

Performative Surveillance in Xinjiang

“They cut my head off just to test the sharpness of a sword.”¹

Perhat Tursun, “Elegy”, Uyghur² poet currently in detention³

An estimated one million Uyghurs, as well as significant numbers of Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, are currently detained in concentration camps by the Chinese government in the northwestern province of Xinjiang. That number, disputed by Chinese officials, is corroborated by interviews with Uyghurs in Xinjiang, eyewitness reports from former detainees, leaked internal documents, cold-calling of local officials, satellite photo analysis of detention centers, and analysis of provincial budget expenditures⁴. Adrian Zenz, a researcher at the European School of Culture and Theology, conservatively estimates that ten percent of Xinjiang’s Muslim population in Uyghur majority areas and five percent in Uyghur minority areas are currently in

¹ Freeman, Joshua L. “Two Poems by Perhat Tursun: ‘Morning Feeling,’ ‘Elegy.’” *Hayden’s Ferry Review* 48, 2011.

² This name, written in the Uyghur language as “ئۇيغۇر”, is sometimes transliterated as “Uighur”. When quoting directly, I preserve this spelling, though the consensus I found is that “Uyghur” more closely approximates the original pronunciation (like oy-gher). Source: Staff, RFA. “‘Uyghur’ or ‘Uighur’?” *Radio Free Asia*. September 13, 2010. Accessed May 13, 2019. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/uyghur-spelling-09062010161733.html>.

³ “Perhat Tursun.” *The Uyghur Facts*. Accessed May 10, 2019. <https://www.uyghur.info/en/human/perhat-tursun>.

⁴ “Where Did the One Million Figure for Detentions in Xinjiang’s Camps Come From?” *ChinaFile*. January 09, 2019. Accessed May 10, 2019. <http://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/features/where-did-one-million-figure-detentions-xinjiangs-camps-come>

what the government calls “vocational education training centers” (职业教育培训中心), noting that these camps are just one of a number of administrative structures created for detaining, harassing, and suppressing Uyghurs⁵. Chinese officials, after publicly denying any form of detention for over a year, began in October of 2018 to promote these extrajudicial facilities as “boarding schools” for language education and professional advancement⁷. However, reports from former detainees sharply contrast these official narratives. While the extent of violence perpetrated in these camps is unknown, reports have described a “high-pressure indoctrination program” in which detainees are forced to practice self criticism, affirm party loyalty, and perform strictly limited Islamic practice⁸. The criteria for arrest is broad and largely arbitrary, with offences including not drinking or eating pork, reading the Quran, any form of international travel or communication, or simply not using the front door⁹. Important work is being done towards the liberation of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and Kyrgyz in Xinjiang, and while international pressure from governments and NGOs is ratcheting up, we are still a significant way from ending this massive and continuing violation of human rights.

⁵ Zenz, Adrian. ""Thoroughly Reforming Them Toward a Healthy Heart Attitude" - China's Political Re-Education Campaign in Xinjiang." Academia.edu. Accessed May 10, 2019.
https://www.academia.edu/36638456/_Thoroughly_Reforming_them_Toward_a_Healthy_Heart_Attitude_-_Chinas_Political_Re-Education_Campaign_in_Xinjiang.

⁶ Reuters. "China Shows off Xinjiang 'vocational Education Training Centres' despite Global Concern." Global News. January 07, 2019. Accessed May 10, 2019.
<https://globalnews.ca/news/4823673/china-xinjiang-education-centres/>.

⁷ Buckley, Chris. "China Breaks Silence on Muslim Detention Camps, Calling Them 'Humane'." The New York Times. October 16, 2018. Accessed May 10, 2019.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/16/world/asia/china-muslim-camps-xinjiang-uyghurs.html?module=inline>.

⁸ Buckley, Chris. "China Is Detaining Muslims in Vast Numbers. The Goal: 'Transformation.'" The New York Times. September 08, 2018. Accessed May 10, 2019.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/08/world/asia/china-uyghur-muslim-detention-camp.html?module=inline>.

⁹ "China's Algorithms of Repression | Reverse Engineering a Xinjiang Police Mass Surveillance App." Human Rights Watch. May 03, 2019. Accessed May 10, 2019.
<https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/05/01/chinas-algorithms-repression/reverse-engineering-xinjiang-police-mass-surveillance>.

I hope to address a topic that I have not seen discussions of in contemporary research or in the Media, that of public perceptions of Xinjiang concentration camps by the majority Han Chinese public, as well as by other minority ethnic groups in China, business investors, and the international community. I begin this effort by asking how Chinese netizens conceptualize and indirectly interact with official censors tasked with policing their content, framing this interaction within Stuart Corbridge's writing on how citizens see the state. I then delve into my technical project concerning communication by netizens on the microblogging app Sina Weibo (新浪微博). I web scrape an online tool from the Journalism and Media Studies Centre at the University of Hong Kong known as WeiboScope, which compiles censored Weibo posts by capturing them in the brief window between when they are published and when they are taken down by official moderators. I translate and compile a section of relevant censored tweets, doing some statistical analysis as well as manually reading a fair number of tweets to uncover patterns of speech deemed objectionable by official Chinese censors. Thirdly, I look at how Chinese netizens avoid censorship and subvert official state dialogues in a myriad of ways, including text obfuscation, memes, and most recently video content on the app TikTok (抖音) that is impossible for censors to automatically parse with existing text based tools. Fourth, I contend with the massive presence anti-Uyghur sentiment on majority Han social media, and build on my preliminary research to ask questions about where and when state violence in Xinjiang is seen as a threat versus as a necessary protection against a dangerous 'other'. Fifth, I draw on James Scott's definition of state legibility to examine how surveillance infrastructure in the city of Kashgar, and more generally in Xinjiang, blurs the boundaries between detention facilities and the city-wide information prisons outside them. Sixth, I challenge the idea of perfect surveillance

