

Ear to Asia podcast

Title: Engineering public morality in China

Description: China's social credit system is being rolled out and will by 2020 track the behavior of all of its 1.4 billion citizens, doling out rewards and punishments to individuals and communities. Asia Institute China analysts Dr Fengshi Wu and Dr Delia Lin ponder whether the system will succeed in bringing unprecedented security and stability to Chinese society or condemn it to a dystopian future. Presented by Ali Moore.

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Ali Moore: Hello, I'm Ali Moore, this is Ear To Asia.

From TomoNews: China is nothing if not innovative when it comes to finding ways to exert control over their people. Beijing plans to launch its social credit system nationwide by 2020 to rate the trustworthiness of 1.3 billion people by assigning each individual a score.

Prof Lin Junyue (through translator) via TV France: We'll be able to establish a blacklist of people, and create a system of punishment that will be based on a scientific theory. These punishments will serve as a whip to rebuild moral values. Our society needs it.

Cathy O'Neill via Fortune Live: One of the things that is the creepiest about the Chinese social credit scoring model is that it also cares about the credit scores of people who are friends with you, and if you do something that is considered not okay by the party, then your friends' scores can be affected. So, this isolates people, socially and culturally, if they disagree with policies. That's something that I think everyone should be afraid of.

Ali Moore: In this episode we discuss social control mechanisms in China. Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia Research Specialists at the University of Melbourne. In Ear to Asia, we talk with Asia researchers about the issues behind the news in a region that's rapidly changing the world.

During China's Cultural Revolution, which began in 1966 and lasted a decade, the communist regime led by Mao Zedong publicly humiliated, imprisoned, or otherwise got rid of anyone deemed to have ideas different from those espoused by the party. The persecution even extended to party line adherents who had the misfortune of having relatives who questioned the regime, resulting in enormous numbers of ordinary people officially losing their standing in society.

In China, the idea that you need strong authority to ensure stability is not new, and the Communist party has a long record of practicing different forms of social control. There's the danwei, or work unit, which wasn't just a place of

employment, but the source of housing, schools, and healthcare, and intimately linked to the communist party infrastructure. Or the hukou system of household registration, set up to restrict where people could live.

Now, China is making another giant step in monitoring its people. Four years ago the government announced its goal to create a social credit system to go online by 2020. Officially, it's a way of fighting crime and terrorism, with the system eventually able to track the behavior of every one of China's 1.4 billion citizens, rewarding behavior deemed good, and punishing behavior deemed otherwise. It will likely exploit cutting edge developments in facial recognition technologies, DNA matching, and artificial intelligence, and when it's fully in place, will be the largest, and possibly most sophisticated, social control system in the world.

But what does constant surveillance mean for the ordinary Chinese citizen? What's the risk-reward equation? And which parts of China's massive population are most likely to be under the official microscope? And what does the determined tracking of its own people mean for the future generation of knowledge and new ideas for China?

To examine China's social control mechanisms, past, present, and future, we're joined by Asia Institute China watchers and political scientists, Dr. Fengshi Wu, and Dr. Delia Lin. Fengshi and Delia, welcome to Ear to Asia.

Delia Lin: Hi, Ali.

Fengshi Wu: Thank you.

Ali Moore: What exactly is a social credit system, Fengshi?

Fengshi Wu: It is a comprehensive database that the government set up across different sectors to monitor individual behaviors from different sources so that eventually you have a final score, that is, your social score, and there are different kind of perks and punishments, or potential consequences, connected to it. Here we are more familiar with, you know, you go to a bank, apply for a credit card, so you have a financial credit score. So, this is a score to give you a sort of assessment of your social behavior.

Ali Moore: And Delia, if you look at the word credit in Chinese, Delia, it actually goes back to traditional Confucius ethics, is that right?

