and defence In the framing of military and defence, both news outlets emphasize portraying the external enemy as a dangerous entity hungry for war. In *GT*, we see the



Figure 12. Cartoon by Taco, *Taipei Times*, 22 March 2023, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2023/05/22/2003800194>, accessed 16 October 2024.

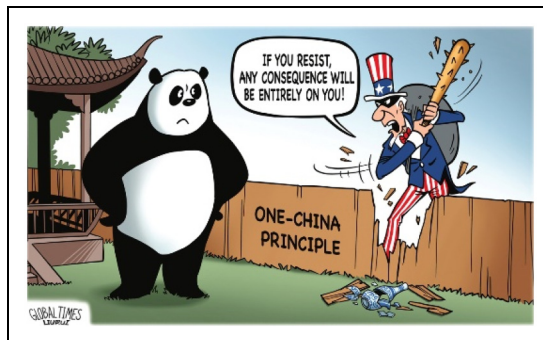


Figure 13. Cartoon by Liu Rui, *Global Times*, 7 August 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202208/1272017.shtml>, accessed 16 October 2024.



Figure 14. Cartoon by Taco, *Taipei Times*, 19 July 2022, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2022/07/19/2003782000>, accessed 16 October 2024.

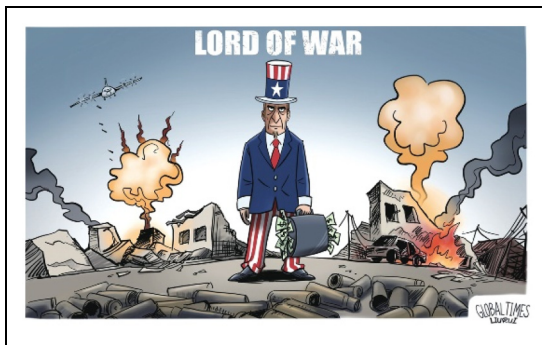


Figure 15. Cartoon by Liu Rui, *Global Times*, 29 March 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202303/1288243.shtml>, accessed 16 October 2024.

United States repeatedly depicted as a military threat, with regular reference to the Military Industrial Complex or the country's role in catalyzing global war. Washington is generally represented as a cunning 'Lord of War' (Figure 15) or as a violent and heavily armed Uncle Sam (Figure 19). On a few occasions, the US military is ridiculed in its efforts to confront China. In one cartoon, Uncle Sam is shown holding a gun labelled 'War with China in 2025' aimed at his own head, with the world in between – implying that the United States will destroy both itself and the globe in the process of containing China (Figure 16).

Similarly, cartoons in *TT* frequently depict China dichotomously, either as a looming military menace symbolized by missiles hovering above Taiwanese territory or as an incompetent 'paper tiger' that lacks substantial influence. However, whereas cartoons in *GT* essentially represent the United States as a serious threat to the safety of the world, *TT* often ridicules the Chinese threat. For instance, the mockery of China's



Figure 16. Cartoon by Carlos Latuff, *Global Times*, 30 January 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202301/1284464.shtml>, accessed 16 October 2024.

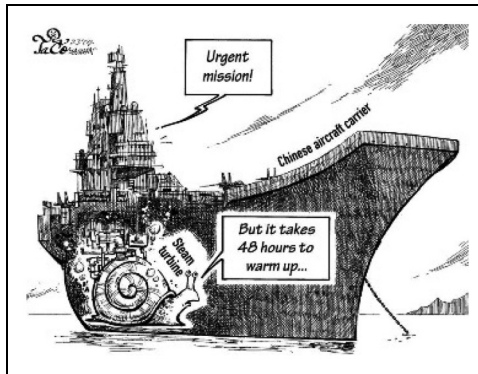


Figure 17. Cartoon by Taco, *Taipei Times*, 29 April 2023, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2023/04/29/2003798799>, accessed 16 October 2024.

military prowess is illustrated through a ‘Chinese aircraft carrier’ within which resides a snail lamenting that ‘it takes 48 hours to warm up’ its steam turbine (Figure 17). In *TT*, China’s ruthless military aggression is frequently contrasted with an Uncle Sam depicted as a formidable and accountable global enforcer. For instance, one cartoon depicts China as an angry monkey portraying ‘Chinese expansionism’, hurling coconuts at the ‘international community’ from the top of a coconut tree (reminiscent of portrayals of Japan in the West during World War II), while Uncle Sam gets ready to cut down the tree with a chainsaw labelled ‘US chip restrictions’ (Figure 18).

