

What Explains Popular Support for Government Surveillance in China?

Zheng Su

School of International and Public Affairs
Shanghai Jiao Tong University

Xu Xu

Department of Communication & Department of Political Science
Stanford University

Xun Cao

Department of Political Science
Penn State University

Abstract: Discussions of China's recent massive surveillance operation often present it as evidence of the country's path to an Orwellian state with an omnipresence of fear and discontent among its citizens. However, based on a most recent survey of a national representative sample in 2018, this paper finds that a great majority of Chinese citizens support various forms of state surveillance. CCTV surveillance receives the highest support (82.2 percent), followed by email and internet monitoring (61.1 percent). Even the most intrusive policy – collecting intelligence on everyone in the country – receives support from more than 53 percent of citizens. These high levels of support are positively associated with individuals' safety concerns, trust in government, and regime satisfaction. Unlike in western societies, information exposure and terrorism concern do not have any impact on Chinese citizens. These findings help explain why the Chinese state can expand its surveillance capacity without resistance from the public and exercise its power effectively to govern the society.

Keywords: Surveillance, public opinion, political trust, security concern, China.

Introduction

In the past decade, one significant change in the way by which a government rules a society is the use of information technologies to collect information and monitor the population. China is a country that stands out from its autocratic peers in both the scale and the technological advancement of digital surveillance.¹ Amid the COVID-19 season in 2020, China further embraced a myriad of surveillance technologies at massive scales to fight the pandemic. The rapid expansion of China's surveillance capacity has led international news outlets to portray it as the birth of a dystopian surveillance state with terrifying consequences.² Journalists commonly raise the concern that a totalitarian social control is underway in China. Scholars also refer to China's new surveillance state as digital totalitarianism.³ However, this pessimistic view is a striking contrast to the fact that China's aggressive expansion of state surveillance faces almost no resistance from the general public. In fact, the extent to which people in China dislikes government surveillance remains largely an unanswered question.

¹ Walton 2001; Qin, Strömberg and Wu 2017.

² "Inside China's Dystopian Dreams: A.I., Shame and Lots of Cameras," *New York Times*, July 8, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/08/business/china-surveillance-technology.html>; "Does China's digital police state have echoes in the West?," *Economist*, May 31, 2018. <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2018/05/31/does-chinas-digital-police-state-have-echoes-in-the-west>; "'The new normal': China's excessive coronavirus public monitoring could be here to stay," *The Guardian*, March 8, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/09/the-new-normal-chinas-excessive-coronavirus-public-monitoring-could-be-here-to-stay>.

³ Xiao 2019.

This paper demonstrates that Chinese citizens are to a large extent supportive of state surveillance. Using a most recent survey of a national representative sample in 2018, we find that about 82.2 percent of the general public support CCTV (closed-circuit television camera) surveillance and 61.1 percent support email and internet monitoring. Even the most intrusive surveillance policy – collecting intelligence on everyone in the country – still receives more than 53 percent of citizens’ support (Figure 1). Further, the high levels of support for state surveillance are positively associated with individuals’ safety concerns, trust in government, and regime satisfaction. Unlike in many western societies, information exposure and terrorism concern do not have any significant relationships with citizens’ attitudes toward surveillance in China.

This paper makes three major contributions to the existing literature. First, since Edward Snowden’s disclosure of global surveillance operations by the US government and its allies in 2013, scholars have extensively examined the public opinion of state surveillance in western democracies.⁴ However, few studies focus on public opinion toward surveillance in China, the largest developing country in the world and one with a government that has long been using information technologies to safeguard social stability. This paper is, to our knowledge, the first attempt to systematically examine Chinese citizens’ attitudes toward state surveillance.

Moreover, we differentiate between three different types of surveillance policies. This is important because survey questions used in this paper move beyond the often vaguely defined questions on surveillance and privacy by asking respondents specifically about their support for 1) CCTV surveillance, 2) email and internet monitoring, and 3) collecting intelligence on

⁴ Reddick, Chatfield and Jaramillo 2015; Potoglou et al. 2017; Trüdinger and Steckermeier 2017.

everyone in the country. We find that support for government surveillance in China indeed varies significantly across policy types. Such a variation also partially demonstrates the credibility of the survey used in this study. There is often a self-censorship concern for respondents in authoritarian states.⁵ This study finds that Chinese citizens' support for a surveillance policy varies as a function of its level of intrusiveness: CCTV surveillance receives the highest support, followed by email and internet monitoring, while collecting intelligence on everyone in the country received the least support – indeed, almost 22% of the respondents are firmly against this arguably most comprehensive and intrusive surveillance policy.⁶ At the same time, only 7% of the respondents are firmly against CCTV surveillance. It seems that the respondents understand the differences between surveillance policies. They are also not shy of expressing their concerns over the more intrusive types.

Finally, this paper reveals significant differences in factors that affect popular surveillance support between Western countries and China. For instance, concern for terrorism often increases support for surveillance in American and European contexts.⁷ Yet we find that it has no effect in China. Unlike past studies that suggest that political trust in government increases one's acceptance of surveillance measures,⁸ we find the effect of political trust is much more nuanced in China – political trust is positively associated with support for CCTV

⁵ Robinson and Tannenberg 2018.

⁶ 25% answered that government “probably should not have the right” to implement this policy.

⁷ Reddick, Chatfield and Jaramillo 2015; Trüdinger and Steckermeier 2017.

⁸ Davis and Silver 2004; Denmark 2012; Pavone and Degli; Esposti 2012; Nakhale and Lint 2013.

surveillance, but is unrelated to email/internet monitoring and the policy of collecting intelligence on everyone in the country. Even for the most government-trusting citizens in China, the level of political trust is unable to increase their acceptance of the more intrusive types of surveillance policies.

