

Gaslit Nation Transcript

9 August 2023

“Chinese Surveillance: The Josh Chin and Liza Lin Interview”

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/chinese-josh-and-86985283>

[advertisement]

[intro — theme music]

Andrea Chalupa (00:42):

Welcome to *Gaslit Nation*. I am your host, Andrea Chalupa, a journalist and filmmaker and the writer and producer of the journalistic thriller, *Mr. Jones*, about Stalin's genocide famine in Ukraine: the film the Kremlin doesn't want you to see, so be sure to watch it. First, a couple announcements. We are running a very special summer series called “The Future of Dictatorship. What's Next? And Ways to Resist”. This series features leading voices on the front lines of understanding AI, corporate surveillance, Silicon Valley greed, and more, because the dictator's playbook remains the same, but the technology they have to oppress us keeps changing. You can learn more about the dictator's playbook in the *Gaslit Nation* graphic novel, *Dictatorship: It's Easier Than You Think*. You can join me for a special night out in New York City to talk all about the making of that book on Saturday, August 5th at 4:00 PM at the fun Lower East Side bar, Caveat, where I will be in discussion with the comedian, Kevin Allison, of the hugely popular *Risk* storytelling podcast.

Andrea Chalupa (01:42):

If you're not in New York, you can join us by livestream. This is a huge deal for me because I hardly go out, so this will be like a *Gaslit Nation* prom night. Join me at Caveat on August 5th in New York. Signed copies of the *Gaslit Nation* graphic novel will be available for order at the event. For details on how to join us in person or livestream, go to gaslitnationpod.com and you'll see the link right on our homepage with more information about the event. Go to gaslitnationpod.com. That's gaslitnationpod.com. We'll be back with all new episodes of *Gaslit Nation* in September, including a live taping with Terrell Starr of the *Black Diplomats* podcast reporting from Ukraine. That's right, Terrell's gonna be in Ukraine, and we're gonna hear all about his summer, his reporting trips, what he is learning, who he's talking to, and what's next. That live taping will take place on Tuesday, September 12th at 12:00 PM Eastern for our supporters at the Truth-teller level and higher on Patreon. Come join us for that and drop questions in the chat and hope to see as many of our listeners as I can on August 5th in New York at Caveat for a fun night out. Before we get to this week's guest, here's a quick word from our sponsor, Judge Lackey, the wiley narrator of the new *Gaslit Nation* graphic novel *Dictatorship: It's Easier Than You Think*.

[clip - Dictatorship: It's Easier Than You Think trailer]

Judge Lackey (03:02):

Wanna live forever? “Yeah!” Achieve immortality thanks to symbols and slogans. From swastikas to MAGA hats, every dictator needs to have consistent branding. Create a sense of belonging, targeting your scapegoats. Learn more from the hottest branding guide in town, *Dictatorship: It's Easier Than You Think*... Almost too easy.w

[end clip]

Andrea Chalupa (03:24):

This week's guests are Josh Chin and Liza Lin. Josh Chin is the Deputy Bureau chief in China for the *Wall Street Journal*. He previously covered politics and tech in China as a reporter of the newspaper for more than a decade. He led an investigative team that won the Gerald Loeb Award for International Reporting in 2018 for a series exposing the Chinese government's pioneering embrace of digital surveillance. He was named a National Fellow at New America in 2020 and is a recipient of the Dan Bolus medal, awarded to investigative journalists who have exhibited courage in standing up against intimidation. *Surveillance State* is his first book. Born in Utah, he currently splits time between Seoul and Taiwan. Liza Lin works as the journalist covering data use and privacy for the *Wall Street Journal* from Singapore. Liza was part of the team that won the Loeb in 2018. Prior to the *Wall Street Journal*, Lisa spent nine years at *Bloomberg News* and *Bloomberg Television*. *Surveillance State* is her first book.

[transition music up and under]

Andrea Chalupa (04:29):

So we are here to talk about *Surveillance State: Inside China's Quest to Launch a New Era of Social Control* with the authors Josh Chin and Liza Lin. Thank you so much for this incredible book. I was raised by a grandfather who lived through Stalin's purges. He spent about a year in a Soviet prison, a communist prison where he was tortured, and the surveillance state, the big brother Orwellian nightmare that he lived through. So many of those family stories are coming back, reading your incredible book. It's just fascinating and complex and I'm so grateful that you wrote it. And I'm sure it was a difficult, very challenging book to write given the sensitivity of it and the people that you had to talk to. Could you talk just a little bit about that; how you sort of navigated the process of covering China's surveillance state and the sources you needed to depend on and how you had to protect those sources and protect yourselves?

