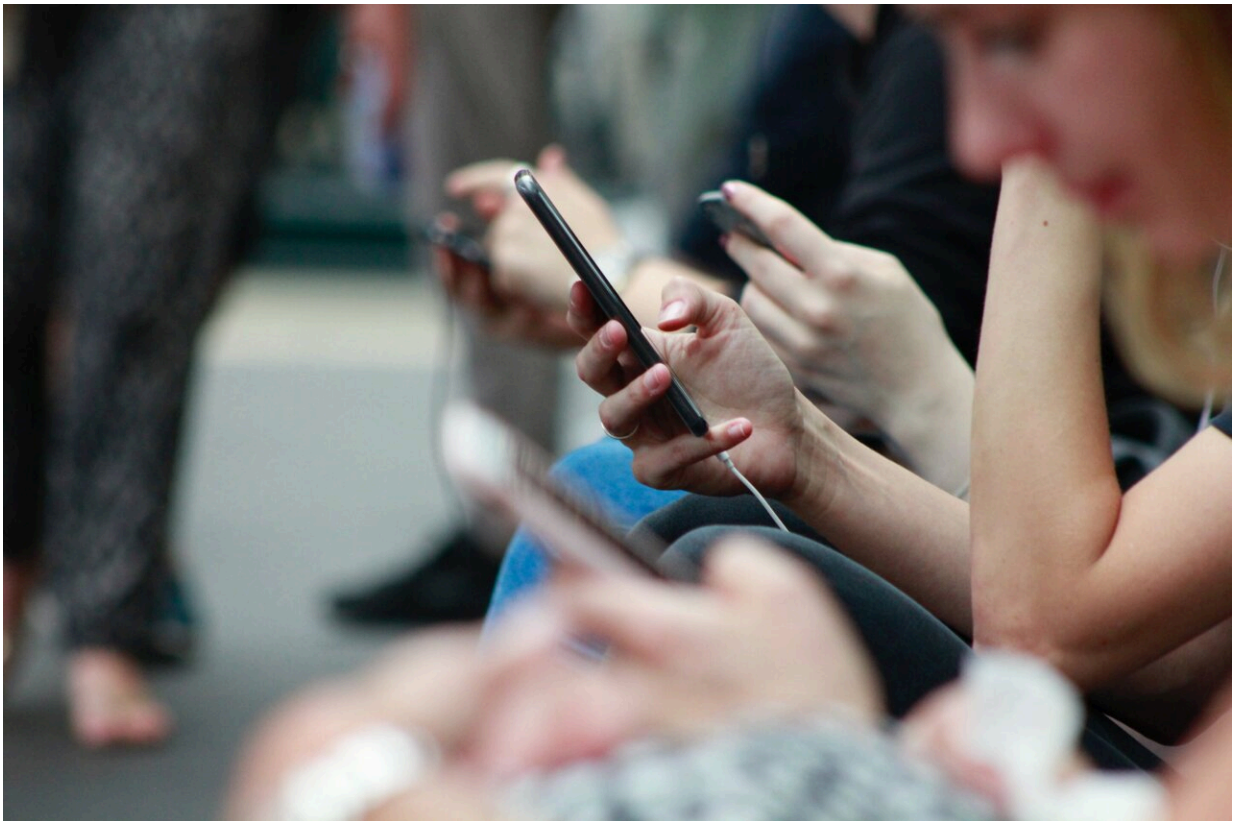# Digital surveillance is omnipresent in China. How citizens are coping

March 14 2024, by Ariane Ollier-Malaterre

Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Do you ever think about the digital footprint you leave when you are browsing the web, shopping online, commenting on social networks or going by a facial recognition camera?

State surveillance of citizens is growing all over the world, but it is a fact of everyday life in China, where it has deep historical roots.

In China, almost nothing is paid for in cash anymore. Super apps make life easy: people use Alipay or WeChat Pay to pay for subway or bus tickets, rent a bike, hail a taxi, shop online, book trains and shows, split the bill at restaurants and even pay their taxes and utility bills.

The Chinese also use these platforms to check the news, entertain themselves and exchange countless text, audio and video messages, both personal and professional. Everything is linked to the user's mobile phone number, which is itself registered under their identity. The government may access the data collected by Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, Xiaomi and other operators.

Much has been written about blacklists (listing authors of "trust-breaking" behaviors, such as not settling one's debts), redlists (listing authors of commendable behaviors, such as volunteering) and commercial and public "social credit" systems. However, recent research has shown that these systems are still fragmented and scattered in terms of data collection and analysis. They also rely at least partly on manual rather than digitized or algorithmic processes, with little capacity to build integrated citizen profiles through compiling all the available data.