by the Chinese government, comparing the situation to pragmatic limitations of the “Panopticon” as Foucault describes it, and putting forward a hypothesis that I believe has emerged from my work so far: that China’s autocratic, surveillance based model of data governance faces serious shortcomings, due both to the practical difficulty of scaling surveillance techniques and the ability of the public to creatively subvert state control. To account for this, I argue that China and other states following the Chinese model will engage in ‘performative surveillance’, focusing an increasingly sharp eye on specific minority groups in an attempt to exaggerate their technical capacity and project an air of compliance and security to citizens, business interests, and the international community. To conclude, I outline what specifically I need to do to flesh out this model of ‘performative surveillance’, and why I believe that further research is necessary.

What is Censored, Why, and by Whom?

“乌鲁木齐是中国为数不多的在城里就能看到雪山的大城市，远远的看很是壮观。晚上吃的红柳烤串，签子比内地的一根筷子还粗，我们感受到了新疆人比内地人不一样的粗豪之气。”

“Urumqi is one of the few large cities in China where you can see snow-capped mountains in the city. It is spectacular from afar. The red willow skewers that were eaten at night were thicker than the one chopsticks in the Mainland. We felt that the Xinjiang people were different from the mainlanders.”

Censored Weibo post, source unknown, posted on February 17th, 2018

Why was the above post censored? Maybe moderators found objection in the claim that people in Xinjiang were “different”. Maybe it linked to further inflammatory text. Maybe it contained a keyword that was blocked on that day en masse, for reasons we do not know. This game of trying to illuminate the black box of censorship is not unique to researchers; it is played

daily by millions of Chinese netizens, surprised to see that their WeChat message has failed to send, their Weibo post has been taken down, or their question on an internet forum has been buried by hundreds of bot-like pro government comments¹⁰. We see this attempt to illuminate state censorship in a number of ways. One common barb lobbed on Chinese social media sites is that another poster is a member of the ‘50c party’ (五毛党), a purported set of individuals who are paid tiny amounts of money per post, 5 jiao or 7.5 US cents, to write pro government comments and posts on social media sites and forums. Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, working from the Institute for Quantitative Social Science at Harvard University, collected evidence of numerous Bloggers, Journalists, and others being called out as 50c members on social media, and found little basis for those accusations. Furthermore, they found that the very idea of a 50c party to be a misconception. Combining an aggregation of social media posts with leaked internal emails from a county level propaganda office in Zhanggong district (章贡区), they concluded that 50c members are not hired workers, but government employees who are assigned to write pro government posts as part of their regular administrative duties. These posting efforts, they uncovered, were not random nor constant, but highly time localized around specific events, such as a massive spike in posts following the bombing of a

¹⁰ We understand the basic outline of how censorship occurs in China. As we understand it, censorship occurs first and foremost through cooperation of state agencies with internet domain providers, with providers blocking access to a list of sites given to them by the government in what is known as the Great Firewall of China. It continues by government enforcement of social media sites and forums, as agencies require these domains to block posts containing certain keywords. It continues through the manual parsing and censorships of existing posts by state officials, in what is known as the Golden Shield. Finally, more subtle censorship occurs when posts are not taken down but instead entire sites of discussion are flooded by pro government posts by members of what people call the ‘50c party’. All of these methods are limited, both by the insight of government officials and by the available pool of labor of censorship officials. And none of them are imperceptible to individuals on the ground, who formulate increasingly creative ways to create subvert dialogues in opposition to or rather disregard of official state guidelines. Source: "How Does China Censor the Internet?" The Economist. April 21, 2013. Accessed May 11, 2019. <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2013/04/21/how-does-china-censor-the-internet>.

railway station in Ürumqi in May of 2014¹¹. This disconnect between perceptions of censorship and the actual mechanisms of propaganda is indicative of both the attempts of Chinese netizens to ‘see’ the state and state censorship, and of the pragmatic difficulty of doing so consistently or rigorously. Stuart Corbridge, in his book considering how people in India, especially the rural poor, interact with and see the state, develops the framework of the state not as a unary entity but as a collection of flesh-and-blood individuals. Espousing the importance of low level officials in perceptions individuals have of state power, he writes, “The ways in which technologies of rule are made flesh will depend on the manner in which they are interpreted and put into play by lower-level government workers, elected representatives, and others.”¹² While rural poor in India navigating conversations with low level bureaucratic officials certainly face different challenges from Chinese netizens navigating censorship online, both situations are representative of the toll placed on individuals by a lack of transparency in state operations. And, importantly, both are emblematic of the fact that states are organizations, and that state policies are upheld, interpreted, and enforced, often selectively, by people. In a personal conversation, I was told by a friend of the difficulty of gleaning what, exactly, censors find objectionable. She described confusion, this May, when people found numbers of their WeChat messages failing to send. The unifying factor, people finally uncovered, was that the censored messages contained references to International Workers Day, or “Labor Day”, celebrated on May 1st. Once people were aware of the offending text, they could continue to talk about the state holiday freely, indirectly referencing it by date or