It is also commonplace in *GT* to resort to binarism to criticize the United States’ military and defence role and the US-led global system rigged with double standards, in contrast with China’s role as a benign actor. Whilst, for example, China is framed as offering peace and economic development to the world, the United States is shown in the parallel frame to be causing war and destruction. Double standards are also lambasted by drawing



Figure 18. Cartoon by Taco, *Taipei Times*, 16 October 2022, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2022/10/16/2003787118>, accessed 16 October 2024.

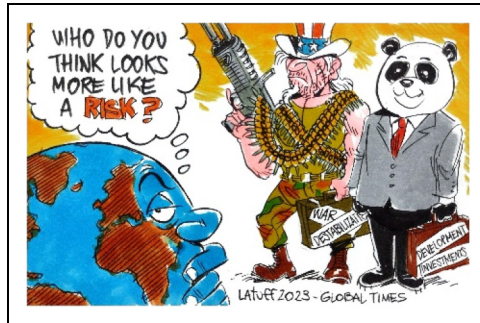


Figure 19. Cartoon by Carlos Latuff, *Global Times*, 12 July 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202307/1294214.shtml>, accessed 16 October 2024.

on US military hypocrisies such as supporting Ukraine while vetoing the ceasefire calls in Gaza. Moreover, there is an underlying role of traditional masculinity sewn into the perspective of the United States as an alpha enemy, drawing on physiological exaggerations of Uncle Sam as a muscular, Rambo-like figure. In one particular cartoon, *GT* contrasts the global roles of the United States and China through a muscular Uncle Sam in uniform and carrying a machine gun, next to a panda – symbolizing China – dressed in a suit, carrying a suitcase labelled ‘development’ and ‘investments’ (Figure 19). Analogously, *TT* cartoons depict China as menacing wolves or an ominous brute, perpetually juxtaposed with a courageous Taiwan confronting the peril despite the presence of Taiwanese opposition politicians succumbing to cowardice (Figure 20).

Economy and technology Economic and technological matters are highlighted to diminish the overall reputation of the enemy. This is conducted through ongoing ridicule of the dwindling domestic economy of the Other, its economic abuse in the international arena,



Figure 20. Cartoon by Taco, *Taipei Times*, 19 August 2022, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2022/08/19/2003783772>, accessed 16 October 2024.

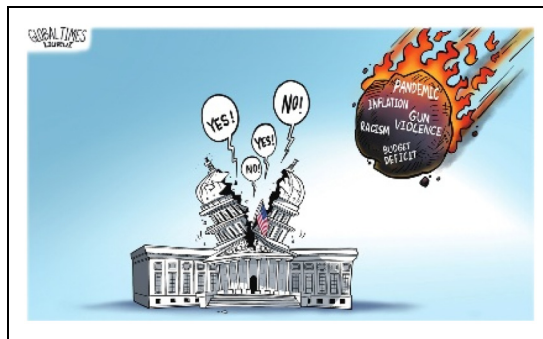


Figure 21. Cartoon by Liu Rui, *Global Times*, 4 September 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202209/1274580.shtml>, accessed 16 October 2024.

or its abuse of technology to harm those outside its borders. The cartoons within this topic often cite the trade war between the two great powers, where the external enemy is often ridiculed as a fool or naive in relation to its understanding of economic issues. In both media outlets, the enemy's economy is constantly alluded to as though it will imminently collapse. *GT* shows the White House mere seconds away from being struck by a meteorite with 'pandemic, inflation, gun violence, racism, budget deficit' written on its surface (Figure 21). In parallel, from the perspective of *TT*, China is represented as a cliff breaking apart into the sea of 'zero covid policy' due to the weight of a house that symbolizes 'property prices' and an avalanche caused by the policies of 'common prosperity' (Figure 22).

The economy is also a relevant topic when it comes to international relations between the enemy and periphery countries, crucially including the enemy's allies. In a *GT* cartoon, Uncle Sam shears a sheep that represents the 'global economy'; in another,

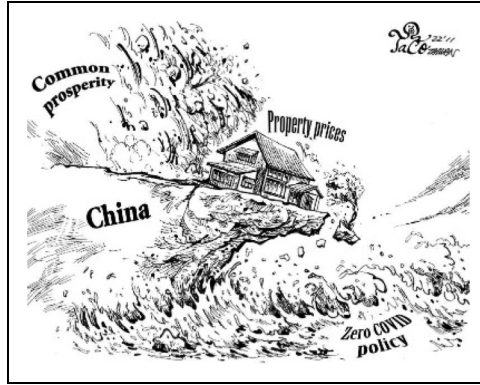


Figure 22. Cartoon by Taco, *Taipei Times*, 1 December 2022, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2022/12/01/2003789892>, accessed 16 October 2024.



