Propaganda and Public Support for Digital Surveillance: Evidence from Social Credit Systems in China

(An Early Draft)

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Abstract

Digital surveillance is expanding towards a creepy kind of omniscience. The recent development of social credit systems that reward and punish citizens far beyond that of their financial credit score further raised concerns that China is turning into an Orwellian surveillance state that could impost great political costs to citizens. Yet, opinion surveys find incredibly high levels of public support for social credit systems in China. This paper argues that the government uses state media to frame surveillance as a tool for social goods to amass public support. In contrast, revealing its repressive potential to ignorant citizens can reduce the support. Using an original survey experiment among 752 college students in three universities in East, North, and West China, I find that support for the SCS is surprisingly high, and individuals who know the SCS from government media outlets are more likely to support it. More importantly, revealing information on the SCS's role in maintaining social order increase public support whereas revealing information on its political control function reduces the support, and the latter effect is strong even among students who have ever experienced the SCS.

1 Introduction

In recent decades, the world's autocracies are experiencing significant growth in domestic surveillance that utilizes technologies such as spyware, metadata collection, high-resolution cameras, facial recognition, and even artificial intelligence (Gunitsky 2015; Qin, Strömberg and Wu 2017). China is a country that stands out from most of its autocratic peers in both scale (Walton 2001) and technological advancement of digital surveillance (Liu and Wang 2017). The recent development of social credit systems that reward and punish citizens far beyond that of their financial credit score further raised concerns that China is turning into an Orwellian surveillance state.[1] Yet, opinion surveys find incredibly high levels of public support for social credit systems in China (Kostka 2018). Why are Chinese citizens willing to sacrifice privacy to support a digital surveillance system that could potentially impose great political costs on them? This paper argues that the government uses state media to frame surveillance as a tool for social goods to amass public support. In contrast, revealing its repressive potential to ignorant citizens can reduce the support.

Contractarian theories of state consider coercion a necessary means to arbitrate the conflicts of interest that exist between individuals (Hobbes 1651/1974). Digital surveillance, like other types of state coercion, can be used to enforce social contracts. However, predatory theories of state hold that a coercive tool powerful enough to enforce social contracts can also be employed by the state to prey upon the citizenry (Tilly 1985; North 1981). Although a large body of literature examines the repressive nature of state coercion in general (e.g., Ritter and Conrad 2016; Davenport 2007) and surveillance in particular (Gohdes 2014; Dimitrov and Sassoon 2014), few studies focus on public opinion toward government surveillance and coercion in dictatorships. Students of public opinions on surveillance in western democracies mainly emphasis citizens' privacy-security trade-off (Davis and Silver 2004; Dietrich and Crabtree 2019), yet this tradition is based on an implicit assumption that media freedom allows citizens to understand the roles of surveillance in both social protection and privacy invasion. In dictatorships where government abuse of coercive power is less constrained and citizens' information on the repressive potential of surveillance is severely

[1] Numerous news articles expressed such concerns. See, for example,

restricted by government censorship and propaganda, how citizens view government surveillance remains largely unclear in the literature.

For citizens, government coercion is a double-edged sword: to support a tool of coercion, they must weigh its social benefits and political costs. However, citizens' judgments are based on their *perceived* benefits and costs that are subject to manipulation by state censorship and propaganda. On the other hand, dictators rely on repression to maintain control and counter threats to their rule (Escribà-Folch 2013). To sustain the *legitimate* use of coercive power, governments in stable dictatorships often disguise their repressive forces or "whitewash" their repression practices. For example, during the Tiananmen Crisis when violent repression erupted in Beijing, Chinese people outside the capital only knew from state media that several courageous and peaceful soldiers were killed by violent protesters. State repression against protesters remained largely obscure to the public. The above logic suggests that, if citizens' *perceived* benefits and costs are manipulatable, we should expect that positively framing surveillance and coercion will increase public support of surveillance whereas negative framing will decrease the support. We should further expect that exposure to state media increases public support of state surveillance and coercion.