Josh Chin (05:27):

Yeah, the story of reporting out this book is kind of interesting because there are a couple different phases to it. It actually began as a series for the *Wall Street Journal* where we both work as reporters. We were both in China. At the time. I was in Beijing and Liza was in Shanghai. We first started reporting on this in 2017 and at the time actually the reporting was remarkably easy. There were all these Chinese facial recognition and AI startups. They had this kind of gee whizz technology and they were raising money. And so they sort of wanted to talk to us and they were happy to let us in. And they brought us into their showrooms and they kind of told us everything they were doing, including how they were working with police and installing these camera systems in various cities and using them to track people.

Josh Chin (06:12):

I think we were actually a little bit shocked at first how open they were. Of course, after we did our first few stories and other people also started writing about it, they started to close off and it started to get quite a bit more difficult. Over time, particularly we did some reporting in Xinjiang which is in the northwestern part of China and it's home to some Turkic Muslim minorities where the Chinese government is really using this technology in some very Orwellian ways. And our reporting there was incredibly sensitive and difficult, and it was hard to ever really—because of the surveillance, because there was so much tracking of people—it was hard to talk to people. It was dangerous for them to talk to

us. So we kind of had to get snatches of conversation here and there in cars or in back alleys and that sort of thing. We did have to be quite careful about protecting their identities and making sure that, you know, our devices were as secure as they could be and that we weren't using platforms that the Chinese government could easily listen in on.

Liza Lin (07:09):

I think one big thing that Josh missed out on was, you know, halfway through the book, Josh himself was kicked out of China [laughs].

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah, that's kind of important. [laughs]

Josh Chin (07:19):

Minor detail.

Liza Lin (07:20):

So it became a book that we began reporting on the ground in China, and then the two of us ended up finishing up the book outside of China. So that entailed a lot of trying to evade authorities themselves when we were doing reporting. As much as we could, we tried not to use internet chat apps that we knew were under close scrutiny. And there is a degree to how much surveillance is done on the various platforms. So you try to use chat platforms where you know maybe the AI surveillance by both the companies and authorities might not be as good or maybe just a simple telephone call because voice surveillance is a lot harder than, you know, just text and image recognition surveillance on chat apps. It was a very fine line and quite tricky trying to get in touch with people in China, especially as China got more and more closed up as the coronavirus kind of raged on.

Liza Lin (08:20):

And I think the other thing to add is, you know, we didn't just rely on interviews. One thing that really I think helps our book stand out is how we used open source material to do things. So, for example, we have a chapter in the book looking at how Western companies have played a part in helping kind of nurture China's AI surveillance state. And to do that, we went through government contracts to figure out which were the companies these state security agencies were buying products from, just because it's just not a topic that would be about or spoken about openly in China itself.

Andrea Chalupa (08:58):

Josh, could you speak a little bit about that experience of getting kicked out in China? When did you realize it was over for you and you had to go? How did they approach you?

Josh Chin (09:07):

Actually, it was a real surprise. It happened in the beginning of 2020 right as the pandemic was actually getting underway, as the virus had started to spread out of Wuhan. And I actually was kicked out along with two of my colleagues from the *Wall Street Journal*. The background of this is the Chinese government at the time had made a big deal about an opinion column that the *Wall Street Journal* had run with a headline that they had disagreed with. And they sort of knew that we on the news side of the *Wall Street Journal* had nothing to do with the opinion side, but they kind of were using this headline

and this column as a way to sort of criticize the *Journal*. And they'd really been making a big deal out of it.

Josh Chin (09:44):

I didn't know what to make of that. It did seem strange. And then it sort of all became clear one day when they called our bureau chief into the foreign ministry for a meeting and he asked me to go along. I was the deputy bureau chief at the time, still am. And so I went with him and they, but they wouldn't let me into the meeting. They made me wait outside and when they came out, his face was sort of pale and I was like, "What?"—I was just joking—"Did they kick you out?" And he said, "No, they kicked you out along with these two other colleagues," one of whom was in Wuhan at the time; one of the few Western reporters reporting on the ground in Wuhan at the epicenter. So it was the first time that China has kicked out multiple reporters from the same news organization since the Mao era. So totally unexpected. And I was just kind of in shock. They gave me five days to get out. We left, then the US responded by kicking out a bunch of Chinese journalists, and then China responded by kicking out even more American journalists. And so it sort of became this media war that ended up reducing the number of reporters on both sides.