Figure 23. Cartoon by Liu Rui, *Global Times*, 25 February 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202302/1285935.shtml>, accessed 16 October 2024.

the abusive hand of the United States squeezes money from the European Union as if it were an orange in a juicer that represents the ‘Ukraine crisis’ (Figure 23). Analogously, a *TT* cartoon uses a metaphor where Italy is represented as a man who has cut himself free from the Belt and Road Initiative, represented by an anchor that threatens to drown him (Figure 24).

The roles of China and the United States are also presented by both outlets as employing ‘economic coercion’ to abuse others. For example, *GT* illustrates Uncle Sam with a mask holding a studded club and saying ‘I condemn China’s economic coercion’ as he takes a bag of money from a frightened anthropomorphic representation of the global economy (Figure 25). On the other side, *TT* labels a smoking cannon as ‘China’s economic coercion’ that aims to impose the ‘1992 consensus’ over Taiwan (Figure 26).

Apprehension regarding technological progress and competition is employed to evoke a perception of the adversary’s menace, ignorance and/or malevolence. For instance, a *GT* collection of cartoons depicts Uncle Sam versus Huawei and TikTok in the context of the technological sanctions imposed by the United States on the Chinese company.

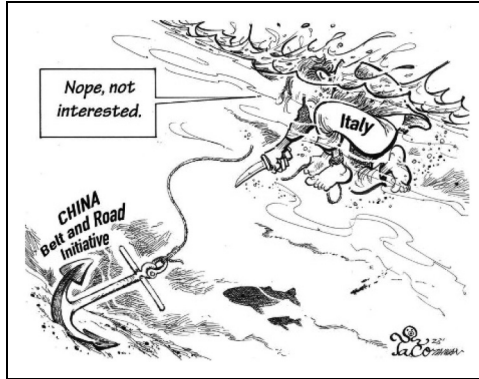


Figure 24. Cartoon by Taco, *Taipei Times*, 19 December 2023, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2023/12/19/2003810828>, accessed 16 October 2024.

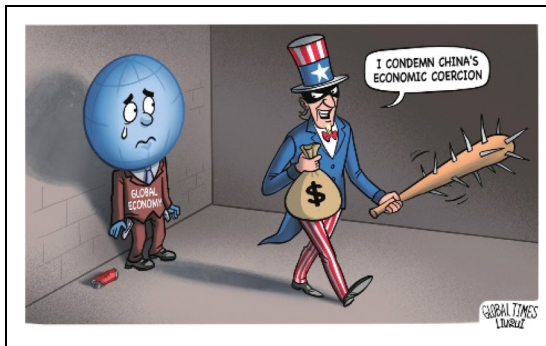


Figure 25. Cartoon by Liu Rui, *Global Times*, 26 September 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202309/1298979.shtml>, accessed 16 October 2024.

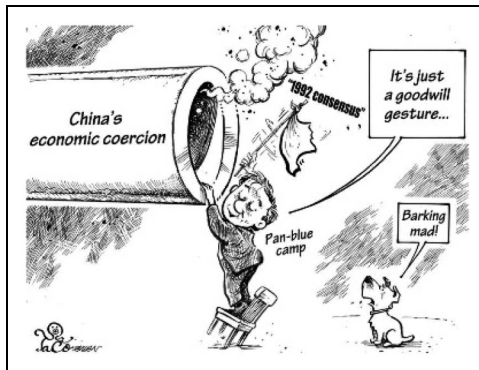


Figure 26. Cartoon by Taco, *Taipei Times*, 13 January 2024, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2024/01/13/2003812022>, accessed 16 October 2024.