Digital Surveillance in China

Since the start of the 21 Century, we have witnessed a rapid expansion of surveillance state in China. China started to develop its surveillance capacity as early as 1998 when the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) initialized the Golden Shield (GS) project—an all-encompassing informatization platform designed to facilitate police operations.⁹ By 2006, the Chinese police had built a nationwide intranet infrastructure that connects all levels of public security bureaus (from the MPS at the center to about 3,000 county-level bureaus). This GS platform combines a comprehensive population database with a security management information system, a criminal information system, an immigration administration information system, a detention, prison, and reeducation information system, and a traffic management information system. The local GS systems also include a database for high-priority monitoring and control personnel (*zhongdian guankong renkou* 重点管控人口).¹⁰ The platform incorporates various surveillance tools such as

⁹ China.org.cn. 2003. “The Golden Shield Project,” 27 February, <http://www.china.com.cn/chinese/zhuanti/283732.htm>.

¹⁰ Shen 2017.

ID scanning and tracking in public and private areas (e.g., hotels, bus terminals, train stations, ticket centers, airports, and Internet cafes).¹¹

In the late 2000s, Chinese police started to integrate street surveillance camera systems into the GS platform. The Ministry of Public Security and local public security bureaus launched a series of surveillance camera projects such as the “3111” Initiative (*3111 gongcheng* 3111工程), the “Safe Cities” project (*ping'an chengshi* 平安城市), the “Skynet” project (*tianwang gongcheng* 天网工程), and the Rural “Sharp Eyes” project (*nongcun xueliang gongcheng* 农村雪亮工程). By 2012, more than 660 pilot counties and districts under the “3111” Initiative had built surveillance camera systems in public spaces. Following these pilot counties, more and more localities constructed their surveillance camera systems.¹² In the past decade, big data and artificial intelligence have been integrated into the surveillance platform. Facial recognition is integrated into the rapidly expanding networks of surveillance cameras. Connecting to population databases and the database for the high-priority monitoring and control personnel, the surveillance camera system works in real-time to identify a criminal or dissident in just a few seconds.¹³

¹¹ Some local police bureaus had also developed Internet surveillance tools and web-attacking modules. See Du 2013.

¹² The demand for surveillance equipment created a booming market in China, which reached \$10.6 billion in 2018. “IDC Releases China Video Surveillance Equipment Tracker Report: AI & 5G Bring Video Surveillance to a New Era,” <https://www.idc.com/getdoc.jsp?containerId=prCHE45536619>.

¹³ “In Your Face: China’s all-seeing state,” *BBC News*, 10 Dec 2017.

The Chinese government and large tech firms such as Tencent and Alibaba are experimenting with social credit systems that reward and punish citizens, companies, and organizations based on their “trustworthiness” by personal, financial, and behavioral information. By 2018, 43 local governments have implemented pilot social credit systems. Although there is no nationally coordinated social credit system so far, the government is making great efforts to put it in place soon. Amid the COVID-19 virus season, Chinese citizens are tracked and sorted into color-coded categories – red, yellow or green – corresponding to their health status and level of risk for COVID-19. The Chinese government also announced that the disobedience of quarantine rule will lower citizens’ social credits. A potential AI-powered nationwide social credit system could have tremendous impacts.

Academic work on China’s state surveillance is growing rapidly. Some scholars argue that the government allows highly sensitive posts published on social media and uses the information to gauge public opinion, predict potential protests, and monitor local corruption.¹⁴ A study finds that the development of state surveillance allows Chinese local governments to substitute targeted repression for universal cooptation.¹⁵ While the policy background of China’s surveillance state and its potential threats are discussed,¹⁶ it is found that the social credit system in China has successfully changed citizens’ behavior.¹⁷ Some researchers explore factors driving

<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-china-42248056/in-your-face-china-s-all-seeing-state>.

¹⁴ Qin, Stromberg, and Wu 2017.

¹⁵ Xu forthcoming.

¹⁶ Xiao 2019.

¹⁷ Kostka and Antoine 2019.

China's export of surveillance technologies to foreign countries.¹⁸ However, except for a few studies on citizens' attitudes toward the social credit system,¹⁹ the public opinion of state surveillance in China has not been examined. This paper uses a most recent nationwide opinion survey in China to fill this gap.

Theoretical Expectations

General Attitudes toward Surveillance: Surveillance invades individuals' privacy. Scholars have found that Europeans expressed very high levels of concerns about individual data protection and information security threats.²⁰ However, this privacy concern may be less salient among people in authoritarian countries. One robust finding in the human rights literature is the association between democratic institutions and a greater respect for human rights, of which privacy is an important component.²¹ Citizens in autocracies often have low expectations for civil liberty. Thus, Chinese citizens probably do not care about privacy as much as citizens in western democracies. Recent opinion surveys also find that Chinese citizens generally support the social credit system, one recent form of surveillance practices in China. Thus, we expect Chinese citizens to exhibit high levels of support for the government's surveillance practices in China. Nevertheless, privacy concern is a robust predictor of support for surveillance in many

¹⁸ Greitens 2019.

¹⁹ Kostka 2019.

²⁰ Potoglou et al. 2017.

²¹ Poe et al. 1999; Davenport 2006; 2007; Keith, Tate, and Poe 2009; Conrad and Moore 2010; Keith 2011.

countries. Thus, we further anticipate that Chinese citizens' attitude varies depending on the intrusiveness level of a surveillance policy.

Trust in Government: It is argued that political trust implies the expectation by a citizen that political actors will not misuse their power, even if they are not being constantly scrutinized.²² Some scholar also advances the argument that the more trustworthy a citizen perceives a government to be, the more likely he/she is to consent to its policies.²³

Political trust is often a resource to be used by the authorities to implement binding decisions. It is found that political trust fosters popular support for anti-terrorism policies.²⁴ Another study show that trust in government is among the key predictors of surveillance and security legislation in Canada and the United States.²⁵ Some scholars estimate the effects of political trust and policy-specific information on the acceptance of surveillance in Germany and they find that political trust was particularly important for surveillance policy evaluations.²⁶ Therefore, we expect that a Chinese citizen's support for government surveillance is a positive function of the level of her/his trust in government.

Closely related to trust in government, some scholars have also linked support for surveillance to social trust. For instance, a study shows that trusting people often are more likely

²² Gamson 1968.

²³ Levi 1997.

²⁴ Denmark 2012.

²⁵ Nakhaie and de Lint 2013.

