



China bans sharing 'obscene' material — potentially including sexting  
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The Chinese government has banned the sharing of “obscene” content in private online messages and increased the penalties for spreading pornographic material — saying this would become a legal issue as well as a “moral” one.

The new [regulations](#), which will take effect on Jan. 1, represent Beijing’s latest effort to enforce tight control over the Chinese [internet ecosystem](#), with a vast censorship architecture rooting out both discussion of politically sensitive issues as well as maintaining a “clean online environment” free of explicit content.

While the revision will target the dissemination of pornography and exploitative images — which are also strictly regulated in countries including the United States — it may also mean that consensual sexting could also be dragged into China’s legal system.

It will cover messages sent on WeChat, the ubiquitous Chinese social media app, and will particularly target cases involving minors, [state media](#) reported Tuesday.

Rose Luqiu, an expert on the Chinese internet at Hong Kong Baptist University, said that the new law is a “positive development” toward protecting minors, however the application may be “very broad” and subject to “excessive interpretations” by law enforcement.

“This raises concerns about whether it could lead to public power intruding into individuals’ private lives,” she said.

The announcement comes after a controversy this summer about explicit content circulating online. Chinese state media [reported](#) in July that a chat group on Telegram called “MaskPark” was distributing sexually explicit photos of women taken without their consent — with hidden cameras or in intimate settings.

The exposé of the group, which reportedly had more than 100,000 members comprised mostly of Chinese men, prompted uproar online — with discussions focusing on deeply entrenched issues of sexism in Chinese society.

Advocates for women’s rights have been silenced in recent years. Chinese leader Xi Jinping has curbed feminist activism in recent years and [jailed activists](#) working on gender rights in China. There are no women in the Communist Party’s 23-member Politburo.

Aizi Chang, who researches Chinese feminism and online platforms at Monash University in Australia and who supports the recent regulations, said the MaskPark case revealed “gender inequality” issues on both the Chinese and global internet, which lead to women routinely being treated “more like objects” online.

Pornography has long been illegal in China, but the revision is aimed at filling “regulatory gaps” by targeting the “increasingly diverse” methods of sharing pornographic content online, according to a report from the state-run [Southern Metropolis Daily](#). Offenders can now be detained for 10 to 15 days, and fined up to about \$700, up from \$420 previously.

The paper described several example cases in its report about the new regulations, including a man in Guangdong being found guilty for violating “socialist morality” by forwarding more than 50 obscene videos to his WeChat friends, and three administrators of a group on the Chinese platform QQ being convicted for not preventing the spread of explicit content.

In another example aimed at driving home the increased punishment for underage cases, a Jiangsu court this spring sentenced an individual surnamed Feng to more than 12 years in prison for sending obscene material to young girls.

The online response to the new rules this week has been mixed.

Not everyone agrees that the revision will lead to significant change. An article published Wednesday in state-run [China National Radio](#) refuted previous state-media interpretations that the law will “broaden the scope” of regulations, writing that some obscene private messages could be punished previously and that a small adjustment to the legal language was made to adjust to technological development.

While some users [support](#) quashing illegal sexual content online, others expressed frustration at state surveillance reaching further into personal conversations and questioned whether the crackdown on “private flirting” conflicted with Beijing’s effort to “get people to get married and have kids.” The government is trying to [boost the birth rate](#) in China to stem a demographic crisis.

Still others turned to humor. One Weibo commentator [posted a meme](#) Tuesday of a police mug shot of two women dressed in orange jumpsuits, with the caption “me after my chat history with my best friend is exposed.” The post racked up hundreds of reposts and 11,000 likes.

These aren’t the only recent legal changes aimed at cleaning up more raunchy corners of the internet. Following [periodic purges](#) of pornographic content online, the Cyberspace Administration of China launched a [crackdown](#) last month on “vulgar” live streams soliciting tips, which include broadcasters wearing “revealing” clothing and making “provocative gestures” for cash.

These regulations are all part of a broader, more traditional approach to issues related to sex in China, said Monash’s Chang. “China’s cultural approach has always been relatively conservative around the sexual things,” she said. “People avoid talking about the sex-related topics in public.”