Andrea Chalupa (10:54):

Wow. I'm just fascinated by this because I've done a lot of research on journalists getting kicked out of Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia. So, if you don't mind, let's just stay on this for a little bit longer.

Josh Chin:

Sure.

Andrea Chalupa:

How did you wrap up your life there? How did you spend your final days? Who did you say "bye" to? What was that like, thinking you might never be able to return again?

Josh Chin (11:14):

Yeah, you know, like I said, I was sort of in a daze. In some ways I was lucky because I had actually just moved back to Beijing. I'd been spending most of my time in Hong Kong where my wife was. And so I didn't have a ton of stuff there. I mean, it seems mundane but it's one of these things; when you get kicked out, if you've got a ton of stuff, five days is not a lot of time to kind of deal with all of that. So luckily I didn't have to do that, but yeah. It was kind of a dilemma actually to sort of... Who to see, you know, because at that point I was sort of toxic, right? I was in the news and there were a lot of Chinese friends who I'd known for years—some of them, you know, most of my life—who I wanted to see, but I just, you know, I felt like it might put them at risk.

Josh Chin (11:58):

And so I didn't. I just sort of wrote to them and said, you know, "See you later." I went to a few of my favorite restaurants; places I knew serve the kind of food I knew I wouldn't be able to get outside of China. But like, you know, I don't think it really hit me that I was being kicked out until after I was gone. I arrived in Japan. It was the only country that had open borders at the time because of the pandemic. And I stepped off the plane and kind of... I just felt different not being in China. And that's when I think it really hit me that I'd been kicked out.

Andrea Chalupa (12:26):

And you're based in Taiwan now?

Josh Chin (12:28):

Well, I was in Taiwan. I went to Taiwan for a while, and now I'm based in Seoul because my wife works for the *New York Times* and has moved up here with them.

Andrea Chalupa (12:37):

China is in this "space race" with the rest of the world in terms of wanting to become a leader in AI. How is it innovating AI? How is AI in China being used for surveillance?

Josh Chin (12:52):

Right. So I think there are two ways to understand that question. There's the sort of broad view and then there's the view from the ground. And I think if you take the broad sort of 30,000 foot view, what you see is that China's Communist Party is using data and AI surveillance together to sort of reboot the way that governments impose control on societies, right? So they're doing this, and they're doing this basically by taking a page from Silicon Valley. So, you know, companies like Google, Amazon, Facebook, they pioneered technologies and techniques for harvesting huge amounts of behavioral data and analyzing patterns in that data to predict future behavior. So in the case of those companies, they did it basically to make advertising more effective and more lucrative. The Communist Party is basically doing the exact same thing, but with government.

Josh Chin (13:40):

So they're using the same techniques and a lot of the same technologies, collecting huge amounts of data on their people, on Chinese people, so that they can predict and eradicate problems before they happen. And that could be anything from a health crisis to a political protest to a traffic jam. And what that means on the ground is that, you know, essentially every street, every stretch of public space is being monitored by high definition cameras. They have something like 400 million surveillance cameras installed, large numbers of which can identify you by scanning your face or even examining the way you walk because people have unique gait. It also means that the government has access to your entire digital life, so they know who you talk to on social media. They know what you say to those people. They know where you work and where you sleep and what you buy online. And in certain circumstances, like during the pandemic, it means that the government is using data it has on you to sort of analyze and judge your behavior and give you a rating based on the threat you pose to public health or social stability.

Andrea Chalupa (14:44):

Wow. So it's like... I think it was a Philip K. Dick novel that was turned into a popular film, a blockbuster film, where they could arrest you before you've committed the crime, right? There's like a futuristic movie on that.

Josh Chin:

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

So do they actually arrest people before the crime is committed?

