

FEATURES

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Exiled democracy activist Wang Dan is at the forefront of using social networking technologies to push for change in China

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Before meeting up with Wang Dan (王丹), I half expected our interview to be interrupted about once every 15 minutes so he could tweet his nearly 7,000 followers on Twitter. But nary a tweet was heard nor sent from his mobile phone throughout our 50-minute conversation. And yet, technology and its potential to influence China's democratization formed the basis of our discussion.

Wang has been at the forefront of using social networking technology to promote democracy in China and to create the kind of transparent and stable civil society that he has championed since coming to international prominence as a student leader of the Tiananmen Square (天安門廣場) protests more than 20 years ago.

Although barred from entering China since 1998, Wang said that the Internet has shortened the distance between the city where he now lives and the one he was forced to leave: "The meaning of exile has changed. Now there is no exile. The difference between Los Angeles and Beijing is not that great."

Wang has been in Taiwan since August as a guest lecturer at Chengchi University's Graduate Institute of Taiwan History and has been spending considerable time on Taiwan's lecture circuit.

He spoke with the *Taipei Times* on Tuesday of last week about the hacking of his Gmail account, the significance of Google's threat to pull out of China, and what the future looks like for students on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

TT: Google said one reason it might pull out of China was because the Gmail accounts of some activists had been breached. You use Gmail. Have you ever experienced this?

WD: My Gmail has been hacked for the past five or six years. They do this in two ways: One, they just steal my account. Then they e-mail to all my friends but [the message] is not from me. So they use my e-mail account to e-mail many of my friends and say something stupid ...

For example, about two years ago many friends received a message from my account attached with an article written by me stating that I support Taiwanese independence. So all my friends [think] that I support Taiwan independence and many Chinese people know this because this rumor becomes a big deal. So I had to write an e-mail to all my friends and state that it was written by the government or somebody else. It wasn't necessarily from the government. It could have been from ... younger people who support the government.

Secondly, some e-mails disappear. My friends tell me that they've just e-mailed me something but I don't get it.

TT: You are in constant contact with democracy and human rights activists as well as students in China. Have you heard of any significant changes in the past few weeks [regarding their ability to] access information about, for example, the Tiananmen Square protests?

WD: You know that I am on Twitter. And I have almost 7,000 followers. Many of them told me after Google [stopped censoring search results] they could get information about June 4. A lot of pictures of June 4, about Tiananmen Square. However, they believe that it won't last long.

TT: What are some of the topics that you tweet about to your followers in China?

WD: Just about my everyday life and some information that I'm interested in. For example, the last time Liu Xiaobo (劉曉波) was on trial, 42 Taiwanese intellectuals wrote an article criticizing the [Chinese] government ... This was to let Chinese people know there are still some Taiwanese intellectuals concerned with this issue.

TT: How many contacts do you have on Facebook and how does your use of it differ from that of Twitter?

WD: About 6,000. There is an interesting difference: All my fans on Facebook are from Taiwan and Hong Kong and all my Twitter followers are from mainland China. That surprises me because they all know how to get around government censors. They have that technology. And everyone uses cellphones. It's very difficult for the government to block every cellphone. Nowadays, and its not only a political



PHOTOS: TAIPEI TIMES

From Tiananmen to Twitter

issue, the whole life of human beings has become more reliant on the Internet. This is the tendency of ... human beings, not a government, not a state. So it is stupid to try and control this human tendency.

TT: Is it fair to say, then, that activists are often one step ahead of government censors when it comes to the use of social networking technology?

WD: Every time the Chinese government tries to successfully block one kind of technology, people will find another one. The government can't block everything.

TT: Is it common for Taiwanese intellectuals and democracy advocates to use these technologies to communicate with their Chinese counterparts?

WD: The situation is not very good. There is very little communication between the two sides in terms of public intellectuals. That's why I always advocate communication on the Internet. I always encourage Taiwanese intellectuals to try to have a dialogue with Chinese intellectuals to provide a good base for the development of civil rights.

TT: What about students in Taiwan? Are they actively in touch with students in China?

WD: I always encourage them to broaden their understanding of the deeper trends happening in China. But I don't think they really understand what happens in China. They only read the newspaper or watch television, but that's not really China.

TT: How can Taiwanese students and intellectuals — or indeed those from other countries — gain a deeper understanding of China?

