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Chinese Netizens' Response to Nancy Pelosi's Visit to Taiwan

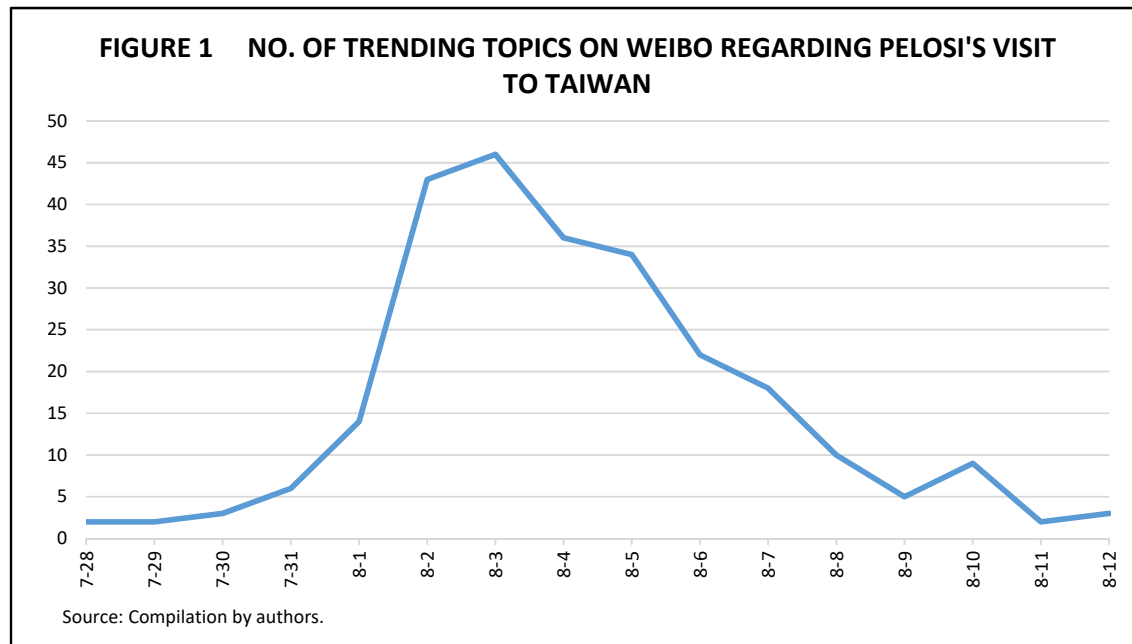
By SHAN Wei and Ryan HO

Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi's trip to Taiwan had stirred up a huge whirlwind of discussions on Chinese social media. As many China observers had expected, Chinese netizens displayed strong nationalist sentiments and hawkish viewpoints. There was, however, considerable diversity in opinions. A small but significant group had clearly expressed its opposition to the escalation of war, while an even smaller group of critics or liberals had expressed its sympathy for Taiwan and criticised the mainland authorities.

Pelosi's visit largely dominated social media discussion in China during the course of her trip. Figure 1 shows the trending topics relating to Pelosi's trip to Taiwan on Sina Weibo, China's largest and Twitter-style platform. Weibo updates daily a list of top trending topics, that is, the top 50 topics most discussed by netizens each day. Figure 1 shows that when Pelosi's visit first showed up on the list of trending topics on 28 July, there were only two topics. Within a few days up till 2 August, the number of topics had surged to as many as 43 topics (out of 50) on this event. The discussions peaked on 3 August with 46 trending topics when Pelosi landed in Taiwan. After this peak, it slid gradually to just two topics on 11 August.

Views in Chinese cyberspace can be summarised into three groups. The first was the mainstream characterised by a nationalist frenzy filled with belligerent rhetoric, stating that they would defend Taiwan at all costs, stop Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, and even as far as to wage war against Taiwan and the United States. Nationalistic netizens also launched a "witch hunt" campaign, attacking celebrities and pop culture stars on Weibo for not explicitly expressing their "patriotism". On 3 August, many celebrities and pop culture idols, including some Taiwanese and non-Chinese nationals, retweeted an image from the Weibo account of the Chinese central state television with the words, "There is only one China". Those who did not

retweet this post were blacklisted and their names were widely circulated on the internet, with some receiving a lot of flak.



