# The Review

China's Digitally Engineered Society

Surveillance State: Inside China's Quest to Launch a New Era of Social Control, by Josh Chin and Liza Lin, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2022, 312 pages, hardcover.

Xi Jinping, the leader of Communist China, is convinced that the East is rising and the West is declining, and that time and momentum are on his side. He is also, like his predecessors, deadly serious about keeping a close eye on the masses. That is a major undergirding theme of *Surveillance State: Inside China's Quest to Launch a New Era of Social Control*.
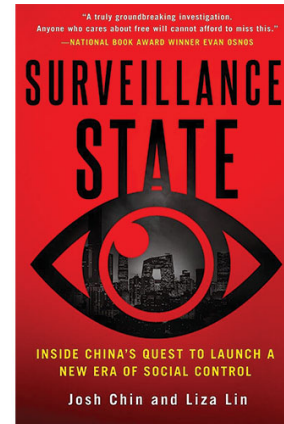
In this straightforward and generally hard-hitting volume, the authors recognize that under Xi, "the Party" — which is usually the reference used (as opposed to the "Chinese government" or "Beijing") — thinks that it has designed the blueprint only dreamed of by its rivals. "By mining insight from surveillance data," the Party believes that it can "predict what people want without having to give them a vote or a voice. By solving social problems before they occur and quashing dissent before it spills out onto the streets, it believes it can strangle opposition in the crib," they write.

If nonconformists need some additional convincing, there are ways to handle that — including interrogation in torturous "tiger chairs" or lengthy sessions of the process called *xinao* (literally "washing of the brains"). (For more on the latter practice to elicit confessions, as it occurred against American and other POWs during the Korean War in Communist Chinese prison camps, see Edward Hunter's eponymous book *Brainwashing*, first published in 1958.)

A line illustration of a tiger chair for detainees, as well as a picture of a typical internment camp — where perhaps 1.5 million people in China have been sent — is included in a photograph section of Surveillance State. There's also a copy of a mandatory personnel questionnaire for residents in Uyghur districts, used to categorize individuals as "safe," "average," or "unsafe."

Wider Aspects of Digital Authoritarianism

A central aspect of the volume focuses on China's western Xinjiang province, where Uyghurs and other ethnic and religious minorities have suffered mass internments and other human-rights abuses. The Party has justified its actions as necessary to contain the (very exaggerated) threat of Turkic Muslim Uyghur terrorism.

The book also covers other parts of China, as well as African countries (Uganda in particular), where China's Belt and Road Initiative and exports by Chinese companies have had an impact. We get details

on China's ubiquitous social credit system — where the credit scoring includes "political compliance, as well as hobbies, lifestyle, and the behavior of friends." The Western growth and exporting of facial and voice recognition technology is examined, and also covered is how the Covid pandemic and lockdown was a boon to China's surveillance industry, which has included using temperature-detecting drones, allegedly to see if targeted people had a fever.

The authors have not made this a one-track story about oppression. They look at the other side of technology, such as in the more prosperous city of Hangzhou, where the elite seem to get relatively utopian treatment. As the writers note, they have covered both the "totalitarian darkness" of Xinjiang and the wealthy coast area "to show how the same algorithmic controls can terrorize or coddle depending on who and where you are."

Co-author Josh Chin is deputy bureau chief in China for *The Wall Street Journal*; he previously served as a reporter for that paper for more than a decade, leading an award-winning team exposing China's digital surveillance in 2017 and 2018. Co-author Liza Lin, a member of that team, covers data use and privacy for *The Wall Street Journal* from Singapore. For this book, they take a deep and broad dive — conducting interviews of 150 people in 14 countries. (Within the text, the authors don't usually become part of the narrative, using the pronoun "we" when it is necessary to make observations.)

Repression in Xinjiang

Their concentrating on one family, led by Tahir Hamut in Urumqi (nearly 2,000 miles from Beijing), helps to give faces to the many who are suffering. The family escaped from Xinjiang in 2017 and now lives in the United States. Hamut, a poet and filmmaker, became a target of the state because he was seen to represent an independent Uyghur identity.

Readers get a taste of why widely instituted facial-recognition technology became a threat to him. It was now possible for the state

> to automatically and simultaneously compare face prints from thousands of camera feeds and security checkpoints against a blacklist with tens of thousands of names in just a few seconds — swift enough to track people in real time as they moved across the city [of Urumqi]. In China, the technology could be linked to the country's national ID database to create what was in effect a digital lineup of more than a billion people.

The creation of the surveillance state came in stages. People started to disappear. Cellphones became one means for the Party to keep control. Police officials at desks on sidewalks could demand that pedestrians surrender their smartphones, which could then be plugged into scanning devices that were given the labels of "Anti-Terrorism Swords." These devices, we read,

> searched for more than 53,000 identifiers of Islamic or political activity. Anyone whose phone has a copy of the Koran, encrypted chat apps like WhatsApp, or a virtual private network for getting around the country's internet filters would be taken in for interrogation. Even photos of Turkish film characters were enough to get someone dragged into a police station.

> Homes weren't much safer. Police had started making daily visits to some families to scan

their QR codes and search for unapproved guests.

Eventually, Hamut and his family wound up in a Uyghur community in northern Virginia. As a result, five remaining relatives of Hamut and his wife were sent to reeducation camps in China, and only released in late 2019. Photographs of them, say the authors, evoke pictures of "Japanese POW camps or Jews rescued from Auschwitz, pale and gaunt."