²⁶ Trüdinger and Steckermeier 2017.

to have faith in authorities' ability to ensure that things do not get out of hand.²⁷ Therefore, in addition to trust in government, social trust, that is, the extent to which an individual is trusting other people in the society, might be another factor that increases her/his acceptance of government surveillance programs.

Information Available to Citizens: Government surveillance policies are often justified by government agencies as necessary means to ensure public order and safety. They are designed to keep the people away from crime, violence, and terrorist attacks. However, what often is not publicized is the intrusive nature of surveillance programs. Past studies often conceptualize government surveillance as one-sided (i.e., by the government), systematic, and routine monitoring of individuals or groups for a given purpose.²⁸ Measures such as the introduction of biometric data into passports, monitoring and recording of telecommunications, and facial recognition through artificial intelligence can limit individuals' civil rights. Citizens simply do not have the time and means to control and regulate the access to their monitored personal information.

Not every citizen is well informed and aware of the potentially detrimental effects of surveillance programs. This is the reason why we suspect that information available to citizens regarding the nature of surveillance programs affects their support for government surveillance. In general, we expect that well-informed citizens are more likely to perceive government

²⁷ Davis 2007.

²⁸ Jenkins 2014; Lyon 2014.

surveillance as introducing a risk to jeopardize individual rights; therefore, they are less likely to support surveillance policies.

In the Chinese context though, the effect of information on surveillance support might be weakened. This is a function of the nature of the media system in China, which still is at least partly controlled by the government. Traditional media such as TV, radio, and newspapers are largely owned and operated by various levels of governments. They often play a propaganda role.²⁹ For instance, the recent government effort of building a social credit system to better collect personal data and monitoring movements has been advertised by state media as means to increase social stability and honesty in the society.³⁰ Therefore, one might expect the more a citizen is exposed to the state-controlled media, the more likely she/he is to support government surveillance policies.

On the other hand, information on the true nature of surveillance policies – surveillance policies are about government collecting personal information to better control the society – is more likely to circulate in new media such as the Internet and other social media platforms (e.g., Weibo and WeChat) despite consistent government online censorship. Some recent studies have refuted the popular view that the Chinese government relentlessly censors or even ban social media. For instance, by analyzing 13.2 billion blog posts published on Sina Weibo during 2009-2013, a study shows that a shockingly large number of posts on highly sensitive topics were

²⁹ In the 1990s, government redefined the primary role of media as agenda-setting, which allows the expression of the people's voice, though priority is still given to the party's voice. See Chan 2002.

³⁰ Kostka 2019.

published and circulated on social media.³¹ Another study also reveal that the government mainly deletes online posts that incite collection action while ignoring others, even those expressing grievances and involving sensitive topics.³² As a result, we suspect that the exposure to less government controlled new media platforms increases the knowledge of the invasive nature of government surveillance, therefore, decreases citizen support for such policies.

Concern for Safety and Terrorism: The studies of public opinion on surveillance in Western democracies often emphasize citizens' privacy-security tradeoff.³³ For instance, using a survey experiment, researchers show that American citizens are willing to support state violation of their civil rights in exchange for the promise of greater security.³⁴ A common argument is that citizens sacrifice freedom for security because they consider themselves beneficiaries instead of victims of state coercion.³⁵ The idea that the public is willing to trade some measure of freedom to ensure security, especially when they think their country is under a security threat has been supported by many historical cases. For instance, following the September 11 attack, the Bush administration in the US took advantage the popular support for anti-terrorism measures and pushed through the Patriot Act.

³¹ Qin, Strömberg and Wu 2017.

³² King, Pan and Roberts 2013.

³³ Davis and Silver 2004.

³⁴ Dietrich and Crabtree 2019.

³⁵ Huddy et al. 2005; Huddy, Feldman and Weber 2007.

However, not every citizen shares the same level of privacy-security tradeoff. Some prioritize safety and are more willing to sacrifice personal freedom and civil liberties – they are more likely to support government surveillance policies. Therefore, we expect that the more a citizen is concerned about safety issues and the more she/he prioritizes social stability, the more likely she/he will support government surveillance.

Data

This study uses data from a national representative survey in China, implemented between July and October in 2018 by a joint research team from universities such as Shanghai Jiao Tong, Peking, Tsinghua, and Nanjing University. The targeted respondents are citizens 18 to 70 years old and who lived in mainland China for more than 6 months in the past year. The research team applied GPS/GIS assistant sampling with stratified, multi-stage probability proportional to size (PPS) sampling to get a nationally representative sample.³⁶ 4,921 questionnaires were distributed. A sample of 3,036 respondents with a valid response was obtained (61.7 percent). Answers were collected through face-to-face interviews by well-trained graduate and undergraduate students under the guidance of field supervisors.

³⁶ 50 out of the 2,855 counties were chosen as the primary sampling units (PSUs) by stratified PPS sampling. Using the DMSP night light data, two half-square minutes (HSM) of latitude and longitude were chosen within each PSU. Two spatial square seconds, approximately 90 by 90 meters, within each HSM were randomly chosen for investigation. Investigators randomly drew 50 dwellings in each HSM and selected respondents using the Kish Grid method. See ; Kish 1965; Landry and Shen 2005.

Dependent Variables: During the survey, we asked respondents' attitudes toward three different types of government surveillance policies:

“Do you think that the Chinese government should or should not have the right to:

- 1). keep people under video surveillance in public areas?*
- 2). monitor all e-mails and any other information exchanged on the Internet?*
- 3). collect intelligence about anyone living in China without his/her knowledge?”³⁷*

From CCTV surveillance in public areas to email and Internet monitoring, and to collecting intelligence on everyone living in China, the surveillance policy in question becomes more intrusive and allows the government to exercise an increasing influence on people's daily life.

The original answers to each question are “1 = Definitely should have the right, 2 = Probably should have the right, 3 = Probably should not have the right, 4 = Definitely should not have the right”. Neither neutral nor “Don't know” answers are offered. For a better interpretation of our results, we reversed the order of the responses so that a larger number indicates a higher level of support for government surveillance.

