Global Taiwan Institute

# Through the Firewall: Leveraging Grassroots Online Exchange to Address Cross-Strait Tensions


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# Executive Summary

This report considers the strategic potential of grassroots online exchanges to address cross-Strait tensions and foster mutual understanding between individuals in Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (PRC). While direct interactions between Taiwanese and Chinese citizens have declined since 2016 due to reduced opportunities for travel and student exchange, opportunities for dialogue persist on a small scale in certain online spaces. Despite China's strict internet censorship, the "porous" nature of the Great Firewall creates gaps that allow for limited but meaningful exchanges. These interactions provide Chinese individuals with access to Taiwanese perspectives and ideas that are often absent in state-controlled media and education systems. By examining these spaces, the report highlights overlooked opportunities for direct, informal dialogue that counter the dominant narratives of tension and aggression.

The report analyzes two case studies—the social media app Clubhouse and online videogames—that illustrate how grassroots online exchanges enable Taiwanese and Chinese individuals to engage in open discussions despite censorship and polarization. The existence of these grassroots spaces demonstrates a shared willingness among individuals in Taiwan and the PRC to engage in non-aggressive dialogue. This analysis then challenges assumptions that conflict is inevitable, revealing a readiness among individuals on both sides of the Taiwan Strait for peaceful engagement.

The report further provides a detailed analysis of four specific features that make these spaces conducive to meaningful exchange, contrasting the typically polarized internet environments that dominate cross-Strait interactions. These characteristics include:

1. The leveraging of gaps in the Great Firewall;
2. The involvement of influencers committed to reducing conflict;
3. The use of platforms that encourage active engagement, and;
4. The co-existence of diverse beliefs.

Identifying these four characteristics opens the potential for these types of grassroots exchanges to be maintained, encouraged, and or even expanded, as they provide a glimmer of hope in the often seemingly impossible task of maintaining stability in the Taiwan Strait.

While direct interactions between Taiwanese and Chinese citizens have declined since 2016 due to reduced opportunities for travel and student exchange, opportunities for dialogue persist on a small scale in certain online spaces.

# Introduction

Over the past 10 years, opportunities for in-person exchange between people in Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (PRC) have become increasingly scarce. This decline reflects broader political trends toward deteriorating cross-strait relations, particularly since Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨) came to power in 2016. Indeed, the number of Chinese exchange students studying in Taiwan peaked in 2015 and then dropped sharply in 2020, when these students were barred from entry during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although Chinese students were eventually allowed to return as the pandemic eased, their numbers have remained significantly lower than pre-2020 levels, with 25,049 students in Taiwan in 2019 compared to only 4,651 in 2023.[1] This reduction in exchanges has curtailed opportunities for Chinese citizens to engage directly with Taiwanese perspectives. At the same time, military tensions in the Taiwan Strait have escalated, with the People's Liberation Army increasingly engaging in gray zone tactics and large-scale military exercises.[2]

While tensions in the Taiwan Strait and the decline of in-person exchanges paint a grim picture of cross-Strait relations, these trends do not tell the whole story. Opportunities for cross-Strait engagement persist, particularly in the form of grassroots, online interactions. Though the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) maintains strict controls over the PRC's media, the "porous" nature of the PRC's Great Firewall allows for limited opportunities for small-scale cross-Strait dialogue.[3] These interactions provide a counterpoint to the prevailing narrative of aggression, revealing overlooked spaces where individuals from Taiwan and China interact directly and negotiate their differences peacefully.

Recent research indicates that a significant number of individuals in both the PRC and Taiwan are open to resolving cross-Strait tensions without the use of force and aggression. In the PRC, a 2023 study conducted through UC San Diego's 21st Century China Center revealed that while nationalism and peer pressure can drive support for aggressive policies toward Taiwan, "concerns about economic, human, and reputational costs of non-peaceful unification and the likelihood of US intervention" dampen such sentiments. The study found that only a small majority (55 percent) of respondents supported taking Taiwan by force, with only one in 100 people indicating that forceful takeover is the *only* viable method.[4] On the other side, more than 80 percent of Taiwanese people support maintaining the status quo, according to surveys from the Election Study Center at National Chengchi University.[5]

Given a tendency in the US media to overemphasize the PRC's intentions to use force against Taiwan, the willingness of individuals in Taiwan and the PRC to resolve tensions through non-aggressive methods is often overshadowed.[6] This report draws attention to overlooked

1 Chih Yuan Lin and Mateus Lee, "Taiwan's Opening Policy to Chinese Tourists and Cross-Strait Relations: The Impacts on Inbound Tourism into Taiwan," Tourism Economics 26, no. 1 (2020): 27–44; Mainland Affairs Council, Republic of China (Taiwan), *Statistics on Mainland Students Researching and Studying for Degrees in Taiwan*, February 10, 2025, https://www.mac.gov.tw/en/News_Content.aspx?n=CA7B5FA9C0EC7005&s=54D121541C911FB1&sms=D645444CA321A4FA&Create=1.

2 Sze-Fung Lee, "Decoding Beijing's Gray Zone Tactics: China Coast Guard Activities and the Redefinition of Conflict in the Taiwan Strait," *Global Taiwan Brief* 9, no. 6 (2024), https://globaltaiwan.org/2024/03/decoding-beijings-gray-zone-tactics-china-coast-guard-activities-and-the-redefinition-of-conflict-in-the-taiwan-strait/; Amrita Jash, "China's Military Exercises Around Taiwan: Trends and Patterns," *Global Taiwan Brief* 9, no. 19 (2024), https://globaltaiwan.org/2024/10/chinas-military-exercises-around-taiwan-trends-and-patterns/.

3 For a detailed discussion of porous censorship, see Margaret E. Roberts, *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2017).

4 Adam Y. Liu and Xiaojun Li, "Assessing Public Support for (Non)Peaceful Unification with Taiwan: Evidence from a Nationwide Survey in China," Journal of Contemporary China 33, no. 145 (2024): 1–13.

5 Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, "Taiwan Independence vs. Unification with the Mainland," 2025, https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/PageDoc/Detail?fid=7801&id=6963.