Xi Jinping (AP Images)

Reprogramming Uyghurs

The horrendous mistreatment of the Muslim Uyghurs is not unique. In fact, to lead the effort against the Uyghurs, the communists leaned on the same official (Chen Quanguo) who had helped secure ultimate control over Tibet. Chen also burned the books of the Falun Gong movement and led the purging of errant Party members in Henan province, where the Party constructed "Reeducation Through Labor" camps. (It would have improved the book to have had a better map — there is one — showing details in such areas.)

Part of the anti-Uyghur campaign in Xinjiang included the introduction of widely scattered, euphemistically named "convenience police stations." As the authors note, the beneficiaries of this "convenience" were "Party leaders looking for a more efficient way to exert control over the Uyghur population."

The first official to be given the top slot in both Tibet and Xinjiang, Chen "wasted little time" in the latter, write the authors. During his

> first four months in charge, he built 4,900 convenience police stations — giving Xinjiang twenty times as many police stations per capita as Chicago — the vast majority in neighborhoods dominated by Uyghurs. He would order construction of at least 2,800 more over the following year and a half. Each police station was connected to a network of surveillance cameras.

Surveillance led to construction of "transformation through education" centers. We learn how, assisted

by government documents, "suspicious" people got flagged (24,000 during one week in 2017); two-thirds of those were detained (some arrested and sent to prison); and around 15,000 were dispatched to the new facilities.

The Party bosses are not trying to "eradicate" the Uyghurs, write the authors, but rather are "attempting to reprogram them."

What's going on in such places? Ethnic Kazakhs who had been held in the camps and later made it across the border to Kazakhstan, told what happened to them. One former detainee, we read,

> described being bound to a chair for up to nine hours at a time and interrogated about links to religious groups abroad. Afterward, he and other inmates would be roused at 4:00 A.M. and forced to go on forty-five-minute runs, shouting, "The Communist Party is good!" Breakfast was bread and barely flavored soup. The rest of the day was taken up by political study, which involved reading Communist Party documents, watching videos of Xi Jinping, and singing patriotic songs. They were told to not pray or fast during Ramadan.

There's much more in that vein. All activities are constantly monitored. Others from other camps gave similar accounts. Various estimates put the numbers of those interned at a million or more, perhaps a tenth of Xinjiang's Muslim population.

Western Partners

The scope of the book goes beyond China's borders; it also reviews some not-so-distant history. It brings to mind the oft-apt Santayana aphorism about those who cannot remember the past being condemned to repeat it.

Recalling IBM's early collaboration with Nazi Germany, the authors draw some similar parallels between Western companies and investors and the Chinese Communist Party's surveillance state. In this regard, the authors make use of research by, among others, Greg Walton in his 2001 book *China's Golden Shield: Corporations and the Development of Surveillance Technology in the People's Republic of China*.

For example, Chin and Lin mention the Golden Shield project by which the Ministry of State Security in China sought to upgrade the Great Firewall of internet filtering. Western firms flocked for a piece of the action; the authors point to American companies Cisco Systems, Motorola, and Sun Microsystems; Germany's Siemens; and Canada's Nortel Networks.

Here were some of the big players serving as midwives at the beginning of the Party's surveillance state. At the time, we read, China was

> already buying close to $20 billion of Silicon Valley's original telecommunications equipment from foreign firms, according to Walton's calculations. Sun Microsystems, one of Silicon Valley's original computer and software success stories, helped the Ministry of Public Security build a national fingerprint database. Nortel, one of North America's dominant makers of networking gear at the time, provided state-owned Shanghai Telecom with state-of-the-art equipment that allowed the Chinese Telecom to filter out unwanted URLs at the point where individual subscribers accessed the internet, allowing for fine-

tuned censorship.

American academe also boosted the Party, and/or was exploited by it.

Years later, under the Trump administration, as the authors point out, American officials did try "to prohibit sales of advanced American companies, with limited success."

One of the book's relatively few weaknesses is in its conclusions, which mention, among others, the "allure of algorithmic simplicity." After marshalling scads of evidence as ammunition, there's more of a whimper than a bang at the end.

The authors suggest that the answer for the abuses of surveillance technology might be found in "Europe's privacy law," which is rooted, we are assured, in "international human rights law." They don't seem that credulous, if it is indeed naïvete, in other regards.

Book schedules are long-term propositions and can't cover events that happen after publication. But there are some recent "international human rights" actions worthy of mention. The Chinese Communist Party continues to abuse the Uyghurs and others, yet the United Nations Human Rights Council in October voted to not even discuss the findings of abuse made by its own commissioner. China is one of the council's big dogs, and its lobbying worked. Lapdogs such as Cuba and Venezuela took Beijing's side. Ukraine was one of the abstentions. Several nations with Muslim majorities (Indonesia, Pakistan, Qatar, and the United Arab Republic) were among those voting "no."

Those latter countries, suggested the editors of *The Wall Street Journal*, either "don't want to offend China or are on the hook as part of its Belt and Road Initiative." If that Human Rights Council cannot pass a "motion merely to open discussion on China's abuses in Xinjiang," continued the editors, "there's no reason for it to exist, or for the United States to continue to be a member." Better yet would be getting out of the United Nations itself — a story for another day.

— William P. Hoar

New American

Written by **Staff** on December 6, 2022

Published in the December 26, 2022 issue of the New American magazine. Vol. 38, No. 24

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