PRIVACY LOST
Appropriating surveillance technology in China’s fight against COVID-19
China's unprecedented measures to mobilize its diverse surveillance apparatus played a key part in the country's successful containment of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Critics worldwide believe these invasive technologies, in the hands of an authoritarian regime, could trample the right to privacy and curb fundamental civil and human rights. However, there is little domestic public resistance in China about technology-related privacy risks during the pandemic.

Drawing on academic research and a semantic network analysis of media frames, Jun Liu, Associate Professor at the University of Copenhagen, and Hui Zhao, Senior Lecturer at Lund University explore the contextual political and cultural belief systems that determine public support for authorities’ ever-expanding access to personal data. They interrogate the longer-term trajectories – including the guardian model of governance, sociotechnical imagination of technology, and communitarian values – by which the understanding of technology and privacy in times of crisis has been shaped. China’s actions shed light on the general acceptance of the handover of personal data for anti-epidemic purposes in East Asian societies like South Korea and Singapore.

**Key Takeaways**

- Three different perspectives can explain the lack of public resistance to the increased surveillance during the pandemic:
  - The guardianship model of governance highlights the state in a paternalistic role as the protector of the Chinese people.
  - The cultural horizon of technology in China view technology as beneficial to national development and the nationwide battle against COVID-19.
  - Communitarianism emphasizes that collective interests and sacrifice for "the greater good" is more important than individual right.

_Keywords: China, Covid-19, lockdown, public surveillance._
PRIVACY LOST:
Appropriating surveillance technology in China’s fight against COVID-19

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The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic not only poses unprecedented threats to global health and human well-being but also raises significant concerns about data and privacy breaches. This is largely due to the deployment of technological surveillance and tracking measures worldwide to help slow the spread of the disease. Among countries that have introduced pandemic-related surveillance, China is a remarkable example that has mustered the digital contact tracing and health surveillance resources at its disposal to mitigate the effects of the virus to a significant extent (Cadell, 2020; Wu et al., 2020). A slew of surveillance systems – from drones to CCTV cameras, from digital barcodes to geospatial information on mobile apps – have established the country’s extensive, aggressive virus-tracking system.

Not without controversy, the surveillance system has prompted a storm of international concern and criticism of the invasive technologies used by an authoritarian regime in ways that could trample the right to privacy and data protection and repressively curb other fundamental civil and human rights (Huang, 2020; Singer & Sang-Hun, 2020). Yet, compared to the increased concern elsewhere (Sweeney, 2020), there is little public resistance and criticism domestically about technology-related privacy and surveillance risks during the pandemic in China. Chinese people seem to consent to the government’s expansive virus-tracking policy (Mozur et al., 2020). Are Chinese people “comfortable with outright surveillance” (Huang, 2020) by the state, or tolerant of the government’s digital measures that would lead to the infringement of privacy rights and freedoms while stemming the epidemic? If so, why?

To answer these questions, this article explores the terrain in which the understanding of state, technology, and privacy has been shaped concerning their social and historical context in China. An analytical framework consisting of three aspects – a high level of expectation and confidence in state intervention based on the guardian model of governance, a cultural horizon of technology through which technologies are intertwined with nation-building and national rejuvenation, and a communitarian tradition with less concern over individual rights – offers a much needed understanding of the myth behind Chinese people’s obedience to the authorities’ ever-expanding access to personal data and cybersecurity during the pandemic.
The Guardian Model of Governance

One of the biggest concerns with epidemiological tracing measures is intrusive state surveillance into citizen privacy. State surveillance carried out by either democratic or authoritarian regimes involves “the monitoring, collecting, and/or processing of personal data by a government” (Eck & Hatz, 2020, p. 604). While such surveillance on people’s location, activity, or biometrics is largely and increasingly used for the containment of the coronavirus, it also significantly expands state power with greater social and political control over citizens. Such control risks infringing fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and the right to privacy, as well as entrenching power imbalances between the national governments and its citizens.