¹¹Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts. 2017. “How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, not Engaged Argument.” *American Political Science Review*, 111, 3, Pp. 484-501. Publisher's Version Copy at <http://j.mp/2ovks0q>

¹² Corbridge, Stuart. *Seeing the State: Governance and Governmentality in India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp 7-7.

by another name. However, she and others remained unaware, beyond speculation, as to why that keyword was blocked in the first place. The pattern established is not of a public discourse molded by a perfect omnipotent algorithm, but of a interpersonal back and forth, albeit through the anonymizing medium of the internet, between Chinese netizens and the low level officials charged with policing their content. As consistent with Corbridge's framework of state perception, this interaction sometimes allows individuals to understand the actions of state officials fairly lucidly, such as discovering exactly what keywords are being blocked, and sometimes generates significant confusion, such as widespread misperceptions about the nature of the 50c party.

Seeing the State Through Censorship

I wanted to pattern this attempt to illuminate the black box of state censorship, using my positionality as a researcher outside of China to uncover both patterns of censorship and of subversion surrounding discussion of the mass detention of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. To do this, I relied on a tool called WeiboScope, developed by researchers at the Journalism and Media Studies Centre at the University of Hong Kong. On the microblogging site Weibo, posts containing explicitly banned keywords are prevented from ever being posted. However, there is a significant subset of posts that are posted, are visible for a short time, and are then removed by censors manually for containing objectionable content. WeiboScope collects these posts, aggregating the activity of a set of popular microbloggers, selected either because they had more than 1,000 followers or because their posts were frequently censored. The system checks these posts regularly, detecting when the post is no longer available, either because the user chose to

take it down or, ideally for us, because it was censored by authorities. The dataset is significant: in 2012, the tool collected 226 million Weibo posts, of which 10.9 million were either censored or taken down voluntarily¹³¹⁴. However, I faced a technical limitation in using this tool, as the dataset's public API only allows the user to search for posts by keyword, and only returns the last 200 censored posts containing that keyword, as well as a language limitation because the posts stored are in Chinese, and my experience with tools for text analysis rely on the ability to break text into discrete words based on spaces. Within these limitations, I wrote two tools to parse this dataset and peek into both what is being censored and what is being said on and around the detention of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim minorities in Xinjiang. The first tool scraped a set of the censored posts from WeiboScope based on a given keyword, translated the text into English using the Google Translate API, and stored both versions of the post's text, along with the date¹⁵. The second took the English text and generated bigrams pairings of all sets of two words appearing in a post together, avoiding common English filler words such as 'not', 'and', or 'the'. Ordering those bigrams by frequency across posts containing a keyword, as well as among all posts scraped, I hoped to get a sense of what connections were common, as well as potentially inflammatory to censors. I include an overview of the results of those tools in the table below.

¹³ "Weiboscope." Journalism and Media Studies Centre, The University of Hong Kong. March 03, 2016. Accessed May 11, 2019. <https://jmsc.hku.hk/2016/03/weiboscope/>.

¹⁴ "Just Another WordPress Site." Weiboscope. May 07, 2019. Accessed May 11, 2019. <http://weiboscope.jmsc.hku.hk/>.

¹⁵ The section headings in this piece come from those posts!

Keyword	Meaning ¹⁶	Number of posts found	Most common bigram	Unusual common bigram ¹⁷
维吾尔	Uyghur	200	Xinjiang, Police	Political, Organization
乌鲁木齐	Ürümqi	200	Gao, County	Golden, Decade
喀什	Kashgar	200	Xinjiang, Kashgar	Dopeytom, Surprised
伊斯兰教	Islam	200	Islam, Muslims	Xu, Kai
陈全国	Chen Quanguo	27	Party, Provincial	Marriage, Tibet
再教育营	Re-Education Camp	0	n/a	n/a

Some of these results clearly arise from common associations that I assume would be prevalent even in an uncensored dataset, such as the connection between “Islam” and “Muslims”. Xu Kai (许凯) is a Chinese actor and model¹⁸. Others, it seems, reference specific controversial events. Chen Quanguo, for example, the current party secretary of Xinjiang and former party secretary of Tibet, was put in control of Xinjiang by President Xi Jinping after his effective oppression and policing of Tibet. In censored posts, he is frequently criticized for his policy promoting intermarriage between Tibetans and Han Chinese. In a censored post from June of 2014, an anonymized individual writes, “I am not against marriage, because freedom of marriage is the basic right of man. But I object to those who are in power to blatantly encourage

¹⁶ Ürümqi is the capital of Xinjiang, Kashgar is a large city and center of Uyghur culture. Chen Quanguo is the party secretary of Xinjiang, and was formerly the party secretary of Tibet. Ningxia is another autonomous region I found referenced a number of times.

