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ANGER, FEAR, AND HURT:  
CHINA'S EMOTIONAL RESPONSES  
TO THE TAIWAN ISSUE<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

In the field of international relations, few states appear as emotional in their official rhetoric as the People's Republic of China (PRC). China's diplomatic language is infused with emotionally charged expressions, followed by a range of symbolic gestures: canceling diplomatic meetings, terminating official communication channels, orchestrating street protests against countries or organizations perceived to have offended China, and, in more extreme cases, demonstrating strength through military drills.<sup>2</sup> This emotionality has been captured by international media through headlines featuring expressions such as "China is angry,"<sup>3</sup> "enraged China,"<sup>4</sup> and similar phrases intended to illustrate Beijing's emotional reactions to situations where it believes its red lines have been crossed.

Nowhere is this emotional expressiveness more evident than in China's responses to developments surrounding Taiwan – a democratically-governed island

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<sup>2</sup> T.H. Hall, *Emotional Diplomacy: Official Emotion on the International Stage*, Cornell University Press, New York 2015, p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> A. Wang, J. Taylor, 'China Is Angry': Taiwan Anxiety Rises As Sabre-rattling Grows, "Barron's," 4.11.2020, <https://www.barrons.com/news/china-is-angry-taiwan-anxiety-rises-as-sabre-rattling-grows-01604468713> (access: 6.04.2024).

<sup>4</sup> A. Singh, 'United States Has Ignored...': Enraged China Opposes Washington's Arms Sales to Taiwan, "WION," 5.07.2023, <https://www.wionews.com/world/united-states-has-ignored-angry-china-opposes-washingtons-arms-sales-to-taiwan-612101> (access: 6.04.2024).

that Beijing considers a mere renegade province<sup>5</sup> (though it does not use this term).<sup>6</sup> From military exercises to impassioned editorials in state-controlled media, China has deployed a wide array of rhetorical devices, symbolic gestures, and actions to express its emotions regarding Taiwan. This becomes particularly apparent when Beijing interprets Taipei's words or actions as a deviation from the One China concept<sup>7</sup> and a move toward so-called "independence," that is, a transformation from the Republic of China (ROC) to the Republic of Taiwan, regardless of whether such is Taipei's actual intention.<sup>8</sup>

However, China's emotional expressions are not simply random outbursts; they appear to follow a patterned logic, reflecting both strategic calculation and deep-seated historical consciousness. As China's global stature continues to grow, comprehending how and why it employs emotional rhetoric is crucial for interpreting its behavior on the international stage.

To foster a deeper understanding of why China acts the way it does and what it seeks to communicate, this article examines the emotional dimensions of China's Taiwan discourse. Specifically, it focuses on expressions of anger, fear, and hurt as potential driving forces behind China's decisions and actions. The primary time-frame for this analysis stretches from the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019 to the most recent Taiwanese presidential election in January 2024; however, some other relevant developments prior to this period are also considered in order to strengthen our arguments and to help visualize Beijing's emotional dynamics.

The central concept guiding this analysis is what scholars have termed "emotional diplomacy" – the strategic use of emotion-laden language and affective

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<sup>5</sup> A. Luszczkiewicz, P. Mendis, *Taiwan's Participation in International Organizations: The Current Position of Poland and Its Possible Ways of Supporting Taipei*, Report submitted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan), February 2023, p. X, <https://wnpism.uw.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Taiwan-Report-on-Poland-and-IOs-by-Luszczkiewicz-and-Mendis-February-2023.pdf> (access: 21.05.2025).

<sup>6</sup> I. Stone Fish, *Stop Calling Taiwan a 'Renegade Province'*, "Foreign Policy," 15.01.2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/15/stop-calling-taiwan-a-renegade-province/> (access: 20.09.2025).

<sup>7</sup> Beijing's One China principle states that "there is but one China in the world, Taiwan is an inalienable part of China's territory, and the Government of the People's Republic of China is the sole legal government representing the whole of China", *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference on May 21, 2024*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People's Republic of China, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530\\_11347760.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347760.html) (access: 19.05.2025). A more ambiguous One China policy, however – with its most famous version adopted by the United States – recognizes the Beijing government as the only legal representative of China without clarifying the status of Taiwan.

<sup>8</sup> Ch.-T. Yeh, *'Taiwan Independence' Doesn't Mean What You Think*, "Foreign Policy" 11.04.2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/11/taiwan-independence-china-republichuadu-taidu/> (access: 14.05.2025).

displays in statecraft.<sup>9</sup> This approach treats emotions not as irrational byproducts, but as political tools used deliberately to shape narratives, assert moral authority, and influence the behavior of other governments, international organizations, and non-state actors.

In addition to reconstructing Beijing’s emotional rhetoric, this article also explores whether China’s emotionality stems from authentic collective trauma rooted in historical memory, or whether these displays are simply instrumentalized by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to consolidate domestic legitimacy, shape public sentiment, and exert pressure on the international community. In doing so, it interrogates the boundaries between performance and authenticity<sup>10</sup> in the context of China’s emotional expressions regarding Taiwan. Thus, assuming that China’s emotionality may go deeper than mere political performance, the article traces the interdependencies among anger, fear, and hurt – not only examining how these emotions drive Beijing’s behavior, but also how they interact with and reinforce one another.

