

# [***A Platform Storing TikTok Corporate Secrets Was Inspected By The Chinese Government***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:69J1-VJ51-DXVP-5021-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Highlight:** A ByteDance app called Feishu that holds nearly all of TikTok s internal communications was subject to a wide-ranging inspection before the CCP s 20th National Congress last fall, documents show.

**Body**

**A ByteDance app called Feishu that holds nearly all of TikTok s internal communications was subject to a wide-ranging inspection before the CCP s 20th National Congress last fall. But TikTok says no proprietary information was accessed.**

**By Emily Baker-White, Forbes Staff**

**TikTok's internal workplace collaboration platform**, which hosts some of the company's most sensitive information, was inspected by the Chinese government ahead of the Chinese Communist Party's 20th National Congress,**Forbes**has learned.

Conducted in October of 2022, the review covered a broad swath of internal information related to Feishu, TikTok's main workplace tool, including product network security, data security, personal information, and daily operations," according to a document reviewed by**Forbes**.

Feishu is a ByteDance product comparable to Google Docs and Microsoft Office that hosts TikTok employees documents, chats, meetings, calendars, and other business records. Over the past year,**Forbes**has reviewed hundreds of internal TikTok materials stored in Feishu, including attorney-client privileged information, draft content policies, and information related to TikTok sUnited States Data Security entity, which is supposed to cordon off American user data.

This is the first report revealing a direct level of access by Chinese government officials to a product that hosts some of TikTok s most secret information, and the documents show that at least for now TikTok remains reliant on its parent company ByteDance s systems, which are subject to Chinese regulatory control.

Seth and Haurek did not answer questions about whether ByteDance has previously made TikTok employee communications available to the Chinese government.

The review was referenced in a set of briefings TikTok security personnel received from ByteDance in October 2022 about preparations for theChinese Communist Party s 20th National Congress a weeklong event, occuring once every five years, where the party selects its leadership committee and defines its strategy for the next five year term. The company had tightened its security protocols and increased the number of people it had working on content moderation, steps not unlike those U.S. tech companies took ahead of the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections.

But it had also opened its doors to Chinese regulators for an on-site regulatory inspection, and fulfill[ed] ad hoc inspection requirements from the National Radio and Television Administration (Beijing), Cyberspace Administration of China, National Government Offices Administration, and Cybersecurity corps, according to a document reviewed by**Forbes**. Along with Feishu, which is also used by some domestic Chinese companies, the inspection also covered products including Toutiao, Douyin and Ocean Engine, which are available in China.

TikTok was not among the covered products, according to ByteDance spokesperson Jodi Seth. While some ByteDance products are not available in China, other products like Douyin and Toutiao, do operate in China and follow Chinese laws and regulations. The inspections referenced in the document are to test for and guard against privacy and security vulnerabilities," she said.

When asked whether the inspection gave Chinese regulators access to proprietary TikTok information within Feishu, TikTok spokesperson Alex Haurek said, no, because they were not focused on employee communications. Seth and Haurek did not answer questions about whether ByteDance has previously made TikTok employee communications available to the Chinese government.

After publication of this story, Seth provided an additional statement: "We have not made internal employee communications available to the government as part of this review. We would only provide such communications for a specific purpose, such as an investigation of criminal activity, in accordance with local law the same way we comply with valid legal requests in any country."

Xiao Qiang, the head of UC Berkeley s China Internet Center, told**Forbes**that government inspections of tech companies in China are routine, especially before big events like the National Congress. As for whether such inspections could include a review of the TikTok records stored within Feishu, it depends on the level of the inspections, he said.

**Got a tip about TikTok or ByteDance? Reach out to Emily Baker-White securely at** [***ebakerwhite@forbes.com***](mailto:ebakerwhite@forbes.com) **or** [***emilybakerwhite@protonmail.com***](mailto:emilybakerwhite@protonmail.com)

Documents reviewed by**Forbes**also showed that preparations for the 20th National Congress went beyond inspections; one noted that ByteDance planned to do enhanced public sentiment monitoring. **Forbes**previously reportedon word lists used by ByteDance to track public conversations on dozens of topics ranging from Tibet and Taiwan to Uyghur-Han couples, and Special prohibited words for Xi and Peng.

The document also noted that ByteDance had expanded the security intel to cover 6 more highly active ***politics***-related external telegram groups during the 20th National Congress. Seth told**Forbes**that ByteDance undertook the Telegram monitoring to guard against hackers using methods like phishing to infiltrate the company s systems. Telegram did not respond to a request for comment.

TikTok s CEO, Shou Zi Chew, has said under oath that the company has not shared TikTok user data with the Chinese government and would defy an order from the CCP to do so. TikTok s parent, ByteDance, has not made such a promise, though adraft agreementbetween ByteDance and the government (which the parties have not yet agreed to) would require ByteDance to irretrievably destroy all U.S. user data within its possession. The draft agreement would also give U.S. authorities the right to inspect TikTok s US offices and products, in a potentially similar manner to the Chinese government s inspection of ByteDance s China offices.

Through initiatives known asProject Texasin the U.S. andProject Cloverin Europe, TikTok has sought to reduce the extent to which TikTok users private information is available to employees in China. After these projects are completed, in theory, Chinese employees at ByteDance would be unable to turn over foreign user data to the Chinese government, even if they were asked to do so. But neither Project Texas nor Project Clover is yet complete, and it is not clear that the plans would satisfy governments in the U.S. and EU.

Meanwhile, ByteDance has continued to partner with the Chinese government in its domestic business.As of 2019, there was a room in the company s Beijing headquarters that housed a team of Chinese government cybersecurity police officers, so that when content moderators identified illegal behavior, the company could instantly report it. Also in 2019, ByteDance entered into astrategic partnershipwith Beijing Time, a state-controlled media outlet, andpartneredwith the state-owned conglomerate China Mobile. It has signed a10-year infrastructure contract with the state-owned China Telecom United Corporation.

Seth described the Beijing Time partnership as a licensing agreement, and noted that all companies doing business with telecom providers in China must work with state-owned entities. She said regarding the room that houses Chinese cybersecurity officers: In accordance with Chinese law, online platforms operating in China are required to permit inspectors to examine content moderation processes focusing on areas like fraud and cyber crimes."

Like other Chinese tech companies (and even some American ones, includingDisney), there is also an internal CCP committee at ByteDance. According to theChina Digital Times, an outlet helmed by Qiang, the Berkeley scholar, the Chinese governmentinstructedtech companies in the country to establish these committees in late 2017. Now-deleted Chinese state media articles and social media posts preserved by the China Digital Times show photos of ByteDance committee meetings.One photopreserved by the group showed a plaque awarded to ByteDance by the government for innovation in party building.

Seth, the ByteDance spokesperson, said that ByteDance itself does not have a party committee, but that its subsidiary, Douyin Group, does. She said that the plaque shown in the China Digital Times report was for the Douyin committee, rather than a general ByteDance committee, and that the Douyin committee does not inform the company s business decision making.

Qiang told**Forbes**that corporate party committees are important because they provide unofficial ways for party leaders to communicate with companies. He noted that these channels can be even more important than their formal counterparts, because they don t have to be official government-level.

**This story has been updated with additional comment from ByteDance.**

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