

Celebrity, Social Media and Disputes Over Taiwan's Sovereignty

Written by Austin Horng-En Wang, Charles K.S. Wu, Yao-Yuan Yeh
and Fang-Yu Chen

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AUSTIN HORNG-EN WANG, CHARLES K.S. WU, YAO-YUAN YEH AND FANG-YU CHEN, JUN 6 2021

It has become common for Hollywood stars, sports stars, and big-name brands to apologize to China for stepping over its political red lines. Of all of those, any mention or recognition that Taiwan is an independent country has become perhaps the most reactive. On May 25, 2021, John Cena posted a video on his Weibo account, apologetically, announcing that he loves China and Chinese people. This followed a previous interview where he referred to Taiwan as one of the first 'countries' to watch his latest film.

Since Cena is known for his masculine and positive image, his apology in line with China's One China Principle was met with criticism. For example, one meme making fun of Cena on Reddit quickly amassed 129k upvotes (support), while another booing John racked up 25k. A well-known Youtuber, Philip DeFranco called Cena a 'coward', and his video got 1 million views in three days.

Meanwhile, to counter Cena's message, the #TaiwanIsACountry movement began on Twitter. Many politicians, celebrities, and activists, including U.S. Congressmen Steve King (IA-R), entrepreneur Jason Calacanis, software engineer-activist Tracy Chou, hedge fund CEO Kyle Bass, and Chinese-American Republican politician Solomon Yue, endorsed this movement. This movement quickly spread beyond the America and trended worldwide. For example, Filipino politician Kim Atienza, Estonia congressman Toomas Hendrik Ilves, and Paraguayan actress Milva Gauto, all of whom have more than 100,000 followers, tweeted #TaiwanIsACountry.

To explore this movement, we crawled all public tweets with the hashtag #TaiwanIsACountry from May 25 to May 29. Overall, we found 14,898 tweets with this hashtag. Figure 1 (see below) shows a timeline of these tweets being posted. The number of #TaiwanIsACountry tweets soared on May 25 and 26 in response to Cena's apology. Additional analysis reveals that the content of these tweets also included keywords such as Taiwan and China.

Even though we do not know how many Twitter users have seen these tweets, we can estimate potential readership by the number of followers of each Twitter account. Overall, the total number of followers of those that tweeted #TaiwanIsACountry is 34,716,326. If just 10% of their followers saw those tweets, about 3 million Twitter users were exposed to this movement.

Utilizing their self-reported geo-location, we successfully gathered 5251 of the 14898 tweets. Among them, 57% of these tweets are from the U.S., 17% are from Taiwan, 4% are from India, Canada, and Hong Kong, and 3% are from the United Kingdom, Australia, and the Philippines, respectively. There are also posts from Thailand, Indonesia, and Brazil.

The result shows that this #TaiwanIsACountry movement is not only supported by the American and Taiwanese citizens but also members of the #MilkTeaAlliance, a pro-democracy online solidarity movement across East Asia since May 2020. The movement took hold in places like Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan owing to their ideological conflict with China in the #nnevvy episode. The movement later found allies from India, Brazil, and Australia as these countries with China became strained in late 2020 as well.

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The Cena incident has numerous similarities with prior movements like this one. For example, during the #TweetForTaiwan movement in July 2020, when the U.S. government initiated an online movement to support Taiwan joining the World Health Organization, the movement received support worldwide, especially those from the #MilkTeaAlliance. The strength of this new #TaiwanIsACountry movement suggests that the effect of the #MilkTeaAlliance movement persists. Such a long-term cross-country collaboration may explain why Twitter offered a special emoji for the #MilkTeaAlliance movement in April 2021.