I test these predictions by examining citizens' attitudes towards recently developed surveillance systems in China. In the past decade, the Chinese government has worked with technological firms to experiment with social credit systems that assess the "creditworthiness" of individuals, companies, and social organizations. The country is currently laying the legal and regulatory foundations to implement a nationwide social credit system after 2020. With a massive helping hand from high-tech and big data, such social credit systems could potentially serve as a powerful surveillance tool for political control. Since the social credit systems have not been implemented nationwide, a large majority of citizens only know the SCS from media resources or other citizens. This allows me to use experimental vignettes to change their perceptions of this surveillance system.

Using an original survey experiment among 752 college students in three universities in East, North, and West China, I find that support for the SCS is surprisingly high, and individuals who know the SCS from government media outlets are more likely to support it. More importantly, re-

vealing information on the SCS's role in maintaining social order increase public support whereas revealing information on its political control function reduces the support, and the latter effect is strong even among students who have ever experienced the SCS. The evidence together shows the power of framing in shaping public support for digital surveillance in dictatorships. It further suggests that digital surveillance can be disguised as a tool to promote social goods. Since the number of political victims of political repression is usually small, we expect that the public support of digital surveillance will maintain a high level even the country implements a nationwide social credit system for political control.

Literature...

2 Theory and Hypotheses

State coercion is the very fabric of society. In countries with weak states, citizens are potential victims of various harms such as bureaucratic corruption, criminal violence, ethnic/religious conflicts, economic decline, and even civil wars. Scholars such as Hobbes and Jefferson argue that state was to be created by an implicit social contract between individuals to prevent the "war of every man against every man". State coercion is necessary to enforce this social contract. However, a tool of coercion powerful enough to enforce social contracts could also be used for political repression. In well-functioning democracies, the abuse of state coercion was constrained by institutions and laws. In dictatorships where the government pay less heed to civil rights and the rule of law, a powerful coercive tool is always used for political repression. For example, Scoggins (2018) finds that the Chinese police is much more well-trained for repressing social unrests than for combating crimes. Digital surveillance, a tool enabling the government to collect refined information on individual citizens for reward and punishment, could help maintain social order and discipline violators, yet it will also largely empower the government to conduct the finest targeted repression ever.

(Discussion on digital surveillance.)

Citizens may support a digital surveillance system when this specific power is used to enforce social contracts, but they may disapprove it when it enhances political control. Citizens evaluate

this coercive tool thus must weigh its social benefits and political costs. However, studies of public opinions have long questioned citizens' competence in understanding complicated political discourses due to limited information available to them. Further, since dictators have a tendency to shift society's views of them (Wallace 2016), citizens in dictatorships are even less-informed about the true purposes of government policies. Thus, citizens' attitudes toward digital surveillance are usually based on their "perceived" benefits and costs, which is subject to information manipulation. As scholars show, framing of information could significantly alter people's thinking (Entman 1993; Chong and Druckman 2007). This is because, individuals often base their opinions on available and accessible considerations without conscious deliberation (Tversky and Kahneman 1973; Higgins 1996). When the available information emphasizes the social benefits of digital surveillance, citizens will be more likely to support it. In contrast, revealing information on the political costs of digital surveillance should decrease public support. This logic entails the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Framing digital surveillance as a tool of social contract enforcement increases citizens' support.

Hypothesis 2: Framing digital surveillance as a tool of political repression decreases citizens' support.

In dictatorships where repression is a crucial tool of social control (Svolik 2012), the government often portrait state coercion in a positive way by emphasizing its role in enforcing social contracts. For example, during the Tiananmen Crisis when violent repression erupted in Beijing, Chinese people outside the capital only knew from state media that several courageous and peacekeeping soldiers were killed by violent protesters despite of the violent conduct of PLA soldiers against protesters. Censorship combined with propaganda could effectively shape public opinions in favor of state coercion in dictatorships. Thus, we expect that exposure to state media increases public support for state coercion. This argument has the following implication.