Josh Chin (15:03):

The one place that they have essentially been doing this is in Xinjiang. So, you know, in the northwest of China where they've been targeting a group of Turkic Muslim minorities known as the Uyghurs. And the Uyghurs have long sort of resisted Chinese rule there. I mean, they are sort of culturally, linguistically, religiously distinct from China and they don't really see themselves as Chinese. And this is a conflict that goes back centuries. It's always been a sort of contentious place. They've always resisted communist party rule. And starting in 2017, the Communist Party started rolling out these technologies on a massive scale in Xinjiang, in a just really suffocating way, so that they had an almost sort of 360 degree view of what nearly every Uighur was doing. And they used that data.

Josh Chin (15:54):

So, they used data on, you know, sort of where people went, how much gasoline they bought, whether they had been abroad or they'd been to Muslim majority countries, whether they went to the mosque, how often they went to the mosque, and how often they prayed, if they had a *Koran* on their phone, you know, all this sort of data. And they would collect it on this sort of central platform, this data fusion platform that was developed originally for the military to do sort of counter-terrorism operations. And then they analyzed that data to sort of give people a rating based on the future threat they might pose to the Communist party's order in Xinjiang. And people who were deemed threatening were taken and sent to this network of internment camps where they were subject to political indoctrination without any legal due process. So in that sense, they were doing pre-crime; they were arresting people and punishing them before they had done anything.

Andrea Chalupa (16:46):

I was reading in your book the stories of torture in the Uyghur genocide and the prison camps. The silence is what really stuck out to me because my grandfather wrote about his time in a communist prison, and they would actually chat very openly with the other prisoners and exchange gossip and news about the outside world. And even pray, they would even pray in prison, which of course was an atheist dictatorship. But what really jumped out at me is in the Uyghur prisons, there's silence because of advancements in technology; the surveillance. They always are listening to you.

Josh Chin (17:24):

Yeah. And I think it's a peculiar sort of state to be in, right? I mean, obviously it's terrifying, but then there's some other just very difficult to describe feeling. I guess it's sort of like suffocation when you're there. I mean, as a journalist, just as soon as I went to Xinjiang the first time I could feel it. I could sort of feel my heart pumping a little bit faster and just, you know, I was constantly aware of being watched the possibility that was always being watched. And I can only imagine what that was like for Uyghurs who were subject to much heavier surveillance. And, you know, there were some Uyghurs who believed that their homes were bugged, right? And that even in their more sort of private space, they were being watched. And some of them almost certainly were. It's kind of an out of body experience in some ways. And I think it had devastating effects on the people who were sent to those camps.

Andrea Chalupa (18:11):

Of course. And in terms of resistance, because we saw a lot of pushback with the draconian measures that China took. We saw acts of resistance, brave acts of resistance in the general Chinese population. Could you speak about the way citizens are reacting to the surveillance system? Are there any sort of

workarounds of these systems, both in the general population and the Uyghur minority? Do they have any resistance system, anything that they're doing that helps them push back or protect each other? Could you just speak about any strategies or any loopholes essentially in China's growing surveillance systems?

Josh Chin (18:54):

I can answer on the Uyghur side and then maybe Liza can weigh in on the rest of China because she knows that pretty well. But in Xinjiang there really isn't much you can do. I think the system there is so pervasive and it's backed up with both human surveillance and then also human sort of manpower, right? Weaponry and just sort of government power. So it is really difficult in Xinjiang for, I think, anyone to resist. I mean, you can find sort of pockets where you may be able to have a private conversation, but those I think are fewer and fewer.

Liza Lin (19:24):

And I guess, you know, to kind of weigh in on ordinary Chinese and how they feel about the surveillance system watching them: When we started reporting this, you know, most Chinese actually felt very resigned to the fact that they were being watched because if you walk down the streets of Shanghai or any large city in China, the surveillance cameras are everywhere and they're filming you from every angle. So even if you were wearing a cap, they would still have a clear shot of your face from the side profile or a front profile if you were walking towards a traffic intersection with a camera mounted on a traffic light. So most Chinese that we spoke to just kind of worked on the notion that if you didn't do anything wrong, you had nothing to fear.

Liza Lin (20:10):

I think that viewpoint was definitely challenged over the coronavirus. What we saw the last two to three years was the use of digital surveillance, not specifically AI, but big data-style surveillance in which the Chinese government tracked each and everybody's mobile phones to figure out where they went and used that location tracking data to assign them a health risk. If you were, for example, in the past two weeks in a place that happened to be a covid hotspot, you would be given a red health code, which meant that you are a health risk and you couldn't be out walking the streets in public; you had to stay home and quarantine for two weeks. So this was very limiting because everywhere you went, you know, be it a mall or taking a subway, you had to flash that health code.

