China's Surveillance State Pushes Deeper Into Citizens' Lives

Xi has taken government tracking to new levels during the pandemic

Brian Spegele Oct. 19, 2022 11:55 am ET

SHANGHAI—In many parts of Xi Jinping's China, state surveillance and Covid-19 controls begin the moment you step out the door in the morning.

The day might start with a government-mandated Covid test from workers in white hazmat suits. Without proof of a negative result, public spaces are off limits, including office buildings, grocery stores and parks.

Surveillance cameras keep watch over the city streets. In a cab on the way to work, the driver requires you to scan a QR code for a government database tracking people's movements. Scan again when stopping by Starbucks for coffee and then again at the office.

If the database shows you've crossed paths with someone infected by the virus, you'll likely be forced into quarantine. It may be in a hotel room, at a converted convention center, or if lucky, at home with an alarm installed on the front door.

The Chinese state has stretched far deeper into citizens' lives since Mr. Xi took power in 2012. Covid has pushed the controls to entirely new levels. Such measures are increasingly testing the faith of Chinese citizens in a government that is no longer delivering the supercharged economic growth that underpinned popular support for decades.

When Mr. Xi took office, he set in motion a campaign to put the Communist Party back at the center of public life. Beijing increased censorship of social media, expanded surveillance and cracked

down on private enterprise. He is expected to secure a third term as the country's leader following the party's twice-a-decade congress this week, after a [steady drive to consolidate power](#).

In [a rare public protest](#) last week, two banners appeared on a bridge in Beijing ahead of the congress. Slogans on the banners included "We Want Freedom, Not Lockdowns" and "Depose the Traitorous Dictator Xi Jinping. " Police quickly arrived and the banners were taken down.

"I trust them less, definitely," said Krissy Gu, who runs a fitness and dance studio and has endured two extended lockdowns since the beginning of 2020, including the earliest one in the city of Wuhan in 2020 and [one in Shanghai this spring](#) that lasted two months. The government had initially said it would last four days.

Ms. Gu went to graduate school in Boston and stayed in the U.S. for several years, then returned to China in 2017. "I just felt like I could do all the things I wanted to do" in China, she said. She launched her studio in downtown Shanghai and got involved with local theater.

She is considering leaving China again, this time for a Ph.D. in Europe. "This year is my first time to start to think about me as a citizen and the relationship with the government," she said. "I think it has happened to a lot of people."

A surveillance camera hangs on a bridge in Shanghai.

Photo: aly song/Reuters

A health-tracking code on a building in the Lujiazui financial district of Shanghai.

Photo: Qilai Shen for The Wall Street Journal

The State Council Information Office, which handles press inquiries for senior leaders, and Shanghai's government didn't respond to requests for comment.

The surveillance extends far beyond Covid. Chinese authorities combine data from biometric tools such as facial recognition with ID numbers and behavioral data collected by tech companies to identify actions they consider threatening to social order. In the far northwestern region of Xinjiang, faces, voices and physical movements are tracked in real time using cameras and other surveillance tools powered by artificial intelligence as part of a campaign to forcibly assimilate ethnic Uyghurs and other minority groups.

The increasing intrusions into daily life build on growing frustration over an economic slowdown, brought on in part by Covid lockdowns, that has made it harder to find jobs. Mr. Xi has cracked down on technology and education companies in an effort to rein in private sector risk-taking and assert greater state control over the economy. As of August, the urban youth unemployment rate sat at 18.7%, according to government statistics.

In China's beleaguered property market, government restrictions on developers' borrowing have helped spark falling prices. Over the summer, a movement to boycott paying mortgages on stalled real-estate projects spread to numerous cities.

Consumer confidence measured by the National Bureau of Statistics hit a new level of pessimism in April, and has since remained depressed as pandemic controls have endured.

Public opinion will likely start to rebound whenever China eases Covid controls, especially if the economy strengthens as a result. Economists expect output to grow around 3% this year, missing the government's 5.5% target. Some are reconsidering when China's economy will surpass the U.S. as the world's largest, or if it ever will. The government has given little information about how its Covid policy might evolve going forward.

In the case of a 6-year-old boy who recently tested positive for Covid days after landing in Shanghai on a domestic flight, the government first placed 400 of the boy's close contacts into quarantine. Then officials began tracking down secondary contacts—people who had come into contact with others deemed to be close to the boy.

Authorities descended on an IKEA after determining that a close contact of the boy had also visited the store, then left. Verified video footage showed people attempting to escape as security officers tried to barricade shoppers inside.

Authorities locked down an IKEA in Shanghai in August while tracking Covid cases.
Photo: Qilai Shen for The Wall Street Journal

Covid testing on the street in Shanghai on Oct. 12.

