

Privacy in Xinjiang: A Cautionary Tale for America

The Chinese government has wedded totalitarian ambitions with high-tech surveillance technology, conducting a slow [cultural genocide](#) of the Uyghur Muslim population in the Xinjiang region of China.

The genocide is cultural because the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is not outright killing the Uyghurs. Instead, they are waging a war of slow attrition. The CCP punishes Uyghur women for having too many children. Some endure forcible sterilization. Other Muslims (male and female) who show signs of nationalism or religiosity suffer abduction and undergo brainwashing in re-education camps, where torture, rape, and forced labor lead to psychological re-engineering.

What's remarkable is the Chinese government's use of technology for their ends. Computer algorithms sift through massive amounts of data collected on Uyghurs, reporting individuals needing detention. Surveillance systems, including ones that identify facial features, constantly monitor Uyghur Muslims. The CCP has also executed a project called Golden Shield, a large-scale data collection program designed to stamp out any dissent to the status quo before it can grow. Meanwhile, the Great Firewall prevents Chinese citizens from viewing certain websites.

If citizens try to protest this repression, the CCP will cut off their access to cellphone and internet usage. The CCP has co-opted phone and social media companies so as to acquire the data these companies possess, giving them a sophisticated dossier on every citizen.

While the CCP seems extreme, Americans would be naïve to think that some of our own government elites do not secretly admire

this model of airtight technological control. Recall only three years ago: In the name of [public health](#), the government promoted a “vaccine passport” system. This card was made to prove that one had taken the requisite [COVID-19 vaccine](#), and it was required in many major cities to enter public places.

We witnessed efforts to digitize these passports via inserting one’s vaccination status into an app. Contact tracing programs even tried to identify those infected with the virus, consequently enforcing quarantines on those who might have been around the infected person.

In the name of public health, the government cast aside any respect for privacy. They wanted to know who was vaccinated, and who was not, to “stop the spread” and protect grandma. Insistence on medical confidentiality, the official narrative said, was an obstacle to saving lives.

Still, we only need to look to Xinjiang to see the naïveté of allowing governmental invasion of privacy, trusting that authorities will use data to protect us.

As an intellectual backdrop to all this, some academics question whether there really is a right to privacy. Some claim that the [right to privacy](#) is not an independent right, but one that is reducible to more fundamental rights, like the right to property and bodily security. In other words, we have grounds for complaints only when someone unjustly takes our property or harms our bodies. If this is true, we do not have distinct rights to ownership over facts about ourselves—so long as taking this knowledge does not infringe on our property or bodies. [Other critics](#) claim that a right to privacy leads to an excessive individualism, causing us to segregate ourselves with suspicion from the larger community.

At the very least, the situation in Xinjiang ought to give us pause. The CCP’s execution of a cultural genocide began with an initial violation of privacy. Without massive surveillance

programs, the CCP could not execute its plans. The totalitarian impulse begins with knowledge of its enemy.

Yes, yielding privacy may at first seem harmless. If we are complying with authorities, why should we worry if they know what we are doing? Yet, without data, Uyghurs would constantly find loopholes and private enclaves in which to transmit their culture. Totalitarianism often passes first through the gateway of privacy, only afterward suppressing other rights.

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