The article is organized around several core themes. Following a methodological and theoretical overview, it explores the evolution of China’s “diplomacy of anger,” the recurring trope of “hurting the feelings of the Chinese people,” recent efforts by the Chinese state to codify emotional injury into law, and, finally, the foundational role of fear as a potential driving force behind China’s behavior. By examining these themes, this article aims to contribute to a broader debate on the role of emotions in global politics and to offer new insights into the emotional underpinnings of China’s approach to Taiwan.

## 2. Methodological and theoretical background

To analyze China’s emotional responses to the Taiwan issue, this study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This choice is motivated by a belief that CDA is particularly well-suited to examining the nexus of language, power, and ideology – especially in authoritarian contexts where state narratives are carefully constructed and emotionally charged. Given the importance of rhetoric in diplomacy, interpretative and explanatory CDA<sup>11</sup> makes possible a systematic investigation of how emotions such as anger, fear, and hurt are

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<sup>9</sup> T.H. Hall, *Emotional Diplomacy...*, p. viii.

<sup>10</sup> For the purposes of this research, “emotional authenticity” is defined here as a “congruence between one’s outer behavior and one’s feelings or sense of self.” I. Landa, T. English, *Variability in State Authenticity Predicts Daily Affect and Emotion Regulation*, “Emotion” 2022, Vol. 22(8), pp. 1995–1999, <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0001017>.

<sup>11</sup> T.A. Van Dijk, *Critical Discourse Analysis [in:] The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, eds. D. Tannen, H.E. Hamilton, D. Schiffrin, John Wiley and Sons, Chichester 2015, p. 466.

articulated, framed, and instrumentalized by Chinese state actors through official communication.

The primary materials analyzed in this research include statements from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, articles in state-affiliated media outlets, press releases, and Chinese-language online commentary and social media content. These sources were selected not only for their informational content, but also for their function as tools of both domestic propaganda and international signaling. To situate the findings within a broader scholarly context, secondary sources – including academic articles, policy papers, and reports from think tanks – were consulted, particularly those addressing emotional diplomacy, nationalism, and discourse politics in China.

The wider theoretical framework of this study is based on an attempt to find a balance between constructivist and rationalist approaches. Essentially, it accepts a constructivist approach in international relations, which views state behavior as shaped by identities, norms, and emotions, rather than solely by material interests or rational calculations. This perspective enables a nuanced interpretation of how collective memory, national trauma (rooted in the “Century of Humiliation”), and cultural narratives contribute to the emotional tone and strategic choices of the Chinese state. Simultaneously, however, elements of a rationalist perspective have been incorporated to examine whether China’s emotional performances may be seen rather as calculated efforts to achieve specific policy objectives, such as deterrence or legitimization.

The central concept employed in this paper is “emotional diplomacy,” defined by Todd Hall as the coordinated, collective, and strategic use of emotional displays by state actors to influence international outcomes.<sup>12</sup> For an emotional display to qualify under this definition, it must meet specific criteria: it must be officially endorsed, synchronized across actors and platforms, and strategically directed. While a “diplomacy of anger” is perhaps the most conspicuous form of emotional expression, it is important to stress that states can also deploy a wide range of both positive and negative emotions – including joy, fear, sadness, shame, and guilt.<sup>13</sup>

However, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research rests on the assumption that states are not sentient beings: they do not

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<sup>12</sup> T.H. Hall, *Emotional Diplomacy...*, pp. 2–3.

<sup>13</sup> Compare with: B. Rimé, *The Social Sharing of Emotion as an Interface between Individual and Collective Processes in the Construction of Emotional Climates*, “Journal of Social Issues” 2007 Vol. 63(2), pp. 307–322, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2007.00514.x>; G. Szabó, B. Kiss, *Unpacking Shame Management in Politics: Strategies for Evoking and Steps to Mitigate the Feeling of Shame*, “Political Research Exchange” 2023, Vol. 5(1), <https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2023.2221733>; G. Gatta, ‘*There Is a Corpse in the Room*’: On Political Guilt and Reparation of the Past, “The Review of Politics” 2024, Vol. 86(1), pp. 70–92, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670523000530>.

“feel” emotions in the human sense.<sup>14</sup> What we refer to as a state’s emotions are, in fact, expressions of individual actors representing the state.<sup>15</sup> These expressions may be strategic, sincere, or a combination of both. To address this challenge, our analysis focuses on observable discursive and performative behaviors such as statements, symbolic acts, and policy decisions.

Second, this article recognizes the fact that linguistic and cultural translation poses a significant challenge. Many Chinese words and phrases carry culturally specific connotations that may not translate cleanly into English emotional vocabulary.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the semiotic complexity of Chinese characters results in meaning being embedded not only in word choice but also in symbolic structure. These nuances must be considered carefully to avoid misinterpretation, particularly when analyzing politically sensitive or emotionally charged terms.

Finally, it is important to recognize that Chinese digital discourse – including media reports, social media posts, blogs, and online commentaries – is always first filtered through mechanisms of censorship and self-censorship. This complicates the task of assessing genuine bottom-up emotional expressions. Nevertheless, online reactions still serve as important indicators of social mood and can highlight tensions between official narratives and public sentiment.

