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Under Watchful Eyes: How Surveillance Collects and Disseminates Information for the State

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SURVEILLANCE TECHNOLOGY

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When we think of surveillance, we might conjure up images of the Stasi's covert operations or the shocking revelations by whistleblowers like Edward Snowden. These instances underscore a common perception: Government surveillance is secretive, largely invisible, and typically sparks public outrage and even protests when exposed.

However, the situation in China sharply contrasts with the typical narrative surrounding surveillance. Far from being hidden, surveillance is a prominent and pervasive element of daily life across the country. Cameras saturate urban environments, appearing at busy intersections and crowded public areas, all clearly signed to notify citizens of their presence and ongoing monitoring. This visibility has expanded in recent years, particularly in rural areas where surveillance cameras not only observe but also engage directly with residents, issuing corrections or reminders through a system colloquially known as "cloud speakers" (*yunlaba*). Additionally, individuals identified by red armbands (*hongxiuzhang*) or vests (*hongmajia*) routinely patrol residential neighborhoods, ready to intervene immediately when necessary.

What's particularly striking is the government framing of surveillance in China. While opponents of state surveillance in the West are often regarded as moral heroes, my research shows that the Chinese government actively associates surveillance with moral values, especially care, fairness, and authority.

This widespread expansion of surveillance, its high visibility, and interactive features suggest a deeper layer of intent beyond mere information gathering. The strong public support for surveillance also hints at it playing a broader role that goes beyond security maintenance. This raises pressing questions: What additional roles has the Chinese government attributed to these expanding surveillance measures? How do citizens perceive this omnipresent monitoring? Moreover, how is the government managing to broaden surveillance efforts while minimizing public backlash?

Beyond Digital Dystopia

While existing research[1] and media often depict China as a digital dystopia, focusing on facial recognition and AI-enhanced surveillance cameras, there's a significant yet underdiscussed aspect of the surveillance system: the extensive and continued use of human agents alongside digital advancements. As I observed during my fieldwork in Shaanxi Province in 2023, these agents were often identifiable by their red armbands or vests marked with their roles and sometimes governmental affiliations, acting as direct and tangible extensions of state presence within communities.

Local governments actively recruit for these positions through public postings on their websites. Job titles vary widely, with some focusing on general responsibilities within administrative neighborhood units, such as grid or community workers who assist residents with services and coordinate government directives. Others are more specialized, like public security joint defense officers who support police with neighborhood patrols and crime prevention, or ideological guidance officers and community public opinion monitors who promote state policies and monitor ideological compliance in local communities. Additionally, some roles specifically address monitoring certain demographics. Key population correction officers oversee individuals deemed a threat to social stability, such as those released from prison or labor camps or individuals who have participated in protests. Floating population management officers are in charge of monitoring migrant workers and their integration into urban environments. These roles reflect the highly targeted and organized nature of China's surveillance system.

Job Title (Chinese)	Job Title (English)
网格员/网格长/网格监督员	Grid Officer
社区工作者/社区专职工作者	Community Worker
治安协管员/社区协管员	Community Management Assistant
治安巡防员/治安联防员/治安联防队员	Public Security Joint Defense Officer
社区安全维稳信息员/维稳信息员	Stability Maintenance Information Officer
意识形态指导员	Ideological Guidance Officer
社区民意监测员	Community Public Opinion Monitor
重点人口矫正员/社区矫正工作者/重点人口再教育员	Key Population Correction Officer
流动人口管理员/流动人口协管员	Floating Population Management Officer

Table 1. Job titles on physical surveillance.

Although closely connected to the government and often trained by local police bureaus, these human agents are not formal government employees, which means their job security is tied directly to their performance. Their performance is evaluated through a penalty point system, where failure to meet duties can result in deductions in points and compensation. These duties include regularly visiting key populations considered potential threats to social stability, collecting and updating data on population movements, and keeping detailed records of daily inspections and patrols. Additionally, they assist with policy communication and propaganda dissemination to ensure public alignment with governmental directives. Most critically, agents are tasked with settling citizen complaints and preemptively addressing any signs of collective action to prevent escalations, and they face significant penalties for noncompliance or failure. One agent described their mission in an interview as ensuring minor issues are resolved locally, major problems are addressed at the grassroots level, and no conflicts escalate to higher authorities.