By the time Pelosi landed safely in Taipei, Chinese public opinions quickly shifted from a nationalist rage to a strong sense of frustration or even a sense of shame.¹ Many netizens admitted that they cried after seeing Pelosi's successful arrival in Taiwan: "I haven't cried for my country in all my life, really, not like this". Some said, "Never in a million years would I have thought that we would have the entire nation welcoming the plane arrival of the old woman (Pelosi)".² There is a widely circulated video showing people slapping themselves in agitation. Some threw eggs at the entrance of the Xiamen municipal government.³ The emotions were so strong that on the evening of 2 August, Weibo had reportedly blocked mainland China IP addresses and mainland users' access. It is alleged that the government had banned mainland IP addresses access to reduce the intensity of mass emotions to prevent them from spiralling out of control.⁴

The frustration eased after news of PLA military exercises around Taiwan was released. The official media also posted a series of topics on Weibo to guide people to be "patriotic in a rational way", emphasising the advanced weapons used in PLA's drills and demonstrating its ability to defeat Taiwan. The authorities reassured the public that the party and the government have the determination and means to preserve the country's unity. However, many netizens remained unconvinced, arguing that the military exercise was just "bombarding fish" and "beating the air", which was still a weak and "traitorous" act.

The ever-hawkish opinion leader Hu Xijin, former editor-in-chief of the nationalist tabloid *Global Times*, came under fire for triggering public frustration. Another nationalist opinion

¹ <https://www.wenxuecity.com/news/2022/08/12/11760717.html>, accessed 14 August 2022.

² <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/685210.html>, accessed 12 August 2022.

³ <https://www.wenxuecity.com/news/2022/08/12/11760717.html>, accessed 14 August 2022.

⁴ <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/685485.html>, accessed 13 August 2022.

leader, nicknamed Chairman Rabbit, accused him of making too many belligerent statements and raising public expectations too high, which had backfired and put the government in a bad light. Hu refuted he was a “special force” in managing public opinions in defence of the country’s interests, implying that he was acting on government instructions.⁵

The second line of views generally opposed belligerent rhetoric. Although they were the minority, they were present in almost all the trending topics. They were against going to war, not because they were sympathetic of Taiwan or the West, but because of concerns that war would result in the loss of many people’s loved ones and destroy the economy. Some with this line of view suggested that Weibo should have an automatic military enlisting feature for anyone who called for war to be automatically classified as a soldier and sent to the front line.

Interestingly, much of the rhetoric from this group justified the government’s “weak” behaviour, calling for confidence in the government and arguing that such restraint is rational and more effective for unification. People with these views tried to comfort and reason with the frustrated nationalist netizens. Their claims tend to go along these lines: “It is still necessary to believe in the state”, “War is not a game”, “Our country is not afraid of war, but our country needs to think about its citizens and avoid unnecessary wars and casualties, we don’t have to be jingoists”, and “I hope we can all remain sensible. The country has always taken all things into considerations. When the two great powers of China and the United States go to war, it may not only be a war between two countries bearing in mind the lessons of the two World Wars. Don’t question the country. Trust the country and trust the Party”.

There is also a small group of netizens who are critical of the government, or sympathetic of Taiwan and/or pro-West. Despite heavy censorship, they still made their presence felt in many corners of the Chinese internet, for example in the comments of videos or posts. Under an article titled, “It is the right of every citizen to defend the motherland and resist invasion”, a bunch of people replied: “I didn’t do the nucleic acid test (PCR test) and now I have a yellow health code, can I go defend the motherland?”⁶ One said, “I can’t pay my mortgage, can I still defend my country?” Yet another retorted, “Hey, be careful of what you say. They can’t punish Pelosi, but they can punish us”. When Hu Xijin said on a Weibo post that he had tweeted harsh words on Twitter, a number of netizens asked pretentiously, “May I ask what is Twitter?” Others questioned: “It’s illegal to be on Twitter. May I ask how Hu got on to Twitter?” Twitter is firewalled by the Chinese government. Evidently, the sarcasm is on the fact that Hu as a former government official has free access to Twitter.

