

Baidu opens Ernie Bot to the public after Chinese approval under new AI rules

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ERNIE Bot is Baidu's answer to ChatGPT [Florence Lo/Reuters] By AFP

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China's Baidu has rolled out its ChatGPT rival ERNIE Bot to the public, in a major leap for the country's tech sector as it aims to cash in on the artificial intelligence gold rush. The Chinese government introduced new regulations this month for AI developers, aiming to allow them to stay in the race with the likes of ChatGPT maker OpenAI and Microsoft while tightly controlling information online. Recommended Stories list of 4 items list 1 of 4 Does artificial intelligence pose the risk of human extinction? list 2 of 4 Artificial intelligence without borders list 3 of 4 Musk launches artificial intelligence rival to ChatGPT's OpenAI list 4 of 4 Does artificial intelligence pose a risk to humans? end of list ERNIE Bot is the first domestic AI app to be fully available to the public in China. It is not available outside the country. "We are thrilled to share that ERNIE Bot is now fully open to the general public starting August 31," Baidu said in a statement on Thursday. "In addition to ERNIE Bot, Baidu is set to launch a suite of new AI-native apps that allow users to fully experience the four core abilities of generative AI: understanding, generation, reasoning, and memory." The chatbot was released in March but its availability was limited. By making it widely available, Baidu will be able to gain "massive" human feedback to improve the app at a swift pace, CEO Robin Li was quoted as saying in the statement. Generative AI apps, including chatbots such as ERNIE Bot, are trained on vast amounts of data as well as their interactions with users so they can answer questions, including complex ones, in human-like speech. Chinese generative AI apps must "adhere to the core values of socialism" and refrain from threatening national security, according to the guidelines published this month. When tested by the AFP news agency on Thursday, ERNIE Bot easily answered mundane questions such as "What is the capital of China?" and "Do you have any hobbies?". Advertisement

But on sensitive topics such as China's bloody clampdown on the pro-democracy protesters at Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1989, it said: "Let's change the topic and start again." Public discussions about Tiananmen are banned in China, and online information about the incident is strictly censored. When asked about Taiwan, a self-ruling island that China claims as its territory, ERNIE Bot offered a longer answer. "Taiwan is part of the sacred territory of the People's Republic of China," it responded. "China's sovereignty and territorial integrity cannot be violated or divided." Then, it said: "Let's talk about something else." And in response to the question "Can we freely discuss any topic?", ERNIE Bot replied: "Yes, we can talk about anything you want. However, please note that some topics may be sensitive or touch on legal issues and are therefore subject to your own responsibility." The rapid success of US-based OpenAI's ChatGPT – which is banned in China – sparked an international race to develop rival apps, including image and video generators, but also widespread alarm about the potential for abuse and disinformation. Under Chinese regulations, AI developers must conduct security assessments and submit filings on their algorithms to the authorities if their software is judged to have an impact on "public opinion", according to the rules. They are also required to label AI-generated content. Baidu is one of China's biggest tech companies but has faced competition from other firms, such as Tencent, in various sectors. In addition to AI, it has also looked to grow its cloud computing business and develop autonomous driving tech. Baidu shares were up 3.3 percent in Hong Kong at 03:30 GMT on Thursday. Bloomberg reported that another Chinese tech titan, the Hong Kong-listed SenseTime, has also received a green light from Beijing for its service.