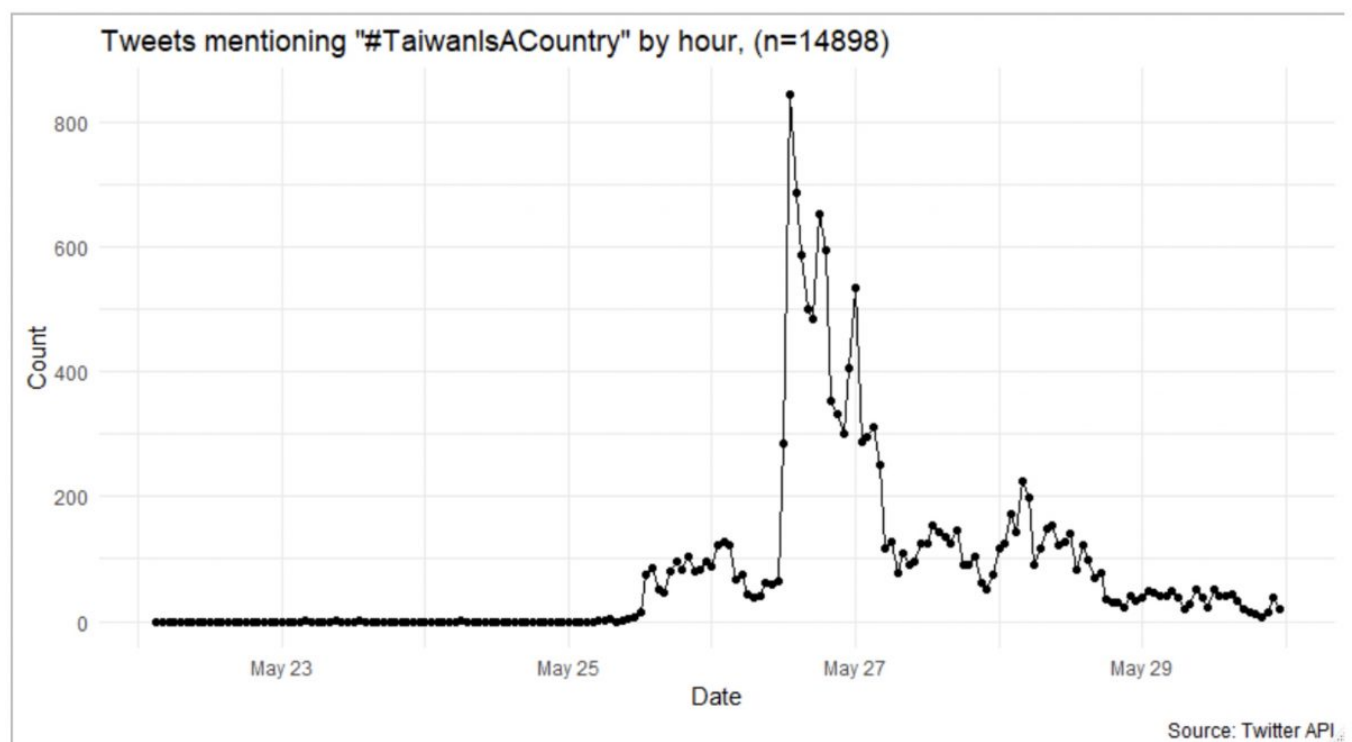
Judging from these movements, we can observe that many countries worldwide resent China for their belligerent behaviors, often asking others for an apology to avoid punishment from the country (such as the banning/withdrawal of a movie or product from the Chinese market). The gesture of giving in to Chinese pressure is equivalent to self-censorship and harms freedom of speech in other countries. It is of little wonder that the White House reacts to China's demands harshly, calling China's behavior 'Orwellian nonsense'. However, as Cena shows, pressure from China still has some successes.

The development of this incident offers foreign policy implications. The fact that many netizens in democracies support #TaiwanIsACountry and dislike what China is doing aligns well with current foreign policies of the U.S. toward China. Since Biden came into office, the administration has taken a tougher stance on China and attempted to weaken the country's influence through multilateral diplomacy. Within this scheme, the U.S. has doubled-down on its efforts to internationalize the issue of Taiwan. For example, the U.S. has embedded the Taiwan issue into the agendas of meetings with key partners such as Japan, South Korea, and within the G7. These meetings have resulted in substantial changes such as when Japan and the European Union both issued joint statements that specifically alluded to Taiwan.