Hypothesis 3: Citizens are more likely to support digital surveillance when their information of the surveillance tool is obtained from state media outlets.

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3 Social Credit Systems in China

Social credit systems as a powerful tool of state surveillance and coercion are portrayed by Chinese state media in a positive way for social goods instead of a negative way for repression.

4 Empirical Strategy

To understand how framing affects public support of digital surveillance, I designed a randomized controlled trail to maximize internal validity.

4.1 In-the-Field Survey Experiment Design

I conducted a field survey experiment among 752 students to examine public opinion toward the SCS, the aforementioned government surveillance system in China. I choose students because they are the social group that is most active in civic engagement and political participation. I visited three universities in East, North, and West China to broaden the geographic representativeness of the sample. Students were recruited in dinning halls and main roads between classroom buildings and residential halls for better representing the student population in those universities, because all students will come to those areas regardless of their major, gender, and year. Survey questionnaires require five to ten minutes to complete. Each student received five Chinese Yuan (about 0.75 USD) as a compensation for their time and effort. The enumerators ask students whether they are willing to participate in an *anonymous* survey first, if they agree, the enumerators then present the five-Yuan compensation to them. Roughly 50% of the students approached by enumerators agreed to participate. This response rate is within the normal range for a field survey. In addition, most of nonrespondents refused before the enumerators explained the survey to them – their unwillingness to participate is not due to the content of the survey.[2] Thus, it is unlikely that attrition is related to potential outcomes to bias the results.

The questionnaire was composed of three blocks but this paper only uses the first block and the third block.[3] Respondents first completed a series of questions that measured their personal backgrounds: age, gender, province of birth, income, CCP membership, civic and political partic-

[2]The reasons for nonresponses include "no time", "hunger", "too busy", etc.

[3]The second block is an experiment on students' civic engagement on campus in response to surveillance.

ipation, soical distrust, media usage, and so forth. The third block is a short survey experiment on students' attitude toward the SCS.

To make respondents aware of the SCS as a surveillance system, the third block of the questionnaire hints that "many public spaces are equipped with facial recolonization and ID scanning; there are also surveillance cameras everywhere. It is very easy to record citizens' behaviors", followed by an explanation how a SCS works. I then use a factorial design that assign respondents into four groups with different scenarios of framing the SCS. In the control scenario, respondents receive no additional information. In treatment scenarios, respondents may receive information on the SCS's roles in social contract enforcement, political control, or both. This factorial design allows me to utilize the entire sample of 752 respondents for statistical analysis (Table 1). Table 2 shows the treatment scenarios.

Table 1: Experimental Design for Attitude toward the SCS

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Assignment:	Control	Treated	Treated	Treated
Information Treatment:	No Info.	Social Contract Enforcer	Political Repression	Social & Political
N:	204	162	197	178

Due to the relatively small sample size, I use block random assignment to mitigate potential imbalances among groups. The easily identifiable variables that could predict public support of government coercion are gender and region. Thus, I partition the subjects into 6 blocks (two sexes by three regions/universities), and randomize within each block. Questionnaires were prepared in a random order and then distributed to students that enumerators approached. Although this is a convenience sample, enumerators actively walked around all areas of the survey locations to increase representativeness.

To measure respondents' opinion towards the SCS, I ask them to what extent they support the SCS on a 0 to 10 scale, and whether the government or third party credit organizations should manage the SCS. The third block of the questionnaire also includes a question that asks respon-

Table 2: Treatment Scenarios

Scenario 1: Enforcing Social Contract Treatment

Recently, one citizen in an eastern city drove drunk and caused chain-reaction accidents (although no one was hurt). Being downgraded in social credit, this person is stopped from buying air tickets or hopping on high-speed trains. Now this person can only travel by bus or slow train.

