LEADING THE NEWS

CROSS-STRAIT RELATIONS

Taiwanese artistes walk a tightrope amid tense ties

Entertainers face inquiry in Taipei for reposting content on social media from mainland sources

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When more than a dozen Taiwanese entertainers reposted Foreign Minister Wang Yi's reference last week to the island as a "province of China", the response was swift on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

Wang made the reference during his annual report to the "two sessions" in Beijing and state broadcaster CCTV included them in an online post with the slogan "Taiwan must return".

CCTV urged people to repost it on social media and by the end of the day at least 18 artistes from Taiwan had done so.

The entertainers gained widespread approval from users on those platforms and CCTV published screenshots of those who had shared the post.

The next day, though, Taipei hit back, with its Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) saying the artistes were under investigation for deliberately reposting content from official mainland accounts that, it claimed, undermined the sovereignty of the Republic of China, Taiwan's official name.

> If they want to develop their careers on the mainland, they must take a stand
>
> AN ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY INSIDER

While such reposting by Taiwanese artistes is nothing new, it is the first time for the island to launch investigations, highlighting the political tightrope these entertainers must now walk to navigate ever-tenser cross-strait relations.

One of the 18 is Patty Hou, a Taiwanese news anchor who has built her career on the mainland and hosted shows on mainland television in recent years.

By yesterday, her post alone had nearly 30,000 likes and a flurry of supportive comments.

"It takes courage and boldness to speak the truth. We support you! You have more than 1.4 billion supporters behind you," one user called "jiaowojingguoguo" commented.

Across the strait, Taiwanese authorities described "certain" artistes who reposted an official mainland post as "pawns" exploited by Beijing.

The MAC said the artistes were trying to advance their careers and had deeply hurt the sentiment of the Taiwanese public.

It also accused Beijing of using political ideology to control the arts and entertainment industry by "mobilising" Taiwanese artistes to make political statements at key moments.

"This time, some artistes have willingly become pawns in the [Communist Party's] United Front efforts towards Taiwan, aiding in the destruction of their own country. We hereby issue the strongest condemnation," the council said.

The Taiwanese authorities also said they would investigate whether these artistes had violated laws governing cross-strait relations.

In Taiwan, citizens are prohibited from cooperating with the mainland's government agencies, the ruling Communist Party, or the military. If found guilty, offenders could face fines ranging from NT$100,000 (HK$23,583) to NT$500,000.

Taipei's swift response this time is a stark departure from the past. As recently as last year, Taiwanese leader William Lai Ching-te had expressed "understanding" for artistes navigating the pressures of the mainland, saying they were merely "living under the roof" of China to develop their careers.

A mainland entertainment industry insider said there were two big reasons that not only Taiwanese artistes but also mainland entertainers made such statements: commercial interests and the demands of entertainment companies. "If they want to develop their careers on the mainland, they must take a stand; otherwise, they won't be able to survive in the mainland market," said the insider, who requested anonymity.

Beijing sees Taiwan as a breakaway province that must be united, by force if necessary. Most countries do not see Taiwan as an independent state but are opposed to any change of status quo by force.

Mainland officials defended the artistes.

"As rightful Chinese citizens, it is only natural for them to express their recognition of the country and their opposition to 'Taiwan independence' separatism," Chen Binhua, spokesman for the mainland's Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO), said.

Chen also accused Taiwan's government of restricting freedom of speech and thought.

Chang Wu-ueh, director of Tamkang University's Centre for Cross-Strait Relations, said Taiwanese artistes were increasingly burdened with political expectations, drifting away from their original professions.

"This reflects the worsening atmosphere in cross-strait relations, where authorities on both sides are increasingly taking pre-emptive measures on various issues," Chang said.

"This is not a healthy phenomenon," he said, warning that cross-strait relations were becoming more emotional, less rational, and ultimately more volatile.

The "province of China" incident is one of a long list of similar events that have played out over the years. In October, during Beijing's military exercises near Taiwan, several Taiwanese artistes publicly echoed the message that "there is only one China", a position seen as an endorsement of Beijing.

Beyond explicit political statements, mainland internet users have also targeted celebrities perceived as pro-independence, calling for boycotts of their careers on the mainland.

At the same time, voicing support for Beijing can invite backlash in Taiwan.

According to a survey by the Taiwan Brain Trust, 78.5 per cent of respondents opposed the mainland's demands for Taiwanese artistes to publicly state their position on unification or independence.

TECHNOLOGY



Cameras installed at Yau Tong Estate help monitor objects thrown from buildings. Photo: Sam Tsang

A.I. HELPS IDENTIFY OBJECTS THROWN FROM BUILDINGS

Minister gives assessment of software that has been used at 10 public housing estates as part of a trial run to catch tenants who break the rules

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Authorities have incorporated artificial intelligence (AI) into their surveillance systems to help catch public housing tenants who throw objects from buildings, as part of the city's smart estate management initiatives.

