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China to vet foreign music for internet

By Mure Dickie in Beijing

China's culture ministry has ordered local internet companies to apply for approval from government censors for any foreign music they make available online and to prove they own all necessary distribution rights.

The new rules from the Ministry of Culture mark the latest in a series of moves by Beijing to tighten control over the internet which has in the past been less tightly regulated than other media sectors.

The rules, which were issued last month but posted on the ministry's website only this week, are intended in part to crack down on rampant internet music piracy.

However, they will also likely make it harder to distribute in China any music judged by censors to harm "society's public morals or the nation's fine cultural traditions" or to go against a range of other vaguely worded prohibitions.

Some online musical products were "of low moral quality" or were being illegally copied, downloaded or uploaded, the ministry said in a policy "opinion" setting out the new censorship requirements.

"A minority of internet music products have included content that violates national customs and habits and disturbs social stability," it said.

The rules restate a ban on foreign investment in companies involved in "cultural activities" on the internet, though the scope of this restriction remains unclear.

Under the rules, internet companies that want to make imported songs available on their websites must first submit them on a disc to the ministry along with copies of their lyrics in both Chinese and the original language. The Chinese names of songs must be used ahead of their foreign-language names, the rules say.

Websites that break the new rules can be fined and shut down.

It remains unclear how effectively the rules will be enforced, with many other attempts by Beijing to regulate internet activity having only limited effect.

However, a manager at Chinese online music website a8.com said the rules would help the local industry by promoting the use of licensed content. The vast bulk of music available on the internet in China is pirated.

Beijing has long censored imports of foreign music on tape and compact disc and famously ordered the Rolling Stones not to play five of their raunchier tracks at their first China concert in April.

However, the need to win individual approval for imported songs could hurt websites that have benefited from being able to offer a wide selection of foreign music.

The rules would be "of very great help" to the development of China's own cultural industry, said Wu Duanping, chief executive of website 5fad.com, which sells original music by Chinese songwriters.

"This policy will to a certain degree limit the entry into China of foreign music," Mr Wu said. "Having this policy will give our company room to develop and reduce the pressure (on us)."

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