Scenario 2: Political Repression Treatment

Recently, one citizen in an eastern city often posted criticisms online to blemish the government's image. Being downgraded in social credit, this person is stopped from buying air tickets or hopping on high-speed trains. Now this person can only travel by bus or slow train.

Scenario 3: Both Enforcing Social Contract and Political Repression Treatment

Recently, one citizen in an eastern city drove drunk and caused chain-reaction accidents (although no one was hurt). Another citizen in an eastern city often posted criticisms online to blemish the government's image. Being downgraded in social credit, these two persons are stopped from buying air tickets or hopping on high-speed trains. Now they can only travel by bus or slow train.

dents' source of information on the SCSs, such as state media, non-state media, commercials, self-experience, or friends. This question allows me to examine whether state propaganda can increase public support of coercion. In addition, as scholars argue that the public may support a coercive tool if they are not victims but beneficiaries of state coercion, I further ask respondents to guess their future soical credit levels if a nationwide SCS were to take place.

Several other factors could also influence support for state coercion. For example, in dictatorships, social trust is low and exploitative opportunism high because the regimes often pit citizens against each other for "divide and rule", and opportunistic behaviors are encouraged by a low level of law enforcement. Thus, I include two questions to measure respondents' social distrust in the first block of the questionnaire. In addition, an individual may be more likely to support the SCS if he or she obeys social rules and contributes to social goods. So I ask several questions to capture individuals' social behaviors and rule abidance. Moreover, exposure to social media may increase individuals' perceived social disorder, which in turn will increase their support for government coercion. Thus, I also ask respondents to report their media usages.

5 Preliminary Results

Table 5 shows that revealing information on the role of SCS for social order maintenance increase support for the SCS, though the effect is insignificant. The more important finding is that, revealing information on the SCS's role for political control significantly reduce support for the SCS as well as having the government to manage the SCS. Moreover, state media exposure increase public support of the SCS. These pieces of evidence suggest that digital surveillance can be easily disguised as a tool for maintaining social order instead of political control. Finally, respondents' positive self-evaluation of their social credit score significantly increase their support for the system, suggesting that they do not consider themselves victims of the state surveillance system.

Table 3: Public Support of the Social Credit System in China

VARIABLES	(1) Support SCS	(2) Support SCS	(3) Support SCS	(4) Support SCS	(5) Govt. Manage	(6) Govt. Manage	(7) Govt. Manage	(8) Govt. Manage
Punish Civic	0.334	0.340	0.351	0.361	-0.0298	-0.0295	-0.0366	-0.0361
	(0.235)	(0.227)	(0.227)	(0.223)	(0.0502)	(0.0502)	(0.0504)	(0.0504)
Punish Political	-0.914***	-0.862***	-0.841***	-0.858***	-0.131***	-0.129***	-0.124**	-0.123**
	(0.254)	(0.248)	(0.251)	(0.251)	(0.0493)	(0.0492)	(0.0495)	(0.0496)
Civic & Political	-0.0120	0.0304	0.0303	0.0184	-0.00143	0.00200	-0.000742	-0.00104
	(0.239)	(0.233)	(0.236)	(0.233)	(0.0485)	(0.0485)	(0.0488)	(0.0488)
State Media		1.099***	1.085***	1.068***		0.0748*	0.0705*	0.0693*
		(0.208)	(0.210)	(0.205)		(0.0389)	(0.0392)	(0.0392)
Commercial		-0.526**	-0.488*	-0.427		-0.0476	-0.0479	-0.0459
		(0.264)	(0.268)	(0.261)		(0.0551)	(0.0559)	(0.0558)
Social Distrust			0.0412	0.0323			-0.00703	-0.00740
			(0.0305)	(0.0302)			(0.00603)	(0.00610)
Self-score				0.607***				0.0202
				(0.141)				(0.0278)
Experiment 1	0.0408	0.0860	0.0720	0.0582	0.00576	0.00868	0.00468	0.00385
	(0.187)	(0.183)	(0.185)	(0.182)	(0.0369)	(0.0370)	(0.0373)	(0.0374)
Univ. Fixed	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	7.904***	7.170***	7.001***	8.156***	0.591***	0.543***	0.583***	0.622***
	(0.204)	(0.258)	(0.297)	(0.376)	(0.0448)	(0.0541)	(0.0608)	(0.0820)
Observations	733	733	724	723	734	734	725	725
R-squared	0.043	0.091	0.091	0.120	0.026	0.032	0.031	0.032

