Chinese Twitter users concerned over executive appointment

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Chinese Twitter users have expressed concerns over the company's appointment of a China regional executive who has a background working with the country's military and state security apparatus.

Since last week, when Kathy Chen was appointed Twitter's first managing director for China, Chinese users of the U.S. microblogging site have raised concerns over Chen's past links to the Chinese government and wondered if their freedom of speech on the platform would be compromised.

Although blocked in China, Twitter is a popular platform for Chinese—especially those living overseas—to freely express themselves in their native language. While China has produced homegrown equivalents such as Weibo, the government exerts strict controls over what can be said on them and by whom.

"Twitter has vast amounts of users' data. Given that U.S. tech firms have in the past kowtowed to China, and given the military background of Kathy Chen, it's only reasonable for the Chinese users of Twitter to be worried about the future," He Qinglian, a prominent overseas-based Chinese political activist, wrote on her blog. She urged the U.S. Congress to conduct a hearing on Chen's appointment.

Wen Yunchao, a U.S.-based political dissident, noted on his Twitter account that Chen had worked for the People's Liberation Army for seven years and later headed an anti-virus software company in a joint

venture with connections to the Ministry of Public Security.

"It's only reasonable to question the direction of a company by its personnel decisions," Wen wrote.

Chen began working as a technical engineer for a military research institute in 1987 after graduating with a computer science degree from North Jiaotong University, according to Chinese media reports.

She went on to work for DEC, Compaq and 123COM before leading the anti-virus software company Jinchen, a joint venture whose local partner was owned indirectly by the Ministry of Public Security.

In an emailed statement, Twitter said it was usual for the Chinese government to assign graduates to jobs in the 1980s. Chen's computer science degree made her a prime candidate for a job as a junior engineer in the People's Liberation Army, the company said.

"When the Chinese economy further opened up with reform in the early 1990s, Kathy chose to pursue her passion for a technology career by switching to the private sector in 1994," the statement said.

It also said that her role with Jinchen was to represent the interests of majority shareholder Computer Associates, a U.S. tech firm, and that she "never worked for the Ministry of Public Security."

Chen, who will be based in Hong Kong, was most recently an executive with Microsoft Asia-Pacific Research and Development Group before being hired by Twitter.

"I am really excited to find more ways to create value for our advertisers, enterprises, creators, influencers and our developers, and partners as well," Chen said in a video posted on Twitter.

She has not publicly responded to Twitter user concerns.

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