

Alibaba and other tech companies push back if they believe a Chinese government request for data isn't warranted, said a Chinese police official familiar with the operations of the country's cyberpolice. He said law enforcement must follow set procedures to gain access to private information.

China's government, however, has the last word. There is no independent judiciary to appeal to if they disagree with a demand.

It is unlikely any Chinese company could mount the sort of challenge Apple Inc. did when it refused to comply with a request by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation to unlock the iPhone of a suspect in the San Bernardino mass shooting in 2015.

Over the past year, Chinese regulators have ordered three popular internet platforms to stop streaming videos with political content not in line with government policy, and they more recently warned that companies that didn't comply with new social-media rules would be shut down. Facebook Inc. was banned in China in 2009, without a stated reason.

On June 1, a new cybersecurity law went into effect that requires companies running internet platforms in China to help authorities ferret out content that "endangers national security, national honor and interests."

That goes far beyond U.S. government demands on internet service providers or platforms, which are required by law to report suspected instances of child pornography when they discover it and take down material that has been found to infringe on copyrights. Chinese government authorities didn't respond to requests for comment for this article.

In one of the first significant actions under the new law, China's Cyberspace Administration this fall slapped maximum fines on Tencent, internet company Baidu and others for allowing users to spread banned content, including "false rumors" and pornography.

Tencent said it "sincerely accepted" the punishment and vowed to do a better job. Baidu

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"I would disagree with the premise that the central government has access to all this corporate data. That's just not true," said Joseph Tsai, Alibaba's executive vice chairman, at the Journal's D-Live conference in October. "If they want data from you, just like in the U.S., they have to have a reason."

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Companies including Alibaba Group Holding Ltd., Tencent Holdings Ltd. and Baidu Inc. are required to help China's government hunt down criminal suspects and silence political dissent. Their technology is also being used to create cities wired for surveillance.

This assistance is far more extensive than the help Western companies extend to their governments, and the requests are almost impossible to challenge, a Wall Street Journal examination of Chinese practices shows.

Unlike American companies, which often resist U.S. government requests for information, Chinese ones talk openly about working with authorities. Tencent Chief Executive Ma Huateng, also known as Pony Ma, and Alibaba founder Jack Ma both have voiced support for private companies working with the government on law enforcement and security issues.

"The political and legal system of the future is inseparable from the internet, inseparable from big data," Alibaba's Mr. Ma told a Communist Party commission overseeing law enforcement last year. He said technology will soon make it possible to predict security threats. "Bad guys won't even be able to walk into the square," he said.

In practice, China's internet giants, which have benefited from trade policies shielding them from foreign competition, have little choice but to cooperate in a country where the Communist Party controls both the legal system and the right to function as a business.

Tencent, the world's largest online videogame company, dominates Chinese cyberspace with news, video-streaming operations and its WeChat app, used by nearly one billion people to communicate and for mobile payments.

Beijing activist Hu Jia said he bought a slingshot online after a friend recommended it for relieving stress. He paid with WeChat's mobile-payment feature. Mr. Hu said he was later interrogated by a state security agent, who asked if he was

Little choice