

Frustration grows in China as face masks compromise facial recognition

Face masks are mandatory in at least two provinces in China, including the city of Wuhan. In an effort to contain the coronavirus strain that has caused nearly 500 deaths, the government is insisting that millions of residents wear protective face covering when they go out in public.

As millions don masks across the country, the Chinese are discovering an unexpected consequence to covering their faces. It turns out that face masks trip up facial recognition-based functions, a technology necessary for many routine transactions in China. Suddenly, certain mobile phones, condominium doors, and bank accounts won't unlock with a glance.

Subverting surveillance cameras

Biometrics, including facial recognition, are essential to daily life in China, on a scale beyond other nations. It's used to do everything from ordering fast food meals to scheduling medical appointments to boarding a plane in more than 200 airports across the country. Facial recognition is even used in restrooms to prevent an occupant from taking too much toilet paper.

And beyond quotidian transactions, the technology is a linchpin in the Chinese government's scheme to police its 1.4 billion citizens. Last December, the government passed a new law that forces anyone registering a new mobile phone SIM card to undergo a face scan, in the stated interest of protecting "the legitimate rights and interest of citizens in cyberspace," as Chinese Ministry of Industry and Information puts it. The technology is also used in some schools, where a camera records student attendance and can offer predictions about behavior and level of engagement.

Hong Kong's government, incidentally, has been trying to install a "mask ban" for protestors participating in anti-government rallies. The anonymity afforded by surgical masks, gas masks, and respirators has somehow emboldened both police and demonstrators to act aggressively, without fear of being caught on camera

Source (<https://qz.com/1796833/coronavirus-face-masks-foil-facial-recognition-cameras/>)

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