



Taiwan's Civil Society Ecosystem for Countering China's Authoritarian Influence

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Billion Lee, the leader of Taiwan's Cofacts fact-checking project, was wearing a violet kimono when she greeted me outside the Taichung train station conference hall. On July 1, 2023, I had travelled down from Taipei for g0v's (pronounced "gov zero") "hackath56n"—the 56th iteration of the civic tech group's bimonthly coding sessions. She ushered me into a crowded room filled with tables. The event began with programmers' introductions to their civic tech projects, strictly timed by Billion, an event organizer. One project mapped the location of natural disasters across Taiwan. Another fixed a bug in Taiwan's Reddit-style discussion board platform, PTT (Professional Technology Temple), that allowed users from outside of Taiwan to register accounts. The patch was aimed at users in the People's Republic of China (PRC) who were posing as Taiwanese on PTT and influencing discourse towards disunity and division. Billion's husband, Jonathon, stepped up last and asked for volunteers to submit fact-checks on his open-source fact-checking platform, Cofacts, that disputes misinformation threatening Taiwan's democratic system. By four o'clock in the afternoon, teams of volunteers had coded improvements to many of these projects. I departed with a sense of inspiration, wondering how I could use my own social science-oriented skills to emulate the impact of these civic tech projects.

Hackath56n was one of many instances of innovative activism that I observed during the 18 months I lived in Taiwan, from 2022 to 2023. I am not alone in making such observations; Taiwan's civil society is widely renowned for its energy and innovation. A broad array of news reports, journal articles, and television segments have praised the island's civil society activism—particularly its non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that fight online information manipulation. Observers have hailed Taiwan's civil society as a model for grassroots activism that defends democracy against authoritarian threats.¹

This model, however, has been left largely undefined. Taiwan has an illustrious cadre of sociologists who have documented how civil society groups contributed to the

democratization of the Republic of China (Taiwan) in the 1980s.² However, few Taiwanese or foreign researchers have examined the underlying components of the ecosystem of new NGOs that have emerged in the past decade in response to the growing salience of the PRC's authoritarian influence.³ Without a clear characterization of the "Taiwan model," foreign societies cannot seek to emulate its successes.

The civil society ecosystem that has emerged in Taiwan to fight PRC interference has relied on communities of civic-oriented software engineers, successive broad-based social movements—and in recent years, funding from Western countries such as the United States and Germany.⁴ Not all of the characteristics of Taiwan's civil society ecosystem could be replicated overseas. Taiwan's geography is small, allowing strong networks to thrive among civil society actors across the main island. Taiwanese society is highly entrepreneurial, with a high concentration of small and medium enterprises—which in turn provides a model for the creation of new NGOs.⁵ Countries without robust democratic systems may struggle to replicate the freedom with which Taiwanese civil society can communicate with fellow citizens and political leaders. However, some aspects do lend themselves to reproduction overseas: such as the cultivation of social initiatives and talent through open-source technology communities.

This report draws upon experience from 18 months of professional work at a prominent civil society organization in Taiwan called Doublethink Lab (DTL, 台灣民主實驗室). DTL is one of the largest organizations in Tai-

2 *Inter alia* Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao, "Emerging Social Movements and the Rise of a Demanding Civil Society in Taiwan," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 24 (1990): 163–180, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2158893>

3 Exceptions include: Shih-Shiuan Kao, *Taiwan's Response to Disinformation: A Model for Coordination to Counter a Complicated Threat*, NBR Special Report no. 93 (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, September 2021), https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr93_taiwan_sep2021.pdf.

4 Penghsuan Lee (李芃萱), interview by author, Taipei, June 2023.

5 Ipa Chiu (瞿筱葳), interview by author, Taichung, July 4, 2023; Executive Yuan, "Increasing the Competitiveness of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises," Government News, accessed April 10, 2026, <https://english.ey.gov.tw/News3/9E5540D592A5FECDD10f536e7-89b4-4258-941f-b388c619a56a>.

1 *Inter alia* Jukka Aukia, *China's Hybrid Influence in Taiwan: Non-State Actors and Policy Responses*, Hybrid CoE Research Report no. 9 (Helsinki: European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, April 2023), <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/20230406-Hybrid-CoE-Research-Report-9-Chinas-hybrid-influence-in-Taiwan-WEB.pdf>.

wan dedicated to countering PRC authoritarian influence. I also conducted 20 field interviews with leaders in Taiwan NGOs, the Taiwanese government, and international organizations (INGOs) that support local groups. I am grateful for the patient guidance offered to me by friends, colleagues, and acquaintances in Taiwan.

The report will open with a discussion of why civil society is uniquely suited (and governments, by contrast, somewhat poorly suited) to tackling the problem of PRC authoritarian influence. I will further outline the core functions of Taiwanese NGOs in this space, and the specific systems and values that undergird their development. Finally, I will suggest policies for Taiwanese and foreign actors to enhance their civil society communities able to counter authoritarian influence.

The Confounding Issue of Authoritarian Influence in Democracies

The PRC's authoritarian influence vexes Taiwan's society because it exploits weaknesses in Taiwan's liberal democratic system of government. Indeed, this is the reason why authoritarian influence writ large (whether expressed by the PRC, Russia, or another state) has proven so challenging an issue for democracies. Authoritarian influence—sometimes referred to as “sharp power” or “foreign malign influence” (FMI)—capitalizes on the restraints that liberal democracies place on themselves in terms of regulating speech, economic activity, and citizen organization.⁶ This activity manifests in a variety of forms: the manipulation of online discourse by social media intrusion, cross-border financial transfers to capture the loyalty of influential elites and enterprises, and the use of diasporic networks to form local political organizations advancing the agenda of the influencing state.⁷

There are numerous articles documenting the PRC's sharp power activities in Taiwan. In the information realm, Beijing has hired private companies operating social media bot networks to promote posts by Taiwan citizens that

contain PRC-friendly—or simply divisive—narratives.⁸ By liking and sharing divisive or PRC-friendly narratives, bot networks encourage the algorithms of sites like Facebook and X to elevate the content among human users in Taiwan. A 2026 report by the National Security Bureau (國家安全局), Taiwan's intelligence agency, documented 46,000 inauthentic accounts operating in Taiwanese social media that were potentially linked to the PRC.⁹

Despite the obvious security repercussions triggered by social media manipulation, the government of Taiwan has found it particularly difficult to introduce regulations forcing internet companies to curtail online information manipulation. As a liberal democratic society only decades removed from the Kuomintang's (KMT, 國民黨) “White Terror” martial law period, Taiwanese citizens are thoroughly opposed to government intervention in their media sources.¹⁰ In part, this opposition stems from the fact that democracies operate multi-party systems. If the ruling party (in charge of government) seeks to constrain the spread of a damaging narrative—even one that has been manipulated by bot networks—opposition parties can easily accuse the ruling party of engaging in censorship to protect its own political interests.¹¹ Whether this accusation is true or not, voters often believe it. The democratic society then becomes more polarized, which plays into the hands of the authoritarian influencer. This has occurred in Taiwan, the United States, the United Kingdom, and many other democracies suffering information attacks from the likes of Russia and China.¹²

8 Gaute Friis, Nickson Quak, Sara Shah, and Elliot Stewart, *Countering China's Use of Private Firms in Covert Information Operations*, Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford University, June 21, 2024, https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/druid:fg865kf5598/countering_prc_use_of_private_firms%20in_IO_gordian_knot_center_ver.pdf.

9 Huang Ching-hsuan and Fion Khan, “Chinese Online Manipulation Soars: NSB,” *Taipei Times*, January 12, 2026, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2026/01/12/2003850442>.

10 Wen-Chen Chang and Yu-Teng Lin, “Mitigating Disinformation with Civic Constitutionalism: The Case Study of Taiwan,” *Global Policy* (2026), <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.70128>.

11 Shannon Bond, “Ex-Twitter Officials Reject GOP Claims of Government Collusion,” NPR, February 8, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/08/1155491204/ex-twitter-officials-reject-gop-claims-of-government-collusion>

12 Samantha Mullaney, “Everything Flows: Russian Information Warfare Forms and Tactics in Ukraine and the US Between 2014 and 2020,” *The Cyber Defense Review* (Fall 2022):

6 Miles Kahler, *Foreign Influence and Democratic Governance: Defining and Countering Malign Influence*, Council Special Report No. 98 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, October 2024), https://static.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/CSR98%20Foreign%20Influence%20and%20Democratic%20Governance.pdf.

7 Albin Östervall and Charlotte Wagnsson, “How Russian Malign Information Influence Exploits and Exacerbates Western Loneliness,” *The RUSI Journal* 169, no. 6 (2024): 30–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2024.2412001>.

Even as it has failed to implement effective social media regulation, Taiwan's government under the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民進黨) has experienced fierce pushback to its policies to tackle perceived malign influence over television news. Among other things, the Taiwanese government has taken issue with the financial interests that the Taiwanese corporate owner of a TV news channel, CTiTV, maintains in the PRC. The corporate owner, the Taiwanese food conglomerate Want Want (旺旺), has received USD 500 million in subsidies from the PRC government for its operations in China and owns several news companies in Taiwan (including CTiTV) that take pro-Beijing editorial stances.¹³ Taiwan's government has legitimate cause for concern about the PRC's influence over Want Want's news organizations. Indeed, channeling financial incentives to corporations with interests in both the PRC and Taiwan is a standard method of CCP united front work, aimed at encouraging alignment with the CCP's political warfare objectives. Yet, the Taiwanese government's attempts to regulate the content of these outlets has arguably infringed upon core democratic values. For example, Taiwan's National Communication Commission (NCC, 國家通訊傳播委員會) fined CTiTV for reporting that "auspicious" clouds in the shape of a dragon had appeared before a rally for the China-friendly KMT—the major rival to the DPP in Taiwan's democratic era.¹⁴ The NCC also censured CTiTV for devoting too much coverage to a particular KMT candidate during an election.¹⁵

Concerns about the financial incentives of Want Want to advance pro-China narratives notwithstanding, the NCC's fines on CTiTV have suffered criticism on the basis that they infringe upon the free speech rights of the news broadcaster. After all, it is extremely difficult to prove that the reporting on the religious character of a particular set of clouds constitutes the willful dissemination of false information; nor can one easily prove that devoting a particular proportion of coverage to one candidate is a signal

of corruption, rather than a subjective reflection of the candidate's newsworthiness.

Ultimately, the NCC opted in 2019 to deny the renewal of CTiTV's license, forcing the channel off air.¹⁶ During this episode, the NCC Chairwoman Nicole Chan (詹婷怡) resigned over her discomfort that the NCC was receiving too much pressure from DPP leaders to regulate content from news organizations.¹⁷ A KMT spokesperson pointed out the quandary in which Taiwan's political leadership found itself, arguing that the DPP government could not act as both a "player and a referee."¹⁸ Indeed, this latter phrase summarizes the dilemma democratic governments encounter when tackling authoritarian influence: when acting both as a participant in competitive politics, and as a regulator of information outlets, their objectivity and fairness may be called into question.

Liberal democratic governments' perceived lack of legitimacy in tackling authoritarian influence also harms their ability to leverage those parts of society best positioned to respond. For example, the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD, 臺灣民主基金會), a government-backed foundation tasked with supporting civil society in Taiwan, held an Indo-Pacific Workshop on Countering Disinformation in 2023.¹⁹ When I attended the event, I encountered a number of suited diplomats and government officials from Taiwan, the United States, and other countries in the region. But there was little attendance from civil society actors or citizens relevant to the disinformation challenge in Taiwan, suggesting that the government-funded TFD may have only weak relationships with Taiwan's NGOs countering PRC influence.