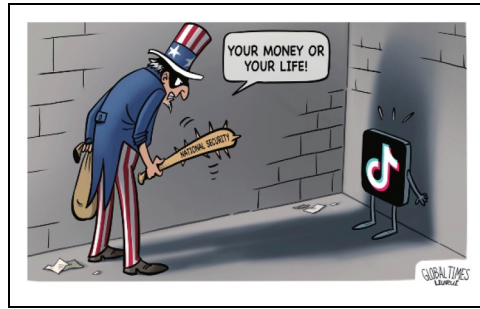


Figure 27. Cartoon by Liu Rui, *Global Times*, 16 March 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202303/1287420.shtml>, accessed 16 October 2024.

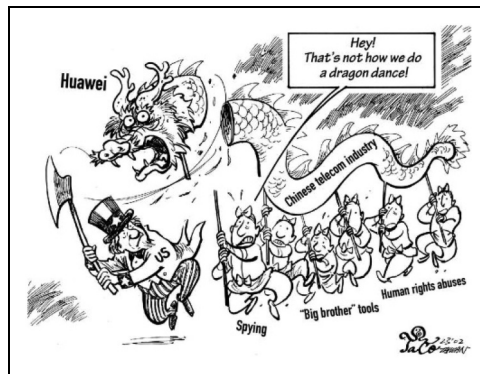


Figure 28. Cartoon by Taco, *Taipei Times*, 5 February 2023, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2023/02/05/2003793742>, accessed 16 October 2024.

This set of cartoons further capitalizes binarism between the glorified Chinese tech and the demonized United States for its ignorance and malice (Figure 27). *TT* tackles this identical issue in analogous terms, although conversely glorifying the role of the United States while demonizing China. For instance, one cartoon portrays the ‘Chinese telecom industry’ as a dragon whose head is Huawei, which is then severed by a serious Uncle Sam with an axe (Figure 28).

Health The idea of an external enemy posing a health threat is divided across two levels. The first suggests the idea that the external enemy seeks to undermine health safety on a global level. In *GT*, there is continued reference to the United States’ collaboration with Japan on the release of wastewater from the Fukushima power plant. In one cartoon, Uncle Sam is shown expressing satisfaction with Japan’s ‘safety, transparency and science-based processes’ while rejecting the toxic fish he is being served to eat (Figure 29). This portrayal emphasizes both the political aspect of the country’s



Figure 29. Cartoon by Liu Rui, *Global Times*, 31 August 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202308/1297334.shtml>, accessed 16 October 2024.

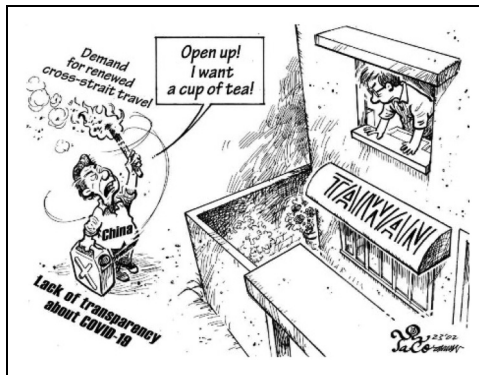


Figure 30. Cartoon by Taco, *Taipei Times*, 13 February 2023, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2023/02/13/2003794245>, accessed 16 October 2024.

double standards and its lack of care for international health welfare norms. In *TT*, a cartoon creates an analogy between China and a dangerous pyromaniac, suggesting Beijing's 'lack of transparency about COVID-19' as the man attempts to enter the home of a Taiwanese man carrying a jerrycan and a torch (Figure 30).

The second level criticizes the external enemy's domestic health status, with a specific focus on its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic or, in the case of *GT*, the fentanyl crisis in the United States. In one *GT* cartoon, we see a hospital in America besieged by a hurricane of viruses, a metaphor suggestive of the mounting challenges posed to the domestic US healthcare system. In another cartoon from *GT*, Uncle Sam holds a microphone labelled 'smearing China' while holding a cup of coffee with a smiling COVID-19 virus atop (Figure 31). This imagery is used to critique the US government's attempt to divert attention or blame away from its internal mishandling of the pandemic and redirect it to China. Similarly, satirical critiques of China's handling of the pandemic are evident in a range of the *TT* cartoon collection. One cartoon employs the metaphor



Figure 31. Cartoon by Liu Rui, *Global Times*, 18 January 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202301/1283420.shtml>, accessed 16 October 2024.



Figure 32. Cartoon by Taco, *Taipei Times*, 27 December 2022, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2022/12/27/2003791475>, accessed 16 October 2024.

of a natural disaster when depicting a man called ‘China’ opening the door to a tsunami of COVID-19, with him saying ‘OK, you can come in now’ (Figure 32). This raises questions about China’s management of the pandemic and presents it as an irresponsible country jeopardizing the safety of both Chinese citizens and the world.