Building on these approaches and assumptions, our article seeks to uncover the layered meanings embedded in China’s emotional rhetoric. Rather than treating emotions as irrational or disruptive, we regard them as both an analytical lens and a constitutive force in China’s international conduct – especially with regard to the Taiwan issue.

### 3. China’s “diplomacy of anger”

Historically, Chinese philosophers have examined the role and power of emotions. The most strategic treatment of this subject appears in Sun Zi’s classical treaty *The Art of War*, which addresses emotions in a highly practical way. For instance, Sun Zi recommends simulating fear as a tactic: by feigning cowardice, one can lull the enemy into complacency and thereby cause them to make mistakes. At the same time, the general himself should not be fearful. Fear arises from ignorance; to

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<sup>14</sup> Y. Ariffin, *Introduction: How Emotions Can Explain Outcomes in International Relations* [in:] *Emotions in International Politics: Beyond Mainstream International Relations*, eds. Y. Ariffin, J.-M. Coicaud, V. Popovski, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2016, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> E. Hutchison, *Affective Communities in World Politics: Collective Emotions after Trauma*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2016, p. xii.

<sup>16</sup> S. Koschut, *Emotion, Discourse, and Power in World Politics* [in:] *The Power of Emotions in World Politics*, ed. S. Koschut, Routledge, London 2020, pp. 9–10.

avoid it, he must cultivate knowledge of both his own side and the enemy, enabling a more accurate assessment of success.

Furthermore, the commander should suppress his emotions, such as anger, that might cloud his judgment. Likewise, higher officers should remain disciplined and organized, rather than being driven by anger. Soldiers, however, “must be roused to anger”<sup>17</sup> if they are to fight and kill effectively. This suggests that while emotions can be dangerous for leadership, they may also serve as powerful tools when carefully directed.

In classical Confucianism, attitudes toward anger are highly nuanced, as reflected in the richness of terms used to describe this emotion and its many shades. On one hand, anger may be condemned for its disruptive effects; on the other, it can be seen as a legitimate and even necessary response, depending on the situation.<sup>18</sup> One of the most important concepts is that of “righteous indignation” or “moral anger”<sup>19</sup> (憤), understood as a justified reaction to injustice, one that calls for retribution and the correction of wrongs. This stands in contrast to negative forms of anger, which undermine harmony, lead to violence, and ultimately result in social disorder. Crucially, Confucian thought emphasizes that righteous anger must be properly channeled through ritualized forms and etiquette, ensuring that it produces positive outcomes and avoids destructive consequences.<sup>20</sup>

Anchored in this classical performative framework, anger seems to have emerged as a defining feature of the PRC’s emotional diplomacy. It serves as an immediate, theatrical, and deeply symbolic expression of discontent, used to communicate that a red line has been crossed, and that such actions will not be further tolerated. In this context, it appears that anger is not merely a natural or authentic reaction; rather, it is a diplomatic tool employed to signal Beijing’s disapproval, assert moral authority, and deter further provocations. Above all, it conveys moral grievances while avoiding overt military confrontation.

The most visible manifestations of the diplomacy of anger include verbal condemnations, diplomatic protests, military posturing, and media campaigns designed to stir nationalist sentiment. These responses are often triggered by perceived affronts to China’s sovereignty, dignity, or international standing, especially in relation to the most sensitive and controversial territorial issues: Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang. Through these emotionally charged responses, China projects unity and emotional coherence while implicitly reinforcing the authority of the CCP.

<sup>17</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. L. Giles, <https://classics.mit.edu/Tzu/artwar.html> (access: 20.09.2025).

<sup>18</sup> P. Santangelo, *Anger and Rage in Traditional Chinese Culture* [in:] *Discourses of Anger in the Early Modern Period*, eds. K.A.E. Enenkel, A. Traninger, Brill, Boston 2015, p. 465.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 471.

<sup>20</sup> C. Lewis, *Moral Anger in Classical Confucianism* [in:] *The Ethics of Anger*, eds. C.D. Lewis, G.L. Bock, Lexington Books, Lanham 2020, p. 131.

One of the most dramatic instances of the diplomacy of anger occurred during the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis. In response to then-President Lee Teng-hui's unofficial visit to the United States ahead of Taiwan's first democratic election, China launched a series of ballistic missile tests near Taiwan's coast. Though militarized, these actions were widely interpreted as expressive rather than coercive: a demonstration of Beijing's rage over Taiwan's perceived drift away from unification, and a message to both Taipei and Washington about the limits of Beijing's tolerance.<sup>21</sup>

In recent years, China's emotional performance surrounding the Taiwan issue has been particularly pronounced in its interactions with the United States. For example, in 2022, Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan ignited a fierce rhetorical and military response from Beijing. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted live-fire drills in multiple zones encircling Taiwan, while the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned the visit as a "serious provocation" and a violation of Chinese sovereignty.<sup>22</sup> Yet, despite the intensity of both the language and the military exercises, China avoided direct confrontation. This suggests that the expression of anger was largely performative, a strategic display meant to reaffirm Beijing's red lines while preserving space for later de-escalation. Nonetheless, it took a considerable amount of time to stabilize China–US relations: it seems to have been achieved in November 2023, when President Xi Jinping and President Joe Biden held talks in San Francisco on the sidelines of the APEC Summit, just a few weeks before Taiwan's presidential election.<sup>23</sup>