Liza Lin (20:59):

And that was when people realized that being in the wrong place at the wrong time could actually lead to a quarantine of two weeks, or your being locked away against your will. So that was, I think, the moment when people in China began to realize how much surveillance there was in the country, how much the government knew about them, and what it felt like to be in Xinjiang where every movement of theirs was being watched. And that's it as well. I guess there was one more aspect of AI surveillance that Josh might not have touched on. We've touched on facial recognition and the surveillance cameras, but AI surveillance is also heavily used in censorship within China. The Chinese internet companies are the conduits for this AI surveillance because if you had used a chat messenger in China—and the most famous one of them is called WeChat—most western chat apps are banned in China or cannot be downloaded.

Liza Lin (21:54):

So you have to resort to a Chinese chat app in order to get in touch with friends or, you know, social media generally. They're all Chinese companies such as Tencent, which runs WeChat; use digital

surveillance; they use text recognition to figure out what you're saying to your friend over chat messenger. And if you say certain sensitive terms in quick succession, that message never gets sent. It looks like it gets sent on your mobile phone, but it doesn't actually turn up on the other side. So the other party doesn't see the message at all. And it's not just day-to-day messages. It's not like, "Hi Andrea, did you see Xi Jinping on the street today?" It wouldn't just be that. PDFs, for example, would be blocked if you tried to send someone a file of a news story. And in this case, someone tried to send me a news story. It was a *Wall Street Journal* story all about Xi Jinping and, you know, his increasing grip on power. And that never got through to me. It looks like it was sent on the other person's phone, but it never actually got through to me. So there's a lot of AI surveillance that happens through chat apps and the various mobile phone apps that you have within China as well.

Andrea Chalupa (23:10):

What a creative form of censorship. This is scary. So I wanna touch on what you said earlier. I've heard people in the West say, you know, "What's the problem with the government having these secure measures of keeping us safe? If you're not doing anything wrong, what's the problem?" What would you say to that? Because this sounds very innovative and creative, what China is doing. I would love for you to both just comment on that.

Josh Chin (23:36):

It's interesting when you say that because one of the experiences I had when I was writing this book is I went to the US to sort of see what was happening with surveillance in the US and there is actually quite a bit. But on my way back I was standing in line at JFK airport in the security line and there was like an American couple standing right in front of me, and the woman was discussing stories she'd read in the news about Chinese surveillance. And she's like, "Oh, it sounds so crazy." And her husband turned around and said, "Oh, yeah, well, if you haven't done anything wrong, then you don't have anything to worry about, right?" So that actually is not just a Chinese attitude. It is very prevalent in China, or it was—

Andrea Chalupa:

But very prevalent in America, too.

Josh Chin (24:13):

It is, it is. And I think what China really illustrates very clearly—I mean, you see this everywhere, but you see it really, really clearly in China—is that these systems, they tend to work for you and make your life better and more convenient and easier as long as you are behaving in the way that whoever's running those systems wants you to behave, right? So if you are in China and you're living in a wealthy city and you're Han Chinese and you're, you know, part of the majority and you're kind of a law abiding citizen who doesn't talk about politics and doesn't raise a ruckus, then mostly what these technologies do is make it easier for you to move around the city. You can scan your face to ride the bus. Your life is sort of optimized using data for you. That changes as soon as you cross the authorities, right?

Josh Chin (25:02):

So this often happens when, you know, for example, a common thing that happens in Chinese cities is that the government will knock down old apartments to make way for, you know, a highway or for new apartments. It's eminent domain and there's nothing you really can do about it in China. And often they won't pay full market rates. And so you often have this situation where people who were living a good

life in a nice city suddenly had their house knocked down and they turned into petitioners; they turned into protesters because they're trying to get their money back and suddenly the systems that were making their lives better are now being turned on them. As Lisa said, this definitely happened during the pandemic to people who got fed up with, with zero covid controls.

