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In a live chat dubbed "TikTok Refugees" on RedNote on Monday, more than 50,000 American and Chinese users joined the room.

Veteran Chinese users, with some sense of bewilderment, welcomed their American counterparts and swapped notes with them on topics like food and youth unemployment.

Occasionally, however, the Americans veered into riskier territory.

"Is it OK to ask about how laws are different in China versus Hong Kong?" one American user asked.

"We prefer not to talk about that here," a Chinese user responded.

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Over 700,000 new users joined China's RedNote amid a potential U.S. TikTok ban.

RedNote faces challenges moderating English content as it gains popularity in the U.S.

The surge highlights RedNote's potential for global growth, similar to TikTok's success.

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Such impromptu cultural exchanges were taking place all across RedNote, known in China as Xiaohongshu, as the app surged to the top of U.S. download rankings this week. Its popularity was driven by American social media users casting about for an alternative to ByteDance-owned TikTok days ahead of its looming ban.
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In only two days, more than 700,000 new users joined Xiaohongshu, a person close to the company told Reuters. Xiaohongshu did not immediately respond to a request for comment.
U.S. downloads of RedNote were up more than 200% year-over-year this week, and 194% from the week prior, according to estimates from app data research firm Sensor Tower.
The second most popular free app on Apple's App Store list on Tuesday, Lemon8, another social media app owned by ByteDance, experienced a similar surge last month, with downloads jumping by 190% in December to about 3.4 million.
The influx appeared to catch RedNote by surprise, with two sources familiar with the company telling Reuters they were scrambling to find ways to moderate English-language content and build English-Chinese translation tools.
RedNote maintains only one version of its app, rather than splitting it into overseas and domestic apps — a rarity among Chinese social apps that are subject to domestic moderation rules.
Still, the company is keen to mine the sudden rush of attention, as executives see it as a potential path to achieve global popularity similar to TikTok's.
RedNote, a venture capital-backed startup with a most recent valuation of $17 billion, allows users to curate photos, videos and text documenting their lives. It has been viewed as a possible IPO candidate in China.
In recent years, it has become a de facto search engine for its 300 million-plus users looking for travel tips, anti-aging creams and restaurant recommendations.
The share prices of some China-listed companies that conduct business with RedNote, such as Hangzhou Onechance Tech Corp, surged as much as 20% on Tuesday, hitting the daily limit.
The spike in U.S. users comes ahead of a Jan. 19 deadline for ByteDance to sell TikTok or face a ban in the U.S. on national security grounds.
TikTok is currently used by about 170 million Americans, roughly half of the country's population, and is overwhelmingly popular with young people and the advertisers looking to reach them.
Some users said they joined the platform to seek alternatives to Meta Platforms-owned Facebook and Instagram, and to Elon Musk's X. Some expressed doubt that they could rebuild their TikTok follower base on those apps.
"It's not the same: Instagram, X, or any other app," said Brian Atabansi, 29, a business analyst and content creator based in San Diego, California. "Mainly because of how organic it is to build community on TikTok," he said.

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