6 Bonnie Lin, "Guarding Against Overestimating PRC

interactions in which individuals engage in direct, interpersonal dialogue, focusing on two case studies of grassroots, online cross-Strait exchanges. It then identifies four common characteristics among these case studies, revealing not only a readiness for non-aggressive engagement, but also the specific environments that enable such exchanges. By focusing on these interpersonal interactions, the report demonstrates the potential of interpersonal interactions to serve as alternative channels for addressing cross-Strait tensions. This analysis underscores a continuous vested interest among individuals in Taiwan and the PRC in the peaceful negotiation of their differences, countering the prevailing narrative of inevitable conflict in the Taiwan Strait.

While tensions in the Taiwan Strait and the decline of in-person exchanges paint a grim picture of cross-Strait relations, these trends do not tell the whole story. Opportunities for cross-Strait engagement persist, particularly in the form of grassroots, online interactions.

Intent and Ability to Use Force Against Taiwan," Center for Strategic & International Studies, October 6, 2022, https://www.csis.org/analysis/are-washington-and-beijing-collision-course-over-taiwan#Lin.

## The Case Studies: The Clubhouse Moment and Online Videogames

The case studies discussed in this report represent exceptions to a cross-Strait media environment often characterized by restriction, polarization, and hostility. In the PRC, the censorship and surveillance mechanisms of the Great Firewall have maintained a high degree of control over the type of information that citizens can access since the early days of the internet, and especially since Xi Jinping (習近平) became the PRC general secretary in November 2012. This extensive system restricts access to foreign websites and filters content that Chinese authorities deem politically sensitive or inappropriate. Coupled with the PRC's homegrown economy of propriety online platforms, the internet in China looks very different from that in Taiwan.[7] While internet users in Taiwan (and much of the world) are accustomed to using Google as their search engine and Facebook for their daily interactions, people in China use Baidu (百度) and Weibo (微博). This difference in platforms creates a wide gap in the information that is readily available. Furthermore, when cross-Strait exchanges do occur, they are often characterized by hostility, with Taiwanese users encountering nationalist commentators like "little pinks" (小粉紅) or paid propagandists (五毛), both of whom aggressively promote PRC government narratives. Such interactions leave little room for pluralistic dialogue, thus deepening polarization.

Even while the majority of cross-Strait interactions are restricted or hostile, China's Great Firewall is "porous," allowing a small minority of citizens to access the outside world's internet.

Even while the majority of cross-Strait interactions are restricted or hostile, China's Great Firewall is "porous," allowing a small minority of citizens to access the outside world's internet—typically those who are tech savvy, wealthy, educated, politically motivated, and willing to expend extra effort to access censored information. By allowing this minority to "climb" the firewall (翻牆), the CCP avoids calling attention to the severity of the censorship (which could cause backlash), while also continuing to control the information that is accessible to the majority of citizens.[8] The nature of porous censorship means that while Chinese people face severe restrictions in their use of the internet, there also remain limited gaps in the firewall through which they can engage in cross-Strait exchange with their counterparts in Taiwan. While limited in scale, these interactions underscore the potential of grassroots online exchange for building mutual understanding in the Taiwan Strait. They counteract the typically polarized nature of cross-Strait communication by enabling constructive negotiation of differences outside of official government narratives. In this report I focus on two online spaces in which internet users in Taiwan and the PRC have engaged in in-depth, pluralistic exchanges: (1) the social media app Clubhouse, and (2) online videogames.

### *The Clubhouse Moment*

The audio-centered social media app Clubhouse gained brief popularity across the Chinese speaking world for a period of a few months starting in February 2021.[9] During this "Clubhouse moment,"

7 This platform gap is perhaps shrinking as Chinese social media apps such as RedNote (小紅書) become increasingly popular among younger generations in Taiwan. See Dong Zhe and Zhuang Jing, "Xiaohongshu: Innocent Lifestyle App or Another Security Risk?" *Asia Fact Check Lab* (Radio Free Asia), September 5, 2023. Regarding "platformization," see Guobin Yang, *The Wuhan Lockdown* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 36–37; Jeroen de Kloet, Thomas Poell, Zeng Guohua, and Chow Yiu Fai, "The Platformization of Chinese Society: Infrastructure, Governance, and Practice," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 12, no. 3 (2019): 249–56.

8 Roberts, *Censored.*

9 Liya Chen 陳莉雅, "Clubhouse『兩岸房』三日

people joined live audio chatrooms with as few as two or as many as 5,000 participants. Chatrooms ranged in theme, from current events to language learning, and from Q+As with celebrities to sharing opinions on topics that are typically off-limits in the PRC, such as cross-Strait relations. The Clubhouse moment served as a rare opportunity for internet users in Taiwan and the PRC to speak and listen directly to one another. Since the platform centers around live voice communication, Clubhouse users often discussed a high degree of engagement, empathy, and emotional response while listening to others' voices on Clubhouse, even if the ideas being shared contrasted with their own beliefs. As an outlier in the highly regulated, polarized online environment of cross-Strait exchange, the Clubhouse moment was short-lived. Initially, exchanges on Clubhouse were an opportunity for people in Taiwan and the PRC to share and grapple with diverging opinions. However, as the app grew in popularity, it became flooded with little pinks promoting CCP ideology who had little interest in listening to different ideas. Soon after, the rapid popularity of Clubhouse caught the attention of the PRC's censors, who blocked the app on February 8.[10] Though some Chinese Clubhouse users continued to use a Virtual Private Network (VPN) to access the app after the ban, Clubhouse declined in popularity over the following months.[11] Though brief, Clubhouse's popularity and the depth of engagement in chatrooms demonstrates a widespread interest among people in Taiwan and China for sharing ideas and listening to one another, in contrast with the typically antagonistic cross-Strait online environment.

記：如果沒有牆，我們會跟彼此聊什麼," *Initium Media* 端傳媒, 2021, https://theinitium.com/article/20210223-taiwan-clubhouse-crossstrait-room.

10 Brenda Goh, "Clubhouse App Blocked in China, Added to 'Great Firewall,'" *Reuters*, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/clubhouse-app-blocked-china-added-great-firewall-users-activists-2021-02-08/.