Delia Lin: Yeah, absolutely. So, xìn, which is one of the characters, or words, used in social credit system, it means credibility, trustworthiness. So, it is a moral thing, it's not just your financial credit, or whether you've paid all your loans. It is really about other areas as well.

Ali Moore: And how broad are those other areas, Fengshi? I mean, is it as simple as jaywalking, you might lose a point, helping an elderly person, you might gain a point?

Fengshi Wu: The scope is still under experimentation, I think. It also depends on the locality, so different local governments is experimenting with different kinds of data. You probably are aware of these examples. In some places jaywalking is important, so they're using this digital imaging surveillance technology to instantly capture have you violated traffic rules, and you would lose these points instantly.

Some other localities, they focus more on your internet purchasing behavior. So, they would get the data from these popular platform for people to buy things on the internet. And I then I was given some examples, such as if you are a middle aged married woman, and you're buying a lot of things for elderly, for children, you're considered very caring, so you gain some points.

And other places, some local governments might pay more attention to whether you've paid your loans, have you ever had a job with the government? That would give a big bonus, because you're a good citizen that's why you are trusted, and to give a public affairs sort of job.

Ali Moore: So, there's a couple of years before it's expected to be completely and fully in place, but at the same time it would seem, Delia, that it's not quantitative, that it's actually going to be a subjective analysis of someone's behavior.

Delia Lin: The ideal building up of the system is to try to make it quantitative, but the thing is, as Fengshi just mentioned, that different localities may look at different parts of the behavior, because some behaviors are more important to some localities, and less important to others. For example, in Xinjiang they will be looking at how many times you pray a day, and that would be part of your credibility. Of course, who makes those criteria? That's absolutely not decided by one person, but that's quite a subject if depending on what the local government sees the important behaviors that would be considered as a good citizen in that particular situation.

Ali Moore: And it's not just limited to the individual, there have been a lot of media reports in China just recently about a child who was given a place in university, but lost it because of his parents' social credit standing.

Delia Lin: Yeah, exactly, because what this system is all about is about reward those who are deemed to be credible by the system, and the [inaudible 00:07:20] who are deemed to be not credible by this system, then how far does punishment go? And that's quite subjective.

Fengshi Wu: Yeah, the implications to people beyond just that particular individual, but to the people related to you.

Delia Lin: Yeah, so that's called collective punishment-

Fengshi Wu: Punishment.

Delia Lin: ... which is not new to China's governance, because that was invented in Qin Dynasty between 221 and 207 BC. So, that kind of collective punishment was used at that time, and also was used later on, so which means that when you are deemed to be a criminal, especially political criminal, or not credible, not just you are punishable, also people who are related to you. So, that's why we've seen media reports on successful candidates being rejected to the university because the father was deemed incredible, because the father didn't pay some of the loans.

Ali Moore: Fengshi, what are the broader implications of this collective punishment, if you like, which in many ways would appear to rely on reporting on each other, in essence?

Fengshi Wu: This is the part of the credit system that worries a lot of China watchers, or China experts, is because somehow it does ring a bell of our understanding of the social damage, and the lingering social damage of the Cultural Revolution, that essentially pulls out the dark side of humanity. It's not just a technology-based surveillance, or specialized governmental surveillance of its citizen is to mobilize every single person turn themselves into an agent of surveillance, and breaking down social trust to the fundamental degree, breaking families, and encouraging children to report on parents, and so on, and so forth. So, this is something that worries many of us.

Ali Moore: Delia, the picture that Fengshi paints there is a really quite dramatic one. Do you think that this will go that far? That it will become an act of encouraging of people to report on each other?

Delia Lin: It's not that it will go that far, it has gone that far already.

Because this kind of reporting culture is already happening in China quite a lot, and even some university vice chancellors are calling their students not to do that, which shows that it's happening right now. And this is facilitated by technology as well, because it is so easy to record conversations, and so easy to keep a record of what people are doing, and when governments are encouraging collecting data for everybody, collecting behaviors of every single person, everyday life, that it encouraged this kind of culture to grow.