Nevertheless, this concern about all-powerful states does not appear to be relevant in the case of China. Rather, the guardian model of governance (Lu & Shi, 2015; Shi & Lu, 2010) – which promotes paternalistic leadership – generates a favorable or supportive condition for the Chinese regime to impose, in this case, tech-enabled state surveillance during a public health crisis. Studies on the China-specific political model have consistently revealed that the regime enjoys a substantially higher level of political trust, popular support, and confidence, despite the lack of the institutional fixtures of a representative democracy. For instance, the Asian Barometer Survey showed a high percentage of respondents trust and obey the Chinese government (Steinhardt, 2012). To account for the pattern of political support and regime legitimacy, scholars have adopted Dahl’s (2008, pp. 52-53) term government by guardians, “a perennial alternative to democracy,” to scrutinize the influence of Confucian values on Chinese politics. The guardianship model of governance entails the persistence of paternalistic power, including obedience to political authority (Pye & Pye, 2009) and superior-inferior relationships (Pye, 1999). Shi and Lu (2010, p. 125) explained the Chinese theory of government in this way:

Under the steady hand of elites according to Confucianism, which holds (like all ‘guardian’ concepts of governance) that ‘rulership should be entrusted to a minority of persons who are specially qualified to govern by reason of their superior knowledge and virtue.’

More specifically, the guardianship discourse advocates that “the guardians be endowed with the discrentional power and authority that is necessary to make decisions on public issues” (Lu & Shi, 2015, p. 25).

Against this backdrop, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has been deliberately indoctrinating the Chinese people within the guardianship discourse to embrace paternalistic leadership that gives rulers discretionary power in policymaking. For instance, the survey found that high proportions of citizens agree or strongly agree with statements such as “You can generally trust the people who run our government to do what is right;” “You can generally trust decisions made by the central government;” or “The government can be trusted to do what is right without our having to constantly check on them” (Wang, 2005, p. 158). Such guardian discourse further diverts people’s attention away from the role of the institutions, procedures, or routines of a democratic system to “the substance and outcomes of its [the regime’s] policies,” or “what a government does – how well it performs and cares for its people – is more important than how it came to be” (Shi...
Subsequently, the guardianship discourse convinces subordinates to believe – and welcome – that the state should intervene in civil society for the sake of social benefits and judge the governance capacity in terms of the outcomes.

This guardianship model of governance is particularly exemplified in the politics of public emergencies and disasters in China (Lyu, 2012; Xu, 2016; Zhao et al., 2017). As studies have uncovered, the politics of public emergencies and disasters consists of two key issues: paternalistic compassion and accountability (Xu, 2016, p. 420). Paternalistic compassion speaks to a continued strong, prevailing public expectation that the “rulers’ primary obligation is to benevolently and sympathetically protect and enhance the subsistence rights of the ruled as a collective good” (Hung, 2013, p. 196) in precarious situations. Accountability, then, indicates that the authorities must demonstrate that they were accountable for the people’s suffering, hence directing public attention towards the state’s effective response (Xu, 2016, p. 424). In turn, by projecting a publicly expected image as a “grandpa state” (Xu, 2016, p. 421) to safeguard its “children” (Zhao et al., 2017, p. 369), the state makes efforts to secure popular approval, maintain its legitimacy, and strengthen its resilience. We thereby ask our first research question: How do media discourses implicate the guardianship model of governance beneath their narratives in COVID-19 coverage?

The Cultural Horizon of Technology

Apart from the concern over the surveillance state, the large-scale collection, use, sharing, and further processing of vast amounts of personal and nonpersonal data for purposes related to the COVID-19 response has drawn criticism from civil society groups and nongovernmental organizations, which have labeled the pandemic surveillance tech “privacy-infringing” (Ienca & Vayena, 2020, p. 463) technologies. Yet, a different language that articulates the “cultural horizons” (Feenberg, 1992, p. 307) of technology – or more precisely, a sociotechnical imaginary (Jasanoff & Kim, 2009, 2013) that ties technology with national development in China – offers another essential framework for the sense-making and acceptance of the massive adoption of a digital contact tracing apparatus to monitor individuals’ movements.

Feenberg (1992, p. 307) said that although “technology ought to be subject to interpretation like any other cultural artifact . . . [w]e are assured that its essence lies in a technically explainable function rather than a hermeneutically interpretable meaning.” The technically explainable function, or “social meaning” of technology (Feenberg, 1992, p. 307), indicates the goal of the technology but leaves no room for its meaning in its concrete social context. Instead, the hermeneutically interpretable meaning, or the “cultural horizon” of technology, manifests “culturally general assumptions that form the unquestioned background to every aspect of life” (Feenberg, 1992, p. 309). These assumptions condition, shape, or constrain the adoption and development of technology, hence making “technology’s contextual causes and consequences visible rather than obscuring them behind an impoverished functionalism” (Feenberg, 1992, p. 308).
One way to uncover the cultural horizon of technology beyond functionalism is through an exploration of sociotechnical imaginaries. Sociotechnical imaginaries encapsulate “collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology” (Jasanoff, 2015, p. 4). In other words, the visions of desirable futures regarding a specific technology – “typically grounded in positive visions of social progress” (Jasanoff, 2015, p. 4) – epitomize culturally general assumptions and norms for such technology and further guide technological development.