The construction of internal enemies

The articulation of internal enemies through chains of equivalences that link them with the external enemies of choice constitutes a recurring motif within the discursive practices adopted in *TT*, whereas it appears more sporadically in *GT*. In some cases, the control over ‘traitors’ is showcased as an act of puppetry. In *GT* cartoons, we see the United States depicted as the utmost *external* enemy that is guiding the Taiwanese *internal* enemy, the DPP, astray. For instance, *GT* published a cartoon of a US hand mastering



Figure 33. Cartoon by Liu Rui, *Global Times*, 6 April 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202304/1288624.shtml>, accessed 16 October 2024.



Figure 34. Cartoon by Carlos Latuff, *Global Times*, 19 January 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202401/1305721.shtml>, accessed 16 October 2024.

the movements of his small, fire-breathing puppet: an exaggeratedly small Tsai Ing-wen that holds a bottle of flammable liquid labelled ‘secessionism’, while a box marked ‘well-being of Taiwanese people’ burns (Figure 33), a symbolic representation of how the DPP engages in risky conduct. In another cartoon, Vice President Lai Ching-te (who became president in 2024) smiles as he receives a match from an old Uncle Sam while seated atop an explosive barrel labelled ‘secessionism’ (Figure 34).

Taiwan is often represented as a passive actor in *GT* cartoons; a small island where Uncle Sam places a multitude of missiles or explosive barrels. Moreover, in another example Taiwan is represented as a matchbox from which Uncle Sam ignites a match in a room full of TNT (Figure 35), drawing an analogy between Taiwan and an excessively militarized dangerous place facilitated by the United States. On other occasions, Taiwan is portrayed as an internal enemy that is not simply depicted as a passive puppet but also as an active collaborator. In this cartoon, *GT* portrays Tsai Ing-wen as offering money to a menacing ‘FBI’ agent or Western politicians in suits in exchange for ‘supporting democracy’ (Figure 36). In other cartoons, Tsai offers a banquet of money to



Figure 35. Cartoon by Liu Rui, *Global Times*, 19 July 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202207/1270924.shtml>, accessed 16 October 2024.



Figure 36. Cartoon by Liu Rui, *Global Times*, 17 September 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202309/1298338.shtml>, accessed 16 October 2024.

an overweight, greedy man symbolizing the US ‘military-industrial complex’. In another cartoon, Tsai is shown next to an overweight businessman surrounded by bags of money and missiles (see such themes of a Tsai alongside military might in Figure 2 also).

TT places a greater emphasis on representing the Taiwanese Kuomintang (KMT) and the Taiwan People’s Party (TPP) opposition parties as internal enemies that are either manipulated or willingly colluding with China. For example, one cartoon depicts a Mao-era communist bandit relishing in pleasure whilst a dehumanized politician labelled as ‘KMT’ happily runs in a hamster wheel together with a rat (Figure 37). In another attempt at dehumanization, a lascivious man labelled ‘China’s “united front” trade tactics’ puts a jacket on while a drunk woman labelled ‘Pan-blue politicians’ (those representing the Kuomintang and TPP parties) lies in bed, creating the gendered metaphor of sexualized violence (Figure 38). On other occasions, these internal enemies are dehumanized as cowardly men at the service of China (see Figure 22).

Tsai Ing-wen is also represented in *TT* cartoons as the brave bearer of a rifle, in contrast with a naive Kuomintang politician, Eric Chu, who holds a white flag signifying

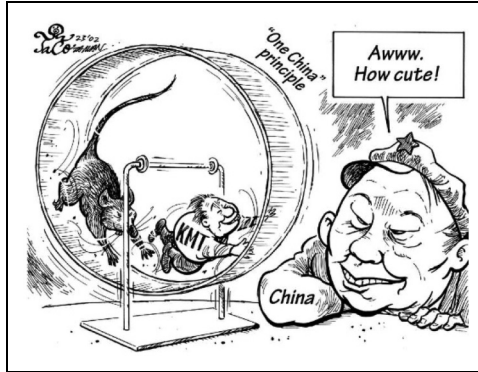


Figure 37. Cartoon by Taco, *Taipei Times*, 25 February 2023, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2023/02/25/2003794995>, accessed 16 October 2024.