According to my interviews, many neighborhoods implement a 10-point penalty system to evaluate the monthly performance of surveillance agents. The most significant point deductions occur when agents fail to prevent resident complaints from escalating into collective action, emphasizing the importance of managing local unrest at its earliest stages.

Duties	Point Deductions (10-point penalty system)
Pay regular visits to the key population	-1
Collect and update information on the population flow	-1
Maintain records of daily inspections and patrols	-1
Assist governments with policy communication and propaganda promotion	-1
Settle citizen complaints and prevent collection action	-2 to -5

Table 2. Duties of surveillance agents and corresponding point deductions for performance failures. Source: Author’s interviews.

Leveraging their in-depth local knowledge—including community members’ concerns and fears—human agents tailor their interactions to address specific needs. My statistical analyses show that while both physical and digital surveillance reduce the occurrence of protest events, a greater presence of surveillance agents significantly lowers the likelihood of citizen complaint escalating into social unrest, whereas an increased number of surveillance cameras has no such effect. These agents adapt their communication strategies, offering reassurances and promises of attention to those discontented, while also delivering stern warnings about the consequences of noncompliance to those who may be resistant. This strategic use of information serves both to comfort and to coerce.

Human agents complement the technological tools by providing on-the-ground oversight and immediate intervention that cameras alone cannot achieve. These agents are not only trained to monitor but also to actively engage with the public, playing a pivotal role in upholding community standards and enforcing government directives. Their duties underscore that surveillance extends beyond simple data collection; they are also instrumental in disseminating state information, identifying, and mitigating potential unrest, preventing grievances from escalating into collective action.

When Monitoring Meets Morality

Surprisingly, despite the extensive and intrusive expansion of both digital and physical surveillance, Chinese citizens exhibit high levels of support for government surveillance.[2] This raises a natural question: How does the government manage to advance its surveillance agenda with minimal backlash?