Scientific and technological development has been intertwined with visions of nation-building and national rejuvenation among social elites and political leaders in the modernization of China (Elman, 2009). This emerged as early as 1862 and especially grew after the defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895 (Kuo & Liu, 1978) when the adoption of Western (military) technology was regarded as “the primary task” for the “self-strengthening (Ziqiang)” movement of Chinese state-building (Kuo & Liu, 1978, p. 492). The first populist movement – The May Fourth Movement in 1919 – that pursued China’s modernity exalted Western ideas, Mr. De (“democracy”) and Mr. Sai (“science”), as the only ways to revive China (Poo, 2019). Likewise, Mitter (2005, p. 233) observed “a strong romanticist tinge in the tendency to glorify industrial technology...for the virility and power which it seemed to offer the nation” in the transition from pre-modern to modern.

China’s modernity exalted Western ideas, Mr. De (“democracy”) and Mr. Sai (“science”), as the only ways to revive China (Poo, 2019). For instance, the Chinese propaganda apparatus launched a full-swing campaign in the 1980s to promote Deng’s famous theory that “science and technology constitute a primary productive force” (Yang, 2018). Science and technology were viewed as nothing but the driving force behind economic development (Song, 2008, p. 236). Through mass media and institutions, the government has constructed dominant discourses like “rejuvenating China by technology and education” (Na, 2003), “enhancing trade by relying on science and technology” (Fan & Watanabe, 2006, p. 307), and, most recently, the ambitious plan “Made in China 2025,” through which China aims to become a self-reliant technology power by reducing its reliance on foreign technology (Wübbeke et al., 2016). In short, the discourses encompass a sociotechnical imaginary of technology as a means and promise of rejuvenating the country. This discourse, as Liu (2005, p. 309) argued, “excludes any other alternative version of science and technology and exempts any challenge of the ‘power’ of science and technology.”

With these specifications in mind, we ask the next research question: How do media discourses elicit the specific sociotechnical imaginaries in which technologies are intertwined with nation-building and national rejuvenation beneath their narratives in
The Communitarian Tradition

Privacy protections have been portrayed as one of the victims of COVID-19 (Meyer, 2020; Singer & Sang-Hun, 2020) as the fight against the pandemic has introduced aggressive and evolving mass digital surveillance measures to record and transmit personal health and geolocation data that may involve personally identifiable information (Sharma & Bashir, 2020). While debates heat up in Western countries regarding whether key tenets of democracy, especially the protection of the fundamental right to privacy, should be set aside during the pandemic to enable a more effective response, Asian societies – including Singapore, South Korea, Hong Kong, and the Chinese mainland – have been successful in curbing the spread of the virus, with their populations being “more accepting of smartphone app-based digital tracing... despite the privacy incursions” (Cha, 2020, p. 2). The answer to the acceptance of technologically enhanced surveillance, despite the issue of privacy and cybersecurity breach, has less to do with regime type and more to do with communitarian citizenship (Etzioni, 1996; Janoski, 2014).

Communitarianism is a social philosophy that underlines the importance of a community or society-based definition of the common good and shared value (Etzioni, 1996, 2007, 2014). Often considered in contrast to liberalism, which advocates the centrality of the individual, communitarianism prioritizes community and societal interests over those of the individual. As Taylor (1995, p. 186) explicated, in essence, “[t]he ethic central to a liberal society is an ethic of the right rather than the good,” with basic principles involving “the respect of individual rights and freedoms.” In other words, liberalism “does not in the first instance define what goods the society will further” (Taylor, 2003, p. 197). Rather, individuals should formulate the goods “on their own, without membership in, influence from, or regard for a community” (Etzioni, 1996, p. 4). By contrast, communitarianism takes a community-oriented perspective to support “a sense of a shared immediate common good” (Taylor, 2003, p. 200). It is collective-based units such as the family, schools, and associations – all parts of communities – that articulate shared conceptions of the good. After determining the shared values or the common good, “communities command centripetal forces that seek to pull in members’ commitments, energies, time, and resources for what the community as a collectivity endorses as its notion of the common good” (Etzioni, 1996, p. 5). Subsequently, from a communitarian standpoint, the centripetal forces push the communities and other social entities toward collectivism (Etzioni, 1996, p. 9).