¹⁷ Bigrams I find unexpected or interesting, with more than 30 occurrences

¹⁸ "Xu Kai." MyDramaList. Accessed May 11, 2019. <https://mydramalist.com/people/17086-xu-kai>.

intermarriage. Because this is not to save Tibet, but to be extinct in Tibet.”¹⁹ Chen Quanguo, this poster argues, is not pursuing ethnic harmony but rather a destruction of Tibetan peoples through assimilation with the Han Chinese majority. It is not difficult to guess why such a post would be taken down²⁰. Other prevalent bigrams are less explicable, for example the common connection of “Dopeytom” and “Surprised” in the scrape of Kashgar. Is this a meme? An obscure reference? Dopeytom, it seems, is a specific Weibo user, but I found no further explanation for his prevalence other than a tenuous time connection to a spike in posts censored on August 1st, 2014. These results are not particularly statistically rigorous, nor do I place them against a specific hypothesis. Rather, looking at these hidden conversations allow us to uncover unknown or unusual sentiments relating to issues of detention and ethnic conflict within the Chinese internet. With this initial prompting, I plan to move towards that rigor, expanding the scope of my data scraping to include broader sections of the Chinese internet, potentially getting in contact with the research team behind WeiboScope to gain access to their full dataset, and most importantly scraping a control dataset so that I can compare censored versus uncensored content to hone in on what dialogues exactly are buried, in order to reverse engineer that black box algorithm, or at the very least to ‘see the censor’ in these user-censor interactions.

Surveillance as Security

“不是所有维族都是东突，但所有东突都是维族。据说只要有一只鸡发现感染禽流感，周边几十万只鸡都要遭殃”

¹⁹ Original Chinese: “我不反对通婚，因为婚姻自由乃是人之基本权利。但我反对当权者明目张胆地鼓励通婚。因为这不是拯救于西藏，而是灭绝于西藏。”

²⁰ Bloomberg.com. Accessed May 12, 2019.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-09-27/the-architect-of-china-s-muslim-camps-is-a-rising-star-under-xi>.

“Not all Uyghurs are East Turkistan²¹, but all East Turks are Uyghurs. It is said that as long as one chicken is found to be infected with bird flu, hundreds of thousands of chickens around it will suffer.”

Censored Weibo post, source unknown, posted on March 23rd, 2017

Beginning this research, I was convinced that the types of dialogues censored would reflect sympathy with the Uyghur population, a rebuttal of the state’s oppressive systems, or simply evidence of detention. And while I found examples of all three, I also found an overwhelming number of posts, like the one above, that were blatantly racist and unsympathetic towards Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim minorities in the region. Posters were frequently more concerned with the wellbeing of police forces than with the minority groups they were tasked with persecuting, and less concerned with censorship of the concentration camps in the region than with censorship of evidence of terrorist violence. Discussing police in the region, one poster wrote, “The mainland does not understand, as far as I know, the first-line police work and overtime hours and workloads in Xinjiang have reached or exceeded the limit, and then continue to do so. Be kind to them, because they are the last line of defense for the safety of our people's lives and property”²². One could argue that, in an absence of information on violence perpetrated by the Chinese state in the region, it is natural that individuals would perceive police occupancy as necessary or even beneficial. Certainly, this view is consistent with officially endorsed narratives. However, even assuming that these netizens are unaware of the scale of police violence in the region, this pro-enforcement sentiment plays into larger narratives that paint Uyghurs as fundamentally separate from Han Chinese, as both other and dangerous, to the point

²¹ Referencing “East Turkestan Republic” Uyghur independence movements

²² Original Chinese: 内地不了解，据我所知，新疆一线警察工作及加班时间、工作量都已达到或超过极限，再这样下

where Han officials are seen as more sympathetic than everyday Uyghur citizens. Early in my research, in a desperate grab for some sense of public opinion on the issue within China, I posted a question on an online forum on the detention of Uyghurs hosted by Vox news reporter Sigal Samuel, asking whether the state was attempting to use the detention to demonstrate their surveillance capabilities and subdue through fear citizens outside Xinjiang. Instead, in the first reply I received, an account with the username “PatrickCapitol” wrote, “Chinese perspective here. The internet generally think exact opposite way of western internet. All the gruesome photos of Han civilians killed and shops burned were quickly censored by government... [many, especially young people] think the Communist Party incompetent, cannot protect them, did not crack down enough on security, and “communists stand on the side of Uighur terrorists against Han”. ”²³ I did not have to look far to see examples supporting his analysis, as other commenters immediately followed up, echoing his claim, listing examples of purported anti-Han violence by Uyghurs, and generally accusing both Chinese and western media of bias against Han Chinese in the region.

When considering public perceptions in China of mass detention in Xinjiang, we cannot ignore the history of oppression in the region, contemporary ethnic tensions, or the persistence of official state narratives that paint Xinjiang Uyghurs as dangerous, terroristic separatists. Officially, the Chinese government recognizes 55 ethnic minorities, as well as the ethnic Han majority²⁴. The Constitution of the People’s Republic of China bans “discrimination against and oppression of” minority groups, and outlines a system of regional autonomy in which areas with

²³ “r/worldnews - A Million Muslims Are Being Held in Internment Camps in China. I’m Sigal Samuel, a Staff Writer at Vox’s Future Perfect, Where I Cover This Humanitarian Crisis. AMA.” Reddit. Accessed May 12, 2019. https://www.reddit.com/r/worldnews/comments/bhop3g/a_million_muslims_are_being_held_in_internment/.

