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'cn' reopens to individuals and foreign companies
China - Hogan Lovells International LLP

Domain names

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An interesting turn of events for '.cn' domain names – two-and-a-half years after [introducing sudden and drastic restrictions](#) on domain name eligibility, CNNIC, the Chinese registry, has reopened '.cn' domain name registrations to individuals and companies based outside of China. Until now, only Chinese companies were allowed to apply for '.cn' domain names and supporting documentation was required.

The history of '.cn' domain names has been rather eventful over the last few years. The '.cn' extension (as well as '.com.cn', '.net.cn' and '.org.cn') was, until the end of 2009, totally unrestricted and thus available for registration to all entities, whether local or foreign, companies or individuals. Domain name registrations were easy and cheap, which made '.cn' very attractive; it gradually became, along with the German '.de', one of the two most popular country-code top-level domains (ccTLDs). This success did not come without a downside - the level of cybersquatting was very high and there were countless websites with pornographic and other objectionable content, which soon became a major concern for the Chinese government. As part of their efforts to fight pornography (in all forms), the government undertook an internet clean-up campaign aimed at getting rid of pornographic and vulgar content on the web.

In line with the government's actions, CNNIC took drastic measures to help fight the illegal use of domain names and, in December 2009, it announced that individuals were no longer allowed to register Chinese domain names. Shortly afterwards, the restriction was extended to foreign companies and as a consequence only Chinese companies could apply for '.cn' domain names. Foreign companies, however, had the possibility of registering their '.cn' domain names on a trustee basis. Supporting documentation was required for all applicants, such as signed documentation and various documents proving the registrant's identity.

The new restrictions, together with the purge of objectionable domain names and the campaign of verification of registrants' data that CNNIC also undertook, led the number of Chinese domain names to plummet, going from nearly 13.46 million registered domain names as of December 2009 (when '.cn' was still the first ccTLD worldwide) to about 3.53 million at the end of 2011 - a decrease of nearly 74% in two years only.

CNNIC has now announced, via a release dated May 28 2012 posted on its website, that "any individual or organisation that can bear independently civil liabilities has the right to apply for the domain name registration" - thus, individuals as well as companies based outside of China can now register '.cn' domain names again. This is good news for foreign companies which can finally secure domain names directly in their name. However, supporting documentation is still required for all domain name applications.

It will be interesting to see if the level of cybersquatting and illegal use of '.cn' domain names rises again now that everybody - especially individuals - can register '.cn' domain names; however the new process in place (whereby the identity of the domain name applicant is duly verified) should limit it to some extent.

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