11 A VPN allows users to connect to an international server, hiding the physical location of their computer.

## *Cross-Strait Videogames*

Cross-Strait online video game interactions are often characterized by hostility. For example, in both 2009 and 2023, licensing delays in the PRC for the popular game *World of Warcraft* (WoW) led millions of Chinese gamers to flood Taiwan's WoW servers, causing long waits, lags in connection speed, and frustration on both sides. This frustration escalated into politically charged exchanges, with Chinese players making aggressive comments about taking Taiwan by force, while Taiwanese players referred to the influx as a "locust plague" (蝗蟲).[12]

That said, not all cross-Strait online videogames follow this pattern of conflict. This case study highlights friendlier and more constructive exchanges, particularly within the context of Battle Royale games such as *Apex Legends* and *PUBG* (絕地求生). In these fast-paced games, individual players or teams fight to be the last one standing as the borders of the game world close in around them. Due to geographic proximity and the shared use of regional servers, Taiwanese and Chinese gamers may find themselves either competing against one another or playing on the same team. Live voice communication is a critical component of these interactions, as players must strategize with teammates in real-time and use their hands for game play rather than stopping to type written comments. During slower moments of the game conversations frequently shift to non-game topics, such as food, music, regional slang, or current events. These videogame interactions can also extend beyond the game itself, with livestreams and recordings shared for a broader audience on online video platforms like YouTube and Bilibili. In contrast to the perception of violent games fostering real-world conflict, these examples demonstrate how video games can in fact facilitate relaxed and meaningful cross-Strait

12 Hugh Davies, "The Revolution Will Not Be Gamified: Videogame Activism and Playful Resistance across the Sinophone," *British Journal of Chinese Studies* 12, no. 2 (2022); Holin Lin and Chuen-Tsai Sun, "How Video Game Techno-Governance Shapes Social Interaction," *Delphi Interdisciplinary Review of Emerging Technologies* 2, no. 1 (2019): 48–51.

dialogue.[13] Such interactions offer a unique space for players and audiences to connect while navigating cultural, linguistic, and political differences.

## *Research Methods*

This report summarizes key findings from two chapters of my doctoral dissertation.[14] Research relied primarily on ethnographic methods and was conducted from fall 2021 through spring 2023, including a year-long stay in Taipei from April 2022 through March 2023. For the section on Clubhouse, I interviewed eight Taiwanese and eight Chinese Clubhouse users, either in person or through video meetings online.[15] The people interviewed had previously hosted chatrooms and were heavily involved on Clubhouse during the app's peak popularity. I also engaged in informal discussions about Clubhouse with friends and colleagues leading up to and during my time in Taiwan, and participated in Clubhouse chatrooms during and after its peak. I then compiled these perspectives to draw out themes and tensions across these various accounts. For the videogame case study, the analysis centered on recorded livestreams of Battle Royale games that featured interactions between Taiwanese and Chinese players. The research incorporated multiple layers of analysis, including conversations between players during live gameplay, comments posted by viewers during and after the livestreams, and commentaries provided by participants in group listening sessions. I selected eight representative livestream recordings for focused analysis, and conducted eight group listening sessions with Taiwanese and Chinese gamers who were familiar with the cross-Strait online gaming environment. From this analysis, I identified four common characteristics of grassroots online cross-Strait exchange.

13 It is increasingly accepted that fears of the correlation between violent videogames and real-world violence are overblown and not supported by conclusive evidence. See Patrick M. Markey and Christopher J. Ferguson, *Moral Combat: Why the War on Violent Video Games Is Wrong* (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2017).

14 Sarah Plovnick, "Listening Through the Firewall: A Sonic Narrative of Communication Between Taiwan and Mainland China" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2024), https://www.proquest.com/docview/3111075004/1208A94CCF1C4164PQ/1?accountid=11311&sourcetype=Dissertations%20&%20Theses.

15 Following the guidelines of UC Berkeley's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and to ensure the safety of interlocutors, most people interviewed for this research remain anonymous. Exceptions were made for public figures (journalists and some AI researchers) who are easily identifiable and gave written consent for the use of their names. Anonymous interlocutors are referred to by coded initials unrelated to their actual names.

## Characteristics of Grassroots Online Cross-Strait Exchange

The following Clubhouse and videogame case studies demonstrate the existence of online spaces that provide opportunities for people in Taiwan and the PRC to share ideas and engage in dialogue beyond the limits of official government narratives. Based on my analysis of these case studies, I have identified four common characteristics of such spaces. These include: (1) the leveraging of gaps in the Great Firewall; (2) the involvement of influencers committed to mitigating conflict; (3) the use of platforms that encourage active engagement; and (4) the co-existence of diverse beliefs. These characteristics point toward a framework that could be utilized in future efforts to expand opportunities for pluralistic online exchange. In the following discussion, I use evidence from the case studies to illustrate the four characteristsics.

> One result of this legal gray zone is that games that are popular in Taiwan may also become popular in the PRC, even if these games have not gone through the entire extensive legalization process.

### *1. The Leveraging of Gaps in the Great Firewall*

China's "porous" censorship allows for some small-scale opportunities for cross-Strait communication. Despite strict internet regulation, gaps in censorship mechanisms allow Chinese internet users to access non-Chinese platforms and exchange with Taiwanese internet users. The Clubhouse and videogame case studies represent distinct ways that these gaps are utilized for cross-Strait communication. On Clubhouse, users benefited from regulatory latency—the delay in the implementation of regulation for emerging communication platforms—to participate in open discussions before the platform was banned. With videogames, loopholes and gray areas in the legalization and regulation of international games provided the opportunity for Chinese gamers to connect with other gamers on international servers.

*Clubhouse and Regulatory Latency*

Clubhouse, launched in March 2020, began as a niche app primarily used by Silicon Valley techies to promote their business ventures or discuss the latest cryptocurrency investment strategies.[16] Its early marketing emphasized exclusivity, as it was initially available only on Apple iOS devices and required new users to be invited by current members. A turning point in its popularity came on February 1, 2021, when Elon Musk appeared in a Clubhouse room, with his audience quickly reaching the room capacity of 5,000 users. This event brought global attention to the platform and coincided with Clubhouse gaining traction among Mandarin-speaking users. On February 4, 2021, the hosts of the popular Taiwanese podcast *Bailingguo* (百靈果) organized a Clubhouse room to discuss political oppression in Xinjiang and Tibet, which attracted over 1,000 participants and lasted for more than 12 hours.[17] Around this time, a wave of Mandarin-language rooms focusing on cross-Strait dialogue emerged, with many encouraging young people from Taiwan and China to openly discuss their political views.

