

Facebook's Zuckerberg wages China charm offensive—in Mandarin

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Mark Zuckerberg surprised a hall full of Chinese and international students when he kicked off a question-and-answer session at the elite Tsinghua University with the words "Hello, everyone" in Chinese

Facebook is blocked in China, but its co-founder Mark Zuckerberg appears determined to win over hearts and minds in Beijing—surprising a hall full of students by conducting a Q&A session in Mandarin.

Zuckerberg charmed his audience comprising Chinese and international

students when he kicked off the half-hour session at the elite Tsinghua University with the words "Hello, everyone" in heavily-accented Chinese.

The 30-year-old head of the US-based networking site elicited cheers and applause from the shocked crowd, a video of the event he posted Thursday showed.

Zuckerberg discussed topics including his philosophy on founding a company and his view of Chinese innovation, as well as more personal matters such as his favourite colour, favourite Chinese dish and the Chinese-American family of his wife, Priscilla Chan.

"I want to study Chinese culture," he said. "Studying the language helps me study the culture. So, I'm trying to learn the language. Also, I like a challenge."

Facebook has been inaccessible in mainland China since 2009, one of several major global social media sites including Twitter, YouTube and Instagram that have been blacklisted by the ruling Communist Party, which keeps a tight rein on freedom of expression.

Despite the measures, many Chinese state news organisations and government bodies maintain social media accounts, and Facebook officials have made frequent trips to Beijing, speaking at tech conferences and meeting with business and government leaders.

The company has an office in Hong Kong, where Facebook is not blocked, and has also reportedly rented office space in Beijing in a bid to boost its business selling online ads to Chinese companies and local governments seeking to promote themselves abroad.

Zuckerberg himself has visited China four times, he said at Wednesday's

event, and earlier this week he was named to the advisory board of Tsinghua's School of Economics and Management, a further step towards strengthening the company's China ties.

Asked about Facebook's plans in the country, he maintained: "We're already in China."

"We help Chinese companies increase their overseas customers; they use Facebook advertising to find more customers," he said. "So, we want to help different places in the world understand China."

'Don't shoot'

The video, posted at , was viewable in China on Tsinghua University's website and domestic social media services.

Zuckerberg's linguistic abilities impressed many Chinese Internet users, who credited his wife and her grandmother as much as the Facebook chief himself.

"Chinese women, better than any Confucius Institute," one user quipped on China's Sina Weibo microblogging site, referring to Beijing's ubiquitous overseas Chinese language centres.

"His accent's pretty strong, but it still sounds better than when we Chinese speak English," wrote another.

Some, though, criticised the pronunciation of his tones. "Is his teacher from outer space?" one user wrote. "The patient is terminal, no medicine can save him."

Others speculated about Zuckerberg's motives for addressing a crowd in China, where only a fraction of the country's online population uses anti-

ensorship software to access the site.

"A foreign company founded by this kind of person will inevitably grow closer to China," one user wrote.

"Facebook is shouting, 'Don't shoot, I'm one of you!', hoping to knock open a door that China has shut tight for a long time."

'Change the world'

Asked by the moderator what he believes is the secret to Facebook's success, Zuckerberg responded that "the most important thing is you can't give up".

"It's very difficult to develop a company," he said. "Most things won't go smoothly. You'll have to make some difficult decisions. You may have to lay some people off."

"If you don't believe in your mission, it's very easy to give up," he added. "Most founders give up. But the best ones don't."

He also opined that "the best companies aren't made because the founder wants to found a company, but because the founder wants to change the world".

Zuckerberg praised several Chinese tech companies and products, including Alibaba's Taobao online market, Tencent's mobile apps WeChat and QQ, and mobile phone maker Xiaomi.

"I think Xiaomi is going to grow very quickly," he said, adding that China "has many of the world's most innovative companies."

During the question-and-answer session, Zuckerberg—who is red-green

colourblind—said that his favourite colour is blue, the hue of the Facebook website.

He also drew laughs when he recalled a conversation with his wife about his Chinese language ability.

"One day, I asked her, 'Why is my Mandarin listening ability so bad?'" he told the crowd.

"She responded: 'You're also bad at listening in English.'"

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