Meanwhile, in response to the PRC's military exercises around Taiwan aimed in part at damaging Taiwanese mo-

193–209, https://cyberdefensereview.army.mil/Portals/6/Documents/2022_fall/12_Mullaney.pdf.

13 Ketty W. Chen, "Combating Beijing's Sharp Power: Taiwan's Democracy Under Fire," *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 3 (2022): 144–157, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2022.0029>.

14 Juan Alberto Ruiz Casado "Taiwan as a Field for Disinformation," in *Culture of Enmity: The Discursive Struggle for Taiwan in the Making of the New Cold War*, ed. Alain Brossat and Juan Alberto Ruiz Casado (Singapore: Springer, 2023), <https://www.springerprofessional.de/en/taiwan-as-a-field-for-disinformation/25600630>

15 Ibid.

16 Chen, "Combating Beijing's Sharp Power: Taiwan's Democracy Under Fire."

17 Casado "Taiwan as a Field for Disinformation."

18 Agust Börjesson and Yi-Chieh Chen, "The Political Split at the Heart of Taiwan's Struggle against Foreign Disinformation," *Issue Brief* (Stockholm: Institute for Security and Development Policy, February 2024), <https://www.isdp.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Brief-Taiwan-Feb-23-revised1.pdf>.

19 Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, "2023 Indo-Pacific Workshop on Countering Disinformation Opening Ceremony," accessed April 17, 2026, <https://www.tfd.org.tw/en/news/events/2023%20Indo-Pacific%20Workshop%20on%20Countering%20Disinformation%20Opening%20Ceremony>.



Image: The Want Want conglomerate's logo emblazoned over the office building housing the company's media subsidiaries in Taipei (Image Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

rale, Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (國防部) has organized a "weekend warriors" program that would establish a better-trained set of reservists. The program has suffered from a lack of interest (training only 49 people in 2022) and has been overshadowed by the more popular civil defense training courses offered by NGOs such as Kuma Academy (黑熊學院) and Forward Alliance (壯闊台灣).²⁰

In contrast with agencies of government, civil society groups do not suffer from a lack of legitimacy when

20 "Military to double recruits for 'weekend warrior' plan," *Taipei Times*, May 30, 2022, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2022/05/30/2003779004>; Fang Wei-li, Hollie Younger, and Kayleigh Madjar, "Kuma Academy Eyes Defense Training at Community Level," *Taipei Times*, September 27, 2024, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2024/09/27/2003824449>.

challenging authoritarian influence. Indeed, threats to democracy should be seen as a challenge to society as a whole, rather than merely to elected officials or civil servants. Citizen groups can challenge the validity of information without meriting the accusations that they are "players" and simultaneously "referees." For this reason, the Taiwan FactCheck Center (TFC, 台灣事實查核中心), a fact-checking NGO without financial or personnel ties to Taiwan's government, has thrived while the Ministry of Digital Affairs (MoDA, 數位發展部) has steered clear of a focus on internet disinformation.²¹ Meanwhile, civil society programs often claim a "grassroots" characterization, which attracts citizens who may otherwise be suspicious of government. In many respects, this explains the success that civil defense NGOs like Kuma Academy have had in recruiting participants in Taiwan.

21 MODA official, interview by author, Taichung, July 4, 2023.

Foreign influence operations often target citizens' capacities to evaluate information, to form civic-minded associations, and to engage in public political discourse. For generations that have been raised under authoritarianism—such as Taiwanese who were born before the KMT lifted martial law in 1987—these skillsets are rarely habitual.²² Several NGOs I interviewed described their mission as “*gongmin suyang*” (公民素養), which translates to “cultivating citizens.” The phrase essentially refers to the improvement of citizens' capacities to engage in their political systems in an informed, effective, and fulfilling manner.²³

Although populations typically expect their government to defeat external security threats, civil society is better suited to the specific challenge of countering authoritarian influence. Its activities to counter authoritarian influence do not undermine liberal democratic norms. The grassroots status of NGOs invites greater engagement from fellow citizens, and allows them to improve the civic capacities of individuals who have missed out on certain early education initiatives, such as media literacy training.

Core Taiwan NGO Functions

The counter-foreign influence activities of Taiwanese NGOs can be broken into three key functions:

1. Information integrity
2. Government oversight
3. Civic education

The NGOs that focus on information integrity include fact-checking organizations, research institutions, and news providers. Fact-checking organizations aim to blunt information attacks that manipulate content, such as disinformation campaigns.

Information integrity research institutions often employ software to uncover networks of inauthentic social media accounts that are amplifying narratives intended to divide

22 Laia Balcells and Francisco Villamil, “Generational Legacies of Authoritarianism: Evidence from Spain,” *European Journal of Political Research* (2026): 1-2, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1475676526101042>.

23 Enoch Wu (吳怡農), interview by author, Taipei, September 28, 2023; Chang Shu-huai (張書懷), Mumu (慕慕), Ye Chia-rong (葉家容), interview by author, Taipei, October 27, 2023.

society. Meanwhile, some organizations produce content intended to contradict demoralizing or divisive narratives promoted through PRC information operations, such as narratives aimed at denigrating US security commitments to Taiwan.²⁴

Government oversight NGOs engage in traditional advocacy, such as efforts to encourage changes in government policy. Rather than focusing their efforts on the behavior of everyday citizens, these NGOs target government policymakers for advocacy. These NGOs are often skilled in media engagement and maintain relationships with policymakers.

Civic education NGOs intend to cultivate long-lasting communities of citizens around Taiwan, focused on efforts such as civil defense and critical analysis of news content. While these NGOs espouse objectives such as improving citizens' readiness towards war or natural disasters, the communities they foster are often a civic product in and of themselves—providing citizens spaces in which to productively engage with each other on pressing political issues.

In Table 1 on the next page, I list the NGOs that were the focus of my research, as well as the functions they serve. The list represents the most prominent NGOs countering PRC authoritarian influence, but it is by no means exhaustive.

Measuring the Effect of Civil Society Activism

Measuring the effect of the counter-authoritarian influence activities of Taiwan's civil society is challenging—perhaps as difficult as quantifying the democratic spirit that Alex De Tocqueville observed during his immortalized research trip to early 19th century America.²⁵ Even so, the issue occupies many analysts, who seek hard evidence to justify investment in civil society activism. Assessments regarding the impact of interventions against social media manipulation have been confounded by the fact that it is already difficult to gauge the efficacy of information oper-

24 Chihhao Yu, “US Skepticism Narratives and Where They Come From,” *Taiwan Information Environment Research Center (IORG)*, August 8, 2023, updated November 8, 2023, <https://iorg.tw/ua/a/us-skepticism-238>.

25 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

Table 1 - The Core Activities of Prominent Taiwanese Democracy NGOs

NGO	Information Integrity	Government Oversight	Civic Education
Doublethink Lab (台灣民主實驗室)	X		
Economic Democracy Union (經濟民主連合)		X	
Cofacts	X		X
US-Taiwan Watch (美國台灣觀測站)	X	X	
Ghost Island Media (鬼島之音)	X		
MyGoPen (麥擱騙)	X		X
Taiwan FactCheck Center (台灣事實查核中心)	X		
Taiwan Information Environment Research Center (IORG, 台灣資訊環境研究中心)	X		
Watchout (沃草)	X	X	
Kuma Academy (黑熊學院)			X
Forward Alliance (壯闊台灣)			X
Fake News Cleaner (假新聞清潔劑)			X
Taiwan Digital Diplomacy Association (數位外交行動計畫)			X
G0v (零時政府)			X

ations themselves.²⁶

Nonetheless, Doublethink Lab, an “information integrity” research organization in Taiwan, has employed exit polling during key Taiwanese elections to determine the effectiveness of information-related interventions. During the 2020 presidential elections, Doublethink Lab asked voters whether they had encountered a set of rumors that had been fact-checked and found to be false. One such example was a high-profile rumor that DPP presidential candidate Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) had forged her London School of Economics PhD dissertation. The rumor received an outsized degree of attention, both from its proponents and the fact-checkers that refuted its claims. Over 80 percent of the respondents of Doublethink Lab’s survey reported seeing the rumor. Nonetheless, only 20 percent of that group gave the rumor a “four” or “five” out of five on a credibility score, while 56 percent rated the rumor “one” or “two” on the same scale. While the exit poll surveys could not prove that fact-checking interventions had undermined the rumor, the results at least reveal that a false rumor subject to intense fact-checking efforts was not widely believed.²⁷

Indeed, increasing awareness of mis/disinformation and uptake of fact-checking initiatives points to the success of “information integrity” NGOs.²⁸ Ninety-five percent of respondents in a 2024 National Taiwan University (NTU, 國立台灣大學) survey reported encountering misinformation, up from 83 percent the year before. Given that false information has been commonplace online for several years, the survey authors concluded that this trend may simply reflect increasing awareness of misinformation. Meanwhile, 70 percent of participants reported using fact-checking tools to verify information, and roughly the

same proportion viewed fact-checking organizations as “credible” or “very credible.”²⁹ Even if certain respondents may have exaggerated their use of fact-checking resources, the survey points to a meaningful embrace of the work of Taiwan’s NGOs.

NGO efforts to pressure the Taiwanese government and social media companies to contribute to countering PRC sharp power have produced some noteworthy successes. After Cofacts (the civil society project led by the flamboyant Billion Lee) built a popular fact-checking chatbot on LINE—Taiwan’s principal messaging platform—the corporation managing the platform emulated Cofacts by releasing their own LINE-branded fact-checking chatbot.³⁰ Meanwhile, the journalism NGO Watchout successfully pressed Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense into releasing a handbook educating citizens on civil defense and disaster preparedness, after Watchout had released a handbook of its own.³¹

Taiwan’s civil defense NGOs—engaging in “civic education”—have arguably demonstrated a stronger capacity to mobilize Taiwanese citizens than the government. Forward Alliance, an NGO providing courses in disaster response and first aid, claims to have trained at least 18,000 citizens in its classes since 2022.³² Kuma Academy, a civil defense training organization with a more explicit focus on the threat from the PRC, has trained 40,000.³³ The

26 David C. Grohoski, Steven M. Seybert, and Marc J. Romanych, “Measures of Effectiveness in the Information Environment,” Joint Forces Staff College, National Defense University, https://jpsc.ndu.edu/Portals/72/Documents/JC2IOS/Additional_Reading/3F_Measures_of_Effectiveness_In_the_Information_Environment.pdf.

27 Tseng Po-Yu and Chen Yun-Ju, “An Analysis on the Impact of False Information on Taiwanese Voters,” Doublethink Lab, May 6, 2021, <https://medium.com/doublethinklab/an-analysis-on-the-impact-of-false-information-on-taiwanese-voters-c061500a898c>.

28 In recent parlance, misinformation refers to false information that is unintentionally spread, while disinformation refers to false information intentionally disseminated by malicious actors.

29 Wei-Ping Li, “Truth Matters: The 2024 Survey on What Taiwanese Think About Misinformation and Fact-Checking,” Taiwan FactCheck Center, December 27, 2024, <https://en.tfc-taiwan.org.tw/truth-matters-the-2024-survey-on-what-taiwanese-think-about-misinformation-and-fact-checking/>.

30 Andrew Deck and Vittoria Elliott, “How Line Is Fighting Disinformation Without Sacrificing Privacy,” Rest of World, March 7, 2021, <https://restofworld.org/2021/how-line-is-fighting-disinformation-without-sacrificing-privacy/>.