²⁴ Ethnic Groups in China. Accessed May 12, 2019. http://english.gov.cn/archive/china_abc/2014/08/27/content_281474983873388.htm.

“concentrated communities” of ethnic minorities are granted some freedom in both the development of governance structures, loosely defined, as well as the preservation of language, customs, and culture²⁵. In practice, however, autonomous regions have long been subjected to discriminatory controls that violate both their constitutional autonomy and existing anti-discrimination law²⁶²⁷. Uyghur dissatisfaction with strict state control and tension with Han Chinese populations in Xinjiang intensified in the years leading up to the system of mass detention, being thrown into sharp focus during the 2009 Ürümqi riots. In 2009, after a brawl in a toy factory between Uyghur and Han workers left 2 Uyghurs dead, protests began in Ürümqi, the capital city of Xinjiang. When police confronted the protesters, the demonstration broke into a massive riot that left an unknown number dead, although officials reported 197 casualties²⁸²⁹. Is mass internment by the Chinese government an attempt to quell political mobilization from one of its few non-Han ethnic populations? Is the end goal of detaining a million Uyghurs in internment camps simply collective punishment, or is the government pursuing a plan of cultural erasure? There is evidence of the state promoting intermarrying between Han and Uyghur individuals, in echoes of Chen Quanguo, the current party secretary of Xinjiang’s social engineering in Tibet³⁰³¹. Additionally, Uyghur children in the region are banned from speaking

²⁵ WANG, SHUPING. "The People's Republic Of China's Policy on Minorities and International Approaches to Ethnic Groups: A Comparative Study." *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 11, no. 1/2 (2004): 159-85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24675260>, Article page 165, site page 7.

²⁶ Griffiths, Analysis By James. "China's Paranoia and Oppression in Xinjiang Has a Long History." CNN. October 13, 2018. Accessed May 15, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/11/asia/xinjiang-reeducation-muslim-china-intl/index.html>.

²⁷ "China's Suppression of Tibet: Past, Present and Future." Ucanews.com. Accessed May 15, 2019. <https://www.ucanews.com/news/chinas-suppression-of-tibet-past-present-and-future/78665>.

²⁸ WebCite Query Result. Accessed May 12, 2019. https://www.webcitation.org/5p3p65NtT?url=http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2009-07/18/content_8444365.htm.

²⁹ Wong, Edward. "Riots in Western China Amid Ethnic Tension." The New York Times. July 05, 2009. Accessed May 12, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/06/world/asia/06china.html>.

³⁰ Leibold, James. "The Sinophone Internet Is Awash with Short Videos Promoting Han-Uyghur Inter-marriage." <https://twitter.com/jleibold/status/1120824721124184064?lang=en>.

Uyghur in school, and given mandatory Chinese language education³². Combined with the threat of detention deterring any form of religious or cultural practice, as well as the current detention of uncountable numbers of Uyghur intellectuals and cultural leaders³³, we are faced with a situation in which markers of Uyghur and Muslim cultural identity are shorn away through coercive engineering and state violence.

The Information Prison of Kashgar

“I recall
how many places
my address and phone number have been left
and with that I feel
that I’ve lost many things
I even sense I’ve lost
my most vital inner secrets

”³⁴

Perhat Tursun

To what extent do Chinese officials try to suppress information on mass detention in the region, and to what extent is that very mass detention an appeasement of a public consensus in which Uyghurs are dangerous outsiders who must be controlled or assimilated within the means and practices of the Han majority? In an internet sphere in which both the censorship and

³¹ "Xinjiang Authorities Push Uyghurs to Marry Han Chinese." Radio Free Asia. Accessed May 15, 2019. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/special/uyghur-oppression/ChenPolicy2.html>.

³² The Independent. (2019). *China’s Muslim minority banned from using their language in schools*. [online] Available at:

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/china-muslim-minority-school-language-ban-han-xinjiang-uyghur-hotan-hetian-government-communist-a7873446.html> [Accessed 15 May 2019].

³³ The Globe Post. (2019). *Cultural Genocide in Xinjiang: China Targets Uyghur Cultural Leaders*. [online] Available at: <https://theglobepost.com/2019/01/17/cultural-genocide-xinjiang/> [Accessed 15 May 2019].