The selection of targets for diplomatic anger reveals China's priorities: countries that engage with Taiwan diplomatically or militarily are often met with harsh rebukes and retaliatory measures. In 2021, for instance, Lithuania allowed Taiwan to open a representative office in Vilnius using the name "Taiwanese Representative Office" rather than the more commonly accepted "Taipei Representative Office." Although functionally equivalent to Taiwan's other *de facto* embassies worldwide, the use of "Taiwanese" was interpreted by Beijing as an intentional move to elevate Taiwan's international status and challenge the CCP's One China principle. China responded with immediate fury and unprecedented economic retaliation.<sup>24</sup> Diplomatic ties with Lithuania were downgraded, and Lithuanian exports to China faced

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<sup>21</sup> T.H. Hall, *Emotional Diplomacy...*, p. 72.

<sup>22</sup> Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, *Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on August 4, 2022*, [http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng//lcbt/wjbryrbt/202208/t20220805\\_10734891.htm](http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng//lcbt/wjbryrbt/202208/t20220805_10734891.htm) (access: 18.05.2025).

<sup>23</sup> A. Luszczkiewicz, P. Mendis, *Beijing's Diplomacy of Anger at Taiwan: How the Chinese Art of War Avoids Red Lines*, "Australian Outlook," 15.12.2023, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/beijings-diplomacy-of-anger-at-taiwan-how-the-chinese-art-of-war-avoids-red-lines/> (access: 5.05.2025).

<sup>24</sup> A. Luszczkiewicz, P. Mendis, *Taiwan's Participation in International Organizations...*, p. 17.

customs blockades. Chinese officials accused Lithuania of violating China's core interests and "hurting the feelings of the Chinese people."<sup>25</sup> Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian portrayed the Lithuanian government as a "pawn" of the United States, further describing it as "too emotional" and lacking political wisdom.<sup>26</sup>

This incident illustrates how China uses diplomatic anger to enforce symbolic boundaries and discourage other governments from seeking closer ties with Taiwan. Most importantly, it serves as a warning about the potential repercussions and retaliatory measures that may follow other countries' attempts to forge political relations with Taipei.

China's anger, however, is not limited to targeting foreign actors; it plays an equally if not even more important role in Beijing's communication with its domestic audience. The CCP frequently channels public outrage to reinforce its image as the defender of national dignity. Emotional displays allow the Party to demonstrate strength, distract people's attention from internal challenges, and reaffirm President Xi Jinping's ideological narrative of the "Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation." In doing so, the CCP frames foreign insults as echoes of historical subjugation and justifies strong responses as assurances that such humiliation will never be repeated.<sup>27</sup>

#### 4. Hurting the feelings of the Chinese people

One of the most emblematic and enduring phrases in China's emotional diplomacy is the rhetorical accusation that a foreign government, organization, or individual has "hurt the feelings of the Chinese people" (伤害中国人民的感情). At first glance, this expression may seem like a benign or even quaint diplomatic rebuke; however, beneath it lies a sophisticated and carefully crafted political instrument, one that blends moral appeal, victimhood, and nationalism.

The phrase is believed to have first appeared in 1959. Liao Chengzhi, a high-ranking CCP official and head of the Xinhua News Agency, used it during a meeting with former Japanese Prime Minister Ishibashi Tanzan, while discussing actions taken by the then Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke against the Chinese people.<sup>28</sup> A day later, the "People's Daily" echoed the sentiment in its criticism of India's

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<sup>25</sup> GT Exclusive: Chinese Laser Industry Bodies Halt Cooperation with Lithuania amid Tensions, COVID-19, "Global Times," 30.12.2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202111/1240322.shtml> (access: 17.05.2025).

<sup>26</sup> Q. Wang, *Lithuania 'Hugs America's Thighs' by Hyping 'China's Economic Coercion'*, "Global Times," 22.12.2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202112/1243139.shtml> (access: 12.05.2025).

<sup>27</sup> E. Hutchison, *Affective Communities in World Politics...*, p. 225.

<sup>28</sup> A. King, *Hurting the Feelings of the Chinese People*, Wilson Center, 15.02.2017, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/hurting-the-feelings-the-chinese-people> (access: 12.05.2025).

alleged incursions into disputed Himalayan territories.<sup>29</sup> Since then, the phrase has entered the lexicon of Chinese foreign policy and has been deployed across a wide range of geopolitical issues.

Research findings by both Fang Kecheng<sup>30</sup> and blogger Arctosia<sup>31</sup> indicate that by the early 2000s, over forty countries had been officially accused of “hurting the feelings of the Chinese people.” Japan and the United States top the list, with dozens of such offenses attributed to each. These findings have been cited by the “Global Times,” China’s primary English-language propaganda outlet, as empirical validation of China’s sustained grievances against the world.<sup>32</sup>

What is notable, however, is not only the recurrence of the phrase in China’s sensitive relations with Japan and the United States, but also the consistency of its application across different political regimes and historical moments. For instance, in August 2020, President of the Czech Senate Miloš Vystrčil led a delegation to Taiwan, a move that drew sharp criticism from Beijing. During his speech at Taiwan’s Legislative Yuan, Vystrčil declared, “I am Taiwanese,” echoing John F. Kennedy’s famous “Ich bin ein Berliner” speech.<sup>33</sup> This move was seen by China as a provocation: Foreign Minister Wang Yi asserted that questioning the One China principle equated to “making enemies of the 1.4 billion Chinese people,” thus, emphasizing the emotional impact of those words on the Chinese citizenry.<sup>34</sup> Preceding these events, even more revealing was a letter sent by the PRC Embassy in Prague to the Czech Senate, leaked in January 2020, in which the Chinese side warned that a potential visit to Taiwan by the President of the Senate would “seriously hurt the feelings of the Chinese people.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> D. Bandurski, *A History of ‘Hurt Feelings’*, “China Media Project”, 29.01.2016, <https://medium.com/china-media-project/a-history-of-hurt-feelings-ef717dea055d#.f0mdlsp2f> (access: 12.05.2025).

