
HONG KONG

Two artists ask: what does it mean to live under the shadow of the Great Firewall?

by **HOLMES CHAN**

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If you look hard enough at the Great Firewall of China, beneath the policy documents and internet code and rooms filled with dim screens, you might find an unexpected participant: yourself.

That idea is at the heart of the exhibition “Not Found,” hosted at Green Wave Art gallery in Yau Ma Tei. The two artworks on display are less interested in making abstract arguments about censorship, rather they ask what it means to endure it.



Photo: Holmes Chan / HKFP.

In case you don't know what censorship looks like, ask the interactive art project "FIREWALL" by Joyce Yu-Jean Lee – literally. A large computer screen is split into two, with the left side showing Google and the right side showing Baidu, China's top search engine.

Type in a search term on either side, and – with the help of translation software – the two search engines will each fetch images from their side of the firewall.

It is a study in contrasts, with a swift punchline: type in "[Liu Xiaobo](#)", [the late Chinese dissident and Nobel Peace Prize laureate](#), and one is immediately greeted with perfectly accurate images on the left and perfectly random images on the right.

But Lee, a mixed-media artist based in the United States, told HKFP that her work is meant to prompt deeper questions on how we engage with the internet. "It's very easy for people to point a finger and say that 'FIREWALL' is really just focusing on internet censorship in China, but that's not the case," she said.

"I'm interested in seeing how both of these tools – which is how most people access their understanding of the world – influence all the different aspects of our lives, not just politics."



Joyce Yu-Jean Lee. Photo: Holmes Chan / HKFP.

At first, “FIREWALL” seems to offer a simple binary: censored versus uncensored, East versus West. But the project, which first appeared in the form of a New York internet cafe in 2016, arrived in Hong Kong at a time with fewer certainties about what it means to be free online.

It may be tempting to scoff at Baidu’s censored results, but Google’s algorithms are similarly opaque – plus, the search giant has itself [flirted with the idea of making a censored search engine](#) for China.

Lee said that she was “relieved” that Google had since reportedly [cancelled its China venture](#), named Project Dragonfly.

“I don’t see it as an issue of which tool is better or more true,” she said. “I think this is where we should really question our values and priorities as they relate to freedom of speech in a capitalistic society.”

What, then, is the fundamental difference between Google and Baidu? Lee acknowledged that the line between acceptable curation and outright censorship may be more complicated than it first appears.

FIREWALL initially leads the audience to critique the service provider – be it a corporation or the state – but Lee said that questions should ultimately

be directed towards ourselves. After all, search engines learn what their users teach them.

“The thing that has been most surprising, especially in western nations, is to see how cultural and political biases are revealed through our own search engines and through our browser,” Lee said, referring previous exhibitions of the work in Norway and Austria.



Google and Baidu image searches for 'Liu Xiaobo'. Photo: Holmes Chan/HKFP.

Lee noted that, when it comes to censorship, Hong Kong audiences were not so easily impressed.

“If we pop up in a western country, one of the first things people search – probably our most popular search – is ‘Tiananmen Square massacre’ or ‘Tank Man’, or perhaps even ‘Ai Weiwei.’ Whereas in Hong Kong, nobody bothered to even search that,” she said.

Lee, who has a background in advertising and communication studies, pointed to the fact that there is no such thing as an “unbiased experience”

on the internet. In its blunt juxtaposition, FIREWALL exposes the ways in which our clicks and keystrokes are mediated.

“People should take some agency over their own online experience, and be proactive in supporting the voices that aren’t heard or are easily buried,” she said. “I think of it as an advocacy for awareness.”

‘We are the wall’

The other work featured at “Not Found” is an interactive performance, which involves six actors playing people across the internet spectrum in China.



Green Wave Art Gallery. Photo: Holmes Chan / HKFP.

Each character is associated with an internet service: one uses Weibo, another Telegram, another Twitter and so on. That affiliation ties into the character's background, motives and state of mind – one character, for example, is a *wumao* or a “50 cent” pro-China troll.

Throughout the performance, the audience can vote to decide how characters interact with each other, leading to branching storylines and conclusions.

If “FIREWALL” was an attempt to peer into the walled garden, the performance provides the flip side of the coin: it was made by those who grew up within the wall’s confines.

The director of the performance, who declined to be identified due to safety concerns in the mainland, said she was interested in how the Great Firewall shaped contemporary Chinese society.

A censored search engine may be an object of fascination in “FIREWALL,” but in the real world it can have harrowing ramifications. The director pointed to [the case of Wei Zexi](#), a college student suffering from cancer who died in 2016 after Baidu search results led him to a substandard hospital.

Worse still, the director said that Chinese citizens have accepted the Great Firewall as a fact of life. Many are perfectly happy to cooperate, and some even thrive under its shadow.

“Even if they go abroad it’s meaningless, because outside of China they’re still looking at Weixin and the content they usually look at,” she said.

“I could feel a change over time. Twenty years have passed, and our generation has become the wall,” she said. “Each individual of our generation make up the wall.”

The wall creates a discrepancy in information and access, and such a discrepancy can be exploited for profit, the director added: “People who have vested interest in the wall will say, how can I make money otherwise? How could I survive without it?”

In the same way that the internet has become crucial to modern survival, the Great Firewall has become an entrenched institution in the Chinese collective consciousness.

As for the performance, the director said it has three possible endings. First, the people might subvert the firewall via some alternative network. Second, the wall will become self-correcting and grow indefinitely because of artificial intelligence and big data.

The third ending, she said, was that the flow of information will become restricted both inside and outside of China so the wall will no longer make a difference.

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The exhibition “Not Found” can be viewed at Green Wave Art gallery in Yau Ma Tei until January 23.