16 Erin Griffith and Taylor Lorenz, "The Hot New Thing in Clubby Silicon Valley? An App Called Clubhouse," *The New York Times*, May 19, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/19/technology/clubby-silicon-valley-app-clubhouse.html.

17 感想：在*#Clubhouse* 上開了跟新疆還有西藏朋友的聊天室 - *YouTube*, Bailingguo News, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aL0W51Z3XMI&t=85s. More than 1 million members of the Uyghur ethnic group have been arbitrarily detained in reeducation camps in Xinjiang by the Chinese government since 2017, and many more in the region are subjected to "intense surveillance, religious restrictions, forced labor, and forced sterilizations." See Lindsay Maizland, "China's Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang," Council on Foreign Relations, 2022.

Soon after, Clubhouse's rapid growth and the rise of Mandarin-language rooms focusing on topics that are rarely discussed in China caught the attention of censors. On February 8, 2021, the app was banned in the PRC.[18] Following the ban, some Chinese users continued to access the platform through VPNs, but many shifted to more accessible alternatives, and the initial excitement around the platform began to fade. The ban also marked a turning point in the content and dynamics of Mandarin-language discussions on Clubhouse. As little pinks increasingly flooded the app, discussions became less about listening to diverse opinions and more about repeating deeply ingrained, unmoving beliefs.

Clubhouse's brief popularity represents how internet users can take advantage of regulatory latency, or the process in which regulation of communication technologies often lag behind the widespread use of these technologies.[19] In the context of cross-Strait communication, this process can then create opportunities for unregulated and open exchange. During its short-lived popularity, Clubhouse provided Chinese users with access to the non-Chinese internet, enabling open conversations before censors had a chance to intervene. Users made use of this regulatory gap to join the platform early, taking advantage of its availability before it was banned. This phenomenon is not unique to Clubhouse. A similar process occurred with Instagram, which was banned in China in 2014 following a surge in its use during the Hong Kong student protest movement.[20] In both cases, Chinese internet users were initially able to legally access these international platforms to engage with global audiences, taking advantage of temporary regulatory gaps that inadvertently enabled open communication across the Taiwan Strait, albeit for only a brief period.

18 Goh, "Clubhouse App Blocked in China."

19 For a detailed discussion of regulatory latency, see Plovnick, *Listening Through the Firewall*, 81.

20 "Instagram Appears Blocked in China," *BBC News*, 2014, https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-29409533.

*Videogames in the Gray Zone*

The videogame case study represents a different form of porous censorship. While videogames are highly regulated in China—with the government imposing restrictions on everything from which games receive licenses to even how many hours per week kids can play—there remain exceptions to this strict regulation. One such exception relates to what one Chinese gamer called a "legal gray zone."[21] This regulatory "gray zone" facilitates informal cross-Strait interactions by allowing gamers to access popular games on international servers before they have gone through official approval processes in the PRC.

In more detail, for a game to be legalized in the PRC, Chinese companies like Tencent (騰訊) or NetEase (網易) must obtain a licensing agreement and a government-issued version number. Many international games may at first lack this authorization, though this often does not deter gamers who are eager to access the latest videogames. Gamers instead access these games unofficially through platforms such as Steam—a widely used international online videogame distribution service. In the case of the Battle Royale game PUBG, its release in 2017 led to a surge in Chinese users joining Steam to access the game even though Tencent did not launch an official Chinese version until 2021.[22] Games without a version number cannot be played on PRC-based servers, requiring gamers to use "accelerators" (加速器) to connect to external servers. Accelerators function similarly to VPNs, enabling users to bypass the Great Firewall by rerouting their connections through international servers. However, while VPNs are illegal in the PRC, accelerators are sold openly by major Chinese tech companies, with one of the most popular accelerator subscriptions operated by NetEase.

21 Interview with author, March 1 2023.

22 Tyler Wilde, "Thanks to PUBG, China May Now Have More Steam Users than Any Other Country," *PC Gamer*, December 11, 2017, https://www.pcgamer.com/thanks-to-PUBG-china-may-now-have-more-steam-users-than-any-other-country/; "China Bans International Steam Version," December 25, 2021, https://PUBG.ac/news/60769-china-bans-international-steam-version.

One result of this legal gray zone is that games that are popular in Taiwan may also become popular in the PRC, even if these games have not gone through the entire extensive legalization process. Chinese and Taiwanese gamers may end up connecting to the same server to play against each other or on the same team. In fact, given Taiwan's geographic proximity to the PRC, it is more likely that Taiwanese and Chinese gamers will encounter each other than people from farther away, since a large geographic distance can cause connection delays that make gameplay frustrating. This gaming gray zone therefore challenges the digital boundaries of the Great Firewall without drawing the attention of regulators, enabling informal interactions between Taiwanese and Chinese gamers outside of the bounds of state control.

## *2. The Involvement of Influencers Committed to Mitigating Conflict*

The cross-Strait online environment is generally recognized as one of tension and hostility, meaning that the limited cases where people in Taiwan and the PRC interact with one another are often divisive. This dynamic is especially the case when Taiwanese people encounter little pinks who aggressively promote government rhetoric online. In these interactions, participants are generally not interested in listening, compromising, or engaging in constructive dialogue.

The case studies in this report represent exceptions to this general environment of hostility. One reason these cases did not devolve into hostile disagreement may be the thoughtful facilitation of influencers committed to mitigating conflict, rather than fueling it. The influencers in these case studies have followers in both Taiwan and the PRC and were thus well-positioned to encourage their audiences to engage constructively with people who hold different beliefs. While likely not formally trained in techniques such as Interactive Conflict Resolution (ICR), these influencers employed various strategies for encouraging listening, respect, and mutual understanding.[23] These examples therefore demonstrate the essential role that influencers can play in building more pluralistic cross-Strait interactions, even in contentious digital spaces.