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

As scholars find, past experiences in social credit systems likely influence citizens' attitude toward the systems (Kostka 2018). The insignificant effect of social contract framing on public support is likely due to respondents' past experiences. Thus, I divide the sample by their past

participation in any social credit systems or not. Table 4 shows that students who have never participated in SCSs are more likely to support the SCS when revealing information on its role for social order maintenance. The effect is statistically significant. Again, revealing information on the SCS's role for political control significantly reduce support for the SCS as well as having the government to manage the SCS. Table 5 further shows that the negative effect of political control framing is statistically significant among respondents who have ever experienced SCSs. In addition, the effect of State Media on public support of the SCS is positive and statistically signficicant across all model and samples.

Table 4: Public Support of the Social Credit System: Non-Experience Sample

VARIABLES	(1) Support SCS	(2) Support SCS	(3) Support SCS	(4) Support SCS	(5) Govt. Manage	(6) Govt. Manage	(7) Govt. Manage	(8) Govt. Manage
Punish Civil	0.509*	0.509**	0.522**	0.512**	-0.0109	-0.0101	-0.0171	-0.0170
	(0.265)	(0.255)	(0.255)	(0.256)	(0.0562)	(0.0565)	(0.0566)	(0.0567)
Punish Political	-0.814***	-0.778***	-0.739**	-0.767***	-0.110**	-0.106*	-0.0993*	-0.0993*
	(0.290)	(0.287)	(0.290)	(0.290)	(0.0553)	(0.0555)	(0.0559)	(0.0559)
Civic & Political	0.0989	0.139	0.140	0.112	0.0269	0.0299	0.0277	0.0280
	(0.277)	(0.273)	(0.278)	(0.276)	(0.0545)	(0.0549)	(0.0551)	(0.0553)
State Media		0.877***	0.859***	0.861***		0.0610	0.0556	0.0559
		(0.227)	(0.229)	(0.226)		(0.0429)	(0.0432)	(0.0433)
Commercial		-0.506	-0.456	-0.380		-0.0188	-0.0170	-0.0180
		(0.335)	(0.343)	(0.336)		(0.0657)	(0.0675)	(0.0677)
Social Distrust			0.0529	0.0476			-0.00660	-0.00650
			(0.0345)	(0.0344)			(0.00669)	(0.00676)
Self-score				0.485***				-0.00663
				(0.165)				(0.0315)
Experiment 1	0.0422	0.0485	0.0284	0.0143	0.0269	0.0279	0.0247	0.0251
	(0.212)	(0.208)	(0.211)	(0.210)	(0.0412)	(0.0413)	(0.0417)	(0.0417)
Univ. Fixed	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	7.833***	7.285***	7.065***	5.054***	0.589***	0.549***	0.589***	0.616***
	(0.233)	(0.287)	(0.339)	(0.789)	(0.0500)	(0.0596)	(0.0667)	(0.142)
Observations	585	585	576	575	584	584	575	575
R-squared	0.042	0.074	0.075	0.095	0.022	0.026	0.024	0.024

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

I further examine other factors that could influence citizens' support for digital surveillance. As shown in Table 6, the effect of perceived social disorder (Social Distrust) on support for the SCS is only significant among students who have every experienced in SCSs. Respondents' party membership and social behaviors have no significant effects. However, respondents' family income satisfaction and social media usage significant increase their support for the SCS.