Photo: alex plavevski/Shutterstock

The government tested 83,000 people in connection with the boy's case. No one besides the boy tested positive, according to the city government.

China's government says its approach to Covid has saved lives, and many Chinese support the controls. Official statistics say about 5,200 people in mainland China have died of Covid, compared with more than 1 million in the U.S. Mr. Xi has labeled his effort against Covid as a "People's War," a phrase that harks back to the Mao era's revolutionary fervor.

The lowest rungs of China's government have been handed far more authority to control their neighborhoods. Government workers and volunteers monitor Covid-19 risks and report on residents' activities.

Prior to Mr. Xi, the government had gradually retreated from people's lives beginning in the late 1970s, allowing them to take up more private pursuits. Many foreign executives until recently saw China's leadership as pragmatic above all else.

"Now ideology is trumping the economy," the European Union Chamber of Commerce in China said recently when it released its latest position paper on the country.

Shanghai during a Covid lockdown in May.
Photo: alex plavevski/Shutterstock

Tracking public opinion in China is notoriously difficult. The government jails critics and academic freedom has eroded. On social media, posts critical of the government are frequently suppressed or deleted.

Before Covid-19 and even through the early days of the pandemic, some Western scholars found through surveys that Chinese were broadly supportive of the government, and that their satisfaction levels had grown in the previous two decades.
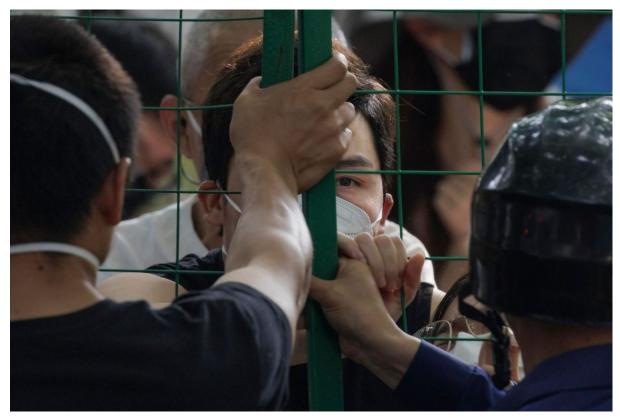
Mr. Xi won support from many Chinese after taking office for a wide-ranging anticorruption campaign and efforts to reduce poverty. These initiatives, and Chinese state media's depiction of a decadent and decaying U.S., fostered greater nationalism.

Much of the recent frustration has been directed at local officials rather than at the central government.

In southwestern Guizhou, one of China's poorest regions, anger crescendoed in recent weeks. A bus transporting residents into forced quarantine crashed in the middle of the night, killing 27 people and injuring 20 others. A local official expressed remorse, but was met with cynicism.

A protest formed online. "We're all on the bus," many users wrote.

A mother of two young children said she was on a different bus that night, forced into quarantine after her 4-year-old tested positive, only to be later cleared of the virus.

"I'm extremely sad and indignant," she later wrote on the Chinese platform Zhihu. "Apart from empathy, I lament even more that our freedom and our lives might merely hinge on another person's careless decision."

A man tries to break out of a quarantine fence in Shanghai in June.
Photo: alex plavevski/Shutterstock

Morning commuters lined up to scan a tracking code and show their health status on their phones at an office building in Shanghai last month.

When Mr. Xi took power, a growing high-speed rail system whisked travelers around the country. Today, carrying a large suitcase can prompt questions about a person's movements. A business traveler upon arriving home can expect calls from the police about where they've been.

Like many Chinese from the provinces, Yuan Yuyu dreamed of launching a career in Beijing. A college graduate with a computer-programming degree, Ms. Yuan landed a job in the capital and booked a train ticket there in early 2020.

When the pandemic hit, Ms. Yuan said her ticket was suddenly canceled due to travel restrictions. Her job offer dried up.

She stayed in her home city in Shaanxi province and found work at a company that makes pre-packed roujiamo, a local specialty food similar to a hamburger.

She began dating a man who shared her love of travel, and they decided to get married in the groom's hometown of Xi'an this spring. But the nearby city where they lived wouldn't let them leave due to the Covid controls.

A day before the wedding, their city lifted the restrictions and the couple rushed to Xi'an for the ceremony. They awoke in the morning to find that Xi'an had banned public gatherings. A few family members gathered at Ms. Yuan's in-laws' apartment instead.

She's now hunkering down at home, too wary to go anywhere.

"You never know if you'll get locked down in some random place," she said. "It's a big problem."

Xi Jinping's China

The Wall Street Journal examines Xi Jinping's first decade in power to better understand the changes he wrought—and the risks they create for China and the world.