

## How a New York art show about Chinese online censorship found itself censored

By **Simon Denyer**

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It was supposed to be an art exhibition exploring China's censorship of the Internet. It became an example of how that censorship can reach all the way around the world, even onto Manhattan's Lower East Side.

Firewall, a Pop-up Internet Cafe, was designed like any other Internet cafe, except with one crucial difference. Visitors were invited to perform simultaneous searches on the cafe's computers – one, using Google, gave results Americans would be accustomed to; the other, using Chinese search engine Baidu via a Chinese server, would replicate the censored results behind the Great Firewall.

That means, for example, no Facebook, Twitter or YouTube, no New York Times, and far fewer stories critical of the Chinese Communist Party.

But when the American artist behind the cafe, Joyce Yu-Jean Lee, tried to organize a simultaneous round-table event to explore how feminists in China use the Internet to build online networks, she found the discussion was effectively censored – all the way from China.

On the eve of the event, one of the speakers, a visiting Chinese feminist who had done significant work on gender law issues, suddenly starting receiving threats and pressures from back home.

“Chinese officials put pressure on her employer in China that she not be part of my event,” said Lee.

Lee removed all traces of the woman's participation off the Internet, even asking people in China who had posted news on social media about the event to delete their posts. The tactic didn't work.

“The next morning, the threats escalated significantly, and it was clear she would not be able to take part,” Lee said. “Censorship suddenly became very real.”

Lee said she felt very guilty and scared that “a project about Internet freedom had affected an individual's right to feel safe and speak freely.” But it also provided her with a lesson on the realities of China under Communist Party rule, and its reach.

*Pursuing critics, China reaches across borders. And nobody is stopping it.*

“Chinese censorship doesn't just exist on the Internet, it happens in real time, in person-to-person relationships, and it extends onto American soil,” she said. “It is my worst nightmare to bring this upon a person in real life. But at the same time, it was window into how censorship manifests itself through coercion on a professional and personal level. It exemplified what the project is about and gave it a whole different life.”

China's Great Firewall, officially known as the Golden Shield project, uses a number of techniques to censor China's Internet and block access to various foreign websites. In these screenshots, you can how an image search for Tiananmen Square on Google shows shots of a lone protester (the Tank Man) standing in front of the tanks rolling

into the square to suppress the 1989 pro-democracy protests: a Baidu search does not. A text search shows a similar contrast between the two services, one prominently mentioning the massacre of protesters, the other leading on the site as a tourist attraction.

Similarly, a search on Google for Li Tingting brings up the Chinese feminist activist who was detained for over a month, along with four other feminists, a year ago this week. The Baidu search brings up an opera singer, and some photographs of a scantily-clad woman, but no mention of the feminist.

*This Chinese feminist wants to be the country's first openly lesbian lawyer, and police harassment won't stop her*

The Chinese woman who faced threats over her participation in the New York event declined to be named or interviewed directly, for fear of reprisals, but did give Lee permission to talk to The Washington Post about the incident.

Human rights groups say China's security services have become increasingly bold their drive to clamp down on dissidents not just at home but also outside mainland China, with booksellers from Hong Kong apparently abducted from Thailand and Hong Kong in recent months, and activists forcibly repatriated from Thailand and Burma.

*How a 16-year-old found himself caught up in China's latest crackdown*

The cafe was open for a month until last weekend, and saw visitors from nearby Chinatown as well as curious and enthusiastic Chinese tourists. Lee says she is collating the searches that people carried out while in the cafe, and hopes to develop an app that will allow people to mirror the experience of visiting the cafe, as well as online life on both sides of China's Great Firewall.

Asked to comment on the search results, Kaiser Kuo, international communications director for Baidu said: "As a Chinese company we are obliged to obey local rules and regulations."

*That time China censored an art summit — in another country*