Key Independent Variables: First, the measure of trust in government (*Trust in administration*) is based on a question asking how much confidence one has in government administrative

³⁷ “*shouji qingbao* 收集情报” in the Chinese translation.

organizations.³⁸ The answers are: None (1), Not very much (2), Some (3), and A great deal (4). There are other questions regarding trust in other branches of the government. We test their effects in robustness checks: there are trust in the legal system (*Trust in court*) and trust in police (*Trust in police*). To measure *Social trust*, we use the question that asked respondents whether they think most people can be trusted: this is a dichotomous answer (1 = Yes; 0 = No). Answers to all questions above are ordered with higher values representing higher levels of trust.

Regarding information exposure, we first construct an *Information index* to measure a respondent's overall information from various sources. In the survey, for each of the seven following sources — newspapers, television, radio, mobile phone, e-mails, Internet, and social media (e.g., WeChat and microblog) — respondents were asked to indicate whether they use it to obtain information daily, weekly, monthly, less than monthly, or never. After reordering these variables with higher values indicating higher frequencies, we conducted a principal component analysis. The result identifies a very strong first factor/component, which has an eigenvalue of 2.73 and explains 39% of the total variation in the data.³⁹ The factor loadings matrix shows that Internet, social media, cell phone, e-mail, newspaper and radio, and TV, all have strong loadings on the first factor/component. This strong first factor suits our purpose, which is to create one indicator to capture overall information exposure: this is the *Information index* variable,⁴⁰ which

³⁸ “*xingzheng jiguan* 行政机关” in Chinese.

³⁹ The second and third factor has an eigenvalue of 1.28 (18%) and 1.02 (15%).

⁴⁰ We apply a regression-based approach to get the first predicted factor score of the latent variable. See Kline 1994, 28-41.

is further standardized to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1, with higher values indicating more exposure.⁴¹

For robustness checks, we construct three information variables. The first one, *Information and chatting*, is also a comprehensive index of information based on the aforementioned seven news sources plus a new source of “talking with friends or colleagues.”⁴² Moreover, among the seven information sources, some are tightly controlled by the government and serve a propaganda role; others are less so. Newspaper, television, and radio often are in the former category. We combine them to generate an additional measure of *Propaganda exposure* index, following the same procedure used to create the *Information index*.⁴³ Mobile phone, e-mails, Internet, and social media fit into the latter category: following the same procedure, we create a *New media exposure* index based on these less government-controlled sources.⁴⁴

⁴¹ This *Information index* variable attains a Cronbach's α of 0.72: Cronbach's α measures reliability, or internal consistency, of multiple-question Likert scales in surveys. A value above 0.7 suggests that a set of variables well measures a single, one-dimensional latent aspect of the respondents.

⁴² The survey question asked the respondent to indicate whether they obtain information from talking with friends and colleagues daily, weekly, monthly, less than monthly, or never. Response options are reversed with higher values indicating higher frequency.

⁴³ The eigenvalue of the first factor is 1.47, with 49% explained variance; the Cronbach's α is 0.47.

⁴⁴ The principal component analysis shows a high one-dimensionality (eigenvalue of 2.51, 63% explained variance) and a reliability of Cronbach's α of 0.80.

We use three variables to measure security concerns. First, we asked about a respondent's evaluation of her/his personal safety. The answers are "Very secure, Quite secure, Not very secure, Not at all secure." We reverse the order of answers so that a higher value represents a stronger sense of personal safety. This is the *Feeling of security* variable. Second, we asked a respondent's concern about a potential future terrorist attack ("Very much (concerned), A good deal, Not much, Not at all"). Terrorism is often perceived as one of the biggest threats in many societies. We also reversed the order of answers to this question so that a higher value corresponds to a higher concern for terrorism (*Fear of terrorism*).

In the past three decades, maintaining social stability has become an important task for the Chinese government.⁴⁵ A strong personal preference for stability and order might also affect people's choice to support surveillance policy and to sacrifice privacy. To test whether there is such an effect (*Importance of stability*), we identify the group of respondents (coded as 1, and 0 otherwise) who listed "Maintain order in the nation" as the first priority above other choices including "Giving people more say in important government decisions", "Fighting rising prices", and "Protecting freedom of speech."

Control Variables: We first control for respondent's political affiliation and ideology. We test the influence of official political ideology with a dichotomous variable, *Party membership* (whether a member of the Communist Party of China). Similarly, we consider personal satisfaction with the political system using a 1 to 10 scale (from least to most satisfied). *Regime*

⁴⁵ Zhao 2001; Lee and Zhang 2013.

satisfaction might lead to acceptance of policies.⁴⁶ Finally, a person's *Political interest* is included because those who care more about politics might spend more time obtaining policy-related information, thus having a better understanding of surveillance policies.

The second category of control variables are demographic and socioeconomic ones, including age, gender, education level, self-reported family income,⁴⁷ and urban household registration (*hukou*). We expect the well-educated, high-income, and urban dwellers to be associated with higher levels of privacy concerns; they are therefore less likely to support government surveillance.

Lastly, we are aware of survey respondents' potential self-censorship in authoritarian states. As robust checks, we include two measures of a respondent's sensitivity concern about the survey. The first one is the respondent's *Concern about survey*. This is not a survey question answered by a respondent, but a three-scale item rated by the investigator at the end of the interview: "Not at all concerned (about respondent's potential self-censorship), A bit concerned, and A lot concerned." Of course, the investigator's judgement is subjective; however, this is based on their observation of a respondent's reactions — in a face-to-face survey setting where a "potential" leakage of personal data may occur — which reflect the respondent's real attitude toward some potentially sensitive questions. We further include a second measure of self-censorship. This is an index following a recent study by calculating the difference in the nonresponse rate of sensitive (regime assessment) questions and that of non-sensitive questions

⁴⁶ Chen 2004; Tang, 2016.

⁴⁷ Respondents are shown an income scale on which 1 indicates the lowest income group and 10 the highest and asked to choose the appropriate number for their households.

for each respondent.⁴⁸ A higher self-censorship index, that is, a respondent answered a smaller proportion of sensitive questions than non-sensitive questions, suggests that the respondent is more careful and reluctant to answer sensitive questions.