³⁴ Freeman, Joshua L. “Two Poems by Perhat Tursun: ‘Morning Feeling,’ ‘Elegy.’” *Hayden's Ferry Review* 48, 2011.

amplification of content inexorably intertwines public and state narratives, questions of impetus or consensus are almost impossible to extract. What we can say is that surveillance efforts by the Chinese government in the region highlight rather than bury ethnic and religious divisions in the region. James Scott, in his book “Seeing Like a State”, outlines the idea that states work to render populations under their control “legible”, simplifying and categorizing individuals through consistent identifiers like names or ID numbers, understanding their location and assets through land registries, imposing official language and customs, and generally implementing systems of organization that provide concrete albeit simplified markers of a population that are visible to a state and allow it to pursue the state goals of, in Scott’s words, “taxation, conscription, and prevention of rebellion.”³⁵³⁶ We have discussed the violence perpetrated against Uyghurs and other Turkic minorities in Xinjiang through the system of mass detention. What we have not turned an eye to, however, is how systems of control extend beyond the walls of the concentration camps, using surveillance and policing to produce an information prison, a dystopian iteration of Scott’s legibility in which the gaze of the state permeates every aspect of daily life. In the city of Kashgar, a cultural hub for Uyghurs, the enforcement methods of this information prison are as old as the use of force as a deterrent. The methods of surveillance, however, the data collection on which that enforcement acts, are unprecedented in both their complexity and their specificity. In “How China Turned a City into a Prison”, a recent piece from New York Times journalists Chris Buckley, Paul Mozur, and Austin Ramzy, reporters describe a city with police checkpoints every 100 yards, where Muslim residents are forced to

³⁵ Scott, James C. *Seeing Like a State How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008, pp 2.

³⁶ Scott, James C. *Seeing Like a State How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.

swipe ID cards and receive verification from a facial scan. Cameras line the streets, including more than 100 within the Id Kah mosque, the most famous mosque in the city³⁷³⁸. This surveillance extends to resident's digital lives, with reports of a compulsory app that Muslims in the city must install to give officials access to their private communications. The app, reverse engineered by HRC researchers, similarly serves to give instructions to police in the region. The app details a series of suspicious categories, and walks officers through a series of questions to ask individuals³⁹. In this way, the application renders legible to the state both the actions of individuals on the ground and the actions of the security personnel tasked with enforcing state power. Surveillance efforts not only attempt to render the actions of Xinjiang Muslims legible, but attempt to render their identity legible as well. Beyond extensive religious profiling, there have been long term attempts to automate identification of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and Kyrgyz by ethnicity. Sui-Lee Wee, in "China Uses DNA to Track Its People, With the Help of American Expertise", a piece for the New York Times, outlines the large scale effort to generate a comprehensive database of identifying factors of Muslims in Xinjiang, such as facial scans, voice recordings, fingerprints, and genetic samples. This compulsory collection, often performed under the guise of health screenings, is used in increasingly complex surveillance systems that work to do things like identify Muslims based on facial scans using surveillance cameras, and

³⁷ Buckley, Chris, Paul Mozur, and Austin Ramzy. "How China Turned a City Into a Prison." The New York Times. April 04, 2019. Accessed May 12, 2019.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/04/04/world/asia/xinjiang-china-surveillance-prison.html>.

³⁸ Mozur, Paul. "Inside the Id Kah Mosque, Once the Center of Kashgar Religious Life, There Are More than 100 Cameras. Above the Central Altar Hangs a Propaganda Shot of the Benevolent General Secretary of the Communist Party of China Who Made Things This Way. Pic.twitter.com/01nDYh3UgQ." Twitter. April 04, 2019. Accessed May 12, 2019. <https://twitter.com/paulmozur/status/1113896347634143233>.

³⁹ "China's Algorithms of Repression | Reverse Engineering a Xinjiang Police Mass Surveillance App." Human Rights Watch. May 03, 2019. Accessed May 12, 2019. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/05/01/chinas-algorithms-repression/reverse-engineering-xinjiang-police-mass-surveillance>.

identify personal histories using their DNA⁴⁰. Not only do these systems impose a state constructed ethnic legibility, they exemplify the use of Xinjiang as a 'surveillance laboratory', in which surveillance technologies can be tested consequence free on a suppressed minority, being honed before they are expanded to the rest of China. Internal documents show that computer scanners for extracting data from smartphones, first used in Xinjiang, have been financially budgeted for police departments in Beijing⁴¹. Mozur, a leading New York Times Asia based technology journalist, discussing the expanding of these techniques of surveillance to the rest of China, says, "They're making lists of the mentally ill, they're making lists of people with a past history of drug use, they're making lists of people who've petitioned the government or complained about the government. But they also have lists of every single person registered to live in that city."⁴². In a region already seen as separate and dangerous by the Han Chinese public, in which the mass detention in concentration camps of ten percent of the Muslim population spills over into an information prison encircling the rest, Uyghurs and other Turkic minorities are rendered separate from the Han Chinese public, placed squarely in the increasingly widening gaze of the state, unable to resist as they are used to perfect technologies of control.

Perfect Surveillance

⁴⁰ Wee, Sui-lee. "China Uses DNA to Track Its People, With the Help of American Expertise." The New York Times. February 21, 2019. Accessed May 12, 2019.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/21/business/china-xinjiang-uyghur-dna-thermo-fisher.html>.

⁴¹ Cadell, Cate. "From Laboratory in Far West, China's Surveillance State Spreads..." Reuters. August 14, 2018. Accessed May 12, 2019.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-monitoring-insight/from-laboratory-in-far-west-chinas-surveillance-state-spreads-quietly-idUSKBN1KZ0R3>.

⁴² "The Chinese Surveillance State, Part 1." The New York Times. May 06, 2019. Accessed May 13, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/06/podcasts/the-daily/china-surveillance-uyghurs.html>.