<sup>30</sup> K. Fang, 不要再来伤害我 – 那些“伤害中国人民感情”的国家 [Don’t hurt me anymore: The countries that “hurt the feelings” of the Chinese people], 方可成的博客 [Blog Fang Kecheng], 9.12.2008, <https://web.archive.org/web/20201227101437/https://fangkc.cn/2008/12/donot-hurt-chinese/> (access: 19.05.2025).

<sup>31</sup> Arctosia, 中国人民是全世界最坚强的 [The Chinese people are the most resilient in the world], *Bear’s Blog Chinese*, 10.12.2008, <https://www.arctosia.com/archives/511> (access: 18.05.2025).

<sup>32</sup> *Mapping China’s ‘Hurt Feelings’*, “Global Times,” 4.06.2009, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/434630.shtml> (access: 12.05.2025).

<sup>33</sup> I. Willoughby, *I am a Taiwanese: Czech Senate Speaker Channels JFK in Taipei*, “Radio Prague International,” 1.09.2020, <https://english.radio.cz/i-am-a-taiwanese-czech-senate-speaker-channels-jfk-taipei-8690805> (access: 18.05.2025).

<sup>34</sup> CGTN. *Heavy Price: Wang Yi Issues Warning as Czech Official Visits Taiwan*, 31.08.2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-08-31/Wang-Yi-warns-of-heavy-price-in-challenging-one-China-principle-TozGH3lzdC/index.html> (access: 17.05.2025).

<sup>35</sup> L. Jichang, “*China’s ‘Economic Diplomacy’ in the Czech Republic: From Promises of Investment to*

It may then be concluded that the use of this phrase has several political functions. First, by presenting China as a victim of foreign insensitivity or disrespect, the government asserts its moral superiority, implying that the offending party has acted with disregard for basic decency. Second, the emotional narrative fosters a shared sense of grievance and collective memory among Chinese citizens, reinforcing national identity through the framing of external insult. Finally, China can present its objections in emotional terms rather than appearing overtly aggressive or authoritarian. In other words, accusations of hurting the feelings of the Chinese people project a softer image – one of vulnerability rather than domination, one that may resonate more favorably with non-Western, post-colonial audiences.

## 5. Capitalizing on emotions: opportunities and threats

On the surface, the CCP appears to have mastered the political utility of emotional mobilization, not only to strengthen international posturing but also to consolidate domestic legitimacy. By invoking national feelings, the CCP presents itself as the guardian of collective dignity: an emotional bulwark against foreign humiliation, moral insult, and internal fragmentation. Beijing’s “emotional diplomacy” seems to resonate strongly with the public, particularly online: on platforms like Weibo and Douyin, nationalist outrage, whether spontaneous or orchestrated, reinforces state narratives. Yet, while the CCP has been highly effective at weaponizing emotions for political gain, this strategy is not without risks.

In 2023, the Chinese government introduced a controversial draft amendment to the Public Security Administration Punishments Law (治安管理处罚法), proposing penalties for behavior deemed “detrimental to the spirit of the Chinese people” and “hurting the feelings of the Chinese people.”<sup>36</sup> It marked one of the most explicit attempts by the CCP to codify emotional injury as a legal offense, blurring the lines between ideological discipline and state-enforced emotional norms. The draft introduced clauses that could penalize:

- a) wearing or displaying symbols that “hurt the feelings of the Chinese people;”
- b) insulting, distorting or denying historical events or figures tied to China’s revolutionary or anti-colonial struggles;

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*Threats of Retaliation*, “Sinopsis”, 20.02.2020, <https://sinopsis.cz/en/embassy-threats/#fn5> (access: 18.05.2025).

<sup>36</sup> China Law Translate, English Comparison Chart of 1st and 2nd Draft Revisions, Public Security Administration Punishments Law (Draft Revisions)(Second Reading Draft), 28.06.2024, <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/PSAPL-comparison-pdf> (access: 28.05.2025).