This line of views is often more analytical in their posts. Those in this group would write on the history of Taiwan and why the Taiwanese are reluctant to accept reunification. Some pointed out that the nationalist frenzy could have a detrimental effect on China’s international relations. There were also articles analysing whether the nationalist sentiments would affect public support for the government. Some also noted that Pelosi’s visit had diverted attention away from domestic issues, such as protests in Henan against rural banks that stopped customers from withdrawing cash, unfinished buildings and the Tangshan incident where a group of men publicly assaulted four women at a restaurant.⁷

⁵ <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/685367.html>, accessed 13 August 2022.

⁶ Residents in many Chinese cities are required to go through a nucleic acid test once every few days to secure a green health code. Otherwise, their health code will turn yellow, and entering public facilities and workplaces will be forbidden.

⁷ <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/685184.html>, accessed 12 August 2022.

Many observers have voiced concerns that the ultra-nationalist sentiments dominating the Chinese internet might push the Chinese government to risk a war and attack Taiwan. However, in this event, nationalism may not lead to serious consequence. A study of Chinese nationalist demonstrations over the past two or three decades has shown that Chinese public opinions have had limited influence on foreign policy decisions.⁸ In reality, the Chinese government had often used public opinions as a tool to promote foreign policy. Beijing only allows or encourages nationalist protests when it wants to demonstrate a strong and uncompromising stance abroad. When it wishes to adopt a more moderate and flexible diplomatic posture, it would suppress such demonstrations.

More importantly, there is evidence that this outbreak of online nationalist sentiments has been consciously instigated by Beijing. Appendix 1 lists the top 50 trending topics on Weibo on 3 August when Pelosi was in Taipei, each hosted by a moderator/host. All topics on Pelosi's visit were hosted by state media accounts, while other unrelated topics were moderated by accounts of private entities. Furthermore, the top posts on Pelosi topics (an example is shown in Figure 2) that received the highest number of likes and replies were all posted by state media accounts.

Some Weibo VIP users were very active in guiding the direction of public opinions in favour of the government. Tough statements from spokespersons of the Chinese Foreign Ministry and Ministry of Defence were promptly reposted on Weibo, leading to a surge in nationalist sentiments. One of the most prominent users was Hu Xijin. On 25 July, he posted that China should deal Pelosi with "head-on blows", followed by increasingly aggressive comments as the days went by. These included comments that the PLA Air Force should block the sky over Taiwan, reminding the United States of China's nuclear strike power, and arguing that PLA planes could accompany Pelosi's plane into Taiwan's sky and even shoot down Pelosi's plane. He also reminded Taiwan's government and military leaders that they would all be wiped out should a war break out.⁹ These remarks were widely retweeted and won bravos and cheers from many internet users.

Although nationalist sentiments may not be a driver pushing Beijing into a war this time, its long-term influence on China's behaviour should not be neglected. Since the Tiananmen Incident in 1989, Beijing has intensified its patriotic education from primary school to tertiary institutions. In textbooks and classrooms, China has been portrayed as a victim of bullying by Western powers since the late 19th century, and is still often treated unfairly in the international system today. In this discourse, Taiwan is depicted as a lost child who will be brought home by the mother, who is now growing stronger. Those born since the 1980s have grown up with such a discourse. One analysis found that though China's younger generations are less nationalistic in identity than the older cohorts, they have become more hawkish and aggressive in their foreign policy opinions.¹⁰

⁸ Weiss, Jessica Chen. *Powerful Patriots: NationalistP in China's Foreign Relations*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

⁹ <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/685254.html>, accessed 15 August 2022.

¹⁰ Weiss, Jessica Chen. "How Hawkish is the Chinese Public? Another Look at "Rising Nationalism" and Chinese Foreign Policy." *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 119 (2019): 679-695.

FIGURE 2 SCREENSHOT OF A WEIBO TRENDING TOPIC “TAIPEI PEOPLE DEMAND PELOSI TO GET OUT OF TAIWAN”
(Texts in red boxes are added by authors)



The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the hawkish tendencies of China's youth, the backbone of Chinese social media users. When China had completely contained the spread of the virus in the summer of 2020, the United States and Europe were still combating the virus, with tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of cases per day. The Chinese propaganda machine portrayed the Western world at the time as a place where the virus was raging and rampant, and the people were desperate and miserable. The policy of living with the virus advocated by many Western governments was described as indifference to people's lives. Questions that have become popular on China's Quora-like platform Zhihu include "Why is the U.S. declining so fast" and "Why hasn't the U.S. collapsed?" A survey found that the pandemic had significantly strengthened Chinese netizens' confidence in China's international standing.¹¹ Those who were more in favour of China's anti-pandemic policies were more hawkish in their foreign policy opinions, more inclined to advocate the use of force against the United States, Japan, Taiwan and so on, and more inclined to pursue regional hegemony.