Descriptive and correlation statistics are in Table A2 and Table A3 of the online appendix. Questions in the questionnaire and the detailed coding rule for each variable is in Table A1.

Empirical Findings

Varying Support Across Policy Types: During the survey, we listed three types of surveillance policy—CCTV surveillance, email and internet monitoring, and collecting intelligence on everyone in the country—and asked people’s attitudes towards each. Aggregated (using survey weights) answers with the relative percentages of four response options are presented in Figure 1.⁴⁹ First, we find that our respondents show high levels of support for state surveillance. 82.2% of respondents reported that the government “definitely should” or “probably should have the right” to “keep people under video surveillance in public areas”. 61.1% of respondents are supportive of the government to “monitor all emails and any other information exchanged on the Internet”. Even the most intrusive type of surveillance, “Collect intelligence about anyone living in China without their knowledge”, received 53.2% of respondents’ support.

⁴⁸ Shen and Truex forthcoming.

⁴⁹ We also calculate the percentages without using survey weights (Figure A1 in the online appendix): the unweighted percentages are within 0.5 percent difference from the weighted ones.

[Figure 1 here]

Chinese citizens respond differently to surveillance policies with different levels of intrusiveness. Our respondents seem to be quite supportive of CCTV surveillance: 42.95 and 39.26 percent, respectively, said the government “definitely should” or “probably should have the right” to do so. If CCTV might sound reasonable and might be a necessary means to fight crimes, monitoring emails and any other information exchanged on the Internet is a vaguer area because this grants government the power that might go too far in restricting civil liberties. Accordingly, we observe that the percentage of strong supporters (“definitely should have the right”) of email and internet monitoring goes down to 23.8 percent (a remarkable 20 points lower than in the CCTV case) while the percentage of who answered “probably should have the right” remain almost the same, at 37.27%. Meanwhile, the proportions of people who are skeptical or strongly opposing increase to 24.06 and 14.87 percent.

Finally, even less popular is “collecting intelligence about anyone that live in China without their knowledge.” For this policy, we observe a good amount of public concern: only 20.38 percent of the respondents are strongly supportive, 32.85 percent probably supportive, while 25.34 percent skeptical, and 21.43 percent strongly opposing this policy.

In sum, popular support for surveillance policies displays a clear pattern at the aggregate level. Respondents’ support surveillance goes down (from 82.2 percent for CCTV, to 61.1 percent for Internet monitoring, and to 53.2 percent for intelligence collection) as the intrusiveness level of a surveillance policy goes up. This pattern suggests that the respondents were carefully thinking about the nature of each surveillance policy. Finally, even for the most

intrusive policy of secret intelligence collection, more than half of the respondents answered either that government “should definitely have the right” or “probably should have the right” to do so. This high level of political obedience may help to explain why the Chinese state can govern the society and implement policies without much of a resistance.

Results from Ordered Logit Models: We estimate ordered logit models on the support for the three surveillance policies (Table 1). Provincial fixed effects are included in all models. For each dependent variable, we present three model specifications. The first two report estimates from ordered logit models, without survey weights, using robust standard error and clustered standard error (at the provincial level) respectively. The third model specification reports results from an ordered logit model using survey weights: since the sampling design involves the use of different strata, clustered sampling techniques and unequal selection probabilities, here we estimate an ordinal model with survey weights to avoid potential biased estimates of parameters.⁵⁰

Explaining Support for CCTV Surveillance: As shown in the first three columns in Tables 2, the parameter estimates of support for CCTV are quite consistent, even though the statistical significance levels of some variables vary. The standard errors are larger when clustering at the provincial level or when survey weights are applied, which results in lower significance levels.

⁵⁰ The survey weight is calculated based on household size, age, gender, education, and distribution of the population in different provinces from the 1% National Population Sample Survey in 2015. See Liu 2015.

In the following, we focus our discussion using results from the weighted model (Model 3) even though all three models yield similar results.⁵¹

In Model 3, the coefficient for trust in government is 0.252, significant at the 0.01 level, indicating a positive and statistically significant relationship between trusting the government and supporting CCTV. With an increase in trusting the government, the log odds of being above a particular category of supporting CCTV also increase. In odds ratios (OR=1.29),⁵² it means that the odds of being above a given category of supporting CCTV increases by 29 percent for a one-unit increase in respondent's trust in the government, holding all other variables constant. By contrast, the coefficient of social trust is -0.124 and is not statistically significant.

For information available to the respondent (*Information index*), the mean coefficient estimate is 0.002 and does not attain statistical significance. Variables that measure a respondent's security concerns seem to have different effects. On the one hand, the coefficient of subjective security (*Feeling of security*) is 0.168 and significant almost at the 0.1 level ($t=1.66$, $p=0.103$; OR=1.24), suggesting that those who feel more secure tend to be more supportive for CCTV. On the other hand, worry about terrorist attacks (*Fear of terrorism*), although has a

⁵¹ In Model 3, the numbers of strata and primary sampling units (PSUs) are 6 and 50; the design degree of freedom is 44 (50-6=44). The adjusted Wald test ($F(15,30)=2.14$, $p<0.05$) for all coefficient estimates indicates that the weighted ordered logit model is significant in predicting the cumulative odds of being at or below a particular level of supporting surveillance.

⁵² An odds ratio in ordinal logistic regression is the change in the odds (of being above a category versus being at or below that category) for a one-unit increase from any value of a variable. It equals the exponentiated logit coefficient.

positive coefficient of 0.05, does not have a statistically significant effect. This differs from many other countries because fighting terrorism is often the main reason why people support such policies. The coefficient of *Importance of stability* is 0.229 and significant at the 0.01 level (OR=1.30), indicating that those assign more importance to maintaining social stability (against other priorities) tend to be more supportive of CCTV surveillance.