An important concession, in Scott's theory of legibility, however, is that state legibility implicitly brings with it what he calls "state simplifications", in which state attempts to cleanly categorize populations cut off important complexities. In the absence of individual voice, Scott argues, a state's failure to address these complexities can cause large scale failure of state projects⁴³. It is tempting, when considering surveillance and detention in Xinjiang, to ignore this idea of simplification. The technologies of control being used, after all, are unprecedented in their capacity and accuracy. When Scott was writing his theory of state legibility in 1998, could he have imagined cameras that could automatically identify individuals by their facial features, link that face back to a comprehensive database containing their date of birth, genetic code, internet activity, financial transactions, and a record of every observed action they had taken in the past two years? Even if there have been datasets of even near approachable size historically, one cannot ignore the fact that the tools with which we can read, process, and act on that data, using modern computing and machine learning methods, are truly new in both speed and scale. Comparably, in the case of Chinese social media, does Scott's theory account for a communication space in which discussion is not just blocked, but pruned, infiltrated, tracked, and automatically buried by official dialogues?

I agree with arguments that China is attempting to pioneer a new governmental model of 'information autocracy', in which government organs collect and unilaterally act on close to perfect information on public behavior. However, the realities of state simplification must be considered. I disagree with the claim that a perfect surveillance model has been achieved in Xinjiang, or that it will be able to scale to the rest of China, given both the pragmatic difficulties

⁴³ Scott, James C. *Seeing Like a State How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008, pp 3.

of implementing surveillance and policing systems, and the ability of the public to creatively subvert state control. In Xinjiang, I argue, technologies of control are, as Mozur says, less like a “laser” and more like a “sledgehammer”⁴⁴; that authorities are more concerned with mass violence, intimidation, and oppression than with surgical social control. This oppression works on a tiny, currently powerless minority, already seen as dangerous terrorist outsiders by many in the Han majority. But the idea that similar controls could be applied to all of China? Our censored Weibo posters already make claims about the overworking of police in the region, and this is an area containing less than two percent of China’s overall population, where much of that population is already denied public voice due to barriers of language and outsider prejudice. Realistically, if surveillance technologies scale, they will have to do so non intrusively: subtle tracking through cameras, increasingly complex censorship of online speech, the slow amalgamation of data on individual citizens. However, as our analysis of Weibo has shown, Chinese netizens routinely subvert official state dialogues through various methods of obfuscation. Additionally, existing keyword censorship methods are built for a text based web. In the same conversation where we discussed the censorship of International Workers Day, my friend told me that the main evidence she had seen of oppression in Xinjiang was not on any text based platform, but was a video posted on the popular video sharing app TikTok (抖音). This app is, indeed, incredibly popular, with 500 million active users globally in 2018⁴⁵. And that popularity is a fundamental shift from previous forms of social media, a move from text based to video based communication, and with it an explosion of complexity of that online

⁴⁴ Buckley, Chris, Paul Mozur, and Austin Ramzy. "How China Turned a City Into a Prison." The New York Times. April 04, 2019. Accessed May 12, 2019.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/04/04/world/asia/xinjiang-china-surveillance-prison.html>.

⁴⁵ Business of Apps. (2019). *TikTok Revenue and Usage Statistics (2019)*. [online] Available at: <http://www.businessofapps.com/data/tik-tok-statistics/> [Accessed 15 May 2019].

communication. If censors already struggle with subversive communication on text based platforms, imagine the space a video sharing app provides for creative obfuscation of communication. Additionally, we talked about the correlation of the popularity of this app with the number of internet phone owners in China. In 2009, there were over 200 million internet phone users in China. Ten years later, that number is almost 800 million⁴⁶.

How does the model of a perfect surveillance state engage with this massive acceleration in the breadth and depth of the communication space? Foucault Introduces the model of governance through ‘Panopticism’, a perfect dystopia based on the architecture of the ‘Panopticon’, a circular structure with cells on the wall facing the center and a lone guard tower in the middle, such that the cell occupants cannot see the watcher but the watcher is able to observe any cell occupant at any time⁴⁷. In the ideal abstraction of this structure, cell occupants are forced to act in a certain way based on the constant chance that they are being watched, with lamps lit behind the cells at night to ensure a constant stream of information from cell occupants to watcher. The governance Foucault describes, derived from this, is based on that principle of social control through the potential threat of surveillance. What happens, however, as the size of this architecture expands? As more cells are added to the perimeter, the circle expands, growing exponentially farther away from the central watcher. How can one reliably police the actions of the cell occupants when their actions make up only a speck of your vision, a blurred dot moving back and forth in front of a distant source of light? In practical terms, how do a handful of

⁴⁶ McCarthy, Niall. "China Now Boasts More Than 800 Million Internet Users And 98% Of Them Are Mobile [Infographic]." *Forbes*. August 23, 2018. Accessed May 12, 2019. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2018/08/23/china-now-boasts-more-than-800-million-internet-users-and-98-of-them-are-mobile-infographic/#19eef927092b>.

⁴⁷ Foucault, M. and Sheridan, A. (2012). *Discipline and punish*. New York: Vintage.

officials monitor the behavior of 800 million Chinese netizens, especially when certain individuals actively obfuscate that behavior?

