

In China, Apple will engrave iPads ☐ if the words aren't too political

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Want to engrave a few words in Chinese on your new iPad? No problem - Apple offers consumers in mainland China free personalization. Just don't get too political.

Say you type in the Dalai Lama's name in Chinese characters into

Apple's online store engraving service. You'll receive a yellow pop-up box saying, "The engraved text is not suitable." Other phrases that return the same error notice include "Tibet independence," "Xinjiang independence" and "Taiwan independence." ("America independence" is permitted.)

And if you happen to share your name with Liu Xiaobo, the jailed 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner, you're also out of luck if you want those three characters etched into your device.

Apple has long rejected a number of vulgarities on its U.S. engraving service. Asked about forbidden language in mainland China, Apple Inc. spokeswoman Carolyn Wu said, "We comply with local laws and requirements around the world."

Apple is hardly the only U.S. tech company that's had to contend with censorship issues in mainland China. In the past, Yahoo Inc., Microsoft Corp., Google Inc. and Cisco Systems Inc. have all endured controversies related to doing business in China amid the country's curbs on speech.

Google for years engaged in a protracted battle with Chinese authorities over censored Web searches, and in 2010 it began redirecting searches to its Hong Kong site, which is not subject to such limitations.

Later, facing blocks and interruptions to its service, Google unveiled a feature for mainland users that would display a message when certain sensitive searches were attempted, such as "We've observed that searching for (possibly sensitive word) in mainland China may temporarily break your connection to Google. This interruption is outside of Google's control." Google dropped that feature more than a year ago, however.

In another case, Yahoo suffered a wave of negative publicity after it provided information to authorities that led to a 10-year jail sentence for Chinese journalist Shi Tao. The company argued that it had to abide by Chinese regulations, including responding to requests by authorities for information about Internet users, just as it must when served with subpoenas in the United States.

Compared with such cases, the restrictions on iPad engravings may be regarded as trivial. Yet the rejected messages illustrate how China's censorship efforts extend deep into the mundane nooks and crannies of everyday life and commerce.

Exactly what words are out of bounds for engraving by Apple remains unclear. But some experimenting on Apple's China website showed that many rejected words closely match those that are typically blocked online by the Chinese government.

For example, Falun Gong, a spiritual movement that was banned in 1999 as an evil cult, is off limits on the Apple site, as is the name of Falun Gong's leader, Li Hongzhi. Words such as "protest" or "human rights" cannot be used either. A phrase commonly used by Falun Gong practitioners, "God will crush the Chinese Communist Party," also seems to be barred. But the phrase "Communist Party" is allowed on its own.

Certain apps available outside of the mainland are not available in Apple's China app store. In December, a Free Weibo app that enables users to see what words are being blocked by Chinese censors on the Internet was removed from Apple's mainland app store. In October, an app known as Open Door, which can be used to leapfrog the country's so-called "Great Firewall," which blocks a number of sites the government does not want people in the mainland to see, was similarly removed.

One Chinese consumer posted an angry message on China's popular

online forum Tianya.cn, complaining she was unable to engrave the sentence "The Diaoyu islands have historically been part of Chinese territory" on the new iPad she was buying - even though this is precisely the Chinese government's position on the uninhabited islets, which are also claimed by Japan.

The phrase "Diaoyu islands" alone in Chinese characters also brings up the error message.

Apple employees, however, appear willing to help satisfy their customers' needs when it comes to potentially sensitive engravings. Queried why "Diaoyu islands" was deemed an inappropriate engraving term in Chinese characters, one Apple rep reached through the company's online chat help service suggested entering the phrase in the Pinyin Romanization system.

Another online chat help representative, asked about banned terms, said, "A certain government department doesn't allow this, I'm sorry." The employee then suggested some possible work-arounds, noting that inserting a period between the two Chinese characters that make up the word "freedom" might result in an approved engraving.

Overall, the number of words being rejected by Apple appears to be much smaller than the number of the ones being deleted on China's Twitter-like service Weibo on a daily basis. And it's much easier to beat Apple's system with some simple variations in Chinese characters. For example, "1989 Tiananmen protest" results in an error, but "Tiananmen Massacre" and "Tiananmen Incident" did not.

Also, the same words or phrases, entered in English, do not result in error messages.

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