### *Bailingguo on Clubhouse*

Bailingguo is a popular Taiwanese news parody podcast with over 900,000 followers on YouTube, and their activity on Clubhouse is representative of the potential for influencers to facilitate meaningful dialogue across the Taiwan Strait. On Clubhouse, Bailingguo hosts Ken and Kylie used their large following to bring fans from both Taiwan and China to the platform, accelerating the popularity of Clubhouse in the Chinese speaking world. Their February 4 room attracted over 1,000 participants and lasted for more than 12 hours, during which they encouraged their followers to listen attentively as people facing oppression in Xinjiang and Tibet shared personal experiences. The room marked a rare opportunity for participants from different backgrounds to engage directly with one another. In a YouTube reaction video the next day, Kylie and Ken reflected on the significance of the event.[24] They highlighted how this experience differed from their usual online interactions with aggressive or defensive little pinks who frequently dominate discussions by reiterating CCP narratives.

Kylie recounted her experience in this room, sharing that she felt moved while listening to the story of a Uyghur participant trying to succeed within the Chinese system only to face systemic discrimination due to his ethnicity:

> *"There was one time I remember really clearly when one of the Uyghur people was saying he believed in*

23 Dialogue initiatives such as *Strait Talk* work to apply ICR tools in fostering cross-Strait understanding, providing a model for how influencers could use similar methods in online environments. See Adrienne Wu, "Introduction: Strait Talk and Changing Cross-Strait Relations," *Global Taiwan Brief* 9, no. 11 (May 2024), https://globaltaiwan.org/2024/05/introduction-strait-talk-and-changing-cross-strait-relations/.

24 感想：在*#Clubhouse* 上開了跟新疆還有西藏朋友的聊天室, Bailingguo News, 2021.

*the Chinese system. He tried to survive, he tried to prosper, and he graduated from a pretty good college. he moved to many other cities to try to get a job and then once he got into a pretty good job, the boss suddenly told him, 'Sorry but you have to go because of your ethnicity' and he was like 'Why? I wasn't doing anything weird, I am just a normal person, a Chinese person.' But his boss said it's too sensitive now. So he was sharing that story. He was so frustrated. He went back to Xinjiang and he didn't know what to do. He said he feels like he has no future. And then at that point another Chinese participant went on and said, 'We never knew that this is what you guys are suffering and I feel so sorry and I apologize for what you have suffered.' And that was..even now I feel goosebumps. I feel like this is a moment that they can finally speak to each other and see each other as human beings instead of how a lot of Han Chinese people will probably think, 'Oh you know those Uyghur people are just a bunch of terrorists.'"*[25]

This Clubhouse room therefore provided a platform for this Uyghur Clubhouse user to share his experiences, while also providing a new source of information for Chinese participants who rarely have the chance to access diverse information outside of the Chinese media. Remarkably, over the course of 12 hours, Ken and Kylie's expert facilitation maintained a respectful environment of pluralistic exchange, avoiding the tension and disagreement that often characterize cross-Strait online exchange.

*Lee Listen in Videogames*

Though cross-Strait videogame interactions are known to fuel conflict, with some live-streamers even intentionally provoking such tensions to attract larger audiences, there are notable exceptions. In one such exception, a July 2022 recorded livestream depicts Taiwanese Vtuber Li Ting (李聽, literally translates as "Lee Listen") using the game PUBG as a platform to engage in cross-Strait dialogue with a Chinese teammate.[26] This interaction occurred against the backdrop of escalating tensions surrounding then-US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's planned visit to Taiwan. Pelosi's visit sparked intense backlash from the PRC, which views official contact between the United States and Taiwan as inconsistent with its claims to Taiwan, and responded with military drills that crossed the median line of the Taiwan Strait.[27] In Taiwan, these military actions were not taken lightly. Civilian defense training courses amassed waitlists of thousands of people, and by December, Taiwan's then-president Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) increased the compulsory period of military service from four months to one year.[28]

This type of political event would typically be avoided in discussions among people in China. However, during a recorded PUBG livestream, Li Ting broached the sensitive topic with his Chinese teammate as they ran through the virtual battleground, asking, "Why won't you all let Pelosi come over?" Initially the teammate avoided the question, but after some back-and-forth, the Chinese gamer––who had previously been reluctant to engage––asked Li Ting what he thought of the situation. Li Ting responded with surprise that the Chinese gamer wanted to engage in this discussion despite his initial hesitation. He then responded by sharing his perspective on the issue, stating that Americans should be able to visit wherever they choose and that outside governments should not intervene. Li Ting's

25 Han Chinese are the largest ethnic group in China, whereas Uyghurs are recognized as an ethnic minority. Interview with author, October 6, 2022.

26 李聽, "兩岸吃雞: 裴洛西來台灣，中國會打台灣嗎? 小粉紅? '大陸玩家竟然神預測!' PUBG 絕地求生," July 28, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=_Asq9gQ3qWA. A Vtuber, or virtual YouTuber, posts videos online by speaking through a virtual avatar. The trend originated in Japan in 2016 and rapidly gained popularity internationally.

27 Paul Mozur, Amy Chang Chien, and Michael D. Shear, "Nancy Pelosi Arrives in Taiwan, Drawing a Sharp Response From Beijing," *The New York Times*, August 2, 2022.

28 Taiwan's Compulsory Military Service Is Extended to a Year," *NPR*, December 27, 2022, https://www.npr.org/2022/12/27/1145594497/taiwan-compulsory-military-service-china.

approach—drawing on humor, persistence, and the relaxed environment of online videogames—created a space where his teammate felt comfortable enough to ask questions and engage in a meaningful exchange. Though in the livestream this discussion was limited to only Li Ting and his teammate, the video on YouTube boasted over 15,000 views. Li Ting and his teammate were then well-positioned to set an example of open exchange for a broad cross-Strait audience.

### *3. The Use of Platforms that Encourage Active Engagement*

In addition to leveraging gaps in the firewall and involving influencers to mitigate conflict, platforms conducive to cross-Strait exchange facilitated a high degree of active engagement among participants. Active engagement has been suggested to be essential in developing pluralistic communication and building common ground, with intersubjective listening practices described as "an essential technique of democratic political life."[29] The Clubhouse platform promoted engagement through an emphasis on live voice communication, where participants listened and responded to one another in real time. Voice communication was also central to the videogame case study, with gamers bonding over shared interests and finding empathy-building opportunities through role-playing. These features enabled participants to connect and interact in meaningful ways, even in contexts where political or social divides might otherwise hinder dialogue.

