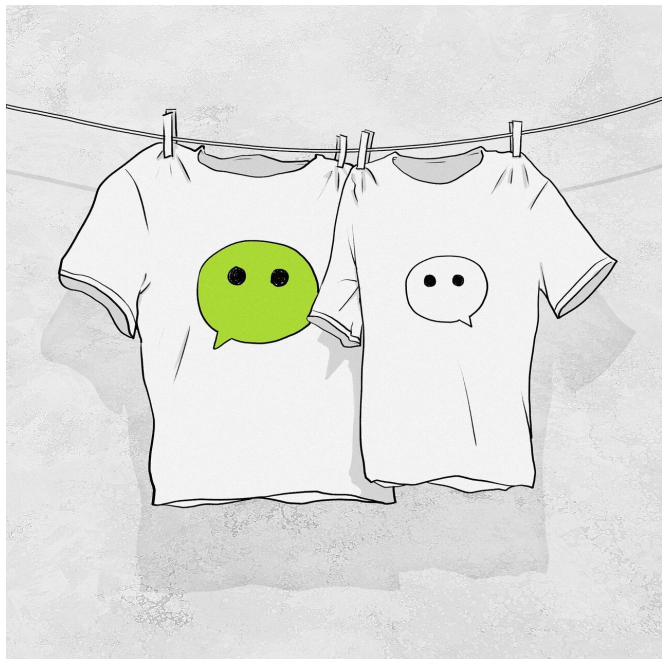


In China, WeChat is everything: Text messaging, video chat and mobile payments

23 September 2020, by Jefferson Graham, Usa Today



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Frances He is a Chinese immigrant living near Los Angeles who uses the WeChat app to talk to her brother back home. But with the Trump Administration's Sunday ban on the app, she's going to have to find a new way.

"I don't even know his phone number," she says. "Because everything is about WeChat. It's the only way we communicate."

For her family and many like hers, the ban is "a really big deal." The app has 1 billion users. And, beyond being the top app in China and a way to connect families spread across the globe, WeChat is also used here to do business.

The Trump announcement means downloads of the app, as well as TikTok, won't be allowed to be distributed by Apple and Google as of midnight

Sunday.

But that doesn't mean folks with apps already downloaded will be able to continue using them. "For all practical purposes it will be shut down in the U.S., but only in the U.S., as of midnight Monday," commerce secretary Wilbur Ross said on Fox Business Network Friday.

Trump said he was banning WeChat because sensitive information was being shared with the Chinese government. Indeed, a recent Wired piece investigated China's massive surveillance operation through apps like WeChat, and it wasn't pretty. An NPR report outlined how the government intercepts text messages sent on WeChat, mostly dealing with politics.

However, WeChat only targets those accounts with China telephone numbers, noted Ronald Deibert, the director of the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto in a recent Washington Post Op-Ed. "Users who register with a [phone number](#) outside mainland China are exempt from censorship."

He has recommended that people in the United States not use the app, because when you do, "you are actually helping the company improve its censorship and surveillance system to which mainland China's users are subject."

Banned apps in China

In China, popular apps like Google, Twitter, Skype and Facebook have been banned by the government. (Savvy internet users get around the ban by using a VPN service.)

Because so many apps aren't allowed in China, WeChat has taken the mantle and bundled similar services all into one.

Imagine if you shut down text messaging, [video chat](#) and mobile payments at once.

To Daniel Ives, an analyst with Wedbush Securities, that's the equivalent of the WeChat ban.

"WeChat is everything," he says. "I've traveled throughout Asia, and if you're there and don't use WeChat, you're viewed as the rarity."

Ditto for those of us here in the United States who communicate with and do business with China.

WeChat is how Adam Sohmer, a New York public relations professional, communicates with his client Hifiman Electronics, which is based in Tianjin, China.

"Anytime we speak, it's with WeChat," he says. Going without it "will be a readjustment."

Most tech products are manufactured and assembled in China, from iPhones, Alexa devices, Ring video doorbells and the like, mostly in Shenzhen, requiring American executives to either fly over, or communicate via other methods, most often WeChat.

WeChat has over 1 billion users in China, and while it's been available here for some time, it isn't one of the more popular apps, except for those talking to family back home or doing business.

For Sohmer, he's already written to his client and asked if they could switch to another program for communication, like Skype.

"This will be a stumbling block for anyone who does business with China or has family in China," he says.

WeChat connects everything in China

WeChat is Uber, Facebook, ApplePay, Snapchat, Amazon, Skype and Tinder in one app, notes Nellie Shen, the CEO of Great Britain-based Kaitlin Zhang Branding in a blog post. "You don't have to go outside of WeChat to enjoy all the services 10 other apps would give you."

Beyond [social networking](#), WeChat has largely replaced work emails, but it's also a platform for mobile payments, e-commerce, train bookings and

blogs, as well as being host to a universe of other apps," notes Shen.

For Sha Zhu, who is Chinese and lives in Washington, WeChat "is the first thing I check in the morning," she recently told the Associated Press. It's how she talks to her mother and old friends from China, which she left in 2008, and how she communicates with her colleagues as a [public relations](#) manager for a Chinese-owned consulting company.

Kurt Braybrook, who lived in Shanghai for 22 years before moving back to the United States and Grand Rapids, Michigan, told the AP the app is irreplaceable for him and his China-born wife.

"If they banned it entirely, it will wipe out connections to my wife's family, all our friends and my network of business contacts I built over 22 years," he said.

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