

Young Chinese scale Great Firewall to flood Taiwan media

January 21 2016, by Didi Tang



A young Chinese couple take a souvenir picture at Taiwan's Alishan Square, a commercial area set up by Taiwanese government near Qianmen Street in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 21, 2016. For the first time, a huge number of Chinese web users are clamoring to scale the Great Firewall to access websites banned within China. Driven by nationalistic sentiments, they are defying the government-built cyber barrier not for forbidden knowledge but to flaunt their unswerving patriotism and unconditional claim over Taiwan, a breakaway province where a pro-independence political party has won the latest presidential election, a sign that the hearts and minds of Taiwanese people are pulling further away from the mainland China. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)

The Facebook page of Taiwan's president-elect was flooded Thursday with tens of thousands of pro-China comments following a campaign by young mainlanders to jump the country's "Great Firewall" into normally forbidden overseas social media to express displeasure over the recent election.

President-elect Tsai Ing-wen is from a party that is less friendly toward Beijing and the notion of eventual reunification than the previous one, angering many residents in China, which considers Taiwan part of its territory.

A youth-dominated online forum on the mainland with millions of members launched the crusade late Wednesday to flood Tsai's Facebook page as well as news sites, including Taiwan's SETN.com and Hong Kong-based Apple Daily, with comments and conversation. Thousands of mainland Web users appear to have answered the call.

One of Tsai's Facebook posts drew 42,000 comments, with most warning that China "firmly opposes any independence." Some taunted the island to declare formal independence so Beijing has an "excuse to annihilate the bandits."

Though some Chinese have long chafed at Internet restrictions aimed at insulating residents from forbidden, harmony-eroding ideas from outside, this is the first major public groundswell to scale the wall in the opposite direction, for Chinese Internet users who want to flaunt their unswerving nationalism abroad.



People walk past a mock-train on display at Taiwan's Alishan Square, a commercial area set up by the Taiwanese government near Qianmen Street in Beijing, Thursday, Jan. 21, 2016. For the first time, a huge number of Chinese web users are clamoring to scale the Great Firewall to access websites banned within China. Driven by nationalistic sentiments, they are defying the government-built cyber barrier not for forbidden knowledge but to flaunt their unswerving patriotism and unconditional claim over Taiwan, a breakaway province where a pro-independence political party has won the latest presidential election, a sign that the hearts and minds of Taiwanese people are pulling further away from the mainland China. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)

Though Chinese authorities tolerate eruptions of nationalist sentiment, they also do not like to see them spiral out of control. Beijing is wary of efforts to break out of the confines of the Chinese cyberspace and has hinted that the use of virtual private networks, or VPNs, to access banned websites could be considered illegal.

Beijing-based journalist Zhang Heng said the outpouring among young Chinese was the result of youthful exuberance and being "brainwashed for more than a dozen years by thought and politics courses" in school.

The crusade's silver lining was that many young people are learning how to access the global Internet, he said.

"I think that's a good skill to have," Zhang said. "At least some of the young people will see a more colorful world on the other side of the wall. When they are exposed to more information, they won't be easily manipulated by a single political thought."

The campaign was organized by an online forum named after former Chinese football player Li Yi that has bred some of the most popular expressions in China's Web culture. Forum members planned further forays over the Great Firewall into Taiwan's cyberspace later this week.

Supporters in China have cheered the online aggression as a spontaneous manifestation of the will of China's young generation, while critics there have derided the crusaders as "little pinkos" who blindly follow the propaganda of the "red" Communist Party.

On Tsai's Facebook page, the Taiwanese president-elect did not directly address the storm of comments but posted a picture with the line, "The greatness of this country lies in that everyone has the right to be oneself."

On the Facebook page for the news site SETN.com, the web administrator for its entertainment page engaged with the "crusaders." When some of them inquired if they were on the right page, the web administrator helpfully provided the link to the site's political news page.

When a crusader posted a long list of yummy Chinese delicacies as an enticement for fellow youth in Taiwan to look toward joining with the

mainland, the administrator replied, "You are quite a cook."

In an interview with PingWest, a website devoted to tech news in China, a person who described himself as a backroom staffer for the crusade detailed how the action was organized. He said he was responsible for translating replies in foreign languages. PingWest said it withheld the man's name because he feared his own Facebook page would be attacked if he were identified.

The man said others were tasked with "liking" the comments by team members, or engaging outsiders in conversation.

"We pretended to be picking fights, but then we found what we brought to the battle was bread and not bricks," the unnamed participant told PingWest. "In the end we were talking about food, and scenic sites.

"The purpose of the Facebook battle is not to convince one side but let the two sides know we are all living beings instead of enemies with labels."

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