

Google-China Explainer

ABSTRACT: A brief FAQ to help illuminate Google's recent move to redirect China searches to Hong Kong, what this means for users and how the Great Firewall *now* plays a role in blocking content.

By Andrew Lih (andrew@andrewlih.com, +1 213 304 3842, <http://andrewlih.com/>), University of Southern California.

Based on a blog post: <http://www.andrewlih.com/blog/2010/03/23/in-brief-googles-china-move/>

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The drama that pitted a search engine juggernaut against the world's most populous country started on January 12, when Google revealed it experienced a "targeted attack on our corporate infrastructure originating from China."

While Google was vague about the origins of the cyber offensive, it prompted an unprecedented Google corporate [blog post](#) announcing the company was reconsidering "the feasibility of our business operations in China." In an apparent retaliatory move, Google said it would investigate how to "operate an unfiltered search engine within the law," in China, indicating it was going to play hardball with the People's Republic of China government.

New Approach

In a new [blog post](#) today, Google announced a dramatic change to do just that: any visitors to google.cn would now be redirected to google.com.hk located in Hong Kong.

So earlier today we stopped censoring our search services—Google Search, Google News, and Google Images—on Google.cn. Users

visiting Google.cn are now being redirected to [Google.com.hk](https://www.google.com.hk), where we are offering uncensored search in simplified Chinese, specifically designed for users in mainland China and delivered via our servers in Hong Kong.

The move has a number of implications, and the following backgrounder tries to help sort out the issues.

What is the significance of Google.cn located in China?

Google.cn servers are located within the borders of the PRC, and are subject to the country's ICP (Internet content provider) licensing scheme. Google had been self-censoring its search results on Google.cn to keep its ICP license valid. In the PRC, it is up to the operating entity to make sure it does not run afoul of the content guidelines setup by governmental authorities.

What changed on March 23 (China time)?

Google changed its configuration such that traffic destined for google.cn was redirected to the google.com.hk site, in the simplified Chinese character mode. Hong Kong and Taiwan use traditional Chinese characters, while the mainland uses simplified. They are somewhat mutually intelligible, but it does require some adjustment for someone trained in one system to get used to the other. [More info here.](#)

How is a server located in Hong Kong different than China?

Hong Kong SAR (Special Administrative Region) while technically part of China, is completely separate in terms of free speech, expression and rule of law. (This has been dubbed "[One country, two systems.](#)") After Hong Kong was handed over by the Brits in 1997, it has had its own chief executive and Legislative Council independent of Beijing. Rule of law is strong in Hong Kong, with PRC dissidents and naysayers operating freely and in the open.

Because of this, Hong Kong's Internet service and content providers are not subject to PRC's censorship system. Likewise, the Great Firewall of China does not affect Hong Kong Internet traffic with the rest of the world.

The bottom line: Google.com.hk results do not need to be censored by Google to conform with PRC content guidelines as only

HK laws apply in Hong Kong.

Does this mean users in China get unfiltered results?

Yes and no. Traffic between Hong Kong and the PRC is subject to filtering by the Great Firewall, because HK is considered outside the mainland's domestic Internet. The Great Firewall system is very sophisticated, as it can block access to sites outside of the domestic Internet at four different levels:

- by domain name (ie. twitter.com)
- by IP address (12.34.56.78)
- by URL (Web address)
- by a keyword found within a web page

For that reason, even though Google.com.hk is not censored by Google itself, the HTTP stream (ie. Web traffic) going between HK and PRC may be interrupted by the Great Firewall system of filtering, based on URL and keyword blocking. If a block is triggered for an individual, it is often seen as a “**Connection reset**” by the user. It usually lasts about 1-2 minutes before surfing can resume on that site.

This bears repeating and emphasis: China's Great Firewall system is so sophisticated and massive, it can tailor blocking for each individual web surfer because it monitors a person's surfing activity to sites outside of China's domestic Internet, right down to what's contained inside the web page. That's an impressive feat given there are 300 million Internet users in China, although only a small fraction of them are surfing web sites outside of the country.

In the case of someone doing a Google search, each search engine results page (SERP) being sent back to a PRC user is being analyzed for sensitive keywords, and the user's Internet traffic to Google can be blocked within seconds. This is happening every day, constantly, regardless of whether the search engine is Google, Bing or something else.

It is possible that in the future, the Google.com.hk domain name or Internet protocol address may be blocked as a whole, but it doesn't appear to be so as of March 23.

Is all of Google.cn affected?

While Google.cn Search, News and Images are now being

redirected to Hong Kong servers, the Video, Music, Maps and Translate sites are not, and still seem to be hitting PRC domestic servers on Google.cn. (Google Music has gained **notoriety** because it provides free, legal downloads of popular music via top100.cn).

Google has indicated it will still keep R&D and other efforts going in China.

There are still questions about what types of conversations occurred between Google and Beijing before this move. PRC authorities have declared officially that, “January 29 and February 25 of this year responsible officials from China’s relevant authorities held talks with Google.” (“Text of Chinese official comments on Google,” Reuters, March 23, 2010)

For now, Google still has less controversial, entertainment-related web properties operating in China, and has ambitions for its Android mobile operating system in the region. Many are waiting to see if the PRC authorities will allow these activities to occur after Google’s bold move.

Author biography

Andrew Lih is a professor of journalism at the University of Southern California, Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism and author of *The Wikipedia Revolution*. He’s a former Beijing and HK-based journalist, and frequent speaker to Foreign Correspondents Club of China and HK. He has spoken about the Google-China situation on the PBS Newshour.

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