- c) damaging memorial facilities, such as monuments or cemeteries honoring national heroes; and
- d) engaging in speech or conduct deemed “detrimental to the spirit of the Chinese people.”<sup>37</sup>

The proposed legislation aligned with President Xi’s broader ideological campaign to shape national identity through patriotism, historical pride, and loyalty to the CCP. However, unlike many other laws passed over the last decade, this draft faced a high degree of public pushback – not from dissidents, but from local mainstream voices, including legal scholars, journalists, and common internet users. Critics mainly objected to the vagueness and subjectivity of the proposed language: without clear definitions of the “spirit” or “feelings” of the Chinese people, the law risked arbitrary enforcement. Columnists and netizens raised hypothetical questions, such as, could someone be punished for wearing a kimono since wearing clothing with the rising sun flag of the Japanese invaders is a crime?<sup>38</sup>

In response to the backlash, lawmakers revised the draft, removing or significantly softening the most contentious provisions. While the final version retained broad patriotic language, it excluded the ambiguous clauses about emotional harm. Most importantly, this episode underscores that public opinion, particularly on legal and cultural matters, can still shape policy outcomes, even within an authoritarian framework. From the standpoint of emotional governance, it highlights a key limitation: while emotional rhetoric may succeed in diplomacy and propaganda, it is far more difficult to translate it into enforceable law.

Perhaps the greatest and most paradoxical risk of the CCP’s emotional mobilization strategy is that public anger may exceed the Party’s capacity to control it. Nationalist sentiment, while often cultivated to project strength and moral legitimacy, is a volatile and unpredictable force. The 2022 visit of US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan illustrates how a carefully managed emotional narrative can be overtaken by grassroots radical nationalism.

Despite repeated warnings from Beijing, Pelosi’s visit proceeded in August 2022, prompting a strong diplomatic and military response. China conducted live-fire drills around Taiwan, suspended several diplomatic dialogs with Washington, and condemned the visit as a violation of Chinese sovereignty. From a foreign policy perspective, the CCP’s reaction was well-calibrated and symbolically powerful; it signaled that a red line had been crossed without triggering direct military confrontation.

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>38</sup> W. Xu, 徐文海：’伤害中华民族感情’ 表述将被修改，下一个问题来了… [The phrase „hurting the feelings of the Chinese nation” will be revised, the next question is...], 观察者 [Observer], 25.06.2024, [https://www.guancha.cn/xuwenhai/2024\\_06\\_25\\_739156.shtml](https://www.guancha.cn/xuwenhai/2024_06_25_739156.shtml) (access: 18.05.2025).

However, this strategic restraint clashed with public expectations, especially among hyper-nationalist users on Chinese social media. In the lead-up to the visit, many online commentators called for drastic actions. Hu Xijin, former editor-in-chief of the “Global Times,” even suggested on what was then Twitter that China should shoot down Pelosi’s plane.<sup>39</sup>

When it became clear that Pelosi had landed safely in Taipei and that China’s response, though substantial, remained largely symbolic, the online backlash was immediate and fierce.<sup>40</sup> Chinese netizens accused the government of “losing face”<sup>41</sup> and questioned the CCP’s credibility, mocking the military drills as “bombarding fish” and “beating the air.”<sup>42</sup> Memes and sarcastic posts circulated widely, so much so that reportedly Weibo temporarily restricted access for users with Chinese IP addresses in an attempt to cool the heated online atmosphere.<sup>43</sup>

In the aftermath, the CCP moved quickly to regain control of the narrative. It amplified coverage of the drills, demonstrating China’s capacity to surround and isolate Taiwan. State-affiliated commentators framed the response as a display of strategic patience, arguing that restraint showed strength and served long-term national interests. A leading voice was that of Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Hua Chunying, who called on citizens to trust the government’s resolve to “firmly defend sovereignty and territorial integrity.”<sup>44</sup>

Yet, this case revealed a deeper dissonance between state messaging and public interpretation. The CCP had nurtured nationalist fervor to assert moral and political superiority, but in doing so, it created unrealistic public expectations of confrontation or retribution. As a result, this incident demonstrates that once the state

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<sup>39</sup> Y. Li, *Perils of Preaching Nationalism Play Out on Chinese Social Media*, “New York Times,” 4.08.2022, [www.nytimes.com/2022/08/04/business/new-world-nancy-pelosi-taiwan-social-media.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/04/business/new-world-nancy-pelosi-taiwan-social-media.html) (access: 30.04.2025).

<sup>40</sup> See more: E. Baptista, *Patriotic Fervour Erupts on Chinese Social Media over Pelosi’s Visit*, Reuters, 3.08.2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/patriotic-fervour-erupts-chinese-social-media-over-pelosis-taiwan-visit-2022-08-03/> (access: 30.04.2025); DFRLab, *How Chinese Social Media Reacted to Nancy Pelosi’s Taiwan Visit*, “Medium,” 13.09.2022, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/how-chinese-social-media-reacted-to-nancy-pelosis-taiwan-visit-b70ff0bfe1b9> (access: 30.04.2025).

<sup>41</sup> *Chinese Netizens Mock Xi Jinping Govt over Nancy Pelosi’s Taiwan Visit*, “News Bharati,” 5.08.2022, <https://www.newsbharati.com/Encyc/2022/8/5/Chinese-netizens-mock-Xi-Jinping-govt-over-Nancy-Pelosi-s-Taiwan-visit.html> (access: 30.04.2025).