Among the three control variables of political affiliation and attitude, regime satisfaction deserves special attention. Its coefficient is 0.074, significant at the 0.01 level (OR=1.05), suggesting a positive association with supporting CCTV surveillance. According to Easton (1975), regime satisfaction offers leads to diffuse support that is more durable and independent of policy outputs and performance. A higher regime satisfaction, from socialization or direct experience, represents an attachment to the political objects and decreases social resistance, making it easier for government to implement less-favorable policies. The coefficients of party membership and political interest are significant in the unweight models (model 1 and 2) but do not attain statistical significance in the weighted model (model 3).

Finally, most of the demographic and socioeconomic controls, such as age, gender, education, and urban hukou do not have any effect as suggested by the weighted model; the only exception is household income. Its coefficient of -0.074 (OR=0.95), significant at the 0.01 level, suggests that wealthier people are less supportive of CCTV monitoring.

Explaining Support for email and Internet Monitoring: The models on support for e-mail and Internet monitoring (column 4-6 in Table 1) yield different results. Among the key independent variables, only a preference for social stability (*Importance of stability*) is found to be associated with a higher support for Internet monitoring. The coefficient is 0.367, significant at the 0.01

level. An odds ratio of 1.44 suggests that a one-unit increase in *Importance of stability* will lead to a 44 percent increase in the odds of being supportive (above a particular category). While remaining positive, the effect of trust in government (*Trust in administration*) on support for Internet monitoring (a coefficient of 0.115, $p=0.803$) is not significant. Social trust also does not have a significant effect. Furthermore, the coefficients of information index and those of security concerns for personal safety (*Feeling of security*) and terrorist attacks (*Fear of terrorism*) are also not statistically different from zero.

Regarding the effects of control variables, while regime satisfaction (a coefficient of 0.12, significant at the 0.01 level) remains to be a strong predictor, people with higher family income tend to be more skeptical and less supportive (a coefficient of -0.07 at the 0.1 level). Other variables such as age, gender, education, and urban hukou do not have statistically significant coefficients. The effects of political interest are significant in the unweighted models but not in the weighted model.

Explaining Support for Intelligence Collecting: Since the results from unweighted and weighted models (Model 7 to 9) are almost identical, we focus our discussion using the latter, weighted model. The coefficient of trust in government, 0.107, and that of social trust, -0.054, are not statistically significant. Nor does *Information index* influence people's support for secret intelligence collection. The factors that matter are two variables that measure respondent's security concerns: with a one-unit increase in subjective security (*Feeling of security*, a coefficient of 0.23, significant at the 0.05 level; OR=1.26) and in preference for stability (*Importance of stability*, a coefficient of 0.27, significant at the 0.05 level; OR=1.31), a respondent is 26 and 31 percent more likely to support intelligence collection.

Regime satisfaction and political interests are both associated with higher support for collecting intelligence; party membership, however, is not. Age, gender, income, and urban hukou do not matter, either. Education attains statistical significance with a coefficient of -0.28 ($p < 0.05$, OR=0.89) for high-school education and a -0.26 ($p < 0.1$; OR=0.86) for college graduates, suggesting that compared to those who did not receive formal education or who attended only primary schools, the odds of being supportive of intelligence collecting above a particular category decrease by 11/14 percent if the respondent attended high school/college.

[Table 1 here]

Summary of Main Results: Using regression analysis, we test whether trust, information, and security concerns affect support for three types of surveillance polices. The results are mixed. Variables that measure security concerns affect popular support for surveillance way more than those measuring trust and information exposure. The most consistent effect concerns a respondent's preference for social stability (*Importance of stability*): this variable is positively associated with support for all three types of surveillance policies. A respondent's attitude towards surveillance has nothing to do with her/his fear of terrorism. Subject personal security (*Feeling of security*) affects support for CCTV surveillance and intelligence collection, but not email and Internet monitoring. Moreover, information available to respondents does not affect people's support for surveillance of any sort. Finally, while social trust does not affect surveillance support, trust in government does in a very limited fashion: it only increases support for CCTV but not for Internet monitoring or collecting intelligence.

Robustness Checks: First, for information exposure, we test whether the exposure to less government-controlled new media platforms—which might contain more information on the nature of government surveillance—might have a different influence from traditional media such as newspapers, TVs, and radio. We replace the overall *Information index* variable with one measure for *New media exposure*, one for *Propaganda exposure*, and one for all seven available information sources plus whether a respondent receives information via chatting with friends and colleagues (*Information and chatting*). Empirical results are in Table 2. Using these new measures of information exposure does not affect regression estimates for other key independent variables. Most importantly, information, whether measured by exposure to new media, to propaganda, or all sources plus chatting with friends and colleagues, does not have a significant effect on popular support for surveillance.

[Table 2 here]

[Table 3 here]

Furthermore, in Model 1 to 6 of Table 3, we use trust in court and trust in police as alternative measures for trust in government; in model 7 to 9 and 10 to 12, we include the respondent's concern about the survey—rated by the investigator after the interview—and the self-censorship index, as controls for self-censoring/social desirability bias. The coefficients of trusting court and trusting police are only statistically significant for support for CCTV: this is consistent with *Trust in administration* in Table 1. Respondent's desirability bias concern (*Concern about survey*) has a negative coefficient but only attain statistical significance in

support for CCTV. While people who are more concerned about being politically correct (supporting government in the Chinese context) are more likely to provide answers that are in line with government, it is also possible that they are more cautious about privacy and are less supportive of surveillance. The self-censorship index (model 10 to 12) does not have a significant effect.

Discussion and Conclusion

Drawing on a most recent survey data from a national representative sample in 2018, in this paper, we find that Chinese citizens largely support state surveillance and their support for a surveillance policy varies as a function of its level of intrusiveness. We further test whether key determinants of popular surveillance support suggested by studies conducted in other countries – trust in government, information exposure, and security concerns – affect surveillance support in China. The results are mixed. Variables of security concerns matter much more than those of trust and information exposure, suggesting that security concerns are an important reason why the general public largely embrace state surveillance in China.