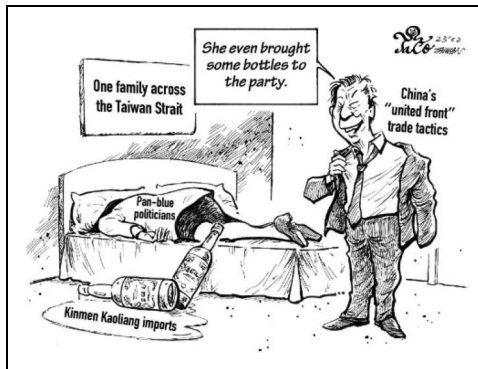


Figure 38. Cartoon by Taco, *Taipei Times*, 3 February 2023, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2023/02/03/2003793616>, accessed 16 October 2024.

'peace' while he walks to a graveyard called 'Peace agreement' with the Chinese flag on it (Figure 39). In this context, *TT* frequently employs the analogy that pursuing peace through reconciliation with China equates to capitulation or betrayal, juxtaposed with the notion that DPP's bold confrontation with China represents the most effective strategy for securing peace. In a final example of dehumanization of the internal enemies in *TT* cartoons, a man called 'KMT' is depicted as an obedient dog of its owner, labelled as 'China', who remarks 'Good boy!' (Figure 40).

Discussion

In this article, we have argued that editorial political cartoons offer a relevant discursive lens for showcasing the formation and upholding of identity-based dichotomies between



Figure 39. Cartoon by Tong Jin-mao, *Taipei Times*, 22 December 2022, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2022/12/22/2003791147>, accessed 16 October 2024.

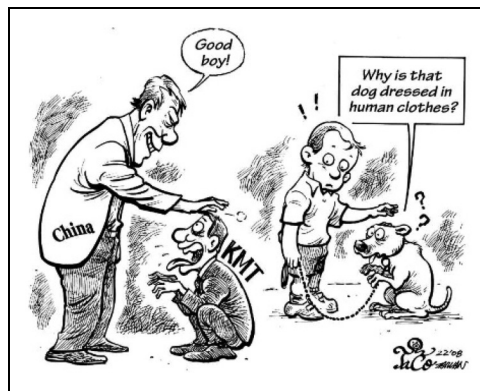


Figure 40. Cartoon by Taco, *Taipei Times*, 29 August 2022, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2022/08/29/2003784326>, accessed 16 October 2024.

Us and Other in China–Taiwan–US relations. Through the analysis of a total of 1010 cartoons in the period from 2 July 2022 to 13 February 2024, we have identified a greater number of similarities than disparities in the topics covered, and the discursive mechanisms employed to construct identities and meaning by both *GT* and *TT*.

In answering research question 1 – what distinctions and parallels exist in the topics explored within the theme of China–Taiwan–US triangular relations? – we found that while *GT* greatly emphasizes China–US rivalry and *TT* chiefly directs the attention to the Taiwan Strait conflict, the topics covered by both outlets are largely related to four broad topics: international relations, economy and technology, military and defence, and health issues. However, a stark and expected difference lies in the absence of a critique of national issues within China, contrasting with the prominence of national politics in *TT*.

While the lack of interest in national politics in *GT* can be argued as a direct consequence of the absence of press freedom in China, the predominant discussion of national politics in *TT* cartoons does not directly translate into a democratic critique of power. An intriguing discovery emerged during the analysis: none of the 556 cartoons featured in *TT* entailed a direct critique of the DPP government, neither in relation to our focal theme nor others. Indeed, the only three occasions on which DPP politicians were criticized by *TT* cartoons were a result of them diverting from the official DPP line, depicting them as traitors. In this vein, both outlets function as a power-support media outlet, serving a similar role in constructing external and internal enemies without critiquing power on a national scale.

Regarding our second research question – through which mechanisms do cartoonists construct the identities of Self and Other? – we have unearthed that the very mechanisms used to draw on identity crafting are similarly employed by *TT* and *GT*. Firstly, we found that both outlets discursively invest in the construction of the enemy through the analogous artistic mechanisms of dehumanization, ridicule, binarism, metaphors, exaggeration, contrast, and contradiction, to name the most prevalent ones. Secondly, we have shown that in both media outlets the constructed enemy is demonized in a binary manner as a dangerous power bloc being blinded into a confrontational paradigm that contrasts with the glorification of ‘our’ side as benign and peaceful, as well as jeopardized by that threatening enemy. In other words, both outlets devise the conflict in terms of good versus evil in a way that divides society into two camps.