Although much more remains to be said in this heated issue, such momentum suggests that social movements on Twitter dovetail with developments in international politics and have leverage in shaping them.

Figures

Figure 1. Timeline analysis of #TaiwanIsACountry tweets (n=14898, May 25–29, 2021)



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Figure 2. Content analysis of #TaiwanIsACountry tweets (n=14898, May 25–29, 2021)

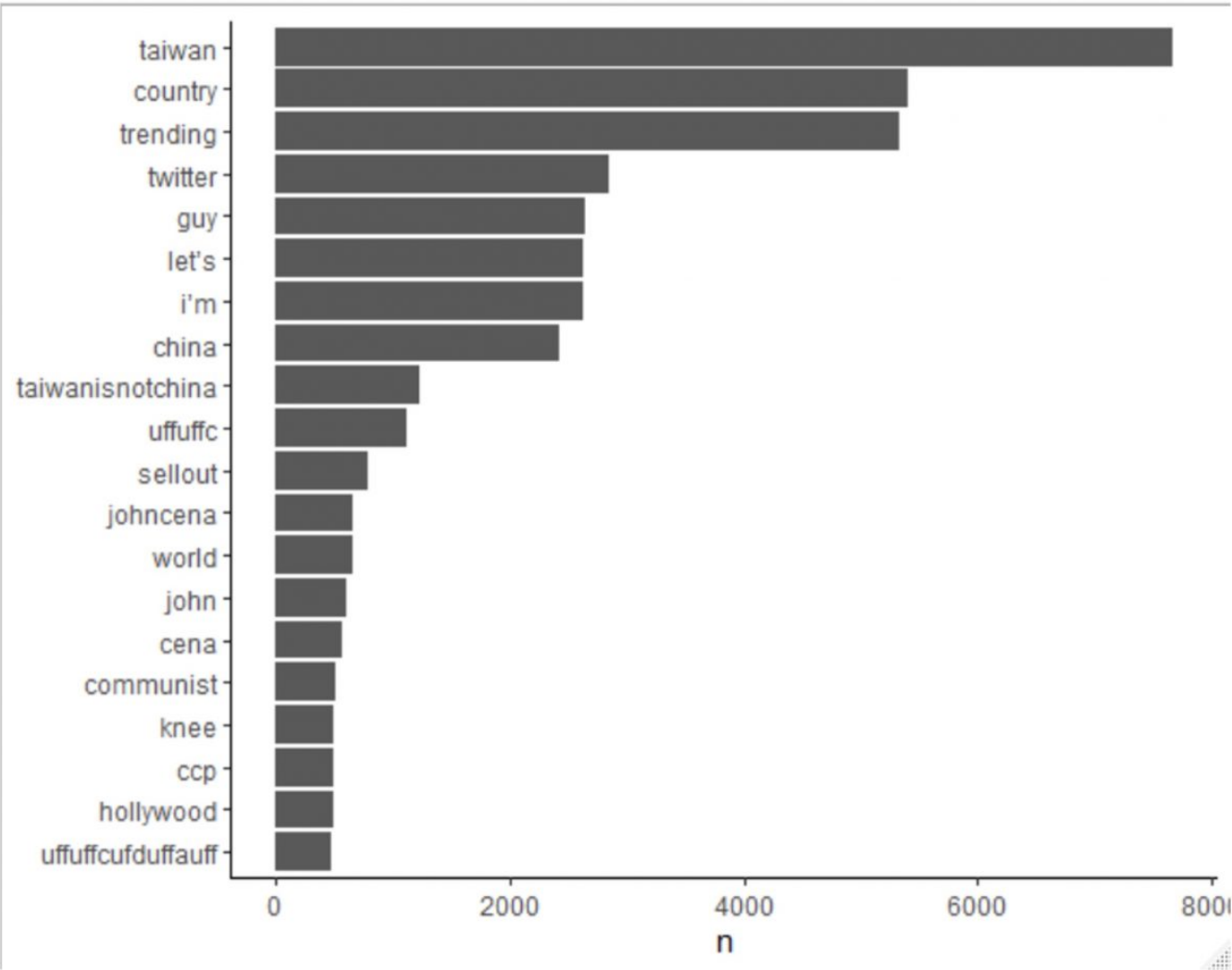
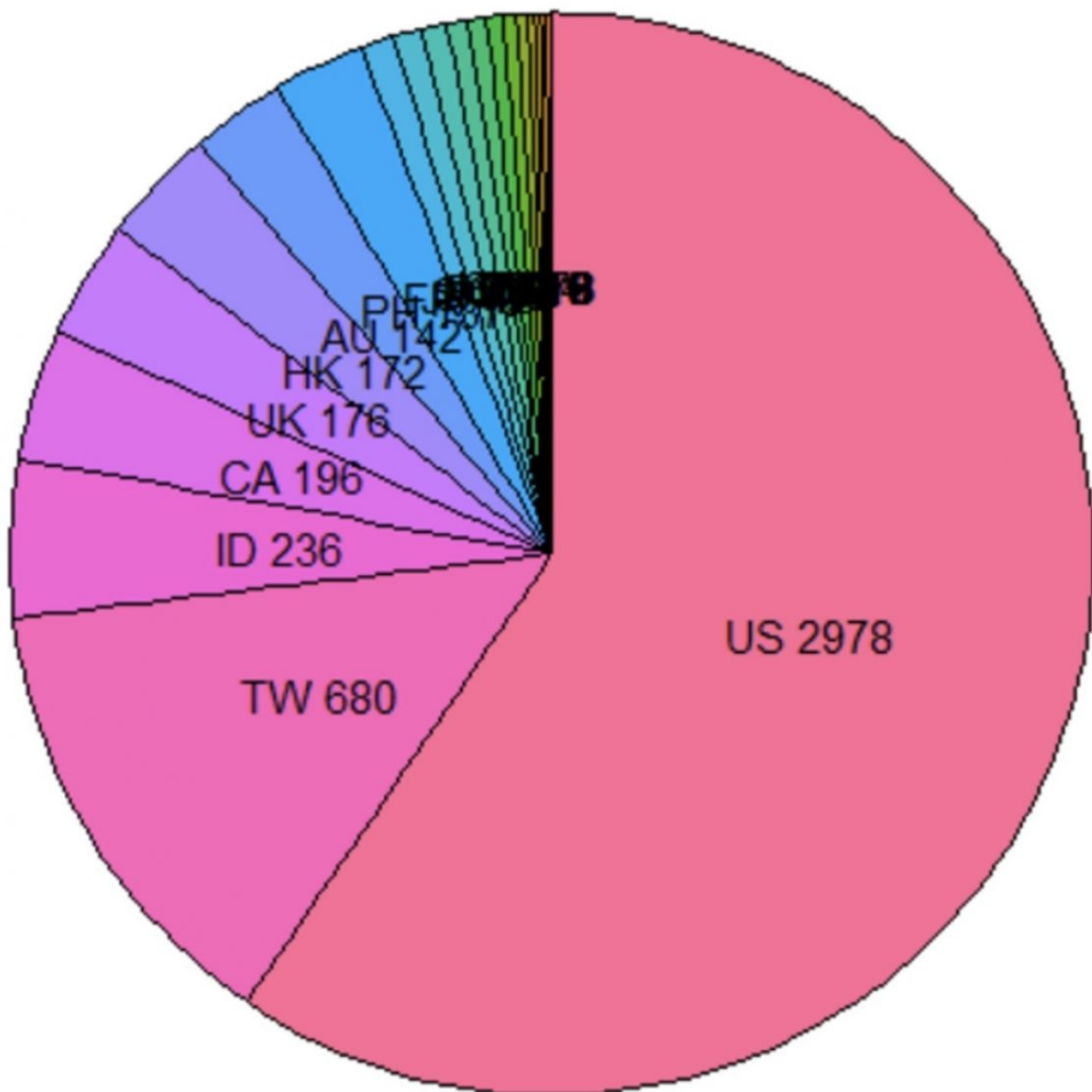


Figure 3. Origins of #TaiwanIsACountry tweets (n=14898, May 25–29, 2021)

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