

Nov 04, 2016 by [APDS Bloggers](#)

Google Diplomacy ^[1]

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Is Google bold? It takes some serious courage to stand up to the gatekeepers of the world's biggest market. By refusing to kowtow to the Chinese censors, the tech company that built its fortunes on the free flow of information stood up for its business model, not to mention the ideals of its home country.

Even the act itself was elegant. Rather than simply shutting down its Chinese website, Google transferred all visitors to the censorship-free Hong Kong website. It *is* still China, right? This "diplomatic" approach allowed the Silicon Valley giant to cross the cavernous fault line between morality and business.

Or is Google dumb? The Chinese powers that be have already hit back, charging Google with breaking its written promise to the country and acting as a White House pawn. The company's hopes of protecting its advertising and research divisions within China are fading fast as state media and government officials lash out.

You often hear about how important "face" is in China. Similar to one's reputation in the West, the concept has a more collectivist tint in the Middle Kingdom. People will go to seemingly absurd lengths to save face - if you have ever seen a street side shouting match in Beijing, then you have some sense of just how important one's public appearance is to the Chinese.

Perhaps the worst possible way to get the Chinese government to change is by making them lose face. In almost every diplomatic tussle between the two countries, a head-on approach invariably leads to both sides digging in. There is a saying popular among American diplomats in China: 宁折不弯 (jianding buyi). It means "steadfast and unwavering," and is regularly evoked in regards to the U.S.'s One-China policy (there is only one China on either side of the Strait). The same idiom perfectly captures China's central government: while U.S. foreign policy can be stubborn, Chinese foreign policy is downright immovable.

The best approach is to push China's leaders from the side, deflecting their energies toward more beneficial ends. Rather than confront the government outright, Google could have better served its own interests through quiet, backdoor negotiation. Perhaps Silicon Valley has a ways to go in its foreign policy.

What is unclear, however, is how Google's move is influencing the Chinese public. Are ordinary people content without a free flow of information? The flowers left at the company's front door make me think no. It's not that Google's move is an "Oh my god! We are being censored!" moment, but it may serve as the tipping point for an already simmering public, ready to join the modern, technology-open world.

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