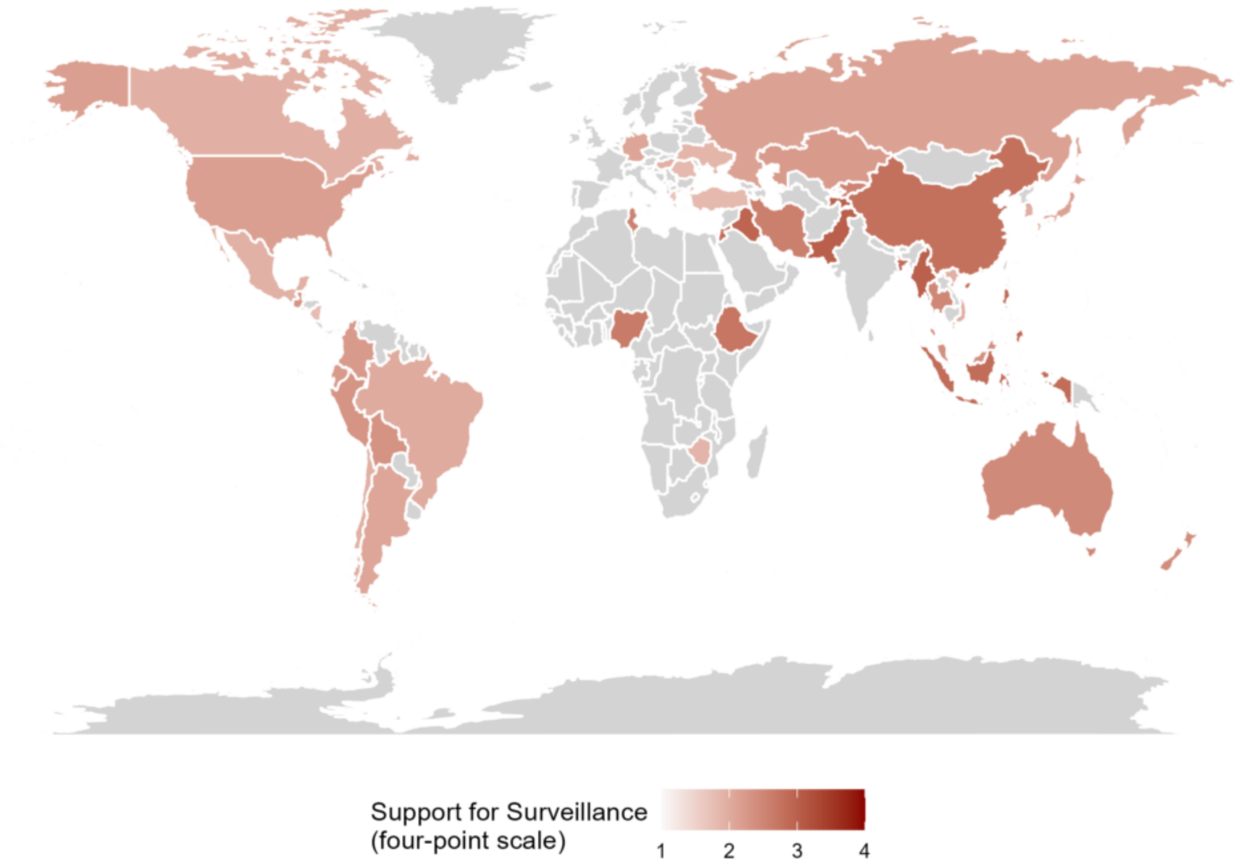

Figure 1. Data from the World Values Survey (2017–2022) shows that China is among the countries with the highest levels of support for government surveillance.

This high level of support is particularly intriguing given that conventional drivers of surveillance acceptance, such as perceived security threats or safety concerns, do not appear to significantly influence attitudes in China based on my analysis. This prompted me to look at the information environment surrounding surveillance. In China's media ecosystem, discussions around surveillance are predominantly positive with a focus on its benefits. However, what especially captures my attention is the moral framing of surveillance in government communications. Analysis of government documents and interviews with local bureaucrats responsible for surveillance programs reveals that surveillance is not only presented as a necessity for public safety but also as a morally driven endeavor.

Three distinct moral narratives have emerged from this analysis. The first narrative portrays surveillance as a means of providing care, particularly to vulnerable populations like the elderly. It suggests that surveillance cameras enable local governments or their representatives to promptly identify when and who needs assistance, facilitating timely and effective care. The second narrative promotes surveillance as a safeguard for fairness. One interviewee shared, “Without cameras, when you see an elderly person fall, you might hesitate to help, fearing they might accuse you of causing the fall. However, with cameras present, you feel more confident to assist, knowing the true sequence of events can be verified.” The third narrative views surveillance as essential for maintaining compliance with authority, making it easier to identify and address behavior that deviates from social norms or government directives.

To what extent do citizens buy into these moral framings? To find out, I conducted a survey experiment to examine how these moral narratives, drawn from real-world government documents, influence public support for expanding government surveillance. The results were telling: Each moral framing significantly enhanced support, with the narrative of care showing the most substantial increase. For example, respondents who were shown a government message explaining how digital surveillance could help provide care for the elderly and children reported an average increase in support of nearly 1 point on a seven-point scale with the weighted survey sample. Notably, this heightened support also extended to physical surveillance not mentioned in the original messaging, illustrating the broad influence of the care narrative on public attitudes. This suggests that citizens do not passively accept these moral justifications; they actively align surveillance with their moral values. Those who strongly adhere to the values of care, fairness, and authority were particularly supportive of surveillance, revealing a deep-seated connection between personal moral convictions and attitudes toward surveillance.