Secretary for Housing Winnie Ho Wing-yin yesterday shared details about the implementation of the AI software at 10 public housing estates as part of a trial run announced last year.

The minister said authorities normally had to spend hours manually reviewing CCTV footage to identify objects that had been thrown from buildings.

But the AI software could make the process easier as it automatically identified abnormal movements and tracked the trajectories of such objects.

"My colleagues shared that digital technologies have greatly improved their work efficiency, enabling them to identify offending households, issue warning letters and deduct seven points from them," Ho wrote in a social media post.

The Marking Scheme for Estate Management Enforcement in Public Housing Estates, introduced in 2003, penalises residents who break estate rules under a points system. Tenants who accrue 16 points or more will be told to leave their flats.

In a reply to the Post, the Housing Department did not disclose the number of cases flagged by AI or where they took place.

But the department said it recorded 190 cases of tenants being penalised for throwing objects off buildings last year.

Fifty-seven of those cases had resulted in prosecutions, it added.

Ho's post included footage of her witnessing the software in action at Yau Tong Estate, where she was accompanied by lawmaker Frankie Ngan Man-yu and several district councillors.

Ho added that about 190 mobile cameras had been deployed to help public housing estates monitor and tackle problems such as noise pollution.

> My colleagues shared that digital technologies have greatly improved their work efficiency
>
> SECRETARY FOR HOUSING WINNIE HO

She also mentioned plans to use the cameras to monitor and combat illegal waste disposal.

Lawmaker Ngan said using AI could prove a great help to frontline management staff at housing estates.

The previous process often required administrators to watch 40 to 50 hours of CCTV footage to identify potential cases, he said.

The legislator said the use of AI could help to quickly alert management staff to any unusual activity and save manpower.

The city's smart estate management initiatives also included using similar software to tackle illegal parking at public housing estates, Ngan said.

The lawmaker said an AI system could alert security guards if it detected any cars blocking roads, alleviating the workload of thinly stretched frontline management staff.

Ngan also revealed that from the next financial year, authorities would introduce an "Internet of Things" system at Yau Tong Estate that could use sensors to monitor illegal parking and signs of potential flooding.

Last year, the government said it would establish a centralised platform for property management and implement digital technologies to improve service quality and effectiveness.

> HARRY'S VIEW A2

ECONOMY

Inheritance tax back on Beijing policy agenda

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The possibility that China could introduce inheritance and gift taxes has resurfaced in a motion submitted during the recent "two sessions" parliamentary gatherings, as the country grapples with slowing tax revenue growth but more spending to stimulate the economy.

Guo Shuqing, a prominent pro-reform figure and veteran policymaker, central banker and regulator who now serves as deputy director of the top legislature's financial and economic affairs committee, is one of the National People's Congress (NPC) deputies pushing for the taxes, the National Business Daily economic publication reported on Monday.

Advancing income-distribution reform and improving the tax system could enhance wealth distribution and more effectively address the underlying issue of insufficient domestic demand, Guo was quoted by the daily as saying.

A motion, according to NPC procedure, requires the backing of at least 30 deputies or the consent of a provincial-level delegation, and it must be reviewed by the NPC presidium for further action. No details of the latest proposal have been provided by the top legislature yet.

In the face of internal and external factors disrupting the economy, including tariffs imposed by the United States, Beijing has put the boosting of domestic demand high on its agenda for the year.

The government has accelerated fiscal spending to stimulate the economy, but the growth of tax revenue – particularly at local government levels – has been slowing due in large part to a persistent downturn in the property market.

Authorities have lifted the deficit-to-GDP ratio for this year to around 4 per cent – an increase of one percentage point over last year – and will issue 1.3 trillion yuan (HK$1.4 trillion) worth of ultra-long special treasury bonds in 2025, up by 300 billion yuan from last year, according to the government work report released last week.

"I think it's just a matter of time before China introduces an inheritance tax," said Zhang Zhiwei, chief economist with Pinpoint Asset Management.

"All of the large developed economies have it. It helps redistribute wealth over the long term.

"It's like delaying the retirement age – it may not be a popular policy, but it is inevitable if we're considering the well-being of society in the long term."

Inheritance, estate and gift taxes are common in Western countries such as the United States and Britain. Typically, they apply to assets that have appreciated over time, but they can also protect people who inherit assets that have diminished in value.

Beijing has yet to introduce any draft plans or pilot programmes for such taxes, but any such move is expected to be closely monitored because of long-standing complaints over tax burdens and amid weakened private sector business confidence.

In recent years, Beijing's drive for "common prosperity" and a previous campaign to combat the "blind expansion" of capital had set off alarms over what some feared could result in a forced redistribution of wealth.