Ali Moore: Fengshi, what about those that welcome this in the context of the lack of trust

in China, the extent of corruption, which has been such a very big, official focus, and the hope that maybe something like this social credit system will make people more honest, will make life more fair?

Fengshi Wu: Yes, there are such arguments, and some of them might have a point, but I think these arguments are sort of made mostly based on more economic theories, that given the fact China has just started, or haven't completed, a solid, reliable, financial credit system in a sense that the economy has grown so big so fast, however, we still lack of reliable data and information of individuals' credit history, or economic or financial credibility.

One argument I've recently been informed is that in China the first internet-based platform for P2P micro financing company was up, running, and made a lot of revenue in 2009, but it took nine years for the government to finally come up with some sort of regulation of internet-based micro financing.

This side of the argument is that the market needs a bit of regulation, needs real investment in established and reliable system for the whole 1.4 billion people. You know, there's less chance to become a victim of these sort of ... e-commerce crime and all these things. But I find that these are strictly more sort of from the economic side.

Ali Moore: So when you look at a risk versus benefit equation of this system, you see more the risk than the benefit?

Fengshi Wu: I think the risks are... it really needs more open discussion. I think the economic side has been more discussed, and the government's more willing to share information about it, but the social side becomes so sensitive. I would rather see myself to be wrong in 10 years, but for me to be wrong is that at least the government has to be a little bit more open and let people to reflect on it.

Maybe if we are aware of the consequence, the risks, then we don't do it in a way similar to Cultural Revolution. Maybe let's restrict this kind of reporting and credit buildings within the financial arena, but there's no discussion so far.

Ali Moore: And Delia, how do you see it? I mean, you were a child during the Cultural Revolution, but you're obviously very, very well aware of what happened in that time.

Delia Lin: Yeah, I think it's very difficult for a number of reasons that, in China, there's kind of all been debate to be carried out around this idea of social credit system, and that's also why we don't really see a lot of resistance from China. I'm sure that the people are discussing, privately, but we don't see a lot of discussions.

A number of reasons, because the rationale behind this massive social credit system is, first of all the Chinese government from their perspective, they have found it's difficult to enforce laws and regulations. So, the court can say to some of the people who borrow money from the bank to repay the loan, and they probably just ignore it, and after a few notices, they still ignore it. So, there are many ways of resolving this problem, but the government intends to resolve it in a very harsh way.

And also, the second consideration of the government is how they rationalize this whole social credit system is that they believe, as we've just discussed, credit in Chinese is not just about how trustworthy you are as a person who borrow money from the bank, but also it's about your moral standard as well. So, the government sees itself always as a agent that should build up, or construct, morality in society, they also assume that role.

Ali Moore: So, that is the official justification for this system?

Delia Lin: Yeah, that's the official justification for the system. So, they believe that building a social credit system will help the government construct general morality in the society without considering that this system has other social impact, will encourage people to report on each other, and also surveillance as well on peoples' private lives. That is not considered by the government, and also people are not very sensitive to violation of privacy, because there are about 200 million CCTV cameras in China, and 400 million are to be built by 2020, but we don't really hear a lot of resistance from within China.

Ali Moore: And is there a difference, do you think, Fengshi, between the official justification and the primary purpose?

Fengshi Wu: After 2012 I do think the so called social control and surveillance become much more tied together. I would say certain tactics were already there even before 2012 or, you know, all the time, as we said, it is a history of social control, it's an important component of CCP's rule, and maybe the technology improved, the hardware side has been enhanced. What I discover is that the ideology is coming back big time, and now, in a sense, all the surveillance and control has been given more meaning.