*Engaged Listening on Clubhouse*

A recurring theme in interviews with Clubhouse users was the way in which the emphasis on live-voice communication increased engagement and receptivity. On Clubhouse, participants found it more difficult to ignore or disregard perspectives that they disagreed with than they might have on a platform with a text-based option. One Clubhouse user who hosted chatrooms about psychology said that whereas on a platform like YouTube or Facebook he could choose to ignore certain typed comments, on Clubhouse he was more likely to let people have their moment to speak. Even if he did not agree with what these people were saying, he let them speak because "he did not want to appear rude."[30] Furthermore, on Clubhouse, only one person could speak at a time. This means that if someone wanted to participate, they would have to listen to the comments of everyone in line before them while waiting their turn to speak. The medium of Clubhouse thus afforded a certain degree of engagement which is often lacking on sites such as Facebook, where typed comments can simply be ignored.

While Clubhouse users were in part compelled to listen to others' comments to avoid being rude or while waiting their turn to speak, some people also discussed heightened emotional connections that came from the experience of hearing other people's voices. One Clubhouse user said that she could get a better sense of people's emotions on Clubhouse than she could with written formats, stating that the emotional elements of voice were not possible to achieve through a text medium. Similarly, in an interview with David Remnick for the *New Yorker* podcast, one Clubhouse user said that the platform provided a unique source of information for people in China, who were able to discuss topics in Mandarin that are typically only represented in English-only Western media:

> *"I think starting at the beginning of the room, there was a lot more denial. Most of the time, if you're Han Chinese, when you're watching a video of a Uyghur talking about his or her experience or her family's experience in a concentration camp, there's always an English voiceover. And then that makes it so much easier to fall into denial because, 'Oh, it's the Western media. They are trying to portray China as some sort of a political devil type*

29 Kate Lacey, "The Labour of Listening in Troubled Times," *Journal of Sonic Studies*, 2023.

30 Interview with author, June 17, 2022.

> *of situation.' In Clubhouse, these people are speaking Mandarin. That person sounds like your friend, your neighbor. You immediately recognize his Northwestern accent because you went to college with somebody from that region. The distance closed up so quickly; you can almost feel like a lot of people are immediately drawn in. The connection is built at that moment, after some of the personal stories were shared. I think that was one of the reasons why this was such a phenomenal experience, because it forced people into a long overdue sense of empathy. It almost dragged all 5,000 people over the hill of denial that you wouldn't be able to climb by yourself."*[31]

In this quote, hearing one's native language as well as a familiar accent provided common ground, leading to a greater sense of empathy and trust than people might experience when listening to a foreign language media source. In this sense, interpersonal communication can be highly influential in shifting people's beliefs and opinions, especially on a platform that allows people to take the time to listen and actively engage.

*Shared Interests and Active Role-Playing through Videogames*

The videogame case study also demonstrates a high level of engagement among participants. In addition to engaging in live voice communication, gamers were able to build empathy based on their shared interest in videogames and through the act of role playing as a specific character in the game.

Unlike passive activities like reading or watching television, videogames require players to make choices and interact both with the game's narrative and with other players.[32] This immersive engagement is the case, for example, in Taiwanese horror videogames depicting difficult moments of Taiwan's history. As Chee-Hann Wu explains, in these games players reenact and connect with the past, actively shaping their understanding and memory of it.[33] This interactive engagement extends to current events as well, as seen in Li Ting's *PUBG* example. At the beginning of the livestream, Li Ting and his Chinese teammate fly over the game world in an airplane, prompting Li Ting to ask, "Why won't China let Pelosi take a plane to fly over to Taiwan?" (as seen on next page) [34]

In this case, the game-world airplane provided an entry point into discussion of a real-world geopolitical issue. Furthermore, the Chinese gamer could not simply avoid this discussion by leaving the game. The two gamers were assigned to the same team, and game etiquette required them to stay online, interacting with the game and each other until the end of the round.

Videogames can also encourage empathy through role-playing.[35] This dynamic may be especially pronounced with the use of audio communication; studies have shown that voice communication in videogames can be used to build trust, strengthen relationships, and avoid conflict, and that the voice medium combined with text may be more effective in these areas than text alone.[36] In the PUBG example, Li Ting and the Chinese gamer take on the role of teammates. As teammates, the two gamers find a way to breach conversational barriers as they are temporarily freed from their real-world bodies, identities,

31 David Remnick, "Clubhouse Opens a Window for Free Expression in China," *The New Yorker*, 2021.

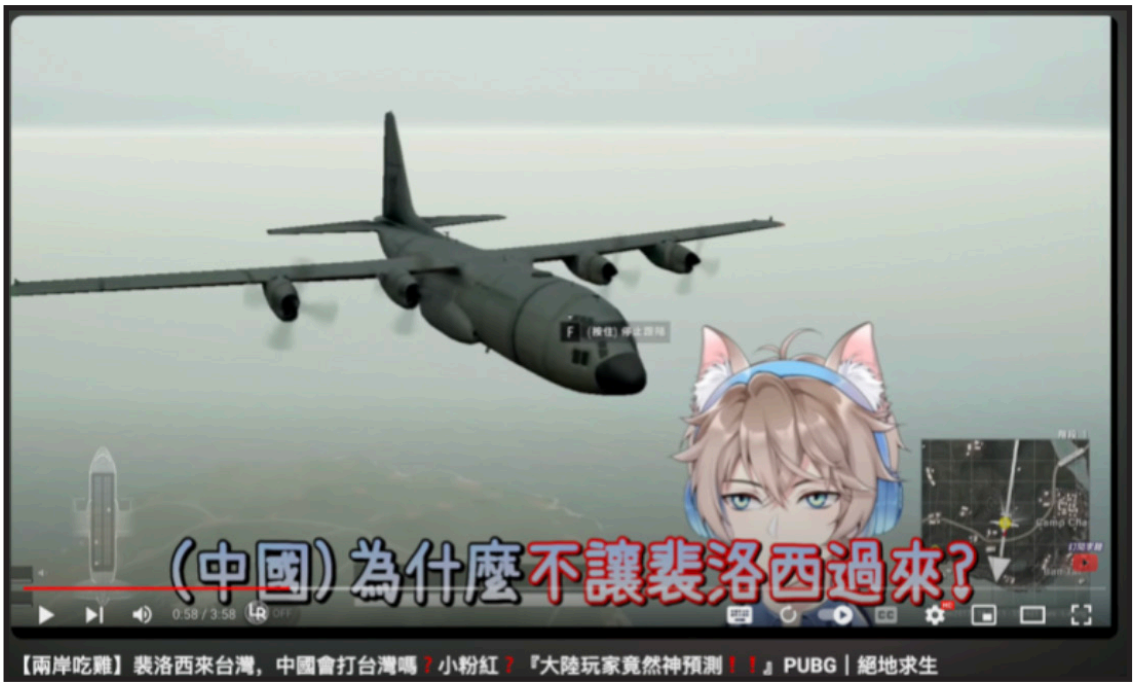
32 For example, see Brendan Keogh's discussion of multi-directional embodied engagement between the gamer and the game: Brendan Keogh, *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

