

# SHUTTERSTOCK EMPLOYEES FIGHT COMPANY'S NEW CHINESE SEARCH BLACKLIST

Sam Biddle

November 6 2019, 12:15 p.m.



Illustration: Delcan & Company for The Intercept

Shutterstock, the well-known online purveyor of stock images and photographs, is the latest U.S. company to willingly support China's censorship regime, blocking searches that might offend the country's authoritarian government, The Intercept has learned.

The publicly traded company built a \$639 million-per-year business on the strength of its vast – sometimes comically vast – catalog of images depicting virtually anything a blogger or advertiser could imagine. The company now does business in more than 150 countries. But in China, there is now a very small, very significant gap in Shutterstock’s offerings. In early September, Shutterstock engineers were given a new goal: The creation of a search blacklist that would wipe from query results images associated with keywords forbidden by the Chinese government. Under the new system, which *The Intercept* is told went into effect last month, anyone with a mainland Chinese IP address searching Shutterstock for “President Xi,” “Chairman Mao,” “Taiwan flag,” “dictator,” “yellow umbrella,” or “Chinese flag” will receive no results at all. Variations of these terms, including “umbrella movement” – the precursor to the [mass pro-democracy protests](#) currently gripping Hong Kong – are also banned.

Shutterstock’s decision to silently aid China’s censorship agenda comes at a time of heightened scrutiny into the relationship between corporate America and President Xi Jinping’s authoritarian regime. Household names like [Apple](#), [Blizzard Entertainment](#), the [NBA](#), and [Google](#) have all garnered harsh criticism for letting the policy directives of the Communist Party of China, and the gilded promise of a billion customers, dictate company strategy. Deciding to censor is a particularly stark inversion of values for Shutterstock, which markets itself as an enabler of creative expression.

The photo company’s relationship with China dates back to at least 2014, when it struck a distribution deal with ZCool, a Chinese social network and portfolio site for visual artists. Last year Shutterstock announced a \$15 million investment in ZCool, noting that owing to the partnership, “Shutterstock’s content now powers large technology platforms in China such as Tencent Social Ads,” an online advertising

subsidiary of the tremendously popular Chinese internet conglomerate Tencent.

Shutterstock's censorship feature appears to have been immediately controversial within the company, prompting more than 180 Shutterstock workers to sign a petition against the search blacklist and accuse the company of trading its values for access to the lucrative Chinese market. Chinese internet users already struggle to discuss even the tamest of taboo subjects; now, it seemed, the situation would get a little worse, with the aid of yet another willing American company.

"Yes, we're a creative photo and video marketplace, but we are also an editorial news hub," one Shutterstock employee told The Intercept. "Want to write a story about the protests in Hong Kong? They never existed. Want to write about Taiwan? It never existed. Xi Jinping is NOT a dictator because he specifically said so. This is dark shit."

The text of the petition, provided to The Intercept, can be read in full [below](#).

Shutterstock's founder and CEO Jon Oringer replied to the petition several days later; those hoping for a change of heart were to be disappointed. Shutterstock's pro-censorship compromise with the Chinese government was justified, Oringer argued, because to refuse to do business in China rather than help the country's government expand its information control scheme would be the real act of craven corporate turpitude: "Do we make the majority of our content available to China's 1.3 billion citizens or do we take away their ability to access it entirely? We ultimately believe, consistent with our brand promise, it is more valuable for storytellers to have access to our collection to creatively and impactfully tell their stories." Shutterstock with a bespoke censorship feature was "more empowering" and "will better serve the people of China than the alternative," Oringer continued.

Oringer's company-wide response is also reproduced [below](#).

Following Oringer's letter and the implementation of the search term blacklist, some employees fear the use of censorship at the company will grow: "He offered no consolation in terms of what our actions will be when China requests to add an X number more search terms to the censorship list," the Shutterstock staffer told The Intercept, "or if another country comes to us with a similar request. We are devastated."

**Join Our Newsletter**  
**Original reporting. Fearless journalism. Delivered to you.**  
**I'm in →**

In an email to The Intercept, a Shutterstock spokesperson confirmed that the censorship feature is currently active, though they would not confirm whether the banned keyword list has been changed or expanded since it first went into effect. When asked if there is anything the Chinese government could request that could make Oringer reconsider his decision, the spokesperson did not answer, but added instead, "We want to provide access to our content to everyone, everywhere. It is our mission to empower creativity and storytellers around the globe. We are also bound to local laws and therefore face a choice. We ultimately believe, consistent with our brand promise, it is more valuable for storytellers to have access to our collection to creatively and impactfully tell their stories. That is much more empowering and will better serve the people of China than the alternative."

The Shutterstock staffer who spoke with The Intercept added that for many at the company, the issue is personal, and that they reject the argument that complying with the Chinese government's request is in the best interest of its Chinese customers. "We have a number of employees who grew up in oppressive regimes – some are unable to

speak up for fear of losing visas – and we are letting them all down,” they explained. “Every day we come in to work, we are making the world a worse place. And for what? To be able to sell photos of sliced fruit on white backgrounds in China.”

## **Shutterstock employee petition:**

### **Petition to End Censorship**

We, the undersigned employees of Shutterstock, are calling upon the company to reject the demands of the Chinese government to suppress search results for politically sensitive topics for site users in China.

