Ritz Carr

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Article Review

A Review of "To Repress or to Co-opt? Authoritarian Control
in the Age of Digital Surveillance."

Xu, Xu. April, 2021. "To Repress or to Co-opt? Authoritarian Control
in the Age of Digital Surveillance." *The American Journal of Political Science, Volume*
65, Issue 2, pgs 309-325.
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INTRODUCTION

Pennsylvania State PhD Candidate Xu Xu wrote an article, "To Repress or to Co-opt? Authoritarian Control in the Age of Digital Surveillance," on increasing digital surveillance in authoritarian governments. That authoritarian governments shape the "repression co-opt trade-off" that in turn allows the substitution of "targeted, preventive repression for more costly universal co-optation." (Xu, 2021). This topic is important, especially in modern American culture because we ourselves are seeing a doom-like trend toward increasing amounts of overwhelming and omnipresent surveillance of citizens.

My reasons for choosing this paper are two: Primarily, my major in cybercrime and the desire to pick a political science-related paper to the technology discipline. Currently, I am writing a research paper titled "A Few Concerns of Technology's Impact on Fourth Amendment Applications." In it, I have a topic about Facial Recognition Technology (FRT) and I feel this source may be of assistance to that discussion.

SUMMARY

This article adds on to previous literature in the field focusing on the political repression and co-optation in dictatorships. Xu details that selective and/or targeted repression of groups and co-optation methods are used by dictators as a method to control their citizens' attempts of "government suppression and violence." (Xu, 2021). Xu also emphasizes the issue imposed by the vertical information flows, which are used to address social grievances and monitor local officials with the media and multiparty elections.

Xu's article mainly focuses on two key terms: repression and co-optation. The former is defined by the author as the subduing of opposition of the dictator and/or ruling elite, a key tool used in dictatorships. The latter is also used by dictators to gain political support by providing benefits to a certain group. Both are used in concert with one another by dictators to "forestall dissent before coordinated protests manifest" (pg 312); thus, dictators hedonistically use these strategies accordingly. Xu emphasizes that those

stable dictatorships need not struggle with this 'trade-off' because citizen-satisfaction with the regime is good.

Other key terms include: The Golden Shield Project, Difference in Differences (DiD),

Then, before going into the discussion, Xu points out the evolution and growing availability of technology has eased the dictator's ability to surveil citizens through a myriad of means. This also increases the dictator's "probability of detecting radical opponents" (pg 313). After the introduction, prelude of concepts, and discussion, the author dives into the data and empirical strategies used, making up the bulk of the paper.

For this study, Xu uses a "full sample of about 3,000 Chinese counties" (pg 314). His reasoning is that these Chinese counties are analogous to those similar dictator-states internationally, using methods similar to the Chinese government's phase-in digital surveillance program. With this, Xu employs a "difference-in-differences (DiD) design" to evaluate and "identify the effects of digital surveillance on repression and co-optation." The choice of the small-level counties is to get the most intimate data to this issue, as local government is the closest connection to citizens. In addition to this, Xu's data sources also include the Golden Shield Project, that created a Chinese government national database interconnected with a nationwide-surveillance network, a powerful tool used in preventive repression.

The Golden Shield Project was completed in two phases, which are further detailed in Xu's empirical specifications section to detail the effects of digital surveillance technology (such as Golden Shield) on repression combined with the DiD approach. Then, a "lagged dependent variable estimation" addressing "endogeneity concerns" concerning repression influences. Xu uses these explanations to detail results and further their argument of the surveillance and repression-co-opt tradeoff.

CRITIQUE

I am impressed and fascinated by Xu's choice and passion in this topic. I am not experienced with using variables for data analysis just yet; however, not only does Xu use many variables, Xu manages to explain them *all* comprehensively enough to be understood. Furthermore, Xu's sample of 3,000 Chinese counties is an academically impressive study to conduct. The results are intriguing; that surveillance has negative effects for non-exclusive co-optation, as demonstrated by Xu's data sets.

I believe with all Xu has written that he has effectively achieved their modest purpose of *contributing* to this topic, as acknowledged in the concluding line: "Future research in these directions is worth exploration."

Reading the article and evaluating its sources, most of them are scholarly, representing a wide array of different journals and disciplines. Some sources are from

news articles, specifically Chinese sources. While this is important for the article that focuses on Chinese dictatorship surveillance, I assume their use is more informative of the country's use of technologies for surveillance. It is safe to assume, then, that Xu was biased in choosing China for this topic; but only that bias is present.

I would say the most noticeable omission was a limitations section; but, I did find implications for "explaining the authoritarian survival in the digital age":

- Digital surveillance gives dictators more opportunity to repress and uprisings by radical opponents of the regime.

- Diminishes the need for in-person surveillance methods that are known for decreasing public trust.

- Far more effective on a nationwide scale (especially for a nation as large and populous as China).

I understood that China was a good example of a dictator-led regime for this topic, but perhaps the title should be more specific to account for this narrowed-down focus. In Xu's literature review, however, many other countries that have similar methods are examined to provide a basis for their argument. Reading through this section and examining a few of these articles shows that Xu's is not as advanced or 'high-level', but it does not need to be. As stated before, Xu's goal was to contribute to this topic, and I believe he did so successfully. I do think, though, there could be a separate literature review section for this.

From my studies and research in topics related to surveillance, it is not surprising to find a lack of articles that contradict this argument. Mentioned before, I would say the only bias would be Xu's focus on Chinese dictatorships. But, after Xu reviewed various sources that include similar studies in various places, the specificity of China for this topic is appropriate; but, again, could be included in the title. In this case, Xu's article would prove to be useful to those looking of how surveillance effects repression and co-optation in the Chinese society and the like as opposed to other sources mentioned.

CONCLUSION

To anyone like myself, this article will prove to be immensely useful. I have never heard of the 'repression co-opt tradeoff' before regarding surveillance. I am anti-surveillance, but I have not dedicated much time to researching the supporting arguments for surveillance in societies such as dictatorships- supporting as in why it works for them. Xu's research shows a concise and rational understanding of why surveillance is used in China. After reading this, I would not put it past my own thinking to imagine that our United States government would want to utilize surveillance on a mass-scale for these reasons.

Again, I feel some would find this article useful if they are interested in topics similar to this, such as surveillance states and modern dictatorships, or even how technology influences government. Xu's article provides a foundation for the leading

surveillance state, China, in the repression-co-opt tradeoff with surveillance that would

be useful to those researching surveillance technologies across the world and/or more

specifically China. Referring to Xu's literature review, this article would be a perfect

addition to a literature review on a similar topic, like my paper!