31 Hong Guo-Jun (洪國鈞) and Roger Hsiao (蕭長展), interview by author, Taipei, July 20, 2023.

32 Spirit of America, “Taiwan Citizens Showcase Their Disaster Response Skills,” September 18, 2024, <https://spiritofamerica.org/taiwan-citizens-showcase-their-disaster-response-skills>.

33 Huileng Tan, “Tourniquets, Gray-Zone Tactics, and Secrecy: I Attended an 8-Hour Course That Teaches Taiwanese Citizens What to Do if China Invades,” Business Insider, September 14 2025, <https://www.businessinsider.com/taiwan-civilian-defense-kuma-training-china-invasion-risk-preparation-2025-9>



Image: The White Lily Student Movement in March 1990 (Image Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Taiwanese government, by sharp contrast, attracted only 49 participants in 2022 in its “weekend warrior” reservist program.³⁴

The Origins of Taiwan’s Foreign

Influence-Focused NGOs

Sitting across from Jou Yi-cheng (周奕成) in the bright, ornate Dadaocheng café that he owns, it was hard to believe that Jou was once a passionate leader of the 1990 “Wild Lily Student Movement” (野百合學運) that helped democratize Taiwan.³⁵ Jou was languid and his posture was straight. As he described the civil society groups that ushered the fall of the KMT’s martial law, his voice hardly deviated from its genteel tone. Jou explained to me that Taiwan’s democratization in the 1980s

and 1990s was supported by the rise of “middle class” activism: the involvement in politics of educated citizens through a network of non-governmental organizations.³⁶ These NGOs were focused on a variety of causes, from environmental protection to labor rights.

Beginning in the 1980s, the KMT government showed a more permissive attitude to the activism of such NGOs, as the party was grappling with direct electoral competition from the *Tangwai* (黨外) (“outside the party”) movement of non-KMT political candidates. The *Tangwai* political candidates first appeared in the 1970s, and despite KMT repression—such as the arrests following the 1979 Kaohsiung Incident (高雄事件)—ultimately established the Democratic Progressive Party in 1986. The “middle class” NGOs and the *Tangwai* were united by a demand for democratic rights, such as unrestricted

34 *Taipei Times*, “Military to double recruits for ‘weekend warrior’ plan.”

35 Radio Taiwan International, “Jou Yi-cheng: Even though the Sunflower Movement blocked the CSSTA, its effect isn’t ‘irreversible’ [周奕成：太陽花學運雖擋下服貿 但未有「不可逆轉」的改變],” RTI News, March 16, 2024, <https://www.rti.org.tw/news?uid=3&pid=61048>.

36 Jou Yi-cheng (周奕成), interview by author, Taipei, September 29, 2023; Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao, “The Tripartite Links of Middle Class, Civil Society and Democracy in Taiwan: 1980–2016,” in *Middle Class, Civil Society and Democracy in Asia*, ed. Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351054263-2>.



Image: Protestors during the Wild Strawberry Movement of 2008 (Image Source: [Flickr, Creative Commons](#))

speech and freedom of assembly.³⁷ NGOs, such as the anti-nuclear Taiwan Environment Protection Union (台灣環保聯盟), lent resources to promote the elections of DPP candidates, who pushed for policy changes and democratic reforms.³⁸

After Republic of China (ROC) President Chiang Ching-kuo (蔣經國) lifted martial law in 1987, Taiwan's democratic transition still required a suite of deep-seated reforms directed primarily at the ROC Constitution.³⁹

37 Ibid.

38 Shuge Wei, "Recovery from "Betrayal": Local Anti-Nuclear Movements and Party Politics in Taiwan," *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, Vol. 14, Issue 8, No. 2 (2016), <https://apjif.org/2016/08/wei>.

39 Jou Yi-cheng (周奕成), interview by author, Taipei, September 29, 2023.

Though Taiwan's bilateral relationship with the PRC was not the organizing issue of the democratization movement of the 1980s and 1990s, the island's political identity vis-à-vis China was an inextricable feature. This is because the ROC Constitution cast Taiwan as merely one province of a greater China—one even larger than the claimed territory of the PRC, encompassing Mongolia and even pockets of Russia.⁴⁰ Accordingly, the ROC was governed by a National Assembly (國民大會) of representatives of these far-flung territories—many of whom were elderly and infirm, having remained in their roles since the KMT retreated from China in 1949.⁴¹ To remove

40 Han Cheung, "Taiwan in Time: When Taiwan claimed Mongolia," *Taipei Times*, August 25, 2024, <https://www.taipei-times.com/News/feat/archives/2024/08/25/2003822726>.

41 Murray A. Rubinstein, "Politicization Taiwanization and Pragmatic Diplomacy: The Eras of Chiang Ching-kuo



Image: Lai Chung-chiang (center), leader of the Economic Democracy Union (Image Source: [Congress Musou](#))

these National Assembly members—who themselves controlled revisions to the ROC Constitution—meant symbolically renouncing the ROC’s claim to governance over mainland China.

The White Lily Student Movement that Jou Yi-cheng helped lead provided impetus for the 1991 retirement and re-election of the National Assembly members.⁴² One of the key demands of the 20,000-strong student-led protest movement was the renewal of the National Assembly through direct elections, as well as a timetable for full democratization that would involve free elections for the ROC presidency and Legislative Yuan (LY, 立法院). Ultimately, the conciliatory KMT President Lee Teng-hui acquiesced to these demands.⁴³ Buoyed by the success of the movement, many Wild Lily leaders took political positions in the DPP after graduation (such as Jou) or joined

NGOs, cementing the links between civil society and the KMT’s political opposition.⁴⁴

A push-and-pull would continue in the following years between the ruling KMT on the one hand, and the DPP and middle class activists on the other—during which President Lee oversaw a series of constitutional changes that weakened the 1946 ROC Constitution’s status as a document governing a country that extended beyond the Taiwan Strait.⁴⁵ In doing so, these reformers established a democratic system confined to the islands of Taiwan. Thus, democratization necessarily involved a rupture in Taiwan’s political identity vis-à-vis China.

All but one of the ROC’s major constitutional changes occurred during the era of contentious politics between President Lee and the DPP and civil society opposition.

44 Jou Yi-cheng (周奕成), interview by author, Taipei, September 29, 2023.

45 Rubinstein, “Politicization Taiwanization and Pragmatic Diplomacy: The Eras of Chiang Ching-kuo and Lee Teng-hui, 1971-1994.”

and Lee Teng-hui, 1971-1994,” in *Taiwan: A New History*, ed. Murray A. Rubinstein (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999).

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

The last took place in 2005 under DPP President Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁), which served as a curtain call for constitutional reform and established a threshold for future change that was “nearly impossible” to achieve.⁴⁶ As Jou told me, the volume of civil society activism declined during the Chen presidency (2000–2008)—the first administration of a DPP candidate—as NGO leaders could “call on friends in government” and did not need to agitate in the public sphere. Crucially, however, the activists themselves did not retire.^{47,48} In Taiwan, the activists that participated in the heady movements of the Lee presidency would play a crucial role in cultivating a new wave of youth protestors during the next KMT administration under President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) from 2008–2016.

During our conversation in the leafy Dadaocheng café, Jou expressed his frustration that the fiercest debates of the last decade or so have focused on “mere words or sentences” in laws or regulations, rather than the “big picture.”⁴⁹ But with the 2005 constitutional amendment that made future revisions impossible without overwhelming majority support, it is unsurprising that contemporary debates would turn from constitutional questions to policy. Taiwan’s attitude towards China, which in the 1990s had been an inseparable facet of constitutional reform, also became a concrete diplomatic and trade issue.⁵⁰

President Ma of the KMT, who in 2008 had campaigned on platform of friendly relations with the PRC, was a key catalyst for a new showdown on cross-Straits policy. While many readers will be familiar with the 2014 “Sunflower Movement” (太陽花學運), which permanently altered

Taiwan’s democracy NGO ecosystem, actions by the Ma Administration precipitated a series of earlier protest movements that incorporated new demographics and 21st century advocacy techniques.⁵¹ For example, the 2008 “Wild Strawberry Movement” (野草莓運動), one of the first important movements of the Ma presidency, was organized online via the Professional Technology Temple (PTT) social media platform.⁵² The Wild Strawberry protestors opposed President Ma’s prohibitions on the display of the ROC flag during a visit by PRC envoy Chen Yunlin (陳雲林).⁵³

PTT, and increasing uptake of Facebook in Taiwan, multiplied participation in domestic policy-related demonstrations, such as a protest against brutality in military training following the death of a young conscript in 2013.⁵⁴ It was at this time that new NGOs emerged, leveraging online media in order to reach non-traditional audiences. The investigative outlet Watchout (沃草) was an early mover. By live-streaming deliberations in the Legislative Yuan in the 2010s, “even when fights would occur,” Watchout sought to contrast itself with old-school activists who would “stand in front of the LY and yell before cameras.”⁵⁵

Internet technology would also allow a new demographic of activists to make an indelible mark on Taiwan’s political ecosystem: software engineers. Civic-minded programmers, such as Audrey Tang (唐鳳) and “clkao” (高嘉良) had been active members of Taiwan’s open-source technology communities since the early 2000s.⁵⁶ Open source technology is software whose code is made available for public examination. Taiwanese software engineers had largely steered clear of partisan politics until the Ma Administration. Indeed, clkao’s wife “ipa” (瞿筱葳) confided in me that her husband had been incensed by a single political advertisement released by the Ma Administration, which urged citizens to refrain from

46 Jou Yi-cheng (周奕成), interview by author, Taipei, September 29, 2023.

47 Ibid.

48 This contrasts Taiwan with South Korea, where the generation of students that brought down the Chun Doo-hwan dictatorship either entered elected politics or simply graduated into corporate jobs that left little time for future advocacy. As a consequence, a strong advocacy culture has not been passed down to younger generations in Korea. See: Yoon-Chul Park, “The Tripartite Links of Middle Class, Civil Society And Democratization in South Korea,” in *Middle Class, Civil Society and Democracy in Asia*, ed. Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351054263>.

49 Jou Yi-cheng (周奕成), interview by author, Taipei, September 29, 2023.

50 Hsiao, “The Tripartite Links of Middle Class, Civil Society and Democracy in Taiwan: 1980–2016.”

51 Ibid.

52 Ipa Chiu (瞿筱葳), interview by author, Taichung, July 4, 2023.

53 Ttcat (吳銘軒), interview by author, Taipei, December 28, 2023.

54 Ibid; g0v, “First Year of g0v.tw – Dismantling Our Government and Building It Anew,” accessed April 24, 2026, <https://g0v.us/tw/>.