This is what I think the current administration has been trying very hard, is really sort of bring back these moral arguments. I used to always argue in my writings is that harsh punishment of dissidents and extreme cases of punishing individuals have always been ... But suddenly I felt this ... It's much more coherent, because there's a coherent narrative now that the CCP is not just, you know, a decorative rhetoric, it's the champion of modernity, as a champion of socialist values, is coming back to fill the so called moral vacuums that many scholars have discussed.

The moment China started to become open and reform, there's a moral vacuum, people all become so consumed by economic gain. So, this time everything is becoming a bit more coherent because this big ideology, now, is being reignited.

Delia Lin: I completely agree with that, because I write on ideology and rule of law, and I could have used-

Ali Moore: So, this is the party basically putting its arms massively around society-

Delia Lin: Absolutely. Yeah.

Ali Moore: ... and being involved in every part of it.

Delia Lin: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. That's absolutely right, and to be in control in every area of everyday life, then also set boundaries around not just your behavior, where you can move, and in your introduction you did mention danwei, and hukou, and household registration, and those helped the government to place people within geographical boundaries. But government's now looking at put people within spiritual boundaries, and moral boundaries, and so that people all behave within that boundaries, and if you do that, then you may flourish as a human being, economically. But if you transgress any boundaries, then something dramatic might happen to you.

Ali Moore: You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. I'm Ali Moore, and I'm with political scientists Dr. Delia Lin and Dr. Fengshi Wu. We're talking about how China keeps track of its own citizens, and how that surveillance may shape Chinese society in the coming years.

You've both referred to the risks here of becoming a society where people are reporting on each other. But what about the other risk that, if you're not quite sure whether you're being monitored, you're uncertain, and that uncertainty is likely to make people more obedient, self censorship. How big an issue is that?

Fengshi Wu: I think that's a valid projection, in a sense. All these social psychological phenomena are connected, as we know from different country experiences. Eventually it doesn't matter whether there's actually a score, but if everybody believed there's a score, then we would act according to it. This is Eastern Europe before the collapse of Berlin Wall is everybody knew there was a dossier about themselves, so you imagine what would go into your dossier, the secret profile of you, so you behave according to it.

There are these very metaphorical sort of stories of grocers, you always put

party ideology slogans in front of your vegetables so that you can prove you are a very good citizen, even though you probably truly privately don't believe it. But you believe somebody, somewhere, is watching you, and there is a dossier, there is a file about you, then you really start to put up this facade of behavior.

Ali Moore: If self censorship is one issue, the other is, of course, actual censorship. And if we're talking about social control, and it's not just this new credit system, there is, of course, the Great Firewall of China, and indeed, social media. I mean, WeChat, Weibo, those sorts of social media outlets, they're censored too, aren't they?

Delia Lin: Yeah, absolutely, and my acquaintance in China are saying that with so many people setting up, establishing WeChat groups, and every five WeChat groups will be watched by one person from the government, so-

Ali Moore: That's a lot of people.

Delia Lin: That's a lot of people. Basically, there's no secret. Anything you write on WeChat, you write to your friends, write to your relatives, or write to your acquaintances, everything will be censored. Everything is being watched, there is absolutely no secret.

So, it's not just about self censorship, and also not only that individuals are censored, but also what we just talked about is collective punishment. My acquaintance told me that the WeChat group leader ... So, there is always a WeChat group leader. Here in Australia, for example, if we set up a Facebook page that is public we don't really know who set it up, it doesn't really matter, whereas in China this WeChat group leader is visible, is a very important figure, because if anything happens within that WeChat group that you set up, this individual, this group leader who set up this WeChat group, would be affected, would be punished.

So then it's not just about censorship, it's also about mutual censorship as well, so people are watching each other, like Fengshi just mentioned, that everybody becomes an agent of surveillance, and that's very dangerous. It has almost become part of normal life. It's how we behave every day.

Ali Moore: What happens to people whose posts are deemed unacceptable?

Fengshi Wu: We don't have a systemic database around these cases here, all we are reading are from some media sources, and there are different cases. The case can go as extreme as you cited, as your children's high school education, or undergrad education will be affected. Some other cases, as if you are deemed as a good citizen with high scores, you might get a free visa from certain countries.