However, a crucial distinction between the discursive strategies put into play by both outlets is that *TT* employs a more pronounced level of antagonism towards the internal and external enemies compared to *GT*. The practices of enmity construction in *TT* not only dehumanize, criticize, delegitimize, or ridicule the enemy, thus justifying its containment or isolation, but also express satisfaction or approval when the enemy suffers harm. In contrast, *GT* cartoons clearly identify their enemies but do not imply the necessity of hurting or eradicating them. For instance, while *GT* may depict the United States as a formidable and menacing creature like a greedy octopus dominating the world or a heavily armed Uncle Sam (for instance, see Figures 5 and 19), *TT* occasionally employs depictions of the enemy as inferior and repugnant animals, with the classic metaphor of the enemy-as-vermin being a prominent example of extreme dehumanization (for example, see Figures 1 and 37). Furthermore, *TT*’s portrayal of China often suggests the maltreatment of the enemy as a legitimate goal, celebrating the killing of the ‘Chinese octopus’ or the ‘Chinese dragon’ by a strong and brave United States (see Figures 10 and 28). Such extreme depictions of enmity are notably absent in *GT*.

The display of these cartoons in a mainstream outlet in liberal democratic Taiwan raises questions about whether the broader discourse in Taiwanese society perceives the rationalization of extreme forms of antagonism as acceptable. This is particularly intriguing in the current international context where the PRC is seeking to eliminate Taiwan as a political entity, for example, by actively erasing Taiwan’s presence in global diplomatic relations; whereas there is no obvious corresponding Taiwanese strategy aimed at eliminating the People’s Republic of China (PRC) – since the historical strategy of the Republic of China (Taiwan) aimed at recovering the Chinese mainland controlled by the PRC was officially discarded in the early 1990s.³²

There are several potential explanations for this paradox. First, that Taiwan's present position of objective material and diplomatic inferiority vis-a-vis China has translated into an effort to adopt a discursively hawkish stance that endorses and aligns with the worldview of certain political elites in other countries who oppose China. In showing support for the construction of this common enemy internationally and suggesting the need to contain it, pro-independence Taiwanese elites discursively contribute to enabling a 'coalition of the willing' that could facilitate the eventual defeat of the Chinese government. Put differently, the derision of the CCP might hinder a desire by certain elites within Taiwan (as well as beyond) to see a regime change in China,³³ which could be seen as the only real possibility for Taiwan to gain de jure independence. This could explain the need to be the spearhead in the narratives of enmity against China, as illustrated by *TT* cartoons. Second, this paradox indicates that Beijing elites, despite being more vocal in their desire to eliminate the Republic of China as a political state entity, prefer to cultivate a more 'peaceful' image and not to disseminate more controversial cartoons that could unnecessarily damage their international image. In contrast, Taiwan's backing from the Global North bestows discursive privileges that enable pro-independence and anti-China advocates to be less concerned about their international image. Consequently, *TT* cartoons can thus simultaneously sustain the portrayal of Taiwan as an innocent victim oppressed by the Chinese regime while resorting to extreme forms of enmity construction of external and internal enemies reminiscent of darker historical periods.

With regard to the third research question – what subject positions are articulated as those of friends and enemies in the editorial cartoons of *GT* and *TT*? – we observed that the construction of friend/enemy imaginaries adopts two differentiated dimensions, with one oriented towards the construction of *external* enemies and another one, particularly in *TT*, towards the representation of *internal* enemies. On the one hand, the antagonized externality manifests in *GT* through the representation of the United States as a vile and hypocritical demon, a greedy businessman, a threatening octopus, a puppeteer, or a warmonger, while China is depicted as a panda, a dove, and focused on building the world through economic means. Similarly, *TT* depicts China as a brute thug, a perilous animal or monster and an unscrupulous manipulator, while Taiwan and its government are portrayed as virtuous victims courageously confronting the aggressive neighbour.