Liza Lin (25:41):

The issue with China as well—and with many of these systems—is you need checks and balances. So what we saw in China in recent years as well, is how technologies that were put in place for public good were gradually used and abused. So, for example, the health code that I flicked at earlier; China had used big data to try and assess the health risk of people moving about in order to stop the spread of the coronavirus. What happened in the middle of last year though was that there was a small protest in the central Chinese city in Hanan province. And authorities there were so desperate to stop the protest, they turned the health code of everyone who they expected to be at the protest red. So that meant, as I mentioned earlier, that if you had a red health code, you couldn't move around. So these people who wanted to turn up at the gates of the central bank in the region to protest, they had their health codes turned red and they were taken away at the train station and quarantined for two weeks. So it's just little incidents like that that show you it's so easy for technology to be subverted and used in a perverted way, even though it started out for good.

Andrea Chalupa (26:57):

Who is profiting off of this? Who are the Elon Musks of China and how are American Silicon Valley companies... Who is raking in money off of what China's doing inside China and outside?

Liza Lin (27:11):

So this is really interesting because on the surface, it felt to us initially like it was Chinese startups that were providing these AI algorithms to the police that were making the money. But if you look under the hood, you're realizing that these Chinese startups did provide the algorithms, but the hardware; the hard drives that were used to store video footage when you have so many cameras, millions of cameras; or the chips that were used by cameras and the networking systems to power these surveillance systems and to power the facial recognition and to train the algorithms even to do the facial recognitions, these were provided by Western companies, specifically American companies. In the case of chips, you imagine your typical... I guess the typical names that come to mind would be Intel, Nvidia. They would be providing the high performance chips that China couldn't make on its own.

Liza Lin (28:10):

And these high performance chips were used by Chinese AI startups to train facial recognition algorithms for the police. And in turn, the same chips, same high performance chips were also used in the backend systems to help process large amounts of data very quickly. And if you really kind of go beyond that, you think about the hard drives that are used, the hard drive industry globally is dominated by three companies; Western Digital, Seagate (both American companies) and Toshiba. So really the people who were raking in a lot of money from this weren't just the Chinese companies. American companies are very complicit.

Andrea Chalupa (28:47):

Of course they are. And is there any global movement to push back against this? Because it's very much a genie coming outta the bottle and what China is doing could easily spread around the world. Do you see it spreading?

Josh Chin (29:02):

You definitely do see it spreading. There's a sort of important thing to keep in mind when you think about the way this is spreading. I think a lot of people—and not without reason—they assume that China's trying to replicate itself around the world, right? It's got growing influence and it is exporting these technologies to dozens of countries around the world. And the assumption a lot of people have, and people have written about is, “Oh, China wants to make a lot of little mini Chinas. It wants to remake the world order so that China is the model for everyone.” And I think that's not exactly true. What China is doing is exporting these technologies and advancing an argument that it should be okay for governments to use these technologies in whatever way they want.

Josh Chin (29:44):

It's just similar to the Chinese government's approach to the internet. China was one of the first countries to argue for a notion called internet sovereignty, which is that governments should decide how the internet within their borders are run. You know, then this sort of Western US-led notion of an open free internet in which multiple people have a say in how it's governed, that we should get rid of that and it should all be up to governments. And they basically make the same argument with surveillance technology. And the reason that's a concern is that one, it's kind of hard to argue against. It's an argument that a lot of governments like, right? It's very attractive to them. And it's particularly attractive to governments that are authoritarian or sort of have authoritarian tendencies.

Josh Chin (30:26):

The example we have in the book—a place I went to—is Uganda, where both the United States and China have influence. And for a long time, you know, the US thought it was going to be a model for democracy in Africa. They thought the leader there, Yoweri Museveni, was this new generation of African leaders who was gonna bring democracy to the continent. It turns out he's much more of a strongman. And recently he faced a fairly stiff challenge from a young kinda upstart politician who's leading a really strong opposition movement. And he turned to China to a Chinese company called Huawei that people may have heard of. And they sold him a sort of state surveillance starter kit which he installed and he used to track the opposition and to sort of shut down their ability to campaign.

Josh Chin (31:14):

And he won. He won the most recent election, even though some people thought he should have lost. So it is effective and China is pushing it around the world. And I think, you know, the challenge right now is that China has this really simple and easy to understand and attractive authoritarian vision for the use of AI and big data surveillance, but there isn't really yet a similar democratic vision. There's a democratic argument about how you use these technologies. In Europe, there are arguments about how to regulate it, but those are different from the ones in the US, right? And basically democratic countries are all sort of a little bit schizophrenic about this, in particular in the US, because, you know, as much as Americans think they love privacy, they also don't like regulation. And Silicon Valley is also a really powerful lobbyist against rules that might regulate these sorts of technologies. So, yeah, it's a bit of a mess on the democratic side.