Scholars address the communitarian tradition when expounding the distinctive Chinese pattern of state-individual relations (Pye, 1991, p. 446) and citizenship in China. Pye (1991, p. 446) suggested that “the dominant feature of Confucianism was a pervasive hostility to the notion of personal autonomy and individualism. . . there was no notion of individual rights” in China. Consequently, “in China's cultural tradition, individuals have always been closely linked with society . . . [and] individuals
have never been placed above society, and the values of individuals have always been unified with the responsibilities of society” (Pye, 1991,). China’s collectivist culture subsequently glorifies the common good – defined mostly by the (Party-)state as “an expression of the majority interests of society” (Pye, 1991, p. 447) – and praises self-sacrifice in the face of public good (Egri & Ralston, 2004) as selflessness, a virtuous form of communitarianism. A crucial rhetoric for public mobilization, the advocacy of communitarian virtues like duty, responsibility, and self-sacrifice soars during crises and disasters like the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak (Ding, 2014), the Sichuan Earthquake (Rosen, 2009; Sorace, 2016), and the COVID-19 pandemic (Palko & Xiang, 2020, p. 206). These types of events cultivate a deep commitment to taking collective action (Xinhua Net, 2020). Given this, we ask the third research question (RQ3): How do media discourses portray the state-individual relationship and, especially, communitarianism beneath their narratives in COVID-19 coverage?

Discussion

While concern is increasing in the West over privacy trade-offs with rush-to-release data surveillance applications for the ongoing COVID-19 health crisis, less controversy has unfolded in China over the privacy and security of such applications beyond public health utilities. Less is known about why Chinese people are tolerant of such surveillance tools – along with the regime’s expansive tracking policy – that also gives the regime a great deal of power over and knowledge about its people (Huang, 2020). In this study, we propose a framework with three aspects to understand the lack of concern over privacy risks in China. We support our proposed framework with exploratory results from a semantic network analysis of media coverage of COVID-19 in the Chinese mainland.

Cultural orientations provide the setting for politics, while the relationship of society to the state is a part of political culture (Moody, 1994, p. 735). Our first question concerns the guardianship model of governance
media narratives in COVID-19 coverage. As illustrated in the analysis, the state has been described, with its paternalistic role, as the pivotal actor in caring for and serving the people through various activities – such as policies and R&D – in the campaign against COVID-19. In figure 4, terms like “治理 (governance),” “安全 (safety),” and “稳定 (stable)” not only imply paternalistic meritocracy as the outcome of the guardian model of governance, but they also legitimize the guardian role of the (Party-)state in China through evaluation of government policies dealing with COVID-19 in people’s daily life.

“A government for the people, rather than government by the people” (Shi & Lu, 2010, pp. 123-130), is further illustrated in the association between the words “elder” and “service” in the service concept cluster. The pandemic exacerbated the digital divide, particularly for China’s rapidly aging population, as elders without smartphones or who do not know how to use a health QR code are encountering many inconveniences in daily life or even finding it nearly impossible to travel with public transportation (China Global Television Network, 2020). The state subsequently responded with solutions – exemplified by terms like “简化 (simplify)” and “便利 (convenient)” – for this tech dilemma to help seniors, and the words “服务 (service)” and “老年人 (elder)” then marked the media frame for a government that considers people’s interests when making decisions. This, in turn, would facilitate Chinese people’s acceptance of and subsequent expectations for the state in terms of the guardianship discourse (Lu & Shi, 2015), rather than democratic institutions and procedures. As Cha (2020, p. 12) explained, in a public health emergency like COVID-19, when “the government’s responsibility” to provide services meets with demands from the public, society gains confidence, and civic trust in the regime increases. In short, the acceptance of state surveillance in China, which is well-equipped with data applications, is embedded in the country’s unique sociopolitical environment and cultural heritage and is thus significantly different from Western norms and values built around individual freedom and rights.

Our second research question queries the specific sociotechnical imaginaries in which technologies are intertwined with nation-building and national rejuvenation to underpin media narratives in COVID-19 coverage.
The culturally general assumptions (Feenberg, 1992, p. 309) of technologies thus determine the sensemaking process of pandemic-related surveillance technologies. Such sensemaking and social imaginaries are exemplified through words like “推动 (enhance),” “提升 (improve),” “创新 (innovation),” “助力 (boost),” “赋能 (empower),” and “加强 (reinforce),” all of which imply that the employment of state imposed surveillance technologies and policies is both a necessity and a promise to contain the pandemic.