The Chinese Communist Party currently uses popular nationalism as a foreign policy tool, namely inciting nationalist sentiments, to show its assertiveness. However, nationalism is a double-edged sword. If government policies fail to meet the demands of feverish sentiments, the anger may be diverted to target the government. As it stands, the government may not have enough muscles to suppress nationalist demands when China's economy is in trouble or when competitions between political elites went out of hand. Under such circumstances, public sentiments may become an important consideration in the government's response to international tensions. It would likely be the time when China will adopt a risk-taking and belligerent policy.

¹¹ Byun, Joshua, D G Kim and Sichen Li. "The Geopolitical Consequences of COVID-19: Assessing Hawkish Mass Opinion in China." *Political Science Quarterly* 136, no. 4 (2021): 641.

APPENDIX 1

TOP 50 TRENDING TOPICS ON WEIBO (3 AUGUST 2022)

Ranking	Chinese Title	English Title	Moderator/Host	Affiliation
1	台媒曝光佩洛西窜台行程	Taiwanese media exposes Nancy Pelosi's sneaky trip to Taiwan	China Taiwan Web	Government
2	对台湾地区暂停天然砂出口	Suspension of natural sand to Taiwan	Nil	Nil
3	解放军将展开一系列针对性军事行动	The PLA to launch a series of targeted military operations	CCTV News	Government
4	外交部回应佩洛西窜访中国台湾地区	The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs responds to Nancy Pelosi's visit of Taiwan	CCTV News	Government
5	解放军在台湾岛周边军事演训和实弹射击	The PLA conducts military exercises and live ammunition around Taiwan	<i>People's Daily</i>	Government
6	实现祖国统一的决心坚如磐石	The determination to realise the reunification of the motherland is as firm as a rock	<i>People's Daily</i>	Government
7	新闻联播	News Feed	Nil	Nil
8	台北民众高喊佩洛西滚回去	Taiwanese public demands Pelosi to get out of Taiwan	China News Web	Government
9	暂停台湾地区柑橘类水果等输入大陆	Suspension of the import of citrus fruits from Taiwan to the Mainland	<i>People's Daily</i>	Government
10	解放军明显在演练全面封锁台岛	The PLA is clearly practising a complete blockade of Taiwan	Global Times Web	Government
11	俄外交部声明称台湾问题纯属中国内政	Russia's foreign ministry says Taiwan issue is purely China's internal affairs	CCTV Web	Government
12	佩洛西访问台湾是危险的挑衅行为	Pelosi's visit to Taiwan is a dangerous act of provocation	China News Web	Government
13	国台办回应蔡英文为佩洛西授勋	Taiwan Affairs Office responds to Tsai Ing-wen's award to Pelosi	Nil	Nil
14	桃园机场收到爆裂物恐吓信	Taoyuan Airport receives explosive threat letter	Global Times Web	Government
15	日本称无法就是否支持佩洛西访台发表评论	Japan says it can't comment on whether it supports Pelosi's visit to Taiwan	Global Times Web	Government
16	佩洛西丈夫酒驾被捕后体内被检出毒品	Pelosi's husband found with drug substance in his body after being caught drink driving	China News	Government