How do Chinese citizens experience this constant surveillance? In my book "Living with Digital Surveillance in China: Citizens' Narratives on Technology, Privacy and Governance," I present research I conducted in China in 2019. Specifically, the book is based on 58 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Chinese participants recruited through colleagues at three universities in Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu.

Unmasking and punishing violators, improving

morality

Like my colleagues [Genia Kostka](#) and [Chuncheng Liu](#), I discovered that many participants in my research frame surveillance as indispensable for solving China's problems.

Underpinning this support is a coherent system of anguishing narratives, to which redemptive narratives respond. The anguishing narratives emphasize the moral shortcomings that the research participants attribute to China: almost every participant brought up the ["lack of moral quality"](#) of their fellow citizens, whom they said behaved like children with little moral sense.

In the context of this shame-inducing narrative, surveillance is framed as a welcome solution to enforce the rules by punishing violators and getting people to behave better. According to the participants, moral shortcomings are responsible for the ["century of humiliations"](#) that China has experienced since the Opium Wars and the Japanese invasions; according to this discourse, "civilizing" the population will enable China to gain the international recognition it so ardently desires.

Finally, wanting to protect privacy was often seen by participants as a [desire to hide shameful secrets in order to save face](#). Here too, surveillance is viewed positively, as a tool to unmask shady behaviors and promote morality.

These three narratives of shame and fear are countered by two redemptive ones, that serve as an antidote: that of the [government as a protective figure](#), i.e., one that acts like a benevolent parent who guarantees the security and prosperity of its children, and the resolutely techno-optimistic one of [technology as a magic bullet](#) where technological advances is credited as the potential to solve all of China's problems, and as a civilizing force that will propel China towards

international recognition.

Four types of mental tactics for distancing oneself from surveillance

Yet the people I spoke to also expressed [frustration, fear and anger](#) about state surveillance. Almost 90 percent of them adopted one or more [mental tactics](#) to distance, and mentally protect themselves, from surveillance.

In my analysis I identified four different types of tactics:

1—Brushing surveillance aside

- Denying or minimizing the existence of surveillance: "Nobody is watching. The government does not want to spend money to pay people to watch all the time. When they need it, they check; otherwise, no one is watching."
- Ignoring it: "If I don't like the loss of privacy and freedom, I choose to ignore it, I don't think of it." Or: "Yes, it's true, but it does not harm me. It does not remind me all the time. Sometimes I choose to ignore it."
- Normalizing it: "In China everyone shares their credit card information, their address, their ID. We feel secure."; "Most governments use social media as a tool to spy."
- Redefining restrictions as temporary, or as occurring less than in the past, or less for oneself than for others, such as civil servants. Some redefine freedom itself: "It's the country that makes the laws, the regulations, it's like that in all countries. Other behaviors are a matter of my freedom, for example what I'm going to have for lunch."

2—Othering surveillance targets

- Because I'm just an ordinary citizen: "I'm not a big potato, there's no need for people to intentionally find me."
- Or because I'm a good person and "the blacklist is just for criminals": "We think that improving public behavior will make the environment and surroundings better for us, for the ones who obey the rules in the first place."

3—Wearing blinders

- By focusing on everyday life: "Most people don't care about these things. They care about money and power."
- Or, by focusing on the present: "We can't live without Zhifu [Alipay], or Didi. We have facial recognition, CCTV is everywhere. It won't harm me at present, so far, it does not do actual harm, so I'm not that concerned."

4—Resorting to fatalism

"Nobody can avoid it… I don't know how to avoid this risk, I just accept it."; "We think it's useless to spend time discussing the social credit system since we can't change it."

The cognitive and emotional weight of surveillance

In short, the way the Chinese citizens I spoke to experience digital surveillance is characterized by strong psychic tensions: the same persons who support surveillance as being indispensable in the Chinese context are also and nevertheless expressing the heavy burden that coping with such exposure places on them.

This weight is both cognitive, as evidenced by the range of self-protective mental tactics to dissociate oneself from surveillance, and emotional, as conveyed in participants' strong emotions and [particularly telling body language](#).

So, what about us? We, in Western liberal democracies, are also exposed to digital surveillance. And our surveillance ideas are also shaped by our own socio-political, cultural, and economic contexts, with significant variations across different Western societies. My work suggests that some of our own privacy and surveillance narratives are quite close to the Chinese ones, while others clearly differ.

What about you? How do you see your own relationship to digital surveillance?

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