Liza Lin (32:08):

I would however add to that that the US government has probably put up the biggest effort to fight against the Chinese surveillance state, and they've done that by putting dozens of Chinese companies linked to AI surveillance on a trade blacklist called the entity list. So this means that if you are an American company and you want to sell certain technologies to such companies, you have to get approval from the commerce department. And beyond that, I think the US government also dealt the

biggest hit to China's AI industry in general last October by cutting Chinese companies off from high performance chips. And part of the reason was because they didn't want China to develop AI-enabled weapons, but they also wanted to push back against the development of digital surveillance in the country itself.

Andrea Chalupa (32:58):

And what impact has that had?

Liza Lin (33:00):

So I think the impact of that is that China's AI development has been stymied because China as a country has been unable to catch up with the West, despite decades of trying, on the semiconductor front. And they've not been able to—at least the homegrown companies have been unable to—produce and design high performance chips that the likes of Intel and Nvidia have been able to design. So when you're cut off from access of such chips, that means you need to find alternatives. So what we're seeing in China now is Chinese AI companies have either been rationing the high performance chips they already have, or they've been trying to buy them on the black market, or they've been trying to tap technologies such as packing older generations of chips together in order to get the same performance that a high performance chip would be able to deliver. So there are various alternatives that the Chinese have been trying, but none of it has been as effective or as cost effective as just buying a chip from American companies itself.

Andrea Chalupa (34:05):

So the innovation, the space race, if you will, has been slowed down.

Liza Lin (34:09):

I think that's safe to conclude.

Andrea Chalupa (34:12):

When you both look to the future with this AI genie and the surveillance genie being out of the bottle, what do you see in the future? What nags at you in terms of where all of this is headed?

Josh Chin (34:24):

I think China, it's really hard to see much resistance there. We did sort of see a sort of brief flurry of resistance at the end of last year where there were these really large zero covid protests that spread across the country, and were actually quite remarkable. But then what you also saw shortly after that was the government using its surveillance systems to track down the people who had participated and to really lock down the country even tighter than before. On the evidence, the Communist Party has sort of more control now than it ever has, and it's not gonna let up anytime soon, at least it doesn't seem like it will. I think the real question is in democratic countries and in other places. One of the most astonishing things about writing this book and then traveling around and talking to people and trying to promote it is actually how little some people seem to care about privacy or think about it.

Josh Chin (35:11):

There are police departments across the United States that are using facial recognition. They are just as vulnerable to the attractions of these systems as police in Uganda or China, right? Because it makes their jobs easier. It makes sense. You can't really blame them. It's just quite interesting to me that that hasn't

really become a public discussion in a serious way. I think it could change in some ways with TikTok because so many people use TikTok and there's this huge debate now in the US about the data that the Chinese government collects through TikTok and then by extension there's been more conversation about the data that all of these tech companies collect and more conversation about whether or not there should be sort of universal privacy rules put in place in the US to prevent that. If you care about privacy, that's a hopeful thing, but we'll just have to see if it actually comes through.

Liza Lin (36:00):

On my part, you know, very similar worries to Josh. I live in Singapore right now and over the last four years that I've been here—I just moved back pre covid and have been unable to leave—I've really gradually started to notice how many surveillance cameras have been popping up in the subways, on the roads. It really kind of hit home how attractive this AI surveillance model is. And it was interesting because even in a place like Singapore, you do find that these systems have been abused. So for example, a couple of years back, just as digital surveillance in Singapore had been ramping up, we introduced some things very similar to China's health code, where we had to scan our mobile phones in order to enter public places such as malls. And it came to light a couple months after that even though this was meant for only public health reasons, the Singapore police had used data that was collected by this health code to solve a murder. And this wasn't made public until an opposition politician had asked about it in Parliament. So it is one of these things that really hit home how you need checks and balances when a government uses such systems because it's just such a fine line and it's so easy for these technologies to be abused.

Andrea Chalupa (37:28):

Tell us about the rise of Xi Jinping. He's been described as a Trumpian sort of leader; thin-skinned, he hated the Winnie the Pooh memes about him. Where did he come from, what does he want and how is he different than recent Chinese leaders? Where is he taking things?