As said, social imaginaries suggest particular ways in which people view their relationships with artifacts – in this case, public health surveillance. Our analysis reveals that the media frame on surveillance technology mirrors the general cultural horizon of technology in China. Underneath the acceptance of the politics of surveillance technologies is, without question, a sociotechnical imaginary rooted in a nationally bounded collective vision in China that pushes the adoption of such technologies as mandatory for wide distribution in everyday situations. The controversies around surveillance technologies in the West center on their benefits as bounded, while its risks are unpredicted and unmanageable (Ram & Gray, 2020; Singer & Sang-Hun, 2020). The sociotechnical imaginary of COVID-19 surveillance technology in China, however, represents a sense of cultural continuity with the view of technology as beneficial to national development and, in this case, to the nationwide battle against COVID-19.

The semantic analysis further disclosed the positive outcomes of technological adoption as the only emphasis in the media framed “创新 (innovation),” “智慧 (wise),” “提升 (improve),” “助力 (boost),” “赋能 (empower),” “智能 (intelligence),” and “保障 (safeguard)” – regardless of the accountability mechanisms over, for instance, data collection, analysis, storage, and removal. Concerns such as state interference or technology-driven solutions, including voluntarily surrendered personal data, have been addressed with sufficient procedural safeguards as illustrated in words like “优化 (optimize),” “完善 (perfect),” “维护 (maintain),” and “整治 (overhaul)” – but specification requirements enacted remain largely unspecified. Although worrying reports about leaks of personal data have emerged, the legitimacy of government surveillance derives from “what a government does” (Shi & Lu, 2010, p. 126) instead of the procedures of governance. To sum up, the continued strong faith in technology and administrative reasoning in
To sum up, the continued strong faith in technology and administrative reasoning in the media frame not only underpins but also buttresses the shared sensemaking embedded in the country’s imaginary on surveillance technologies in the COVID-19 campaign.

We asked our third research question regarding communitarianism beneath media frames in news coverage of COVID-19. As our analysis uncovered, terms addressing collectivism and communitarianism occupied more prominent positions than personal privacy concerns. This signifies the broad support for and cooperation with collective interest through individual responsibility, fidelity, and even sacrifice in the COVID-19 campaign (He et al., 2020). This media frame resonates with, for instance, the central government’s lockdown of Wuhan and other cities in Hubei as decisions for “the greater good,” with “heroic sacrifice” made by both the Chinese people and China as a nation (Rolland, 2020, pp. 28-29). More importantly, it pinpoints the decisive role of the (Party-) state in defining the publicly supported good in the battle against the pandemic. In essence, communitarian values drive a civic willingness and obligation to embrace high-tech means that would limit the spread of the virus as a valuable public good.

To conclude, we scrutinized the three dimensions we proposed to interpret the wide adoption of surveillance technologies in the Chinese mainland: the guardian model of governance that generates high expectations of and confidence in paternalistic leadership to lead the anti-pandemic campaign, a sociotechnical imaginary that establishes a belief in mass surveillance’s positive outcomes in fighting the pandemic, and the communitarian values that downplay individuals’ right to privacy but advocate a conception of common interest defined and espoused by the state. To understand China’s unprecedented measures to mobilize its surveillance apparatus and popular support, Pye (1991, p. 445) calls attention to the fact that “the weight of tradition cannot be easily set aside.”
Unearthing Regional Exceptionalism

This study offers a much-needed elaboration on surveillance technologies and their unchallenged acceptance in China, which is significantly different from Western concern over potential personal data breaches and privacy risks in the face of an all-powerful state. While attributing the effectiveness of the measures deployed by the Chinese regime in containing the epidemic to state capacity, one should not overlook the underlying factors fueling or leading to widespread support from the Chinese people. Our findings are not only indispensable to make sense of the discussion in China, but also beyond China. For instance, the guardianship discourse exists in both China and Singapore (Lu & Shi, 2015), while the majority of East Asians in other countries with a Confucian legacy also tend to be attached to paternalistic meritocracy (Chu, 2013, p. 8). Likewise, communitarian values span Asian countries and must be kept in mind to understand why Asian populations seem broadly tolerant of pandemic-related surveillance (Cha, 2020). A contextual, comprehensive understanding of cultural orientations and institutional performance helped us unpack Chinese (and East Asian) exceptionalism regarding (the lack of) privacy risk and security concerns in the ongoing containment of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 5. Health code cluster
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