Table 5: Public Support of the Social Credit System: Experience Sample

VARIABLES	(1) Support SCS	(2) Support SCS	(3) Support SCS	(4) Support SCS	(5) Govt. Manage	(6) Govt. Manage	(7) Govt. Manage	(8) Govt. Manage
Punish Civil	-0.463	-0.464	-0.465	-0.254	-0.132	-0.127	-0.130	-0.107
	(0.517)	(0.508)	(0.515)	(0.466)	(0.117)	(0.118)	(0.119)	(0.118)
Punish Political	-1.352**	-1.276**	-1.276**	-1.185**	-0.223**	-0.216*	-0.214*	-0.203*
	(0.530)	(0.506)	(0.508)	(0.498)	(0.109)	(0.110)	(0.110)	(0.110)
Civic & Political	-0.541	-0.521	-0.521	-0.361	-0.125	-0.116	-0.117	-0.0988
	(0.500)	(0.462)	(0.464)	(0.450)	(0.111)	(0.113)	(0.114)	(0.114)
State Media		2.330***	2.331***	2.156***		0.155	0.156	0.138
		(0.511)	(0.515)	(0.490)		(0.0956)	(0.0964)	(0.0959)
Commercial		-0.428	-0.429	-0.543		-0.0626	-0.0650	-0.0758
		(0.457)	(0.461)	(0.434)		(0.105)	(0.104)	(0.104)
Social Order			-0.00224	-0.0291			-0.00760	-0.0103
			(0.0655)	(0.0614)			(0.0135)	(0.0139)
Self-score				0.936***				0.0931
				(0.245)				(0.0638)
Experiment 1	-0.00193	0.365	0.364	0.381	-0.0905	-0.0657	-0.0695	-0.0670
	(0.400)	(0.378)	(0.380)	(0.366)	(0.0824)	(0.0849)	(0.0849)	(0.0838)
Univ. Fixed	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	8.333***	6.385***	6.395***	2.736**	0.633***	0.508***	0.542***	0.175
	(0.437)	(0.604)	(0.654)	(1.306)	(0.105)	(0.136)	(0.152)	(0.304)
Observations	148	148	148	148	150	150	150	150
R-squared	0.068	0.239	0.239	0.310	0.086	0.105	0.107	0.124

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p¡0.01, ** p¡0.05, * p¡0.1

Table 6: Other Sources of Support for Digital Surveillance

	(1) No Experience	(2) Experience	(3) Full Sample
VARIABLES	Support SCS	Support SCS	Support SCS
Punish Civil	0.513**	-0.444	0.333
	(0.261)	(0.466)	(0.230)
Punish Political	-0.680**	-1.505***	-0.838***
	(0.292)	(0.544)	(0.256)
Civic & Political	0.110	-0.806*	-0.0306
	(0.283)	(0.453)	(0.239)
Social Distrust (Self)	0.0636	-0.175**	0.0206
	(0.0451)	(0.0837)	(0.0395)
Income Satisfaction	0.115***	0.0447	0.109***
	(0.0439)	(0.0952)	(0.0400)
Party Membership	0.0379	-0.529	-0.0790
	(0.154)	(0.377)	(0.146)
Social Violation	0.0541	0.150	0.0915
	(0.0993)	(0.163)	(0.0841)
Media: Smart Phone	0.669***	0.824**	0.690***
	(0.220)	(0.326)	(0.186)
treat1	0.0442	-0.141	0.0666
	(0.211)	(0.396)	(0.184)
Univ. Fixed	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	3.412***	5.298***	3.614***
	(1.216)	(1.945)	(1.011)
Observations	575	147	722
R-squared	0.075	0.161	0.076

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p¡0.01, ** p¡0.05, * p¡0.1

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