55 Hong Guo-Jun (洪國鈞) and Roger Hsiao (蕭長展), interview by author, Taipei, July 20, 2023.

56 Ipa (瞿筱葳), interview by author, Taichung, July 4, 2023.



Image: Student protestors occupy the main chamber of the Legislative Yuan during the 2014 Sunflower Movement (Image Source: [Voice of America Chinese](#))

close attention to economic policy. The advertisement described economics as “too complicated” and not worth worrying over.⁵⁷

Tang, clkao, ipa (who was herself a documentarian and former activist in environmental movements of the preceding decades), and others decided to found a civic tech community called “g0v” (pronounced “gov zero”). G0v hosted regular hackathons during which coders could engineer solutions to civic problems. These events would prove foundational to the development of technologically-advanced NGOs countering PRC foreign interference. G0v has played an important technical role in the progression of major social movements in recent years, such as by providing wi-fi access to the mass of students that stormed the Legislative Yuan in 2014 to protest President Ma’s Cross-Strait Services Trade Agreement (CSSTA, 海

峽兩岸服務貿易協議) with the PRC.⁵⁸

The 2014 storming of the LY that defined the Sunflower Movement was not the consequence of student activism alone. Indeed, the multi-day occupation of the LY was supported by a set of less-conspicuous NGOs, many of which were led by activists from earlier movements.⁵⁹ In spite of the Sunflower Movement’s fame as a protest that drew in a new wave of students and protestors from across the island, the influence of older civil society leaders is irrefutable. The rally outside the Legislative Yuan—which terminated with Sunflower Movement protestors storming the parliament—was organized by the Economic Democracy Union (EDU, 經濟民主連合). While many of EDU’s core staff were recent university graduates, its leader, Lai Chung-chiang (賴中強), had been a student

⁵⁷ Ibid; hsnuejff, “行政院經濟動能推升方案廣告 (備份)” [Advertisement of the Executive Yuan’s Economic Momentum Promotion Plan (Backup)], YouTube video, uploaded 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RabD3AGFX6I>

⁵⁸ Ttcat (吳銘軒), interview by author, Taipei, December 28, 2023.

⁵⁹ Hsiao, ed., *Middle Class, Civil Society and Democracy in Asia* – chapter 2



Image: Billion Lee presents at g0v's hackath56n in Taichung in July 2023 (Image Source: [g0v](#))

participant in the Wild Lily Movement of the nineties.⁶⁰ The Sunflower Movement vastly magnified the reach and recognition of democracy-focused civil society in Taiwan. The 21-day occupation of the Legislative Yuan—culminating in the capitulation and withdrawal of the CSSTA by the KMT leadership—was beamed across the Taiwanese islands on television and social media. Facebook campaigns brought more protestors to the streets around the parliament, imprinting a vision of activism on tens of thousands of Taiwanese.⁶¹ In an interview, Ttcat, founder of the information integrity NGO Doublethink Lab, told me how new activists had appeared in the days after he stormed the Legislative Yuan. “When I went to civil soci-

60 王柔雅 [Wang Rou-ya], “賴中強 力阻兩岸暗度陳倉的黑臉催生監督機制關鍵推手 [Lai Chung-Chung's Strong Opposition to Clandestine Cross-Strait Exchanges Has Become a Key Driver in the Development of a Monitoring Mechanism],” 財訊 [Wealth Magazine] April 9, 2014, <https://www.wealth.com.tw/articles/557b0239-6d07-483c-a3d3-3ae6ffd01cff>

61 Panayiota Tsatsou, “Social Media and Informal Organisation of Citizen Activism: Lessons From the Use of Facebook in the Sunflower Movement,” *Social Media + Society* 4, no. 1 (2018): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117751384>.

ety events before the Sunflower Movement, I used to recognize the same faces every time. During the movement, I remember picking my way around protestors all around the parliament building, and realized I knew no one,” he said. Before 2014, few Taiwanese had understood the meaning of the words “activist” and “social movement.”⁶²

After those heady few weeks during the Ma Administration, Taiwan’s democracy-focused NGOs would benefit from an infusion of money and manpower that would drastically elevate their presence in Taiwanese society.

Even after the DPP’s Tsai Ing-wen was elected president in 2016—having ridden a wave of anti-KMT sentiment catalyzed by the last years of the Ma Administration—democracy NGOs would still receive two more injections of energy during elections in 2018 and 2020. In 2018, progressive civil society groups were pushing for Taiwanese voters to support a referendum to legalize gay marriage. Widespread observations of manipulated online content regarding the legalization of gay marriage, some of which

62 Ttcat (吳銘軒), interview by author, Taipei, December 28, 2023.

was traced back to the PRC, encouraged a sense that Taiwanese politics was vulnerable to online interference from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP, 中國共產黨).⁶³ It was after this election that information integrity NGOs such as Doublethink Lab, IORG, and FakeNewsCleaner were founded.⁶⁴

The 2018 elections also saw the victory of the populist KMT candidate Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜) in the Kaohsiung mayoral race—a result that was shocking as the city had been seen as a stronghold of the DPP since democratization.⁶⁵ Han secured his victory through a sensationalist media strategy and a strong focus on economic issues, but observers uncovered networks of PRC-based Facebook accounts that had formed large online groups promoting content favorable to Han.⁶⁶ When Han then ran for the presidency in the 2020 national elections on a platform of improved economic relations with the PRC, there were widespread perceptions that Beijing was supporting Han's candidacy through interference operations.⁶⁷ Some evidence suggests that content farms outside of Taiwan spread information favorable to Han and harmful to his

opponent Tsai Ing-wen.⁶⁸

This anxiety translated to increased civil society activism, and it was after the 2020 elections (which also coincided with the PRC's security crackdown on Hong Kong) that civil defense NGOs such as Kuma Academy and Forward Alliance were founded.⁶⁹ While these events were most pivotal to formation of NGOs countering PRC influence in Taiwan, the COVID-19 pandemic would also prove a moment that accelerated the work of Taiwan's NGOs, in that it focused global attention on the PRC. Beijing's pandemic-era experimentation with self-defeating, aggressive "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy also served to catalyze a focus on PRC malign influence.⁷⁰ Dramatically-heightened awareness of the PRC and its authoritarian political system encouraged Western funders to give greater attention to Taiwan and to financially support the activities of Taiwan's NGOs—thereby allowing civil society organizations to hire more employees and travel internationally at scale for the first time.⁷¹

Building an Infrastructure for Information Resilience

Every major city in Taiwan has played host to a hackathon organized by g0v, Taiwan's most prominent civic tech community. So when I met Billion Lee—in her violet kimono—at the Taichung train hall, she was not just introducing me to an isolated gathering of volunteers, but rather one of the core institutions undergirding Taiwan's modern democracy activism. The g0v civic tech community has served as the wellspring of much of the technology-driven activism centered around defending Taiwan's democracy from the authoritarian influence of the PRC.

While seminal political events in the 2010s galvanized Taiwanese civil society, the foundation of g0v brought about an infrastructure that combined software develop-

63 Billion Lee (李比鄰), interview by author, Taipei, May 29, 2023; MyGoPen [麥擱騙], "為什麼急著同婚合法化？答案是健保？謠言扭曲事實 [Why the rush to legalize same-sex marriage? Is the answer health insurance? Rumors distort the facts]" November 5, 2018. https://www.mygopen.com/2018/11/line_5.html.

64 Ttcat (吳銘軒), interview by author, Taipei, December 28, 2023; IORG (Taiwan Information Environment Research Center). "About IORG." Accessed April 24, 2026. https://iorg.tw/_en/about; Huizhong Wu, "In Taiwan, a Group Is Battling Fake News One Conversation at a Time — With a Focus on Seniors," *Associated Press*, April 1, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/fake-news-disinformation-taiwan-elderly-seniors-19773910ede8cdc39ae0ebc236cd652e>.

65 Kou Te-lien and Yen Wen-ting, "How Kaohsiung Got Swept Up in the 'Han Kuo-yu Wave,'" *The Reporter*, November 23, 2018, <https://www.twreporter.org/a/2018-election-kaohsiung-han-kuo-yu-english>.

66 Paul Huang, "Chinese Cyber-Operatives Boosted Taiwan's Insurgent Candidate," *Foreign Policy*, June 26, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/26/chinese-cyber-operatives-boosted-taiwans-insurgent-candidate/>.

67 何蕙安 [He Hui-an], "選後不實訊息不減反增，台灣成打擊謠言成功典範 [Post-Election False Information has Increased Rather than Decreased, Taiwan has become a Success Case for Combatting Rumors]," Taiwan FactCheck Center, September 11, 2020, https://tfc-taiwan.org.tw/migration_article_103953_4442/.

68 Doublethink Lab, *Deafening Whispers: China's Information Operation and Taiwan's 2020 Election*, May 24, 2021, <https://medium.com/doublethinklab/deafening-whispers-f9b1d773f6cd>.

69 Puma Shen (沈伯洋), interview by author, Taipei, November 6, 2023; Enoch Wu (吳怡農), interview by author, Taipei, September 28, 2023.

70 Ttcat (吳銘軒), interview by author, Taipei, December 28, 2023.

71 Lulu Keng, interview by author, Taipei, August 2, 2023.



Image: Puma Shen, cofounder of the Kuma Academy, delivers a 2023 lecture at one of the academy's classes
(Image Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

ment and subject matter expertise into a potent brand of activism. Before this marriage of expertise, NGO leaders simply “yelled at cameras,” as Watchout’s director told me.⁷² G0v encouraged activists to directly reach the Taiwanese people with data-driven social media campaigns, automated factchecks, and live streams of pivotal political processes. Therefore, g0v offers a blueprint for stakeholders seeking to stimulate similar democratic activism abroad. Civic tech communities—groups of technical and non-technical professionals who meet periodically to develop civic-oriented projects—exist all around the world.⁷³ Indeed, the civic tech movement gained steam in the United States under the banner of “Code for America,” with strong buy-in from the Barack Obama presidency of 2008-2016.⁷⁴ Cities in the United States and throughout

72 Hong Guo-Jun (洪國鈞), interview by author, Taipei, July 20, 2023.

73 For a directory of global civic tech communities, see: Civic Tech Field Guide, “Civic Tech Field Guide,” accessed April 24, 2026, <https://civictechguide/>.

74 Ipa Chiu (瞿筱葳), interview by author, Taichung, July

the world began forming civic tech groups, often with idiosyncratic names, community cultures, and objectives.

G0v was born in 2012, while Taiwan’s civil society was mobilizing against the policies of the Ma Administration.⁷⁵ Its early technical pioneers, such as clkao and Audrey Tang (唐鳳), had been active within Taiwan’s open source communities since the early 2000s.⁷⁶ Open source communities generally revolve around a piece of software—whether that be a program or even a programming language—whose code is publicly available and modifiable by any contributor, hence the name “open source.”⁷⁷ Open source communities include civic tech

4, 2023.

75 g0v, “First Year of g0v.tw – Dismantling Our Government and Building It Anew,” accessed April 24, 2026, <https://g0v.us/tw/>.

