

Taiwan Intelligence Chief Pictures Reignite Debate Over Chinese Disinformation Ops

Thursday 29 December 2022, by [HIOE Brian](#) (Date first published: 14 October 2022).

A scandal involving the director-general of Taiwan's National Security Bureau has raised concerns about Chinese disinformation, particularly as amplified by domestic media outlets.

Although not widely reported internationally, a scandal involving the director-general of Taiwan's National Security Bureau (NSB) – Taiwan's main intelligence agency – has raised concerns about Chinese disinformation, particularly as amplified by domestic media outlets.

In mid-September, [screenshots alleging](#) to show a secret trip to Thailand by NSB director-general Chen Ming-tong began to circulate online. The screenshots originated from a Twitter account with the username @andreny45652235, which has since been removed. The account only had six tweets, raising suspicions about its veracity.

Subsequently, the screenshots began to circulate in Facebook groups and pages such as Baoliao Commune, which often posts rumors and unconfirmed news and has a following of more than 3.2 million. The screenshots were then reported on by pan-Blue domestic news networks such as the United Daily News and China Times.

The NSB has stated that the tweets were factually incorrect but did not specify if Chen had in fact traveled to Thailand. It is still unclear if the images were older photos or had been digitally manipulated, or if Chen genuinely did take a trip to Thailand recently.

Much of the initial framing focused on whether Chen was taking a sightseeing trip at public expense, or whether Chen may have been carrying out an affair, as he was traveling with a woman. Later on, after comments to the Liberty Times by [a national security official](#) speaking on the condition of anonymity, there was public discussion that the screenshots may be Chinese disinformation aimed at showing the wide reach of China's intelligence services.

As framed by the national security official, Chen may have been traveling to Thailand to exchange intelligence, which is not uncommon among intelligence officials. The pictures – assuming they are legitimate – were taken by Thailand's customs agency, so this leak may have been aimed at showing that China has access to images from Thai customs.

If so, this may be a result of close relations between China and the Thai government at present. For example, that one of the kidnapped Hong Kong Causeway Bay booksellers, Gui Minhai, disappeared from Thailand. Gui was detained by Chinese security forces in Thailand — something [unlikely to have taken place](#) without the cooperation of Thai authorities.

Another possibility that has been raised is that the images could have been obtained through backdoors in Chinese surveillance equipment. Chinese-manufactured surveillance and telecommunications equipment is widely used globally but could contain backdoors, particularly if

data is routed from Chinese servers – an issue increasingly of concern in Taiwan.

Despite government regulations aiming to phase out the use of Chinese equipment, with the Taiwanese government banning the use of Hikvision and Dahua Technology in 2020, reports suggest that Chinese parts are used in equipment branded as Taiwanese. [According to a report by Commonwealth](#), some disguised Chinese equipment has won government tenders in this way.

The controversy takes place at a time when Taiwanese organizations that work on fighting disinformation, such as the Taiwan Fact Check Center, [have warned of an uptick](#) in disinformation aimed at discrediting Tsai administration officials. This is likely aimed at affecting Taiwan's midterm elections in November.

Likewise, the scandal occurs amidst heightened fears about China's influence in Southeast Asia. This issue came to the forefront amid [a recent wave](#) of human trafficking cases of Taiwanese in Cambodia, with some reports suggesting thousands of victims. After the human trafficking cases were reported on, Chinese diplomatic representatives in Cambodia [stepped in to suggest](#) that they could assist kidnapped Taiwanese in a manner that Taiwanese representatives could not, drawing on close ties with the Cambodian government.

Chen may make a convenient target, seeing as he was recently implicated in a plagiarism scandal regarding the ruling Democratic Progressive Party's Taoyuan mayoral candidate, former Hsinchu mayor Lin Chih-chien. Lin was accused of plagiarizing his master's thesis from National Taiwan University (NTU) from another student, with an NTU committee ruling that Lin's master's degree should be revoked. Lin [withdrew](#) from the race, to be replaced by DPP legislator Cheng Yun-peng.