<sup>42</sup> W. Shan, R. Ho, *Chinese Netizens’ Response to Nancy Pelosi’s Visit to Taiwan*, “EAI Commentary, National University of Singapore,” 26.08.2022, No. 58, p. 2, <https://research.nus.edu.sg/eai/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/EAIC-58-20220826.pdf> (access: 17.05.2025).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>44</sup> J. Cai, *Pelosi, Taiwan and the Perils of Chinese Nationalism*, “South China Morning Post,” 5.08.2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3187722/pelosi-taiwan-and-perils-chinese-nationalism> (access: 1.12.2023).

legitimizes emotional nationalism, it risks losing control over its pace, tone, and consequences. In the case of Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, even censorship of critical or mocking content could not prevent a wave of disappointment and disillusionment from spreading across Chinese cyberspace.

## 6. Is fear the driving force behind Beijing's behavior?

The analysis presented in the preceding sections indicates that the discourse surrounding "hurting the feelings of the Chinese people" and the performance of state-sanctioned anger are closely linked: both stem from the CCP's perception that foreign governments and organizations are undermining China's territorial integrity or diminishing its international prestige. This dynamic underscores a significant relationship between the articulation of historical grievance and the strategic deployment of anger in the public domain. Specifically, the CCP mobilizes expressions of anger to signal that the sentiments of the Chinese people have been hurt, particularly in contexts deemed by Beijing as ideologically sensitive. Such expressions function as political instruments, framing foreign actions as acts of disrespect toward China and reinforcing narratives of national victimhood and moral superiority.<sup>45</sup>

However, while anger and hurt appear to dominate China's diplomatic and domestic rhetoric, they may not necessarily constitute the root causes of its emotional posture, particularly in relation to Taiwan. Beneath the surface of outrage and wounded pride may lie a more deeply seated and politically consequential emotion: fear. Though rarely acknowledged in China's official discourse, fear operates as both a psychological driver and a strategic motivator in China's emotional statecraft. Understanding the power of fear is crucial in order to grasp how the CCP perceives threats, defines its red lines, and projects its identity on the global stage.

It may be argued that at the core of China's emotional response to Taiwan is a profound fear of national disintegration. The history of modern China is marked by the legacy of territorial loss and internal fragmentation, from the "Century of Humiliation" to the warlord era, the Japanese occupation, and the civil war with the Kuomintang (KMT), which culminated in Chiang Kai-shek's retreat to Taiwan in late 1949. From this perspective, Taiwan represents the final unresolved issue, or the last missing piece, in this historical puzzle, with the continued existence of the Republic of China serving as a symbolic reminder to Beijing that national unification remains incomplete.

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<sup>45</sup> A. Luszczkiewicz-Mendis, P. Mendis, *The Odyssey of Hurt and Anger: China's Emotional Diplomacy*, "China Dialogues," London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), 26.06.2024, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/cff/2024/06/26/the-odyssey-of-hurt-and-anger-chinas-emotional-diplomacy> (access: 1.05.2025).

Furthermore, the CCP fears that allowing Taiwan to assert permanent political separation would invalidate the Party's nationalist narrative, centered on the "Great Rejuvenation" of a unified Chinese nation. Such a development could set a precedent for separatist movements in regions like Tibet, Xinjiang, or even Hong Kong, thereby undermining the CCP's legitimacy, which is closely tied to its role as the guardian of Chinese sovereignty and unity.

In this context, expressions of anger toward pro-Taiwan movements or foreign engagement with Taipei may be seen as a mask concealing deeper anxieties about losing control over both the historical narrative and territorial coherence. The CCP's legitimacy is heavily grounded in performance: delivering economic prosperity, maintaining national unity, and securing international respect. Taiwan represents a vulnerability within this structure, posing not only a political challenge but also a symbolic one. Beijing's concern is not merely that Taiwan might declare so-called independence, but that it could successfully embody an alternative vision of China: one defined by democratic governance, respect for human rights, and a higher standard of living for an average citizen, all achieved without the CCP rule. This perspective helps explain Beijing's acute sensitivity to even symbolic gestures that elevate Taiwan's international status.

Should the CCP fail to reclaim Taiwan – or, worse, if Taiwan formalizes its independence as a Republic of Taiwan, abandoning the ROC legacy – the Party risks being viewed domestically as weak and ineffective, betraying the promise it has made to the Chinese people. This fear is further compounded by the fact that unification is not only a nationalist objective but also a personal legacy project for President Xi Jinping, who has explicitly linked it to the "China Dream" and the national rejuvenation project.<sup>46</sup> Failure to achieve progress on Taiwan by that symbolic centennial would likely be interpreted as a political and ideological defeat. Thus, fear of political, and not merely territorial, loss underlies the aggressive tenor of China's emotional discourse. As a result, anger and grievance serve to mask and deflect vulnerability, reassuring both domestic and international audiences of China's strength and resolve.

This co-dependent relationship between anger and fear may be understood within an academic framework which distinguishes "deep" and "shallow" emotional objects. Fear arises in relation to deep objects, that is, those representing existential threats, whereas hate, and by extension anger, are typically directed at shallow objects, or the perceived cause of the loss.<sup>47</sup> Applied to the Chinese context, the

<sup>46</sup> B. Góralczyk, *Geostrategia Xi Jinpinga – od skromności do globalnej assertywności*, "Gdańskie Studia Azji Wschodniej" 2017, Vol. 11, pp. 27–50.

<sup>47</sup> Compare with: M. Alcántara-Plá, *Understanding Emotions in Hate Speech: A Methodology for Discourse Analysis*, "Discourse & Society" 2024, Vol. 35, No. 4, pp. 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09579265231222013>.