76 Ipa Chiu (瞿筱葳), interview by author, Taichung, July 4, 2023.

77 Open Source Initiative, “The Open Source Definition,” accessed April 24, 2026, <https://opensource.org/osd>.

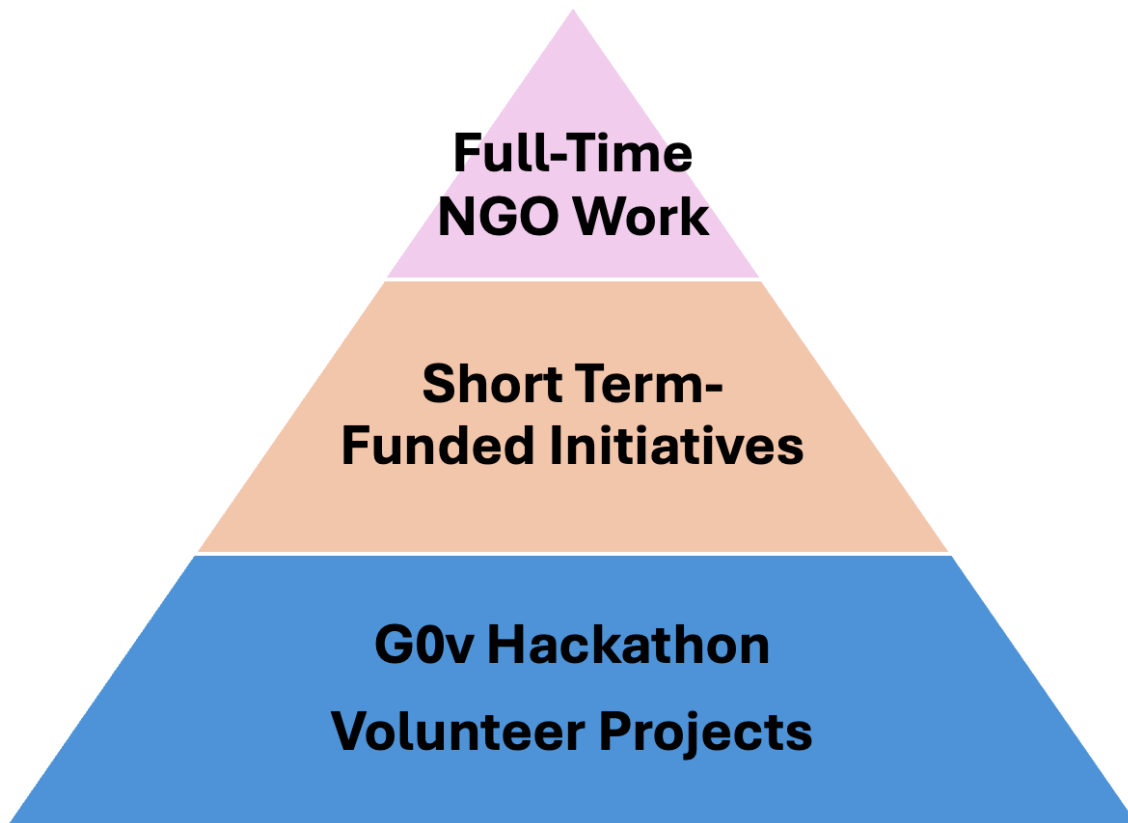


Image: Visual representation of the “pyramid” structure of professionalization undergirded by the g0v community (Image Source: Created by the author)

communities—since the civic-oriented software developed by civic tech communities is almost always open-source—but can also encompass other projects, such as video game development. Famous open source software includes the Firefox browser, the Linux operating system, the Python programming language, and the Signal messaging application.⁷⁸

G0v’s formation was a marriage of coding ability and subject matter expertise. Ipa, clkao’s wife and a long-term activist, observed the outrage that her generally apolitical husband had experienced at the Ma Administration’s 30-second advertisement urging citizens not to involve themselves in complex economic matters. With the help of her husband and friends, she began to assemble a community that would meet for regular hackathons and harness the indignation and proficiency of Taiwan’s tech professionals to promote social change. As ipa explained to me in the cacophonous Taichung Station meeting hall,

78 vivante, “A Curated List of Amazing Open Source Software You May Not Have Heard Of,” Level1Techs Forums, April 24, 2023, <https://forum.level1techs.com/t/a-curated-list-of-amazing-open-source-software-you-may-have-not-heard-of/196389>.

“hackers and geeks don’t organize.”⁷⁹ The sustained effort of ipa, kirby, and others—as well as financial support from Taiwan’s professional class of coders, doctors, and lawyers—enabled g0v to host well-attended hackathons in locations throughout the main island of Taiwan.⁸⁰ The Taichung event I attended was g0v’s “hackath56n”—the 56th iteration of the community’s bimonthly meetups. Each hackathon begins with project managers introducing initiatives that are active in the community, and open to new contributors. New volunteers can then join projects that interest them and demand their particular skillsets.

G0v has attracted foreign participants, too. One of its early regulars was Sam Robbins, now pursuing doctoral research on tech-focused activism. “G0v thrived because of its non-tech members, especially non-tech women,” Sam shared with me in a Zoom call. “Open source com-

79 Ipa Chiu (瞿筱葳), interview by author, Taichung, July 4, 2023.

80 Ibid; Ministry of Digital Affairs (Taiwan), “Sam Robbins 訪問逐字稿 [Sam Robbins Verbatim Interview Transcript],” Government of Taiwan, accessed April 24, 2026, <https://moda.gov.tw/press/background-information/4313>.

munities tend to be male-dominated, which is not good for sustainability.”⁸¹ As I looked around the Taichung Station meeting hall, some 80 percent of the participants appeared to be male. But the vocal contribution of the women in the room, such as Billion hurrying project leads through their initial pitches on her microphone, belied any sense of a male-run organization.

Though many of g0v's projects were and are unrelated to electoral politics, the community made an early impact in democracy activism in the Ma Ying-jeou era. When students stormed the Legislative Yuan in protest of Ma's trade policies during the Sunflower Movement, it was g0v—and Audrey Tang—that quickly arranged for Wi-Fi to be wired into the building so that protestors could livestream their actions.⁸² In response to the Ma Administration's patronizing 30-second political advertisement, g0v's first project was a dynamic visualization of how the government was spending its budget, still available at budget.g0v.tw.⁸³

G0v quickly attracted a community of regular participants who would meet every two months for hackathons, alternating through major Taiwanese cities. In the years that followed its founding, numerous impactful democracy-focused projects and organizations emerged from the community. In 2016, Billion Lee and her partner Johnson Liang founded Cofacts, a news fact-checking service where investigations are crowd-sourced from ordinary users across the island.⁸⁴ Cofacts offers a free direct-messaging service on LINE—Taiwan's version of WhatsApp—where users can paste in links to news and receive information on whether the story has been fact-checked by a Cofacts contributor. It is undoubtedly g0v's most famous project and widely referenced as an archetype of Taiwan's tech-focused activism.⁸⁵ Billion, Johnson, and Cofacts were able to source free coding support, as well as volunteers to perform factchecks, via the bimonthly hackathons

81 Sam Robbins, interview by author, Los Angeles, September 26, 2023.

82 Ttcat (吳銘軒), interview by author, Taipei, December 28, 2023.

83 g0v, “Budget Visualization,” accessed April 24, 2026, <https://budget.g0v.tw/>.

84 Billion Lee (李比鄰), interview by author, Taipei, May 29, 2023.

85 *Inter alia* Jordyn Haime, “Taiwan's amateur fact-checkers wage war on fake news from China,” *Al Jazeera*, September 19, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/9/19/taiwan>.

of g0v. In short, g0v has been a continuous source of volunteer manpower for the Cofacts project.

However, of deeper importance is g0v's role as an incubator for ideas and talent for professional NGOs. Indeed, g0v was the origin of, or the catalyst for, the counter-malign influence activities role of prominent Taiwanese NGOs such as Watchout, Doublethink Lab, IORG, and US Taiwan Watch. In the years around the 2018 local elections, when Taiwanese activists had been shaken by the surge in apparent information operations online, g0v reached out to Puma Shen (沈伯洋) to kickstart research into disinformation. Shen, who at the time was a professor at National Taipei University (國立臺北大學), took up the suggestion and partnered with Watchout to produce educational videos on information operations. G0v had connected Shen to Watchout.⁸⁶ Adopting the field of CCP authoritarian influence as his specialty, Shen would go on to become one of the most prominent public intellectuals in Taiwan, a founder of the Kuma Academy civil defense group, and win election as a representative in the Legislative Yuan.⁸⁷ Around the same time, g0v hired Ttcat to manage a small grant fund the community had been endowed with.⁸⁸ After receiving training as a fundraiser, Ttcat went on to found the Doublethink NGO in 2018, with Shen serving as chairman.⁸⁹

Several other tech projects morphed into professional NGOs under the guidance of g0v. In 2017, two Taiwanese coders based in Texas founded a project that would pull any US Congressional legislation mentioning Taiwan onto a single website—with a goal to undermine arguments in Taiwan that the United States was uninterested in the island's future. The founders partnered with a political scientist, Miguel Yang (楊光舜), to apply for a scholarship from g0v—and founded US Taiwan Watch, an NGO sharing news and information on Taipei's international relationships.⁹⁰ Meanwhile, a group of software engineers heavily involved in g0v hackathons would

86 Hong Guo-Jun (洪國鈞) and Roger Hsiao (蕭長展), interview by author, Taipei, July 20, 2023.

87 ARTICLE 19, “China: Escalation of Transnational Repression Against Taiwan Must End,” November 18, 2025, <https://www.article19.org/resources/china-escalation-of-transnational-repression-against-taiwan-must-end/>.

88 Ttcat (吳銘軒), interview by author, Taipei, December 28, 2023.

89 Ibid.

90 Robin Liao and Jerry Hsu, interview by author, Seattle, July 18, 2023.

break off to form IORG, an information-quality NGO using data science programs to provide large-N insights regarding social media manipulation.⁹¹ Even as civil society groups such as Doublethink Lab, Cofacts, and Kuma Academy have grabbed attention regarding efforts to resist CCP foreign malign influence, g0v has persisted as an indispensable resource for this activism. G0v may describe itself as an “incubator,” but this term might slightly distort the community’s role.⁹² Indeed, g0v’s successes have come less from incubating projects, and more from nurturing human talent. As a volunteer community where participants can engage part-time in projects of civic significance, g0v provides a gateway for skilled professionals to take part in higher-impact, professional activism. Without this opportunity for volunteer activism, however, it is unlikely that many of these skilled professionals would ever have ultimately embraced full-time advocacy. G0v therefore serves as the bottom tier in a “pyramid” of activism—akin to the professional sports pyramid of soccer, where amateur and semi-professional playing opportunities lead to the professional rung.

As is visualized in the pyramid structure on page 16, g0v offers a grassroots level of low-commitment, intrinsically-rewarding activism opportunities. While some of these projects may produce social impact, the more significant benefit is the exposure participants get to civic activism. This exposure gives rise to opportunities to work on temporarily-funded initiatives, such as those supported by small-scale g0v grants or fiscal sponsorship arrangements. Short-term opportunities in paid activist work instill the understanding that participants can at least partially support themselves through activism. This makes an individual’s decision to devote themselves to full-time, professional activism more straightforward. Many activists, such as IORG’s co-director Chihhao Yu (游知濤), have followed a similar route from g0v volunteer work to a full-time NGO career.⁹³

The impact of g0v-origin projects has been enhanced by a highly critical affiliated institution: the Open Culture Foundation (OCF, 開放文化基金會). Now boasting

a staff of over 20 individuals, OCF was brainstormed during a 2014 g0v hackathon by project leaders who needed support for fiscal sponsorship.⁹⁴ While OCF now focuses on promoting open-source software development beyond just the g0v community, it provided a crucial role as a fiscal sponsor, allowing g0v projects to apply for grants and funding without incorporated legal status. In exchange for a small administrative fee, OCF will hold on to grant money for projects, dispensing payments and providing accounting services. According to Lulu Keng (耿璐), a former OCF employee, it was the only institution providing fiscal sponsorship services in Taiwan at the time of its founding.⁹⁵

OCF has allowed g0v projects to move from fully volunteer to being funded on either a short- or long-term basis. Indeed, Cofacts made use of OCF’s fiscal sponsorship services before it was able to form its own independent legal organization.⁹⁶ OCF’s deep partnership with g0v—and other open-source communities in Taiwan—has allowed it to move beyond simple fiscal sponsorship to other capacity-building activities. OCF has supported the internationalization of Taiwanese tech activism, such as by creating group chats for Taiwanese participants of overseas conferences.

