



A man wears a lobster hat representing the OpenClaw logo at the Baidu headquarters in Beijing on March 11, 2026. Photos: AFP

## AI agent 'lobster fever' grips China despite risks

By LUNA LIN

CHINESE entrepreneur Frank Gao used to spend long hours running his social media accounts but now outsources the chore to AI agent tool OpenClaw, which is taking the country by storm despite official warnings over cybersecurity.

OpenClaw, created in November by an Austrian coder, differs from bots like ChatGPT because it can execute real-life tasks such as sending emails, organising files or even booking flight tickets.

"Since January, I've spent hours on the lobster every day," Gao told AFP, referring to OpenClaw's red crustacean mascot. "We're family."

After downloading OpenClaw, users connect it to existing artificial intelligence models of their choice, then give it simple instructions through instant messaging apps, as if to a friend or colleague.

The tool has fascinated tech circles worldwide but particularly in China, gripping tech-savvy companies and individuals keen to keep up with the next big thing in AI.

Hundreds of people queued at tech giant Baidu's Beijing headquarters earlier this month for an OpenClaw event where engineers helped attendees set up their "little lobsters".

It was one of many similar meetups to experiment with the tool, which are drawing crowds from Shanghai to Shenzhen.

Some municipalities, including the eastern cities of Wuxi and Hangzhou, have pledged hundreds of thousands of dollars to support the adoption and development of OpenClaw and other AI agents.

But the lobster fever, as it has been dubbed, has also sparked security concerns.

"What's truly scary about agents like OpenClaw is this: once they have your digital keys, they can theoretically access all the services you've authorised, and can autonomously decide when to activate them," Gao warned.

"The attacker effectively gains a 'master key' to your digital identity," said the engineer, who has named his OpenClaw agent "Q" after his business name QLab.



The tool has fascinated tech circles worldwide but particularly in China, gripping tech-savvy companies and individuals keen to keep up with the next big thing in AI.

### 'Use with caution'

Chinese national cybersecurity authorities and Beijing's ministry of industry and IT have warned of the risks of OpenClaw hacks.

"Use intelligent agents such as 'lobster' with caution," national IT research institute expert Wei Liang advised government agencies, public institutions, companies and individuals in a message on state media.

The mixed signals of rolling out policy incentives while issuing warnings "reflects the authorities' cautious tolerance towards 'lobster fever,'" Zhang Yi, founder of tech consultancy iiMedia, said.

Austrian programmer Peter Steinberger, who built OpenClaw to help organise his digital life, was hired last month by ChatGPT maker OpenAI.

Meanwhile, a separate team of coders that made Moltbook, a Reddit-like pseudo social network where OpenClaw agents converse, are joining Meta.

Top Chinese tech companies have also been quick to get involved.

The likes of Tencent, Alibaba, ByteDance and Baidu are offering simplified installation and affordable coding plans to help users who want to host OpenClaw agents on their cloud servers – seen as safer than downloading it onto a personal computer.

In recent days AI companies big and small have also launched their own competing agent tools, such as ByteDance's ArkClaw, Tencent's WorkBuddy

and Zhipu AI's AutoClaw.

The relatively low cost for cloud deployment of OpenClaw in China, subsidised by big tech firms, is one factor behind its popularity, said Gao Rui, a senior product manager at Baidu AI Cloud.

"For most people, it's likely just the price of a cup of coffee... which is why people will probably be keen to give it a try," she said.

### FOMO

Fear of missing out is also a big driver behind OpenClaw's success in China, said Chen Yunfei, an AI developer who created a popular online guide for using the tool.

"Most Chinese people are quite studious and forward-looking, so when confronted with new things, they might have stronger feelings" of so-called FOMO, he said.

Xie Manrui, a programmer whose latest project is a visualised system for managing OpenClaw agents, said the tool had arrived "at the right moment" to change perceptions in China of what AI can do.

"For many, AI is merely a clever chatbot that talks all the time but cannot act," he said.

Either way, it has piqued the curiosity of many young users. At the Baidu event in Beijing, 24-year-old college student Zheng Huimin was waiting patiently in line with her friends.

"I'd like to give it a go to see what tasks it can actually help me accomplish," she said. – AFP