33 Chee-Hann Wu, "Taiwanese Horror Games and the Ghosts from the Past," *Taiwan Insight*, September 4, 2023

34 李聽, "兩岸吃雞: 裴洛西來台灣，中國會打台灣嗎? 小粉紅? '大陸玩家竟然神預測!' PUBG 絕地求生," July 28, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=_Asq9gQ3qWA.

35 Ian Bogost, *How to Do Things With Videogames* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

36 For example, see: Dmitri Williams, Scott Caplan, and Li Xiong, "Can You Hear Me Now? The Impact of Voice in an Online Gaming Community," *Human Communication Research* 33, no. 4 (2007): 427–49.




*Images: Li Ting asks, "Why won't (China) let Pelosi come to Taiwan?" (top) and then "Why won't China let Pelosi take a plane over to Taiwan?" (bottom). In the bottom image, Li Ting's in-game PUBG avatar flies down on the map and his Vtuber avatar is at bottom right. (Image Sources: Screenshots by author.)*

and political views.[37] This freedom to role-play may encourage them to engage in a political discussion that, in the real-world context of China's highly regulated media environment, would be difficult or perhaps even dangerous if they appeared only as their physical world selves.

### *4. The Co-Existence of Diverse Beliefs*

Social media is often characterized as an echo chamber that places people with similar beliefs in the same corners of the internet, leaving little space for those with different ideas to interact.[38] The Clubhouse and videogame case studies were both exceptions, providing ways for people to get out of their echo chambers and interact across diverse beliefs. While online interactions with people who have different views often result in conflict, when combined with moderators dedicated to mitigating conflict (#2) and a high level of active engagement among participants (#3), they can in fact provide the grounds for pluralistic exchange.

#### *The Viral Clubhouse Moment*

One reason that Clubhouse users were able to avoid echo chambers is because the platform grew rapidly over a short period of time––in other words, the platform "went viral." Virality can be defined as "a social information flow process where many people simultaneously forward a specific information item, over a short period of time, within their social networks, and where the message spreads beyond their own [social] networks to different, often distant networks, resulting in a sharp acceleration in the number of people who are exposed to the message."[39] Virality is most often discussed in the context of specific items of information, though in the context of Clubhouse's virality it encompasses the whole platform, which grew rapidly in the span of just a few weeks. Since a key characteristic of virality is that information can spread to distant social networks, the nature of virality poses a challenge to echo chambers, where information is contained within a single online community. That so many people joined Clubhouse during a short period of time––in turn causing the platform to go viral––then likely contributed to the delayed formation of echo chambers. Indeed, when someone first joins a social media app, the app has limited data about their interests and preferences. For example, if someone joins Clubhouse and the first chatroom they enter is about cross-Strait politics, the app might not know which side of the cross-Strait political divide they fall on. This means the algorithms might suggest more rooms with people discussing this issue from various perspectives, giving the Clubhouse user the opportunity to hear from people who do not always share their opinions.

One Taiwanese student, NG, said that while listening to a discussion on Clubhouse about Taiwanese independence, it was difficult to bridge the gap between worldviews shaped by the contrasting Taiwanese and Chinese education systems. Chinese people have been influenced by government propaganda emphasizing the idea of a unified China, with Taiwan as an inseparable part of Chinese territory. In contrast, in Taiwan the education system increasingly emphasizes Taiwan's history separate from the PRC, including Taiwan's period of martial law (1949-1987) and its transition to democracy starting in the late 1980s. At the same time, older generations in Taiwan were also subjected to propaganda during the martial law period, during which Chinese nationalism and reunification with China were promoted under the Kuomintang's (KMT, 國民黨) rule. The effects of these different educational systems were audible in the cross-Strait Clubhouse rooms. NG said:

37 Musicologist Nina Eidsheim discusses indexical connections between bodies and voices through the concept of the "micropolitics of listening." Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

38 Ludovic Terren and Rosa Borge, "Echo Chambers on Social Media: A Systematic Review of the Literature," *Review of Communication Research* 9 (May 2021): 1–39.

39 Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley, *Going Viral* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 16.

*"I remember that we talked about the education and the history, and the Kuomintang and the martial law period, and how that affects people who believe that we are part of China. And with this kind of discussion, I think it's clear in talking about this to Chinese people that they are suffering from some kind of propaganda. Some of the generations in Taiwan are suffering from another kind of propaganda. And so at some point we are in the same boat––that we're trying to find our own national identity or ethnic identity. But then that discussion is irrational. It's just based on what you have seen in China and what we have seen here in Taiwan, and there is a gap. A lot of discussions are based on addressing this gap. So the conversation is very long because everybody is joining and sharing their own thoughts, so it's a bit unorganized."*[40]

On Clubhouse, NG and his Chinese counterparts could engage in direct conversation despite their different worldviews and opposing political opinions. In this account, NG expressed a sense of empathy in the recognition that both Taiwanese and Chinese people have been influenced by propaganda, but also a sense of frustration in the characterization of the conversation as "irrational." This sense of frustration stems from confronting the "gap" in knowledge between himself and people in China.