Perched in the conference room of OCF’s smart office near Songshan Station in Taipei, straining to interview OCF’s director Singing Li (李欣穎) using only Mandarin, I learned how OCF had trained 20 Taiwanese activists attending the 2023 DRAPAC digital rights conference in Thailand on safety procedures. It was one example of the practical support OCF provides to Taiwanese civil society organizations seeking to grow their activism. OCF had provided additional travel funds for participants lacking resources, and even helped to organize some of the flights.⁹⁷

In my best Chinese, I asked Li how she thought OCF was different from fiscal sponsors in other countries. She replied that she had no experience with other countries’

91 Chih-Hao Yu (游知濤), “chihaio.tw,” accessed April 24, 2026, <https://chihaio.tw/>

92 Ipa Chiu (瞿筱葳), interview by author, Taichung, July 4, 2023.

93 Taiwan Information Environment Research Center (IORG), “關於 IORG [About IORG],” accessed April 24, 2026, <https://iorg.tw/about>.

94 Ipa Chiu (瞿筱葳), interview by author, Taichung, July 4, 2023.

95 Lulu Keng, interview by author, Taipei, August 2, 2023.

96 Billion Lee (李比鄰), interview by author, Taipei, May 29, 2023.

97 Singing Li (李欣穎), interview by author, Taipei, August 9, 2023.

systems. Indeed, OCF was created in Taiwan's "bootstrap" phase of tech activism—when the environment had no international support and solutions were brainstormed by Taiwanese activists alone. This would change at the end of the 2010s, when major INGOs would arrive to provide Taiwan's civil society with greater funding and support.⁹⁸ Yet, in my own experience of fiscal sponsors in the United States, OCF's unique strength comes from the depth of its engagement with the open source communities that it serves—rather than its base administrative services. OCF is not just a fiscal sponsor, but an advocate and organizer for Taiwan's open-source activism.

The Ingress of Foreign Funding

After Taiwan democratized in the 1990s, it no longer qualified for support from many Western-led democracy-promoting INGOs, such as America's National Democratic Institute (NDI) or the UK's Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD).⁹⁹ Taiwan's civil society remained isolated from Western support, even during the busy years of the Ma Ying-jeou presidency.¹⁰⁰ The West's heightened interest in Taiwanese civil society coincided with the United States and allies' rapidly rising threat perceptions regarding the PRC. This was catalyzed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the PRC's authoritarian governance system came under global scrutiny, and during the later advent of Russia's war in Ukraine.¹⁰¹

In 2021, NDI opened an office in Taiwan.¹⁰² In 2022, the US INGO Spirit of America made a bulk purchase of civil defense handbooks written by Watchout.¹⁰³ Though Freedom House had retained connections to Taiwan even before this period—arranging Taiwanese haven for dissidents from the PRC and Hong Kong—it opened the Indo-Pacific Center for Resilience on the island in 2023.¹⁰⁴ The National Endowment for Democracy, a US govern-

ment-funded institution for democracy promotion, had entered the ecosystem earlier in 2019 to support a major project of Doublethink Lab.¹⁰⁵

In order to circumvent their prohibitions on supporting civil society in established democracies, Western NGOs generally funded projects that promoted Taiwanese civil society as a base for both democracy promotion and countering CCP authoritarian influence in the region. This was the model for the Indo-Pacific Center for Resilience, and the NED-supported "China in the World" program at Doublethink Lab, which seeks to knit together researchers and journalists monitoring PRC influence around the world.¹⁰⁶

Accordingly, Taiwanese activists were exposed to international projects and networks that differed from their activities in the early 2010s. This has afforded the island's NGOs greater access to resources, but has also introduced new challenges in language and administrative procedures. In this context, OCF has been instrumental in serving as a fiscal sponsor for INGO grants, allowing smaller projects to access foreign funding while offloading the administrative overhead.¹⁰⁷

Another source of foreign funding emerged for information integrity NGOs: social media platforms. As global consciousness of social media-based information manipulation expanded after the 2016 presidential election in the United States, social media platforms began dispensing funds to civil society groups carrying out fact-checking or media literacy campaigns.¹⁰⁸ In 2021, Google donated USD 1 million to the Taiwan FactCheck Center to support a 3-year, island-wide media literacy training initiative.¹⁰⁹ Both TFC and MyGoPen (麥擱騙), another fact-checking organization, were able to receive pay-

98 Ibid.

99 Penghsuan Lee (李芃萱), interview by author, Taipei, June 2023.

100 Lulu Keng (耿璐), interview by author, Taipei, August 2, 2023.

101 Ttcat (吳銘軒), interview by author, Taipei, December 28, 2023.

102 Penghsuan Lee (李芃萱), interview by author, Taipei, June 2023.

103 Hong Guo-Jun (洪國鈞) and Roger Hsiao (蕭長展), interview by author, Taipei, July 20, 2023.

104 Lulu Keng (耿璐), interview by author, Taipei, August 2, 2023.

105 Ttcat (吳銘軒), interview by author, Taipei, December 28, 2023.

106 Doublethink Lab, "China in the World Index (CITW)," accessed April 24, 2026, <https://china-index.io/citw>.

107 Lulu Keng (耿璐), interview by author, Taipei, August 2, 2023.

108 RAND Corporation. "International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) Codes and Standards." Countering Truth Decay. Accessed May 8, 2026. <https://www.rand.org/research/projects/truth-decay/fighting-disinformation/search/items/international-fact-checking-network-ifcn-codes-and.html>.

109 Eve Chiu (邱家宜), interview by author, Taipei, August 28, 2023; Robin Lee (李信誠), interview by author, October 24, 2023.

ments from Meta (which owns Facebook) after gaining membership to the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN)—an entity that verifies international factcheckers. Meta would pay both organizations for each fact check of a news article, and then demote the visibility of articles deemed to contain false or misleading information.¹¹⁰ However, since the 2024 re-election of Donald Trump, social media organizations like Meta have scaled back their partnerships with fact-checking organizations on the basis that some of the ensuing content demotion constituted “censorship.” Meta announced it was ending all fact-checking partnerships in the United States, and suggested it would move to do so with partners overseas.¹¹¹ Fact-checking partnerships with platforms, which were a crucial source of funding for information integrity NGOs like MyGoPen, are no longer reliable support systems for civil society tackling online authoritarian influence.

Key Operational Tenets

The “pyramid” style recruitment structure of Taiwan’s civil society—undergirded by g0v’s volunteer activist project—has not fed the island community’s success alone. The network of NGOs countering the CCP’s authoritarian influence has sustained and protected itself through three core operational tenets: independence from the Taiwanese government, an emphasis on protecting democracy over opposing a foreign adversary, and extreme openness. These tenets have allowed civil society to attract new ideas and volunteers, and have shielded them from accusations that they lack agency and independence from government influence.

Any stakeholder seeking to encourage an environment of democracy-focused civil society NGOs in other countries must pay attention to these factors and consider their replication. While it is impossible from a single case study to ascertain whether these operational values are universally important for civil society, careful analysis of these

110 Regina Cazzamatta, “From Moderation to Chaos: Meta’s Fact-Checking and the Battle Over Truth and Free Speech,” *New Media & Society* (2026), <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448251413687>.

111 Justin Hendrix, “Transcript: Mark Zuckerberg Announces Major Changes to Meta’s Content Moderation Policies and Operations,” *Tech Policy Press*, January 7, 2025, <https://www.techpolicy.press/transcript-mark-zuckerberg-announces-major-changes-to-metas-content-moderation-policies-and-operations/>.

tenets in Taiwanese NGOs suggests they may be essential in other settings.

Independence from the Taiwanese Government

Every civil society activist whom I interviewed denied that their work had strong links to the Taiwanese government. As Billion Lee told me over coffee in a Taipei café, “We don’t want to be seen as the government’s pet.”¹¹² An emphasis on independence from the Taiwanese government seems to be especially critical for fact-checking NGOs. For these groups, a perception of institutional affiliation with the government fosters suspicions that their fact-checking work or research is biased or politically-motivated.¹¹³ Billion swelled a little with pride as she told me how she had rejected requests from Taiwan’s National Security Bureau for access to Cofacts’ data on disinformation reports.¹¹⁴ Robin Lee (李信誠), a co-founder of MyGoPen, revealed that he had turned down similar requests from the NSB for information.¹¹⁵

This is not to say that Taiwan’s democracy-focused civil society has no relationship at all with government officials. Some civil society activists have been willing to share information informally with national security officials in the Taiwanese government—such as Puma Shen, before he himself was elected as a member of the Legislative Yuan.¹¹⁶ Under the Lai Ching-te (賴清德) Administration, Taiwan’s presidential office has sought to construct a public-private framework that can allow civil society to exchange information with government: the Whole-of-Society Defense Resilience Committee (全社會防衛韌性委員會).¹¹⁷ For civil defense groups such as Kuma Academy and Forward Alliance, membership

112 Billion Lee (李比鄰), interview by author, Taipei, May 29, 2023.

113 Louis-Sidois, “Both Judge and Party? Investigating Media Fact-Checking Bias,” *Journal of the European Economic Association* 23, no. 6 (2025): 2137–2164, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeea/jvaf011>.

114 Billion Lee (李比鄰), interview by author, Taipei, May 29, 2023.

115 Robin Lee (李信誠), interview by author, October 24, 2023.

116 Puma Shen (沈伯洋), interview by author, October, 2023.

117 Eric Chan and Ian Murphy, “Taiwan’s Path to Whole of Society Resilience,” *Global Taiwan Brief* 10, no. 16 (August 27, 2025), <https://globaltaiwan.org/2025/08/taiwans-path-to-whole-of-society-resilience/>.

in this committee has offered opportunities to engage with government agencies vital to civil defense, such as the Ministry of the Interior (內政部) or the Ministry of National Defense. Other NGOs, such as Doublethink Lab and the Taiwan Digital Democracy Association, have accepted membership into this committee.¹¹⁸ It remains to be seen whether an information integrity NGO like Doublethink Lab could suffer reputational penalties for this institutionalized connection to the Taiwanese government.

Meanwhile, some NGOs have received funding from a government-funded institution, the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD, 台灣民主基金會), for certain democracy-promotion activities. (It should be noted that TFD does not provide any support for overhead, meaning that none of its project funding can be used for staff salaries).¹¹⁹ However, TFD funding tends to be modest—Puma Shen commented to me that TFD had only offered Kuma Academy USD 1600 for two projects soon after its founding—and because it does not support staff salaries or overhead, it cannot be a principal source of support for most NGOs.¹²⁰

Emphasis on Promoting Democratic Values over Opposing a Foreign Country

In the course of this report, I have focused on Taiwan civil society's capacity to counter the authoritarian influence of the CCP. However, many Taiwanese activists—even within this space—do not share this explicit objective. Indeed, the majority of civil society leaders whom I interviewed denied that countering CCP malign influence was the primary objective of their work. Rather, they identified a desire to advance Taiwanese democracy as their principal goal.¹²¹ For many, their goal was to encourage uptake of a basic set of civic-oriented behaviors deemed essential to protecting Taiwanese society from both foreign and domestic disruption.

Activists such as Chang Shu-huai (張書懷), Mumu (慕慕), Ye Chia-rong (葉家容) of Fake News Cleaner (FNC, 假新聞清潔劑)—an NGO that got its start by holding one-on-one conversations with elderly Taiwanese regarding social media literacy—described this process as one of “cultivating citizens” (公民素養).¹²² Enoch Wu (吳怡農), the chiseled founder of the civil defense group Forward Alliance (壯闊台灣), used a similar word in Mandarin to me—that of “nurturing” (培養) citizens.¹²³ For Taiwan's activists, “cultivating citizens” is particularly salient in a society that democratized barely more than three decades ago. Some 70 percent of FNC's outreach targets are above 60 years of age—a demographic in Taiwan that completed at least their primary and secondary schooling under an authoritarian government, when civic education was nearly non-existent.¹²⁴

Civic practices that Taiwanese NGOs seek to instill include a greater tendency to associate in politically-oriented groups, a basic awareness of the existence of information manipulation by foreign and domestic actors, and better media consumption habits such as the selection of reliable sources and use of fact-checking. Even for those primarily interested in countering the authoritarian influence of the CCP, the enhancement of these essential civic skills is desirable, as it blunts the authoritarian actor's ability to penetrate and divide society through information operations.