Interestingly, we find that popular support for surveillance is mainly explained by a preference for social stability instead of concerns for terrorism. It is understandable that those who prioritize social stability are more willing to sacrifice privacy. Regarding the lack of effect of terrorism concerns, this might be explained by the fact that for most Chinese citizens, terrorist attacks are unlikely to occur in their cities.⁵³

⁵³ The latest large-scale event categorized by the Chinese government as terrorist attack is the July 5th Event in 2009, almost ten years before our survey. As a result of numerous government

Moreover, we find that trust in government only increases people's support for CCTV surveillance, not for Internet monitoring or collecting intelligence. One possible explanation has to do with people's perception regarding the difference between public and private spaces. It is easier for people to tolerate loss in privacy in public space. This is especially the case when one trusts that the authority will not abuse information collected via CCTV. Regarding Email and Internet surveillance, it is not a government's job to monitor or intervene in people's private activities. Accordingly, people's trust in government does not affect their support for Internet surveillance. Similarly, since obtaining private information and intelligence without consent is not perceived as government duty, trusting government has nothing to do with one's support of this most intrusive policy.

Finally, information exposure does not affect people's support for surveillance policies. However, based on our data, we cannot claim that information does not matter. It is difficult to measure a respondent's knowledge of surveillance policies by measuring his/her exposure to different media sources. Different types of media might use different framings on surveillance policies: it is possible that the more information sources a respondent has access to, the more he/she is subjective to different framing about surveillance. In our robustness checks, we differentiate state-controlled media (*Propaganda exposure*) from new media platforms (*New media exposure*): our assumption is that for the former, the coverage of government surveillance is more likely to be dominated by state propaganda; for the latter, there might be other voices

security measures, the level of violence in Xinjiang has decreased dramatically. Another reason why this event does not have a large psychological impact on Chinese citizens is that Xinjiang is on the western frontier of China, a place often considered far away from the China Proper.

revealing the invasive nature of surveillance. However, we still cannot find any significant information exposure effect. Future research should take a closer look at the contents of different media sources regarding their interpretation of government surveillance programs.

Another limitation is that as an observational study using survey data, this study is not able to provide strong empirical evidence for casual relationships between the variables. This shortcoming might be overcome in future studies with experimental designs. We also believe that comparative studies of popular support in other countries may be fruitful to guide public policies and government activities. While more research is certainly needed to better understand popular support for surveillance policies in China, we hope this article has provided a solid foundation for this new and exciting area of research.

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Tables

Table 1: Results from ordered logit models.

	(1) CCTV	(2) CCTV	(3) CCTV	(4) Email/Internet monitoring	(5) Email/Internet monitoring	(6) Email/Internet monitoring	(7) Intelligence collecting	(8) Intelligence collecting	(9) Intelligence collecting
Trust in administration	0.202*** (0.061)	0.202*** (0.065)	0.252*** (0.079)	0.060 (0.058)	0.060 (0.080)	0.115 (0.073)	0.079 (0.058)	0.079 (0.076)	0.107 (0.074)
Social trust	-0.101 (0.080)	-0.101 (0.087)	-0.124 (0.104)	-0.002 (0.077)	-0.002 (0.067)	0.022 (0.089)	-0.089 (0.075)	-0.089 (0.092)	-0.054 (0.084)
Information index	0.014 (0.050)	0.014 (0.063)	0.002 (0.060)	-0.021 (0.048)	-0.021 (0.055)	0.018 (0.058)	0.014 (0.047)	0.014 (0.057)	0.042 (0.061)
Feeling of security	0.196*** (0.073)	0.196** (0.078)	0.168* (0.101)	0.117 (0.072)	0.117 (0.108)	0.148 (0.100)	0.177** (0.070)	0.177* (0.098)	0.231** (0.109)
Fear of terrorism	0.031 (0.042)	0.031 (0.050)	0.047 (0.063)	-0.044 (0.041)	-0.044 (0.046)	-0.024 (0.057)	-0.015 (0.041)	-0.015 (0.050)	0.018 (0.051)
Importance of stability	0.236*** (0.074)	0.236 (0.157)	0.229* (0.114)	0.337*** (0.072)	0.337** (0.162)	0.367*** (0.130)	0.288*** (0.072)	0.288* (0.160)	0.267** (0.121)
Party membership	-0.185* (0.102)	-0.185* (0.099)	-0.152 (0.122)	0.008 (0.095)	0.008 (0.103)	0.141 (0.113)	0.010 (0.094)	0.010 (0.111)	-0.052 (0.121)
Regime satisfaction	0.074*** (0.021)	0.074*** (0.026)	0.074*** (0.027)	0.132*** (0.019)	0.132*** (0.020)	0.117*** (0.021)	0.071*** (0.020)	0.071*** (0.023)	0.050* (0.025)
Political interest	0.130* (0.076)	0.130* (0.078)	0.058 (0.083)	0.168** (0.073)	0.168*** (0.062)	0.108 (0.075)	0.178** (0.072)	0.178** (0.078)	0.172** (0.078)
Age	-0.001 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.006)	-0.003 (0.005)	0.007** (0.003)	0.007 (0.005)	0.007 (0.004)	-0.002 (0.003)	-0.002 (0.005)	-0.003 (0.004)
Gender (male=1)	0.071 (0.075)	0.071 (0.071)	0.020 (0.080)	0.035 (0.074)	0.035 (0.092)	0.014 (0.095)	0.059 (0.073)	0.059 (0.074)	0.046 (0.081)
High school	-0.178* (0.108)	-0.178* (0.103)	-0.140 (0.106)	-0.053 (0.103)	-0.053 (0.090)	-0.115 (0.111)	-0.287*** (0.101)	-0.287*** (0.107)	-0.283** (0.106)
College and above	-0.164 (0.153)	-0.164 (0.138)	-0.236 (0.170)	-0.032 (0.141)	-0.032 (0.154)	-0.156 (0.162)	-0.196 (0.142)	-0.196 (0.176)	-0.257* (0.151)
Household income	-0.075*** (0.022)	-0.075** (0.029)	-0.074** (0.034)	-0.062*** (0.022)	-0.062 (0.039)	-0.074* (0.039)	-0.036* (0.022)	-0.036 (0.040)	-0.047 (0.038)
Urban hukou	0.054	0.054	0.121	-0.007	-0.007	0.021	0.002	0.002	0.066