Ali Moore: So even a post, a social media comment, can not just be deleted, but can also lead to further ramifications?

Fengshi Wu: Yes, yes, we also have these cases that people get invited to see public security personnels because what they said in social media.

Ali Moore: What about monitoring outside of China, particularly ... and this is one subject that in countries like Australia has been quite controversial, but monitoring of students outside China? Do we have any real sense of the extent to which that is done?

Fengshi Wu: Monitoring citizens abroad, or beyond borders, certainly is much more difficult, because you have to comply with local laws. I would say that this wasn't as obvious, it probably was impossible a decade ago. And what happens is that, increasingly, the government is funding people to go abroad. So, we have increasing percentage of Chinese nationals going abroad with complete government funding, and also without discontinuing their official affiliations.

Or there are more people traveling because of official duties and missions. I mean, in Australia you have to fill a lot of travel diaries if you are traveling for so called official business, and you do have to comply with institutional rules. So, particularly I think this argument, this point, observation that the government is paying more attention to those who travel abroad where these people are actually officials back home, that they are paying more attention in terms of what do you say? What do you do?

Originally, they only monitor, you know, if you do gambling, you know, if you're actually officials, or, you know, CCP officials, and then you go abroad and you gamble, that's always considered a very bad behavior, but I think the government is paying more attention to that.

Ali Moore: And you now have the United Front Work Department.

Delia Lin: Yeah, United Front Department has always been there.

Ali Moore: Is it more active, or are we just more aware of it?

Delia Lin: It's more active, oh, it's definitely more active. It's not just about monitoring, but also about building relationships, about making people aware that whatever they do may have some adverse effect on people within China.

So, they are really making use of those relationships that you have, and with technology, when they can build a large database of basically all your relationships, and what you say, and all the ... or the things that you say, and all

the things that you do, it's much easier to actually find the weak points of human beings, and much easier to control and monitor them. They don't even need to use suppressive measures, they can just make you aware that we know everything about you. That in itself is always hanging back on your mind, that you always have to watch what you say, because you don't want to affect other people.

Ali Moore: Which brings me to my final question. When you have a system like this, that has the potential to be so pervasive, what's the potential human cost? What's the potential cost to society? Arguably, there is a positive, but you've raised a lot of other questions.

Fengshi Wu: Yeah, I think this is a recurring theme today is that it's very clear the state is ambitious. The state wants to achieve a lot of things. One thing I've noticed, the state wants to reclaim its moral high ground, wants to be champion of modernity and morality in today's China. And to reach that goal I think they want to see effects very quickly, and they want to see citizens not just paying lip service. So, they've decided to reactivate, or bring back, a lot of old methods.

Ali Moore: And the risks to society of that?

Fengshi Wu: It is to the shrinking of discursive space, is to think it's only good that we have a unified system of values, that anyone who thinks differently is not right.

Ali Moore: Delia?

Delia Lin: Yeah, and that's absolutely right, because what it does is when you have a whole system that's quantified, so everybody's behavior is quantified, and at end of the day you get a score, so every single behavior, every word you say has a consequence. What it does is really to justify differentiation, differentiated treatment through this whole system. So, that means that citizens can be classified, can be differentiated, in certain ways.

I mean, social control is nothing new to China, but what is the pervasiveness and the massiveness that it's happening now, the risk is that it creates a total different mindset in an entire society, and also justify, formalize, and institutionalize differentiations.

Ali Moore: Dr. Delia Lin and Dr. Fengshi Wu, I would love to revisit this topic in a little while when we know even more about this social credit system, but thank you so much for your insights, and for talking to Ear to Asia.

Fengshi Wu: Pleasure.

Delia Lin: Thank you. It was a great pleasure.

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I'm Ali Moore, thanks for your company.