An orientation of counter-malign influence activism around “cultivating citizens” is also beneficial to the sustainability of this work. The pugilistic, explicit objective of “fighting the CCP” may resonate with Taiwanese activists who are deeply agitated by the threat of a PRC attack, but over multiple years the orientation is more likely to induce burnout than sustained engagement (a phenomenon perhaps reflected in waning voter enthusiasm for the DPP's platform of fervent opposition to the CCP).¹²⁵

122 Chang Shu-huai (張書懷), Mumu (慕慕), Ye Chia-rong (葉家容), interview by author, Taipei, October 27, 2023.

123 Enoch Wu (吳怡農), interview by author, Taipei, September 28, 2023.

124 Chang Shu-huai (張書懷), Mumu (慕慕), Ye Chia-rong (葉家容), interview by author, Taipei, October 27, 2023; Yu Bai and Yanjun Li, “Good bye Chiang Kai-shek? The long-lasting effects of education under the authoritarian regime in Taiwan,” *Economics of Education Review* 78 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2020.102044>.

125 Ya-Wen Lei, “Elections in Taiwan: What the Failed Recall Reveals About Taiwan's Political Landscape,” [Fairbank](#)

118 Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan), “Whole-of-Society Defense Resilience Committee - Members,” accessed July 2, 2026, <https://english.president.gov.tw/Page/671>

119 Penghsuan Lee (李芃萱), interview by author, Taipei, June 2023.

120 Puma Shen (沈伯洋), interview by author, October, 2023.

121 *Inter alia* Eve Chiu (邱家宜), interview by author, Taipei, August 28, 2023; Chang Shu-huai (張書懷), Mumu (慕慕), Ye Chia-rong (葉家容), interview by author, Taipei, October 27, 2023.

Meanwhile, in countries where the threat of a PRC invasion is far less acute, a singular focus on countering an adversary's influence may only attract a narrow set of national security-focused stakeholders. Such an orientation may only appeal to “hawkish” individuals, often on the political right, excluding a large set of potential activists who gravitate towards less-securitized causes such as individual liberties and democratic processes.¹²⁶

Chang Shu-hai of FakeNewsCleaner underscored this point in our interview by saying, “Whether China attacks or not, disinformation will always exist.”¹²⁷ Eve Chiu (邱家宜), CEO of Taiwan Fact Check Center, put it to me more bluntly: “The enemy will change, views will change, but the value [of a society free from manipulation] won't change.”¹²⁸

An Orientation of Extreme Openness

I have already explored the role that the g0v community plays in bringing new individuals into NGO work—the “pyramid of professionalism”—yet it is important to underscore that the value of openness exists within most other democracy-focused civil society in Taiwan. Ttcat, the CEO of Doublethink Lab (DTL), emphasized this to me: “For all work, you need to let people in. Let them come in. Let people consult. This work is not exclusive to DTL. If you have funding, spend all the money.”¹²⁹ Besides its full-time staff, DTL recruits a broader network of part-time workers who perform contract jobs, such as collecting social media data or conducting surveys during elections. The NGO also enlists policy experts and academics to serve in advisory boards across its various projects. The combination of diverse sets of actors creates a strong sense of shared purpose.¹³⁰

[Center for Chinese Studies](https://fairbank.fas.harvard.edu/research/blog/elections-in-taiwan-recall-fails/), August 21, 2025, <https://fairbank.fas.harvard.edu/research/blog/elections-in-taiwan-recall-fails/>.

126 Benjamin Sando, “Taiwan as a Partner for Building Democracy in Southeast Asia,” *Global Taiwan Brief* 11, no. 3 (February 11, 2026), <https://globaltaiwan.org/2026/02/taiwan-as-an-exporter-of-democracy-in-southeast-asia/>.

127 Chang Shu-huai (張書懷), Mumu (慕慕), Ye Chia-rong (葉家容), interview by author, Taipei, October 27, 2023.

128 Eve Chiu (邱家宜), interview by author, Taipei, August 28, 2023.

129 Ttcat (吳銘軒), interview by author, Taipei, December 28, 2023.

130 Doublethink Lab, “About the China Index,” accessed May 22, 2026, <https://china-index.io/about>.

Other civil society groups ground their operations in volunteer labor. MyGoPen and the Taiwan Digital Democracy Association—an NGO seeking to expand citizen-level diplomacy between Taiwan and other countries—are led by a handful of paid employees but are primarily staffed by a larger volunteer body.¹³¹ Others, such as FakeNewsCleaner, may have no full-time workers at all.¹³²

The extreme openness of Taiwan's NGOs not only allows for a steady supply of new talent, but it also enhances the extent to which its NGO projects may be successfully replicated. In one notable case, a Thai group “forked” the Cofacts factchecking bot project—in other words, copying the software code for the application and recruiting their own volunteer pool to conduct factchecks.¹³³ This was made possible by the open-source license for Cofacts' code: meaning that it was visible to the public in its entirety and, crucially, available for duplication under the law.¹³⁴

Weaknesses in Taiwan's Democracy NGO System

In spite of a healthy supply of human talent, provided by open-door activist communities such as g0v, Taiwan's democracy-focused civil society has struggled to attract sufficient financial resources to meet their ambitious advocacy goals. In particular, Taiwan's democracy NGOs are constrained by a lack of English ability, which limits their access to many international sources of funding. Meanwhile, the domestic donation market in Taiwan remains limited, particularly for NGOs operating as civil associations under Taiwanese law.

English Language Barriers

I do not mean to suggest that Taiwanese should be obliged to learn English in order to obtain financial support from overseas; however, it is an unfortunate reality that most international funders, from Europe to North America, require that grantees write their final applica-

131 Kuo Chiayo (郭家佑), interview by author, Taipei, October 25, 2023.

132 Chang Shu-huai (張書懷), Mumu (慕慕), Ye Chia-rong (葉家容), interview by author, Taipei, October 27, 2023.

133 Cofact Project, “About Us,” accessed May 22, 2026, <https://cofact.org/about-us>

134 Open Culture Foundation (OCF), “Cofacts Project,” accessed May 22, 2026, <https://ocf.tw/en/p/cofacts/>.

tions in English.¹³⁵ This places a burden on Taiwanese civil society groups, particularly those that have not yet invested in English-language speakers or hired workers from overseas. Indeed, Roger Hsiao (蕭長展), the chief editor of Watchout, told me that his organization had never contemplated applying to large overseas grants—such as US State Department programs—because Watchout lacked a staff member capable of writing English-language applications.¹³⁶ Likewise, Billion Lee of Cofacts told me she had struggled to produce grants in English, despite Cofacts' international recognition and her own capable English ability.¹³⁷

The grant application challenge is not merely a question of raw English ability. Even capable English speakers in Taiwan may be unable to package their advocacy ideas into the foreign policy terms familiar to Western funders, such as the “rules-based international order” or “PRC sharp power.” Lulu Keng of Freedom House told me: “Because Taiwan’s civil society developed independently, they don’t get words like ‘left-right’ or ‘global south/north.’”¹³⁸ A familiarity with the vocabulary of Western funders is one of the reasons Ttcat of Doublethink Lab has been able to secure large American and European grants for his organization. Before founding Doublethink Lab, Ttcat spent several years as an international liaison at the Open Culture Foundation, bringing him into contact with the global donor community and its geopolitical jargon. Speaking of Ttcat’s fundraising success, the former Doublethink Lab chairperson Puma Shen told me that Ttcat “knows in the Western language how INGOs care about [PRC authoritarian influence].”¹³⁹

In an interview in one of Taipei’s elegant independently-run cafés, Penghsuan Lee (李芃萱) of the National Democratic Institute tells me that it is her job, as a Taiwan-based program officer, to help local activists overcome these language barriers. NDI’s Taiwan office will help local NGOs draft simpler concept notes that can be used to gauge funder interest in project ideas. NDI can

135 Penghsuan Lee (李芃萱), interview by author, Taipei, June 2023.

136 Hong Guo-Jun (洪國鈞) and Roger Hsiao (蕭長展), interview by author, Taipei, July 20, 2023.

137 Billion Lee (李比鄰), interview by author, Taipei, May 29, 2023.

138 Lulu Keng (耿璐), interview by author, Taipei, August 2, 2023.

139 Puma Shen (沈伯洋), interview by author, October, 2023.

also serve as a conduit for Western funding, dispensing money on a project-by-project basis for Taiwanese NGOs. However, Lee admitted that if a local civil society group really has no English ability, “it is really difficult to work with NDI,” and that these cases “require a lot of work from the country office.” In this context, Lee confessed that much of Western funding is directed towards a narrow few Taiwanese NGOs, such as Doublethink Lab or the Open Culture Foundation, and may not reach worthy organizations beyond these networks.¹⁴⁰

Limited Domestic Donor Support

Even as many Taiwanese NGOs seek to remain financially independent from the domestic government, they are still motivated to pursue private donations from local sources. However, as the founder of the Forward Alliance civil defense group, Enoch Wu, tells me in his Zhongshan office, the domestic donation market for NGOs such as his is unforgiving. It is harder to explain the impact of democracy NGOs’ work in comparison to, say, foodbanks run by benevolent temple associations. But more importantly, Wu identified that the civil association status of these NGOs wards off donors.¹⁴¹ Under Taiwan’s *Civil Associations Act*—a law that has its origins in the KMT’s pre-1949 rule over China—non-profits can incorporate at little financial cost under “civil association” (協會) status.¹⁴² However, an important condition is that civil associations form with at least thirty “initiators,” who are nominally charged with oversight over the organization.¹⁴³

Wu explains that this oversight system for civil associations is generally considered lax in comparison to the requirements for legal foundations. But in order to operate under a board-run legal foundation, a founder must first raise up to NTD 30 million (approx. USD 1 million), which remains locked in an endowment fund.¹⁴⁴ After

140 Penghsuan Lee (李芃萱), interview by author, Taipei, June 2023.

141 Enoch Wu (吳怡農), interview by author, Taipei, September 28, 2023.

142 Shawn Shi-hung Shieh (謝世宏), *Taiwan’s Laws Regulating Civil Society: A Comparative and International Argument for Reform* (2023), International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL), https://www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/Taiwan-Freedom-of-Association-Report_12.08.23.pdf

143 Ministry of the Interior (Taiwan), *Civil Associations Act* (人民團體法), accessed May 29, 2026, <https://law.moj.gov.tw/ENG/LawClass/LawAll.aspx?pcode=D0050091>.

144 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Taiwan), *Overview*



Image: Roger Hsiao, chief editor of the journalistic NGO Watchout (Image Source: [Watchout](#))

endowment, the organization must then raise additional funds for its operating costs.¹⁴⁵ Only a few democracy NGOs, such as the Taiwan FactCheck Center, have been able to achieve foundation status.¹⁴⁶

Given that supporters may be less inclined to donate to civil associations—and given that incorporation requires 30 willing initiators—many democracy-focused NGOs in Taiwan have pursued alternative forms of legal status. Kuma Academy, Watchout, Ghost Island Media, and MyGoPen were all founded as private companies.¹⁴⁷ Even as

of Competent Authorities for Foundations (Taipei: Taiwan NGO Center, n.d.), <https://taiwanngo.tw/Upload/FileManager/0f67922e-aefb-4e34-baf8-5b10312ba53a.pdf>.

