

Lack of drone rules raises concerns

A political adviser in Shanghai has pointed out the lack of detailed regulations on the civilian use of drones, as the rising number of devices with high-resolution cameras raises concerns about privacy infringement.

Ma Chi, a member of the Shanghai Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, raised the issue during the committee's bimonthly meeting on Nov 2.

Ma was struck by the number of people flying drones near his workplace, the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, where he is a cultural policy researcher.

"They fly the drones about three floors off the ground, and room interiors can be seen clearly on the remote control screens," Ma said. "They are unaware of this infringement of privacy and say they are just having fun."

Drones with high-resolution cameras are becoming more affordable – a popular model costs about 3,000 to 4,000 yuan (\$450 to \$600) – and can be purchased online.

While the exact number of drone users is hard to confirm, a report by the Civil Aviation Administration of China said there were 10,255 certified drone pilots in 2016.

According to a training center affiliated with DJI, the country's largest drone manufacturer, its 74 branches trained 6,500 drone operators in the past year alone.

Trained drone pilots often engage in tasks related to aerial photography, agriculture and surveying, but for most amateurs the main purpose is taking photos.

"There are potential privacy issues related to drones since they are widely used for photography," Ma said. "And there are no particular regulations dealing with it."

Since June, incidents of drones interrupting civil aviation have prompted the introduction of regulations requiring drone producers to incorporate geofencing – use of global positioning or radio frequency identification to define a geographic boundary – in their products, along with real-name registration of drones that weigh more than 250 grams.

But current regulations regarding the use of drones are either too vague or too complicated for users to follow, Ma said. "Real-name registration does not mean one can fly one's drone at liberty," he said.

Qu Weibing, a guide for a Shanghai travel agency, bought a mini drone in July that required him to register the device online.

He said it was easy and took only a few minutes to fill out the form. But he was stopped by police when he tried to fly the drone in August in Yunnan province.

“They said I needed to apply for a flying permit at a local police station, or I would face a fine,” Qu said.

Though Qu said privacy infringement had not occurred to him, he said he does enjoy using the drone to take bird’s-eye pictures of scenery.

Qu is open to stricter rules.

“If a set of detailed and easy-to-follow regulations and instructions regarding the use of drones is available, I’ll be more than happy to follow it,” he said.