NG's experience provides a clear account of how people were able to avoid echo chambers and interact with people who held different beliefs and educational backgrounds. Though this experience could be frustrating at times, it demonstrates that even within a social media environment characterized by polarization and echo chambers, there remain opportunities to leverage viral moments and gaps in regulation to engage in open, cross-Strait exchange.

*Confronting Difference through Online Play*

The videogame case study also demonstrates how online games can help people to break out of echo chambers by connecting with individuals from diverse backgrounds. By starting from the shared interest of playing the same game, gamers are able to engage with individuals from diverse geographic regions, educational backgrounds, and political perspectives, finding opportunities for meaningful interaction across differences. Significantly, these interactions can provide a way for Taiwanese and Chinese individuals to directly confront and discuss their differences through the relaxed environment of online play, minimizing the chances that these interactions will devolve into hostile aggression.

A common way that cross-Strait differences are addressed in online videogames is through discussion of different accents. When meeting someone new in an online game, their voice is often the first identifying feature, providing a first impression of who that person is and where they are from. Though Taiwan and the PRC share a common official language of Mandarin, there are local variations in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Therefore, when Taiwanese and Chinese gamers meet in online games, they can often easily tell from their first spoken words where their counterpart is from, or, hearing an unfamiliar accent, will often quickly ask where that person is from. This seemingly simple act of hearing a different accent can be interpreted as a recognition of difference among players, even revealing certain stereotypes that people in Taiwan and the PRC may harbor about one another.

With regards to Chinese perceptions of Taiwanese Mandarin accents, Chun-yi Peng shows that many people in China will report that Taiwanese Mandarin sounds "non-standard" or "awkward." Classifications of "innocent," "cute," "babyish," or even "emasculated" are also common.[41] These characterizations of Taiwanese people's Mandarin accents by Chinese people

40 Interview with author, February 22, 2022

41 Chun-Yi Peng, *Mediatized Taiwanese Mandarin*, Sinophone and Taiwan Studies (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 66.

often surface in videogames, with Chinese gamers and audiences of livestreams using various slang words to convey that Taiwanese accents sound cute. In one example, comments by Chinese viewers of a videogame livestream about a Taiwanese gamer's accent included the following:

> "So cute!"( 好可爱)
> "Hahahahahaha cute!" (哈哈哈哈哈哈可爱)
> "Haha this little guy is too cute!" (哈哈这个小哥特别可爱)
> "Hahahahahaha this milky sound is too much… My ears…" (哈哈哈哈哈哈这个奶音有点炸…耳朵…)
> "This sound is too milky, if you're an adult, I would probably beat you up." (这声音也太奶了吧，你要是成年了，我大概会揍你。)[42]

On the other hand, accents that Chinese people may identify to be cute do not always sound this way to Taiwanese people. Taiwanese gamers often said that they disagree with characterizations of their accents as cute or interpret such characterizations as microaggressions. This reaction may be rooted in the broader implications of "cuteness," which is often associated with infantilization, power imbalances, and an underlying dynamic of control or condescension.[43]

Significantly, videogame interactions can provide a means to communicate these different perspectives regarding language and accent. When Chinese people express their perceptions of Taiwanese Mandarin accents, Taiwanese gamers also have the chance the respond with their own ideas. For example, one Taiwanese gamer said that even when she is trash-talking in a game, Chinese people will comment that her voice sounds gentle. Though she disagrees with this characterization, she said that she can empathize with their perspective because she is also listening to the Chinese gamers' voices and comparing them to her own, observing that Chinese speech often sounds "harder" or more "clangy," while Taiwanese articulation is softer. She also takes it upon herself to explain differences in accents to her Chinese counterparts, using language such as, "Thanks, but for people here, it's pretty normal to talk like this, so it's just a difference of what you're used to."[44] While the average gamer may not approach these interactions with such patience, this example highlights how videogames can serve as a space for Taiwanese and Chinese players to confront differing perspectives and take initial steps toward mutual understanding.

42 评论, "这台湾小哥哥太可爱了叭," Bilibili video, December 7, 2018, https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV14t411Q7u2.

43 Sianne Ngai, "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde," *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 4 (2005): 811–47.

44 Interview with author, March 9, 2023.

## Conclusion

This report has examined two case studies and identified four key characteristics of grassroots online cross-Strait exchanges. These case studies reveal a willingness among individuals in Taiwan and the PRC to negotiate differences through open dialogue, rather than reverting to more hostile and aggressive tactics. These exchanges therefore contrast the media's tendency to focus exclusively on negative interactions, restrictions, and tensions in the Taiwan Strait. Although these grassroots, small-scale interactions are often overlooked, such exchanges provide evidence of widespread interest in non-aggressive solutions to cross-Strait conflict and demonstrate the value of maintaining and expanding online spaces conducive to engaging in constructive dialogue.

Although these grassroots, small-scale interactions are often overlooked, such exchanges provide evidence of widespread interest in non-aggressive solutions to cross-Strait conflict and demonstrate the value of maintaining and expanding online spaces conducive to engaging in constructive dialogue.

At the same time, the role of social media platforms in facilitating such exchanges warrants careful consideration. Indeed, social media platforms have come under recent scrutiny for their potential risks to national security and for their role in fueling the spread of disinformation—evident in debates surrounding the banning of TikTok in the United States, concerns over Taiwanese youth using the Chinese app RedNote (小紅書), and Chinese influencers in Taiwan coming under scrutiny for posting Chinese nationalist content.[45] For this reason, this report has identified four key characteristics that lead to open dialogue and mutual understanding on these platforms, rather than exacerbating hostility and polarization. Efforts to regulate social media use should keep in mind the risks as well as the potential benefits of online interactions, aiming to mitigate the risks while preserving and expanding opportunities for cross-Strait dialogue.

45 "TikTok Ban: All the News on the App's Shutdown and Return in the US," *The Verge*, accessed March 24, 2025, https://www.theverge.com/23651507/tiktok-ban-us-news; Dong and Zhuang, "Xiaohongshu."; Brian Hioe, "Fucha Sentencing Shows Efforts by China to Intimidate Taiwan," *New Bloom*, March 19, 2025, https://newbloommag.net/2025/03/19/fucha-sentencing/.