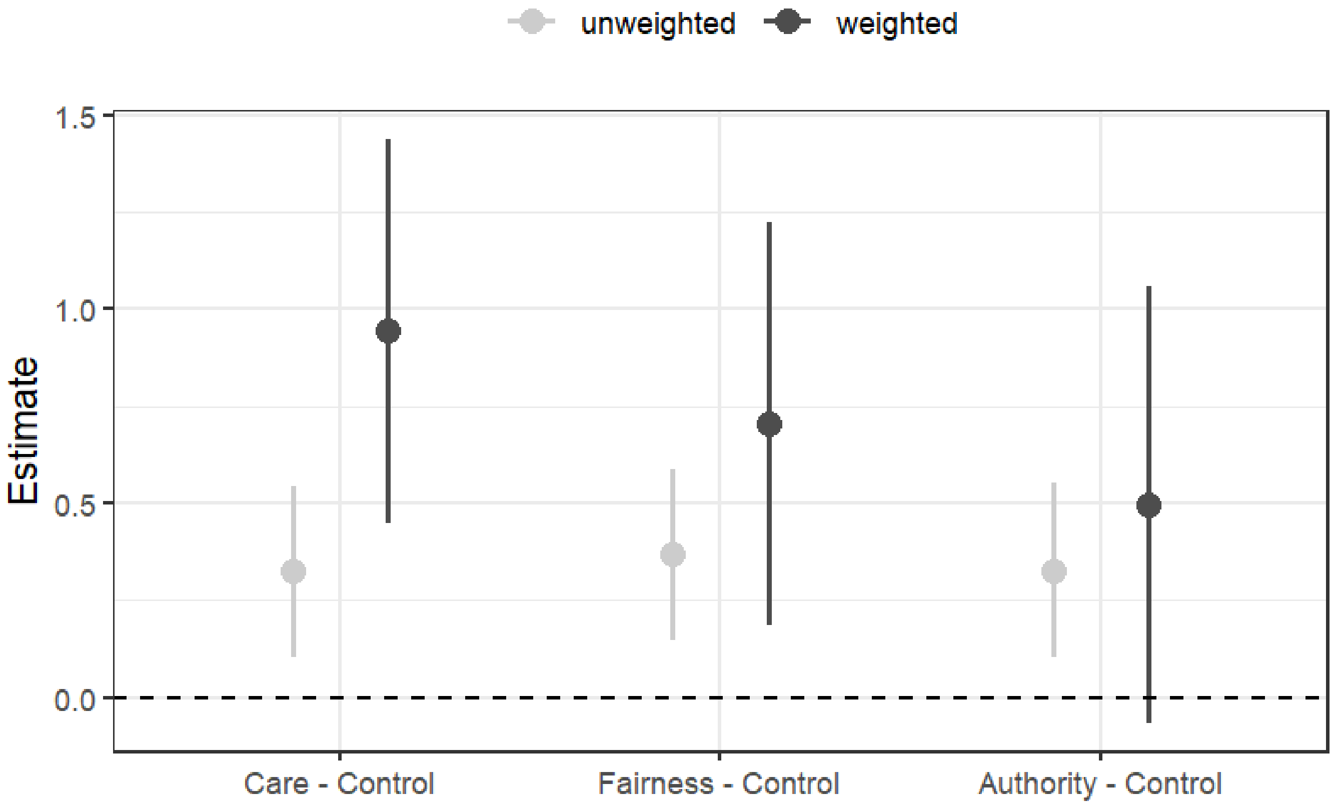

Figure 2. Average treatment effects of moral frames—care, fairness, and authority—on attitudes toward expanding government surveillance show that each frame has a significant positive effect, using both weighted and unweighted samples.

What Needs Awareness?

Through my research, it has become clear that the portrayal of a digital dystopia is far from capturing the full reality of China’s surveillance state, which deftly combines technological sophistication with intensive human monitoring. This role of government surveillance transcends mere data collection; it involves actively disseminating information, addressing grievances, and resolving instances of noncompliance as they are identified. Furthermore, surveillance is intricately linked to the moral values of Chinese citizens, not just pragmatic functions of the state. When surveillance aligns with these moral convictions, it fosters a growing acceptance and legitimization of governmental monitoring, allowing surveillance to be openly visible and still suppress public dissent.

Interestingly, it’s not that citizens are unaware of the risks associated with surveillance—such as privacy invasions or misuse of data—but rather that the perceived benefits often overshadow these concerns. My research indicates that many citizens do not feel personally at risk of being targeted by surveillance, viewing it as a remote, abstract concern rather than an immediate personal threat. This perception highlights a significant gap in public awareness—not just of the risks themselves but who could be affected. Around 46 percent of my survey respondents reported no interest in participating in political activities like petitions or protests, and the data lacked sufficient representation from ethnic minority regions like Xinjiang. While many respondents express care about privacy and the proper use of personal data, they rarely encounter relevant cases involving people like themselves, further reinforcing the belief that surveillance poses little personal threat. As surveillance practices expand globally, it’s crucial to recognize that those who are currently targeted by excessive, unnecessary surveillance could potentially be replaced by others—including those who once felt immune.

Footnotes

1 For examples, see Josh Chin and Liza Lin, *Surveillance State: Inside China’s Quest to Launch a New Era of Social Control* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2022); and Xiao Qiang, “The Road to Digital Unfreedom: President Xi’s Surveillance State,” *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 1 (January 2019): 53–67.

2 Due to data limitations, the survey responses were primarily collected from nonethnic-minority regions.