145 Enoch Wu (吳怡農), interview by author, Taipei, September 28, 2023.

146 Eve Chiu (邱家宜), interview by author, Taipei, August 28, 2023.

147 Puma Shen (沈伯洋), interview by author, October, 2023; Hong Guo-Jun (洪國鈞) and Roger Hsiao (蕭長展), interview by author, Taipei, July 20, 2023; Enoch Wu (吳怡農), interview by author, Taipei, September 28, 2023; Robin Lee (李

Cofacts garnered international attention in the years after its founding, Billion Lee avoided civil association status because of the requirement to assemble 30 initiators who may have had little connection to her project.¹⁴⁸

In order to survive in a competitive donation market, NGOs such as Forward Alliance have turned to innovative methods, such as online crowdfunding on the Taiwanese site Backer-Founder (貝殼放大).¹⁴⁹ Kuma Academy and Watchout raise funds by selling mascots, toys, and other branded products.¹⁵⁰

信誠), interview by author, October 24, 2023.

148 Billion Lee (李比鄰), interview by author, Taipei, May 29, 2023.

149 Enoch Wu (吳怡農), interview by author, Taipei, September 28, 2023.

150 Puma Shen (沈伯洋), interview by author, October, 2023; Hong Guo-Jun (洪國鈞) and Roger Hsiao (蕭長展), interview by author, Taipei, July 20, 2023.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the analysis above, I provide two sets of recommendations. In one section, I offer some advice to INGOs that may seek to inspire Taiwan's model of democratic activism in other countries. In a second section, I present ideas for how Taiwan's government, and INGOs based on the island, can better support the counter-PRC influence work of Taiwanese civil society.

Replicating Taiwan's Model Overseas

Invest in Civic Tech Communities

INGOs and other stakeholders seeking to replicate Taiwan's model overseas must invest in open-source tech communities—particularly civic tech ones. In Taiwan, the civic tech community g0v has proven itself to be a training ground for activists with technical capacities that go beyond the traditional skillsets of NGO workers. The regular, “hackathon” model of g0v has shown itself to be highly inclusive, providing part-time volunteer opportunities that comprise the bottom tier of a “pyramid of professionalism.” Moreover, the open source focus of civic tech communities is inherently anti-authoritarian, rendering the CCP's authoritarian influence a natural target for activism.

Civic tech communities exist in authoritarian and democratic countries around the world, so international stakeholders need not attempt the impractical task of fostering such communities from scratch. While some civic tech communities may be stronger than others, INGOs and other stakeholders can refer to numerous pre-existing resources for locating and supporting civic tech communities. One example is the Civic Tech Field Guide website, compiled by Superbloom, which catalogues civic tech projects around the world.¹⁵¹ Another resource is the *Civic Tech Project and Community Handbook*, published by g0v with the support of Germany's Friedrich Naumann Foundation, which offers advice on cultivating civic tech communities and the projects within.¹⁵²

151 Civic Tech Field Guide, “Civic Tech Field Guide,” accessed May 29, 2026, <https://civictechguide/>.

152 g0v Jothon and Contributors, *Civic Tech Project & Community Handbook: From Taiwan's g0v Community to the World: The Collaborative Wisdom of Digital Citizens*, accessed

Civic tech communities rely on an inherently “civic” sense of activism, and thus cannot be conjured up by international stakeholders. However, INGOs can support the scaling of projects as well as basic operating costs, such as food provided to participants at hackathons (a surprisingly vital element of civic tech communities). Another critical element of g0v's success has been the fiscal sponsorship and administrative support functions of the Open Culture Foundation. In many countries, dedicated fiscal sponsors do not exist; rarer still are fiscal sponsors tailored to open source communities. When seeking to replicate Taiwan's tech-driven activism, stakeholders must reproduce the infrastructural features that have allowed Taiwan's civic tech community to survive, such as fiscal sponsorship and stable funding for basic expenses.

Focus on Democracy, Rather than Opposing an “Enemy”

In an era of heightening geopolitical competition, INGOs and external stakeholders often dedicate too much focus to projects or civil society groups explicitly targeting the CCP's authoritarian influence. Government-funded INGOs are obviously incentivized to select such projects, since they must justify their budgets to security-minded policymakers in their home countries.¹⁵³ However, the result is that NGOs explicitly targeting PRC malign influence may receive outsized amounts of funding, while civil society groups with a more diversified focus may receive far less support. In Taiwan, Doublethink Lab—which exclusively investigates PRC influence—has received many times more foreign funding than the more traditional journalistic outfit Watchout, even though Watchout arguably has a broader domestic following. Projects explicitly countering PRC influence may satisfy the governments that support INGO expenditures, but they tend to engage a narrower portion of society than initiatives focused on a broader mission of advancing democracy or civil liberties.

While some might argue that this shift in focus would dilute efforts to counter the CCP's influence, the count-

May 29, 2026, https://g0v.hackmd.io/@jothon/ctpbook_en/https%3A%2F%2Fg0v.hackmd.io%2F%40jothon%2Fctpbook_en.

153 Benjamin Sando, “Taiwan as a Partner for Building Democracy in Southeast Asia,” *Global Taiwan Brief* 11, no. 3 (February 11, 2026), <https://globaltaiwan.org/2026/02/taiwan-as-an-exporter-of-democracy-in-southeast-asia/>.

er-authoritarian effects of both domestic-focused and “enemy-focused” activism may actually be the same. For example, when local political parties in a given country are able to wield inauthentic bot networks to manipulate social media discourse, it’s likely that PRC-based groups can exploit these structural weaknesses to do the same. When a domestic business can bribe a local politician to gain a government contract or skirt environmental reviews, a PRC firm associated with the Belt and Road Initiative can offer similar corrupt incentives. Therefore, investing in activism that is focused on overcoming domestic barriers to the rule of law may have the simultaneous effect of blunting Beijing’s influence. Meanwhile, these projects may ultimately be more sustainable, attracting interest and participation from a broader section of local society.

Improving Taiwan’s Activism Environment

Loosen Demands on English-Language Ability for INGO Support

Grant-making INGOs often maintain staff overseas who are charged with making grant application processes simpler for local civil society. While certain grant-making organizations, such as the National Endowment for Democracy, often allow local civil society to apply in their native languages, there are some funders who require that grant materials be written in English. Meanwhile, few or no grantmaking INGOs have published websites in Chinese that could familiarize local civil society with their work. The result is that many highly-effective civil society groups in Taiwan have ruled out applying for international funding as they assess that they do not have the English capacity to manage the grant process. INGOs and foreign grant-makers should rule out requirements for the use of English in any grant documents and employ machine translation to deliver the information to grant adjudicators. INGOs should also considering using generative artificial intelligence to quickly construct Chinese and local-language websites to better introduce themselves to non-English speaking activists.

Reform Taiwan’s Civil Associations Law

The burdensome requirement within Taiwan’s *Civil Associations Law* to gather 30 local co-signers before starting a non-profit produces a chilling effect on formal activism. Many project leaders are deterred from forming a “civil

association” (協會) under the law, opting instead to form private companies with less favorable tax arrangements. Meanwhile, the framing of the “civil association” entity, as well as its chaotic oversight structure involving 30 co-signers, deters donors who may prefer the more stable board-based structure of foundations. Taiwan’s government should reform the *Civil Associations Act* to allow for the creation of a “charity” or “social organization” tax entity with a more nimble and professionalized board of directors.¹⁵⁴ This will allow Taiwan’s activists to access a low-cost tax entity status with a modernized board oversight system that can better attract donor support.

Improve the Tax Conditions for INGO Operations in Taiwan

According to Lulu Keng, INGOs that open offices in Taiwan face a 16 percent tax surcharge on salaries paid to workers, as well as a 20 percent tax on funds that are directed from their Taiwan entity to recipients overseas. This tax structure has made Taiwan a less-than-favorable location for INGOs seeking to set up local operations, and many have opted for the better tax environment of South Korea instead.¹⁵⁵ Such a dynamic may also weaken Taiwanese civil society’s access to INGO staff capable of elevating their international grant applications. In addition to the Taiwanese government’s present efforts to build a physical “INGO center” office space in Taipei, it should also lower relevant taxes to make the island a more competitive location for foreign grantmaking INGOs.¹⁵⁶

Conclusion

Taiwan’s democratization over the past four decades has been intertwined with the question of China’s influence. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Taiwan’s democracy activists had to extricate the nation’s constitutional order from one applying to both Taiwan and mainland China, to a system with jurisdiction over the island-nation only. Their success was only partial. At the onset of the Ma Administration, the PRC stepped up its political warfare

154 Global Taiwan Institute, “Taiwan’s Unofficial Diplomacy in Asia,” event page, August 13, 2025, <https://globaltaiwan.org/events/taiwans-unofficial-diplomacy-in-asia/>.

155 Lulu Keng (耿璐), interview by author, Taipei, August 2, 2023.

156 Lee I-chia, “Ministry Outlines Plan for INGO Center,” *Taipei Times*, January 8, 2026, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2026/01/08/2003850236>.

campaigns to annex the island. Taiwan thus faced a second barrier to its democratic development: malign influence operations organized by the CCP.

This does not mean that Taiwan's civil society activists have been chiefly motivated by a desire to rid their society of PRC influence. Rather, my interviews with Taiwan's activists, from the chock-full Taichung Station hall at g0v's hackath56n, to the breezy alcoves of Jou Yi-cheng's café, reveal that their aspirations have been aimed at Taiwan's democracy alone. Indeed, the fate of China is of little interest to them. When they have set their sights on the PRC's influence, it is because they discovered it as a barrier to Taiwan's democratic development. The words of Eve Chiu, CEO of the Taiwan Factcheck Center, have stuck with me: "The enemy will change... but the value [of a society free from manipulation] won't change."¹⁵⁷

This is why an international stakeholder aiming to kindle Taiwan's brand of civil society activism overseas must recognize that the stated aim of this advocacy cannot be defeating PRC influence alone, but rather promoting local democratic development. My study of Taiwan's activists has also uncovered the multiplier effect of software engineers drawn from civic tech communities—in particular, g0v. Stakeholders seeking to recreate Taiwan's network of NGOs countering PRC influence overseas must also invest in civic tech communities: the most successful model of grassroots activism that has fed talent into Taiwanese civil society.

Even if their activism is in the name of Taiwanese democracy, the act of resisting authoritarian influence from the PRC has burnished a sense of Taiwanese nationalism among the island's civil society. In a recently democratized society—whose erstwhile ruling elite were adamant that Chinese and Taiwanese identity were indistinguishable—the inheritors of democratic Taiwan have been forced to eke out a national identity from ideas largely imposed by previous authoritarian rulers. "I want to be a Taiwanese... I don't want to be a Chinese," says Roger Hsiao, the chief editor of Watchout.¹⁵⁸ "It's like I'm digging a hole, and the more I dig ... the more I participate, I realize that there is a bigger problem of identity that hasn't been solved."

The democracy activism conducted by Hsiao and others brings about a sense of national identity not based on ethnicity, but rather civic engagement. This "civic nationalism" has brought energy to Taiwan's activist community, who sense that they are not only defending their democracy, but are also shaping the long-term future of their country. "To be able to work on this as a job," Roger says with a toothy grin, "I think it's pretty perfect for me."

¹⁵⁷ Eve Chiu (邱家宜), interview by author, Taipei, August 28, 2023.

¹⁵⁸ Hong Guo-Jun (洪國鈞) and Roger Hsiao (蕭長展), interview by author, Taipei, July 20, 2023.

About the Author



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