CCP's anger over Taiwan is not solely directed at the island itself, but at what Taiwan represents on a deeper level: the fear of losing domestic legitimacy and international standing, and, ultimately, the existential threat of the CCP's own demise.

Accordingly, China's expressions of anger and grievance should be understood as layered emotional responses rooted in the underlying fear. Recognizing this emotional layering is essential to interpreting China's emotional diplomacy not as irrational or theatrical, but as a form of "emotional rationality," a politically calibrated strategy grounded in realpolitik, historical memory, and culturally embedded sentiments.

## 7. Conclusion

The cases analyzed in this paper demonstrate that China's emotional expressions – particularly anger, fear, and hurt – are not impulsive outbursts, but rather structured, repeatable, and politically instrumental components of Beijing's foreign policy and domestic legitimacy strategy. Among these, anger is often the most conspicuous element of the CCP's emotional performance, manifested through official statements, symbolic sanctions, and military posturing. It plays a central role in reinforcing sovereignty claims, deterring perceived infractions, and projecting strength.

Conversely, the projection of "hurting the feelings of the Chinese people" serves a different yet complementary purpose. It allows Beijing to frame its actions not as aggressive or vengeful, but as morally justified, casting other governments or organizations as immoral actors crossing a red line. This emotional framing projects a softer, less confrontational image while still asserting that China occupies the moral high ground.

This article argues that expressions of anger and hurt often conceal a deeper, more existential emotion: fear. It includes the CCP's fear of territorial fragmentation, loss of legitimacy, and, ultimately, regime collapse. Using the theoretical framework of shallow and deep emotional objects, one can claim that China's anger is typically directed at shallow objects, such as individual visits, foreign statements, or symbolic diplomatic acts, while the deeper emotional objects involve the CCP's internal authority and international prestige, which are essential to its survival. The fear of losing these foundational pillars can, thus, be seen as a core driving force behind the CCP's motivations and, by extension, its rhetoric and behavior.

This layered emotional architecture is especially evident in the context of Taiwan, where symbolic gestures are magnified well beyond their material consequences. Taiwan is not merely a geopolitical issue; it represents an unresolved chapter in the development of China's national identity. The continued existence of the Republic of China serves as a persistent reminder of the CCP's incomplete claim to national unification; thus, emotional narratives that include the phrase "hurting

the feelings of the Chinese people” serve not only to communicate disapproval of and toward external actors, but also to bind the domestic population to the Party through a shared sense of grievance and historical trauma.

Nonetheless, emotional diplomacy is a double-edged sword. While it allows the CCP to mobilize popular support, deflect criticism, and assert moral superiority at home, it simultaneously constrains strategic flexibility. Nationalist fervor, which is supposed to strengthen the Party, can backfire when public expectations are unmet, as seen in the backlash following Nancy Pelosi’s 2022 visit to Taiwan. Moreover, attempts to codify emotional injury into law, as shown by the 2023 draft amendment to the Public Security Administration Punishments Law, highlight not only the Party’s intent to legislate patriotic affect but also its vulnerability to losing control over the emotional forces it has helped to cultivate.

In this light, China’s emotional responses to the Taiwan issue reflect not only reactive anger but also a deeply rooted, historically conditioned fear of loss – of territory, of prestige, of legitimacy, and of the very continuity of the Party-state. Recognizing this emotional complexity is essential for interpreting China’s international behavior, anticipating its red lines, and addressing policies that account not only for China’s strategic interests, but also for its psychological landscape.

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**STRESZCZENIE**  
**GNIEW, STRACH I BÓŁ.**  
**EMOCJONALNE REAKCJE CHIN NA KWESTIĘ TAJWANU**

Niniejszy artykuł poświęcony jest emocjonalnemu wymiarowi retoryki Chińskiej Republiki Ludowej dotyczącej Tajwanu, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem roli gniewu, strachu i bólu. Opierając się na koncepcji „dyplomacji emocjonalnej”, przeanalizowano sposób, w jaki Chiny strategicznie wykorzystują nacechowany emocjami język oraz symboliczne działania, aby sygnalizować swoje niezadowolenie, potwierdzać autorytet moralny i umacniać legitymizację w zakresie polityki wewnętrznej. Materiał badawczy stanowiły oficjalne oświadczenia państwowego, narracje medialne oraz reakcje opinii publicznej po 2013 r., czyli po dojściu do władzy Xi Jinpinga. Dzięki krytycznej analizie dyskursu ukazano, że oficjalne wyrazy emocji nie są spontanicznymi wybuchami, lecz strategicznie zaplanowanymi i skoordynowanymi demonstracjami. Co więcej, przejawy gniewu i bólu często maskują głębszy lęk przed rozpadem państwa, utratą legitymizacji przez reżim oraz wyzwaniami rzucanymi historycznej narracji Komunistycznej Partii Chin. W artykule podkreślono także obosieczną naturę emocjonalnej mobilizacji, która z jednej strony wzmacnia przekazy państwowego, z drugiej natomiast może wywoływać niekontrolowane reakcje nacjonalistyczne. Uwzględnienie roli emocji w polityce Chin wobec Tajwanu jest zatem kluczowe dla zrozumienia sposobów komunikacji oraz imperatywów Pekinu w polityce wewnętrznej i międzynarodowej.