Performative Surveillance

My personal view, and what I believe merits further research, is that China is pioneering a model of information autocracy in which surveillance is not perfect, but rather performative. In this model, both Chinese political organs and the companies from which they source their technology exaggerate their practical capability to expand and achieve precision with surveillance technologies, in order to project an image of competence and control to the Chinese public, companies, and the international community. It is certainly not groundbreaking to claim that a state government plays up its own internal capacity. However, if Chinese surveillance is more performative than perfect, then this distinction has important consequences for both Uyghurs and other Turkic minorities in Xinjiang and for minority groups in countries following the Chinese surveillance model. If the feasible penetration of surveillance technology is practically limited as we have outlined, then it is natural for performative surveillance states to take advantage of minority communities, focusing an intense amount of surveillance resources on a small group of people in order to project security to and limit subversive narratives within the general public under the threat of mass expansion of those methods of control. Achieving the desired outcomes of surveillance without having to invest the resources in or face fundamental difficulties of actually scaling that surveillance infrastructure.

This is a claim I believe is consistent with the preliminary research outlined in this piece. However, moving towards a more concrete claim of “performative surveillance” within the Chinese state requires a significantly more research on both existing surveillance infrastructure, the pragmatism of expanding that infrastructure, and on perceptions within the Chinese public of existing concentration camps and information prisons in Xinjiang. I want to outline a few case studies of what I believe is performative surveillance by Chinese officials, as well as dive into how I want to proceed in generating concrete research on this topic.

Further Research

Mozur describes the 2008 Beijing Olympics as China’s “coming-out party as a new superpower”. It was also, he notes, their first opportunity to flex their emerging surveillance capabilities. Detailing the massive surveillance effort, he says, “They've outfitted the capitol with tons of security to make sure it goes well... they load up the city with 300,000 cameras”. The security was astonishing in scale. It was also, I argue, deeply performative. He continues, “But then what they did when all these international leaders arrived to see the Olympics is they took them into these sort of back rooms where you could see all these cameras operating... [the international leaders] look at it and they say, well, this is pretty powerful. I wonder if we could get this... And so now what we're seeing is that those technologies are beginning to flow to the world.”⁴⁸ Did the Chinese government need 300,000 cameras to ensure security at the Olympics? Do they need 100 inside a single mosque in Kashgar? Or are these performative acts: intense

⁴⁸ "The Chinese Surveillance State, Part 1." The New York Times. May 06, 2019. Accessed May 13, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/06/podcasts/the-daily/china-surveillance-ughurs.html>.

concentrations of surveillance infrastructure, massive in scale but still far smaller than broader, fully penetrative surveillance infrastructure would be, returning on their investment not through the area in their vision, but in the waves of public opinion and behavioral change they inspire far beyond that limited field of view? The targets of this performance, in the case of the 2008 Olympics, are not even those monitored by the cameras. The effect is intended for the watchers, not the watched, for world leaders who are simultaneously advertised to by the camera manufacturers and impressed upon by the capability and seeming scale of the Chinese surveillance state. In Xinjiang, this performative surveillance may similarly be targeted at business leaders. Xinjiang holds significant economic importance in a major infrastructure project that I have not yet discussed in this piece, that of the Belt and Road initiative. China is investing a trillion dollars in a project to develop trading routes, including massive land cargo routes along the historical silk road. The path of that cargo charts directly through Xinjiang⁴⁹. With such high claims at stake, can Chinese officials risk any form of instability in an area that suddenly has massive economic value? The brutal crackdown on Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in the region, existing in our framing as a human rights atrocity, may simultaneously be an assurance to both Government and private officials invested in development of the region that their political and financial interests are not at risk. To pursue this research on performative surveillance, I need to attempt to concretely prove that the detention camps, information prison, and concentrated surveillance infrastructure in Xinjiang are connected to an expansion of Chinese government influence internationally, likely through the increasing buyup of surveillance infrastructure from Chinese technology firms by autocratic, and democratic,

⁴⁹ Kirby, Jen. "China's Brutal Crackdown on the Uighur Muslim Minority, Explained." Vox. November 07, 2018. Accessed May 13, 2019. <https://www.vox.com/2018/8/15/17684226/uighur-china-camps-united-nations>.

governments outside of China. I need to similarly show the connection between the detention in Xinjiang and the Belt and Road initiative, finding not just that the two have a similar time frame, but ideally evidence such as official communications that express economic anxiety about the region or that otherwise tie the two projects together. I need to look more specifically at the existing surveillance technology, in order to understand the price and effort involved in scaling its use. And, I need to collect a far more comprehensive database on social media communication in China, both censored posts and an uncensored control group, combined with in person interviews, to begin to approach the massive and almost certainly multifaceted question of how individuals in China, minorities in autonomous regions as well as the Han Chinese majority, perceive what is happening in Xinjiang, and to approach the question of whether China's intense concentration of surveillance infrastructure in the region does indeed have the desired effect of regulating the behavior of Chinese citizens many miles away. As the Chinese government continues to pioneer this model of information autocracy, and continues to refine, expand, and intensify its practices of surveillance, censorship, and policing, it becomes increasingly pressing to understand exactly how those systems work, and what they hope to achieve. If such research provides even a tiny amount of insight into how this governance model can be resisted, subverted, and prevented from expanding, then I believe it is immediately pressing.