On the other hand, taking a closer look at the political messaging concerning cross-Strait relations, we found that the discursive tactic aiming at constructing internal enemies is notably more pronounced in *TT* than in *GT*, possibly due to *TT*'s greater focus on national politics compared to *GT*. The prominence of this discursive practice in *TT* could also be partially explained by the proximity of the January 2024 Taiwan presidential election during the period studied. Additionally, *GT* reflects the ideological orientation of the party-state, where maintaining a 'united front' remains a key tactic. This strategy necessitates the incorporation of Taiwanese identity within the broader framework of the Chinese nation, thereby discouraging extreme antagonism towards Taiwanese authorities because it would undermine the overarching goal of (peaceful) re-unification. *GT* tends to focus on cross-Strait relations mostly in response to specific events such as Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan or the sale of weapons to the island. By contrast, *TT* consistently depicts the main Taiwanese opposition political

parties – Kuomintang and TPP parties – along with their prominent political figures, as internal enemies throughout the entire period that was analysed.

It is notable that for both *GT* and *TT* the treasonous internal enemies are always Taiwanese politicians who are linked to the selected external enemies through chains of equivalence. These are the main DPP politicians for *GT* and those of KMT and TPP parties for *TT*. In *GT*, Taiwan's subject position is constructed through the portrayal of its government officials as a childlike, easily prone, pawn of US military intentions and an actor that demonstrates no agency in its future but, instead, is led astray by a militant hegemonic power. According to the narrative sustained by the CCP, Taiwanese authorities are generally depicted in *GT* as traitors to China, with DPP politicians represented as secessionist fools or corrupt officials. In this sense, we do not see Taiwan constructed as an external enemy but rather as an internal problem caused by inept and misled Taiwanese individuals acting as agents of American influence. Meanwhile, in *TT*, Taiwanese opposition parties and politicians are consistently articulated as pawns under Chinese influence, as unscrupulous politicians selling the country in exchange for power, or as individuals ignorant of the implications of negotiating or seeking peace with the perceived enemy, a stance depicted as a form of surrender and treason.

Regarding the last research question – to what extent and how is the United States portrayed? – we encountered entirely opposite interpretations of what the US subject position means for both media outlets. Throughout the collection of *GT* cartoons, there is a recurrent interpretation of the United States as the key enemy to Chinese interests, to global interests more broadly and, ultimately, to the United States itself. The country is consistently represented as a conniving, harmful, and malevolent power which instrumentalizes and exploits a series of useful pawns – whether it be Taiwan, Canada, Ukraine, or the EU. In contrast, from the perspective of *TT* editorial cartoons, the United States is predominantly depicted as a commendable global police force, a powerful leader whose essential role is to keep China in check. These cartoons often celebrate how US actions negatively impact China's economy, security, or international political objectives. Accordingly, while *GT* represents Taiwan as a militarized outpost of the United States supported by DPP secessionist politicians, *TT* portrays Taiwan as a brave subject position defending itself from aggression with the support of the United States.


Concluding remarks

The range of striking resemblances, parallels, and pivotal differences observed in the editorial political cartoons featured in *Global Times* and *Taipei Times* reveal the onset of a discursive 'cartoon war' amid the evolving dynamics of the 'New Cold War' and the straining of Sino-Taiwanese-US relations. Within this framework, the editorial stance of both outlets reflects an intense polarization and hostility towards both external (the United States for *Global Times* and China for *Taipei Times*) and internal adversaries (the DPP for *Global Times* and the KMT and TPP for *Taipei Times*), employing mechanisms aimed at dehumanizing and mocking the Other while glorifying the in-group. Paradoxically, these discursive dynamics are more extreme in the Taiwanese outlet than in the Chinese one. Unlike *Global Times*, *Taipei Times* employs more explicit and extreme discursive strategies for dehumanizing internal enemies, specifically

Taiwanese politicians from the KMT and TPP parties, while also legitimizing violence against them and China. Finally, the two media outlets present starkly contrasting interpretations of the United States: *Global Times* depicts the United States as a malevolent force undermining global interests and exploiting allies such as Taiwan, while *Taipei Times* portrays the United States as a commendable leader and global police force, with Taiwan characterized as valiantly defending itself against aggression with US support.

These discourses contribute to an ampler ‘culture of enmity’ currently developing in the Taiwan Strait,³⁴ fostering a dangerous atmosphere of intense hostility that rationalizes and legitimizes actions aimed at containing or even harming both external and internal enemies. Cartoons are just one of numerous tools that shape the discursive practices in the Taiwan Strait; yet the cartoon wars we have seen in this article reveal much about the political imaginaries in the region and the potential directions in which these may evolve beyond both pen and paper.

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Notes

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