To shore up confidence and encourage innovation in the private sector, President Xi Jinping held a high-profile meeting with some of the country's most prominent entrepreneurs in late February.

Ding Shuang, chief Greater China economist at Standard Chartered, noted China's trend of introducing more direct taxes – particularly those on income and property – which are relatively small compared with those in many Western countries.

"From the perspective of tax-system optimisation, I believe these taxes need to be introduced," he said, anticipating a relatively more active push from the top authorities than for the controversial property tax.

Ding said the proposed taxes should not be viewed as a form of scrutiny of the rich, as long as the tax rate was transparent and legalised.

"In the long term, such taxes could improve the social security system to benefit more people," Ding said. "But the legislative process will take time, and it won't directly boost consumption immediately."



Guo Shuqing is one of the officials behind the new tax proposals.

¥41,314

Per capita disposable income in China averaged this much, in yuan, last year. Some analysts have raised concern over any further tax burden

The wealth gap in China has been widening. In 2024, the wealthiest 130,000 families held 58 per cent of the total wealth among households with at least 6 million yuan in assets, up from 56 per cent a year earlier, according to a report published by the Hurun Research Institute in early March.

In comparison, average per capita disposable income was 41,314 yuan last year, up 5.3 per cent from 2023.

Other analysts expressed concern over the effect of a rising tax burden given the country's financial struggles.

"Under the current economic conditions in China – of persistent confidence weakness and wealth deterioration because of the property downturn – these taxes could further repress consumption or exacerbate capital outflows," said Alfredo Montufar-Helu, head of the China Centre at The Conference Board think tank.

"And this is precisely what China does not need now.

"At this moment, the key question is not whether these types of taxes would be useful for the economy, but whether their introduction is viable."

SPACE

Beijing invites world on mission to Mars while Nasa suffers Trump hit

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Applications are open for international science projects to join China's Tianwen-3 mission to Mars, indicating it is on track to launch in 2028 and increasingly likely to be first in the race to retrieve samples from the red planet.

As the official invitation was issued by the China National Space Administration (CNSA) on Wednesday, Nasa was facing new challenges – including the loss of its chief scientist – in the first round of cuts ordered by President Donald Trump and amid uncertainties about its own Mars mission.

According to CNSA, the Tianwen-3 selection process to determine the successful projects will follow an accelerated timeline, with letters of intent due by June and final decisions expected in October.

Each chosen project will be offered a free ride for up to 20kg of instruments – if they can be ready by 2027.

"This opportunity is open to the global community," said the agency in a statement on its website.

Eligible projects would align with Tianwen-3's primary scientific objectives – such as the search for signs of past life on the planet – or would need to provide complementary or extended value to the mission, while showing "strong innovation in science and engineering", it said.



The Zhurong rover and lander arrived on Mars in 2021. Photo: Xinhua

Planetary scientist Qian Yuqi, from the University of Hong Kong, said the announcement confirmed Tianwen-3 was on schedule, noting the contrast with the dramatic shake-up at Nasa, where more cuts are expected.

"This could be a turning point where China challenges US leadership in deep space exploration," Qian said, citing other recent Chinese achievements that included the world's first mission to return samples from the moon's far side.

Tianwen-3 will consist of a lander, an ascender, a Mars orbiter and an Earth return orbiter, to be launched separately from the Wenchang satellite launch centre on board two Long March 5 rockets.

The mission will also investigate the geology and internal structure of Mars, as well as its atmospheric circulation and escape processes, with the aim of contributing to a deeper understanding of planetary habitability.

The samples collected during the Tianwen-3 mission will touch down on Earth around 2030, according to CNSA.

While the ride to Mars would be free, foreign partners must cover their own development costs and agree to share data with China, the agency said.

"Collaboration between international and domestic science institutions and payload developers is encouraged."

The US and China are the only nations to have landed spacecraft on Mars. The Chinese rover Zhu Rong explored the planet's surface for 358 Martian days before switching to inactive mode in 2022.

Meanwhile, Nasa's Perseverance, which also landed in 2021, is still collecting samples. The US plan is to return to Mars and retrieve the sample tubes that have been gathered by its rover over the years.

Nasa's retrieval mission was already at least four years behind the Tianwen-3 timetable before this week's mass firings at the agency as part of the federal budget reductions ordered by Trump.

In one of his last media briefings in January, former Nasa administrator Bill Nelson said the earliest arrival for the Perseverance samples was expected to be 2035, but they might not touch down until 2039.

In response to the programme's prolonged delays and ballooning costs, Nasa under Nelson sought alternative strategies, including collaboration with private aerospace companies like Elon Musk's SpaceX and Blue Origin, owned by Jeff Bezos.

However, in the briefing, Nelson said he would leave the final decision to his successor on whether Nasa should use its own well-tested technologies or turn to privately developed systems.

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