While complying would allow the company to benefit from continued operation in China, we believe that any censorship would set a harmful precedent and have deleterious effects on our company, China and the world. By complying, we are enabling injustices, including the discrimination of the people of Hong Kong, the suppression of Chinese political dissent, and undermining the sovereignty of Taiwanese people. This first step of building search filters lays open the door to more types of discrimination in the future.

We are proud of Shutterstock’s history of taking a stand on important topics like net neutrality, immigration policies, and antisemitism, among others. We recognize that the issue before us today has the potential to impact our revenue and growth in a way these other issues may not, and therefore by meeting the Chinese government’s demands, we would send the message that our commitment to our values is secondary to our commitment to our bottom line. That’s not who we are.

Our opposition to content filtering is not just about China: we object to technologies that aid the powerful in oppressing the vulnerable, wherever they may be. Shutterstock's own employees come from all over the world – many having experienced government oppression firsthand – and in taking on this project, we are letting them down.

As such, we demand Shutterstock call an end to this project. Shutterstock is capable of being a leader for change. As employees and shareholders, we deserve to know what we're building and we deserve a say in these significant decisions.”

## **Response from Shutterstock CEO Jon Oringer:**

Team,

On behalf of the Leadership Team, I want to provide an update to all employees about an important discussion going on in our Company regarding Shutterstock doing business in China. Some employees have expressed concern with the Company's position, and we want to take this opportunity to clearly communicate that position to everyone.

For context, since 2014, Shutterstock has been working with ZCool, a creative social network and artist platform in China, to distribute Shutterstock content to millions of people in the country. We also license directly to customers in China through our e-commerce site. The Chinese government has effectively mandated that – if we want to maintain a level of business in China – we must abide by local laws governing the distribution of certain content in mainland China. Based on available

information, we have determined that certain search terms will not return image or footage results to customers in that region.

We understand that some of our employees feel strongly about filtering content, particularly content that could be considered politically sensitive. A petition has been circulated asking the Company to refuse to comply with local requirements in China in order to do business there.

First we want to say – we hear you. We respect your position and your passion, and want to thank you for sharing your views in a thoughtful and constructive way. We are pleased to see open discussion and debate on this topic. There can be no question that we support the ability of our employees to freely express their views on issues important to them.

And we truly understand the concern. We want to assure you that we do not make business decisions lightly. Our decision to make our website available in China, like elsewhere in the world, is based on careful evaluation of all factors in order to provide maximum value across our networks – from employees to shareholders, customers to contributors, vendors to partners.

At the end of the day, what does our brand stand for? We want to provide access to our content to everyone, everywhere. It is our mission to empower creativity and storytellers around the globe. We are also bound to local laws and therefore face a choice. Do we make the majority of our content available to China's 1.3 billion citizens or do we take away their ability to access it entirely? We ultimately believe, consistent with our brand promise, it is more valuable for storytellers to have access to our collection to creatively and impactfully tell their stories. That is much more empowering and will better serve the people of China than the alternative.

Additionally, we believe you are also asking for something more from our Company, which is to use our voice to make the world a better place, and we are doing that regularly. We are contributing to our global community through our involvement in a number of public policy and community initiatives that will not only make Shutterstock a stronger company, but will strengthen our communities, protect our employees, and deliver on our fundamental values. To drive more attention to these initiatives, we have created a page on The Lens where you can learn more about how to get involved in these initiatives, and also provide your feedback on other policy matters that are important for our business and our networks.

We hope this message clarifies our position. We understand this is a difficult topic and perhaps we are not always going to agree on some issues – and that’s okay. As long as we continue to communicate openly and honestly with each other, we will advance our common goal of empowering creativity and helping professionals from all backgrounds and businesses of all sizes produce their best work with incredible content and innovative tools.

**WAIT! BEFORE YOU GO** on about your day, ask yourself: How likely is it that the story you just read would have been produced by a different news outlet if The Intercept hadn’t done it?

Consider what the world of media would look like without The Intercept. Who would hold party elites accountable to the values they proclaim to have? How many covert wars, miscarriages of justice, and dystopian technologies would remain hidden if our reporters weren’t on the beat?

The kind of reporting we do is essential to democracy, but it is not easy, cheap, or profitable. The Intercept is an independent nonprofit news outlet.

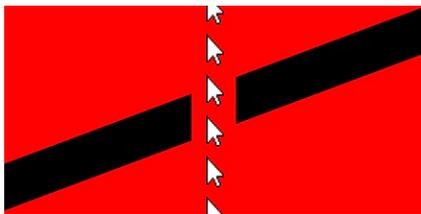
We don't have ads, so we depend on our members – 35,000 and counting – to help us hold the powerful to account. Joining is simple and doesn't need to cost a lot: You can become a sustaining member for as little as \$3 or \$5 a month. That's all it takes to support the journalism you rely on.

[Become a Member →](#)

## RELATED



**Twitter Helped Chinese Government Promote Disinformation on Repression of Uighurs**



**A New App Allows Readers in China to Bypass Censorship of The Intercept**



**How U.S. Tech Giants Are Helping to Build China's Surveillance State**



**I Quit Google Over Its Censored Chinese Search Engine. The Company Needs to Clarify Its Position on Human Rights.**