17	桃园机场明日取消 40 个航班	Taoyuan Airport cancels 40 flights tomorrow	Global Times Web	Government
18	暂停台湾地区冰鲜白 带鱼输入大陆	Suspending the import of chilled white hairtail from Taiwan to the Mainland	People's Daily Web	Government
19	美方在台湾问题上背 信弃义令人不齿	The perfidy of the United States on the Taiwan issue is disgusting	China News	Government
20	东部战区将在台岛周 边开展军事行动	The Eastern Theatre to carry out military operations around Taiwan	CCTV News	Government
21	台媒称山东舰和辽宁 舰驶出基地	Taiwanese media claims that the carrier Shandong and Liaoning have left their bases	China Taiwan Web	Government
22	多国政府发表声明谴 责佩洛西窜访台湾	Many governments issue statements condemning Pelosi's visit to Taiwan	CCTV Web	Government
23	台海局势紧张升级美 方须负全责	The United States should take full responsibility for escalating tensions in the Taiwan Strait	People's Daily Web	Government
24	韩国一客机途经台湾 空域时紧急迫降	South Korean plane makes emergency landing while passing through Taiwanese airspace	<i>People's Daily</i> Overseas Edition	Government
25	你打你的我打我的	You fight your battles, I fight mine	<i>People's Daily</i> Overseas Edition	Government
26	中华人民共和国外交 部声明	Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China	China News Web	Government
27	台媒预计佩洛西明日 17 时离台	Taiwanese media expects Pelosi to leave Taiwan at 17:00 tomorrow	Global Times Web	Government
28	佩洛西与蔡英文见面	Pelosi meets Tsai Ing- wen	Nil	Nil
29	东部战区台岛周边 演训视频	Military training video of the Eastern Theatre around Taiwan	CCTV News	Government
30	佩洛西暴露遏制中国 发展的险恶用心	Pelosi exposes sinister intentions to curb China's development	CCTV News	Government
31	台媒拍到佩洛西离开 酒店前往美国在台协 会	Taiwan media filmed Pelosi leaving the hotel for the American Institute in Taiwan	Global Times Web	Government
32	直播画面显示佩洛西 抵达台立法机构	Live footage shows Pelosi arriving at Taiwan's legislature	Global Times Web	Government

33	什么是天然砂	What is natural sand?	Vista Seeing the World	Government
34	联合国重申遵循一个中国政策	UN reaffirms adherence to one-China policy	Nil	Nil
35	王者荣耀	Honour of Kings	“Honour of Kings” Official Account	Private
36	台媒称解放军军演形同海空锁台 3 天	Taiwanese media said that the PLA military exercise was like blockading Taiwan by sea and air for three days	Global Times Web	Government
37	台媒曝台交通部门深夜急拟应对方案	Taiwanese media reveal that Taiwan’s transportation department had urgently prepared a response plan late at night	Global Times Web	Government
38	台媒称解放军歼 16 战机现身巴士海峡	Taiwanese media said the PLA J-16 fighter jet sighted in the Bashi Strait	Global Times Web	Government
39	海南三亚进入区域管控状态	Sanya (Hainan) in a state of regional control	Nil	Nil
40	8 月 3 日起东海部分海域实弹射击	Live ammunition exercises in parts of the East China Sea from 3 August	Central Military Affairs News	Government
41	华春莹一句中国古话讲给美国官员	Hua Chunying told an old Chinese saying to US officials	CCTV News	Government
42	网红自曝一天带货 2 亿净赚 400 万元	Internet celebrity declares that he sold 200 million goods a day and made a net profit of RMB4 million	Five Circles News and Video	Private
43	解放军空军苏-35 战机穿越台湾海峡	PLA Air Force Su-35 fighter jets cross the Taiwan Strait	Yu Yuan Tan Tian	Government
44	宁德时代暂停北美工厂项目	CATL suspends North American factory project	Sina Cars	Private
45	大爷出轨小 30 岁女子 9 个月花 430 万	An uncle cheated with a 30-year-old woman and spent RMB4.3 million in nine months	Star News	Private
46	多架美军用侦察机在台湾岛周边活动	Several US reconnaissance planes operating around Taiwan Island	Global Times	Government
47	台媒称解放军军机深夜加大机队规模	Taiwanese media revealed that PLA military scaled up its fleet late at night	Global Times Web	Government

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48	白象方便面被曝面饼上满是蚂蚁	White elephant instant noodles exposed, ants on the noodle dough	Sina	Private
49	韩总统办公室回应佩洛西访台	Korean President's Office Responds to Pelosi's Visit to Taiwan	Global Times Web	Government
50	海军任务舰艇已抵达台岛以东	Navy mission ships arrive at the east of Taiwan	People's Daily	Government

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