

Is Your Data Protected from the Chinese Government if You Shop on Taobao or Alibaba?

December 13, 2021 - There is a disturbing report out from the Epoch Times that Taobao - which is often described as the Amazon of China - is sharing purchase and browsing information of its users with the Chinese government. The company is owned by Alibaba, which is a Chinese shopping powerhouse in its own right. And both platforms are frequented by Americans - often retailers - looking for bargain merchandise. But based on the report, the Chinese government may be using the platforms as a honeypot operation (which means they lure people to make purchases that may be illegal and then pursue legal remedies against those who actually make a purchase).

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The report details the plight of a man named Cheng San; a dual citizen of the United States and Taiwan. He was the CEO of a now bankrupt gaming company in 2016 when his company began working on an electronic shooter game to be played smart phones. In order to assist some of his game designers with gun design for the game, he had his employees purchase a number of toy guns. The purchase was made through Taobao and the toys were delivered to them in China where many of his designers lived and worked. Cheng also had a residence in China and was living there at the time.

Shortly after placing the order for the toy guns, Cheng and a number of his employees were arrested. The charge was that they had purchased guns. Even though these were toys by American standards, Chinese law broadly defines guns to include some toy models, and gun ownership is strictly prohibited in China. Obviously, the Chinese government has legitimate worries that the peasants might decide to rise up against them and choose freedom if they could get their hands on a few armaments. Can't have that happening. The next thing you know, they'll all be demanding other things... like food and an electric grid that works. The nerve! We can't have any of that!!

Anyway, Cheng's background is in data. At one point in the arrest process, he got a glimpse of some of the paperwork the Chinese government was using to link him to these so-called gun purchases. It was at that point that he realized that the documents could only have come from Taobao.

Under Chinese law, all companies have a duty to cooperate with the government and to share information. In other words, if you are making a purchase from a Chinese company, you can be almost certain that any details you share with that company will be relayed to the Chinese government. The fact that you are an American, living in the United States, probably increases those chances. China is actively looking at information on Americans and will likely use that information to China's benefit if and when they can.

The bottom line here is that if you want to protect your privacy, don't do business with Chinese headquartered companies. Taobao and Alibaba are just the tip of that iceberg and millions of Americans use them. The same is true with social media platforms that are based in China.

As for Cheng, he wound up getting sentenced to three years on prison. He's now served that time and is now back in the United States. Some of his employees aren't so fortunate. They received longer sentences and continue to languish in prison.

by Jim Malmberg

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