	(0.090)	(0.100)	(0.109)	(0.087)	(0.085)	(0.109)	(0.088)	(0.130)	(0.148)
Provincial Fixed effects	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Robust standard errors	√			√			√		
Cluster stand. Er. (prov.)		√			√			√	
Using survey weights			√			√			√
Obs.	2822	2822	2822	2813	2813	2813	2814	2814	2814
Model Fit	170.71***	162.95***	2.14**	208.82***	248.05***	6.88***	143.11***	295.33***	2.47**

Note: For each dependent variable, the estimates are obtained using ordered logit models with robust standard error, clustered standard error (provincial level), and survey weight. Model fit reports the log likelihood chi-square test (χ^2 value) of the unweighted model and adjusted Wald test (F -value) for all variables of the weighted model. Standard errors in parenthesis; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Table 2: Robustness checks with alternative measures of information exposure, ordered logit model with survey weights.

	(1) CCTV	(2) Email/Internet monitoring	(3) Intelligence collecting	(4) CCTV	(5) Email/Interne t monitoring	(6) Intelligence collecting	(7) CCTV	(8) Email/Interne t monitoring	(9) Intelligence collecting
Trust in administration	0.251*** (0.079)	0.115 (0.073)	0.108 (0.073)	0.250*** (0.079)	0.114 (0.072)	0.110 (0.073)	0.240*** (0.078)	0.112 (0.072)	0.103 (0.072)
Social trust	-0.124 (0.103)	0.023 (0.088)	-0.056 (0.084)	-0.126 (0.104)	0.024 (0.089)	-0.055 (0.084)	-0.118 (0.101)	0.023 (0.089)	-0.054 (0.084)
Information & chatting	0.027 (0.059)	0.053 (0.059)	0.084 (0.058)						
New media exposure				-0.010 (0.065)	0.013 (0.062)	0.054 (0.064)			
Propaganda exposure							0.005 (0.057)	0.063 (0.053)	0.024 (0.052)
Feeling of security	0.166* (0.101)	0.145 (0.099)	0.228** (0.109)	0.170* (0.101)	0.153 (0.100)	0.234** (0.109)	0.178* (0.099)	0.141 (0.100)	0.229** (0.109)
Fear of terrorism	0.047 (0.063)	-0.023 (0.058)	0.018 (0.050)	0.046 (0.062)	-0.026 (0.058)	0.015 (0.050)	0.046 (0.063)	-0.032 (0.057)	0.015 (0.050)
Importance of stability	0.228* (0.113)	0.367*** (0.129)	0.266** (0.120)	0.226* (0.114)	0.362*** (0.130)	0.261** (0.121)	0.222* (0.113)	0.357*** (0.128)	0.261** (0.120)
Control variables	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Provincial Fixed Effect	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Obs.	2819	2810	2811	2834	2825	2826	2845	2835	2836
Model Fit	2.15**	6.91***	2.32**	2.12**	6.82***	2.47**	2.27**	7.02***	2.98***

Note: Control variables are included but not reported because of space limit. Standard errors in parenthesis. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 3: Robustness checks with alternative measures for trust in government and social desirability/concern, ordered logit model with survey weights.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
	CCTV	Email/ Internet monitoring	Intelligence collecting	CCTV	Email/ Internet monitoring	Intelligence collecting	CCTV	Email/ Internet monitoring	Intelligence collecting	CCTV	Email/ Internet monitoring	Intelligence collecting
Trust in court	0.153* (0.084)	0.098 (0.066)	0.047 (0.070)									
Trust in police				0.140* (0.081)	0.093 (0.065)	-0.026 (0.072)						
Trust in administration							0.254*** (0.078)	0.103 (0.072)	0.095 (0.069)	0.252*** (0.079)	0.114 (0.074)	0.107 (0.073)
Social trust	-0.114 (0.105)	0.029 (0.088)	-0.046 (0.083)	-0.107 (0.105)	0.037 (0.087)	-0.027 (0.081)	-0.105 (0.106)	0.078 (0.086)	-0.007 (0.086)	0.252*** (0.104)	0.114 (0.089)	0.107 (0.084)
Information index	0.008 (0.058)	0.014 (0.058)	0.037 (0.061)	0.005 (0.058)	0.014 (0.057)	0.034 (0.061)	0.027 (0.058)	0.025 (0.056)	0.050 (0.064)	0.002 (0.060)	0.016 (0.058)	0.042 (0.061)
Feeling of security	0.179* (0.101)	0.148 (0.101)	0.233** (0.110)	0.168* (0.099)	0.141 (0.099)	0.241** (0.109)	0.165* (0.096)	0.113 (0.092)	0.202** (0.105)	0.168 (0.101)	0.145 (0.099)	0.230** (0.109)
Fear of terrorism	0.053 (0.062)	-0.022 (0.057)	0.021 (0.051)	0.053 (0.062)	-0.025 (0.058)	0.024 (0.051)	-0.009 (0.052)	-0.077 (0.111)	0.009 (0.045)	0.047 (0.063)	-0.025 (0.058)	0.018 (0.051)
Importance of stability	0.226* (0.115)	0.356*** (0.130)	0.257** (0.121)	0.217* (0.116)	0.348*** (0.132)	0.254** (0.122)	0.192* (0.106)	0.347*** (0.124)	0.245** (0.114)	0.229* (0.114)	0.366*** (0.130)	0.266** (0.121)
Concern about survey							-0.194** (0.090)	-0.074 (0.113)	-0.186 (0.122)			
Self-censorship index										0.103 (1.255)	-1.028 (1.148)	-0.458 (1.623)
Control variables	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Provincial Fixed Effect	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Obs.	2821	2814	2811	2825	2817	2815	2806	2797	2799	2822	2813	2814
Model Fit	2.05**	6.87***	2.49**	1.87*	7.82***	2.50**	2.51**	7.23***	2.67**	2.03**	6.62***	2.29**

Note: Control variables are included but not reported because of space limit. Standard errors in parenthesis. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Figure

Figure 1. Public support for surveillance in China, using survey weights.