WD: Use the Internet. There's no border on the Internet! Do more with your Twitter followers or your friends on Facebook. And then you can gain a deeper



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— Wang Dan, exiled Chinese democracy activist

understanding with the real Chinese people, not from the newspaper or television. Turn off the television and go to the Internet.

TT: You recently wrote on your Facebook page that Chinese students might be conducting organized activities on campuses throughout Taiwan and this might influence student politics. Do you support Chinese students studying in Taiwan?

WD: From my position, I support it because it is helpful for Chinese democratization. If Chinese students don't come [here], I think Taiwan will miss an opportunity to influence Chinese society through those students. When those students return to China they will be president of companies or lawyers or reporters.

So to influence them is very important. And this is a good chance for Taiwan to influence China. But I don't think Taiwanese people are aware of this responsibility. That's why I wrote on my Facebook about that incident [at Providence University]. I'm not angry about that reaction from the Chinese students. I've seen that reaction many times, so it didn't surprise me. What worries me is the reaction of the Taiwanese students. They are never aware of this kind conflict.

TT: Have social networking technologies made this generation of Chinese students more open to democracy and human rights in China?

WD: We can talk about three generations. The first generation is my generation, the idealistic generation, that's why we went to Tiananmen.

The second generation is the 80s generation. They grew up in the 1990s. They are really brainwashed by the government and [though] they were brought up with all kinds of information, they are not very open to it.

Then there is the third generation, the

post 90s generation. They grew up after 2000. They have the Internet and more access to information and I have a strong feeling that the third generation is quite different from the second generation. Even though second-generation intellectuals are against our ideas, the third generation is against the ideas of the second generation. So I put my hope on the third generation.

For example, most of my Twitter followers are third generation. They are 20, 21, 22. Under 25 years old. They live in a different world, with more access to the outside world. The generation between 25 and 35 years old, I don't put a lot of hope on them.

TT: Bearing the third generation in mind, do you see the roots of a student movement developing right now?

WD: No, but we see some signals because more and more young people are interested in political issues. And the Google case is just one more. The government always does stupid things. The students never think about the government, but if you do something to Google or the Internet, well, that is serious.

TT: You mentioned in a speech last year that there are two separate Chinas: one controlled by the Communist government and the other, much more open, on the Internet. In light of recent events do you still think this is the case?

WD: I still think there are two Chinas. The first is the real one people come face to face with. The other China is the one on the Internet, which can be regarded as the basis of a civil society.

The Google case is a signal to show that there is a struggle between the censorship of the state and the willingness of people to express their opinions on the Internet. I think that the Chinese government thinks that the whole world cannot survive without China.

TT: The Chinese government's reaction at first seemed somewhat muted. Only after a few days did China's foreign ministry issue a statement. Were you surprised by China's slow reaction?

WD: Not really. The Chinese government hasn't been through this kind of experience. I think at the beginning they can't believe what was happening because before that there was no Western company daring to do this. So they were just shocked.

TT: Looking at the Google case, it seems private companies rather than Western governments are leading the fight against Internet censorship in China.

WD: I disagree with that. I think that Google had support from the US government. Without support from the [US] government, Google wouldn't dare to do this. They must have some mutual understanding with the American government before they can do this.

There is a link. Several days before Google made this announcement, there was a meeting in the White House between [US Secretary of State] Hillary Clinton and the presidents of companies like Google and Yahoo. And after that the State Department issued a lot of announcements.

There is a tendency [to understate] that there is a conflict. In the beginning, Western countries thought that they could ignore the political issues [in China] and just cooperate economically. But gradually they have found that it is impossible to only have economic cooperation without any political conflict. And I hope the Google case offers some kind of lesson.

TT: Taiwan's government is often silent about human rights abuses in, for example, Tibet and Xinjiang.

WD: Until now, unfortunately, they [have been] silent about the Google case. They just say something that's not very important ... so as not to enrage the Chinese government. The Taiwanese government just wants to deal with the Chinese government on economic issues, like Western countries in the past. But that's impossible.

[President] Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) aim is to benefit from economic development. But the Chinese government's purpose is the political issue or political agenda. They use the economy as a tool to achieve unification. Sooner or later they will face the political challenges, and the purpose of this cooperation is very different for the two sides.

TT: So there is a responsibility on the part of the citizens of Taiwan and its government to not only be aware of ...

WD: ... but to try and influence China. Do something positive. The democratization of China absolutely benefits the future of Taiwan.

This interview has been condensed and edited.