Chen was Lin's thesis supervisor. He [defended Lin](#) during the scandal, claiming that he had provided data collected by Lin to another student and that this was what led to misleading perceptions about plagiarism. This was not the first time that Chen, who previously served as minister of the Mainland Affairs Council, had been accused of [granting easy degrees](#) to political allies. After the Lin plagiarism controversy, there were calls for Chen to also face accountability. It was later announced that [Chen would not be teaching at NTU](#) in the near future, given his duties with the NSB.

There have been other news stories along similar lines since the Chen controversy. In late September, a Chinese state-run newspaper published by the Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) in China's Fujian province reported on what it claimed to be a trip to Hawaii by Ministry of National Defense Political Warfare Bureau Director Chien Shih-wei.

The framing of the report was similar to reports of Chen in Thailand, in suggesting that Chien was carousing nightlife and sightseeing at the public expense, while also emphasizing that Beijing was monitoring Chien throughout his trip. The report was then picked up by the China Times, which ran the report as a front-page story. On the other hand, the Ministry of National Defense [has criticized the reports](#) as "cognitive warfare."

More generally, there have long been concerns in Taiwan about pan-Blue outlets amplifying Chinese disinformation – possibly in coordination with the Chinese government.

[A July 2019 report](#) by the Financial Times stated that media outlets belonging to the Want Want Group, which is owned by pro-unification tycoon Tsai Eng-meng, were directly seeking approval from China's TAO before running stories. Fears about Tsai buying up Taiwanese media outlets to promote pro-unification views in Taiwan sparked the 2012 Anti-Media Monopoly Movement, a predecessor to the much larger 2014 Sunflower Movement.

In April 2019, [the Apple Daily reported](#) that Want Want-owned outlets had accepted over 477 million renminbi from the Chinese government in 2017 and 2018. The Want Want Group sought to respond to these reports with lawsuits against the Financial Times, Apple Daily, and Taiwan's state-run Central News Agency, which reported on these scoops.

In May 2019, [70 representatives from Taiwanese media groups](#) attended an event in Beijing co-organized by the Beijing Newspaper Group and the Want Want China Times Media Group. Among the attendees were high-ranking media executives like the editor-in-chief of the UDN, the president of the China Times (owned by Want Want), the chair of the Taiwan Broadcasting Association, and the chair of the Taiwan Radio and Television Program Association. Participants at the event signed a cooperation agreement and were urged to promote unification, with speakers at the event including Wang Yang, chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference National Committee and a member of the Politburo Standing Committee, China's top governing body.

At the same time, even in cases where there are allegations of domestic media networks circulating Chinese disinformation, this issue is entangled with concerns about freedom of speech. Pan-Blue outlets claim that the Tsai Ing-wen administration is merely targeting political opponents and trying to stamp out criticism.

As evidence, they point out that Want Want-owned television network CtiTV [did not have its broadcast license](#) renewed in November 2020, following which CtiTV moved to online streaming. As part of the ruling against CtiTV by the National Communications Commission (NCC), the NCC cited biased broadcasts by the network, [such devoting 70 percent of airtime](#) to covering its Tsai Eng-meng's preferred nominee for the KMT's presidential candidate, Han Kuo-yu. This was during a period in which Han was contending for the KMT presidential nomination against current KMT chair Eric Chu and FoxConn founder Terry Gou.

At present, another controversy involves applications by some networks to move pan-Blue-leaning TVBS to [a lesser-viewed channel slot](#) and replace it with a newer network, Mirror TV. As with the CtiTV ruling, pan-Blue media outlets have accused the Tsai administration of pressuring the NCC to try and ensure that Mirror TV's application is passed and TVBS is removed from its current slot.

Brian Hioe

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French.

P.S.

The Diplomat

<https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/taiwan-intelligence-chief-pictures-reignite-debate-over-chinese-disinformation-ops/>