Josh Chin (37:46):

You know, it's hard to say exactly how thin-skinned Xi Jinping is because he is very unlike Donald Trump; he never talks to the media and it's very hard to actually hear from him directly, at least in an unfiltered way. But he is, I think, objectively just looking at where he came from and his record, I mean, he is by far the most powerful leader that China has had, probably since Deng Xiaoping, maybe since Mao just in terms of the amount of the Chinese bureaucracy that he controls directly. Before he came to power, for many years China was sort of governed by consensus. So there was a leader of the party but, you know, he had to sort of negotiate policy with five or six, seven other top leaders in the Communist Party.

Josh Chin (38:32):

And they would get together and sort of agree on any major decisions. Xi has totally changed that. He now is the decider on everything in a real way, in a way that I think Donald Trump wished he could be. And he now, as of the end of last year, has basically sort of put his allies in powerful positions throughout the government. It's hard to say what he really believes without being able to read his mind. He grew up in China. He never really spent much time outside of China. He grew up during the culture revolution. If you look at what he says, what he reads, and what he writes, he feels like a true believer in the Communist Party. He believes that the Communist Party is the only force that can sort of return China to its previous glory and he wants to make it so that China is at least the dominant power in Asia.

Josh Chin (39:17):

You know, there's debate about whether he wants China to sort of be the top power globally and to replace the United States. Some people believe he does, others think he's just content to sort of erode US dominance. But either way, he's very ambitious and his overwhelming priority is control; security, and control. And he's really started to see this, you know, in the last few years with the pandemic, he kept China locked up under sort of zero covid measures for much longer than any other country. And even now that they've opened, they are sort of cracking down on foreign businesses and on information in ways that are sort of not good for the economy, but they are good for China's security.

Liza Lin (39:55):

And when it comes to digital surveillance, Xi Jinping is a big proponent of it. It really is under Xi Jinping's rule that we've seen all these surveillance innovations, so to speak. You know, he was the one to start pushing for what you would call safe cities, so cities in which the surveillance cameras and AI were meant to keep people of interest off the street. And it's also under Xi Jinping that during the coronavirus crisis we saw the health codes and mobile phone tracking of every individual. And more recently, in November and December when large protests had broken out over in many Chinese cities, Xi immediately reached to digital surveillance as well to track who was at the protest, for example, by using your mobile phone signals to figure out if you were in the area where protests had taken place. So with respect to digital surveillance, you know, he has been a big promoter of it.

Andrea Chalupa (40:51):

And one thing you write in your book is the Uyghur genocide, how China has shown some restraint... It doesn't sound like it's like the Russian genocide of Ukraine, which is extermination. Extermination. But you write in the book that there is some restraint because China does want to still be seen as a power on the global stage. Could you speak a little bit about that; sort of what leverage that we and/or the rest of the world could have over China? Because it doesn't seem like they have this Russian way of just scorched earth, "We're going for whatever we wanna do. You're not gonna stop us and you're gonna just take it and we're gonna just grab Ukraine and that's it." China does seem to want to stay and have some sort of air of respectability. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Josh Chin (41:42):

You know, it's interesting because people talk a lot about the relationship between Xi Jinping and Putin and how they have this sort of bromance going on. And recently just before the Ukraine invasion, the two of them had sort of declared this no limits partnership between China and Russia. And so, you know, people group them together often and for good reason. But there is, yeah, there is a very important distinction between the two leaders, between the two countries. And it is that. Xi Jinping, his ambition for China is to be powerful and to be respected and to have a real say in the way that global affairs are run. Putin is sort of a chaos agent, right? I mean, just self-evidently by the way he invaded Ukraine and other ways he acts, his interest is in sowing confusion and chaos.

Josh Chin (42:31):

China's not in that game. They've benefited from the current global system and they want to make sure that they continue to benefit by changing that system in ways that line up with its interests. And so for that reason, China needs to be respected globally to a certain degree. I mean, it's willing to fight. It's willing to confront the US and other powers, but not to the degree that it's seen as a rogue nation. And so in Xinjiang, it was... People can argue about this and it's difficult to know for certain, but the immense amount of attention that was paid to Xinjiang once it was discovered what was happening there, I personally believe, I think, it had an effect. You know, they built this entire camp system in a way that

looked permanent. We were there and sort of were some of the first people to film one of these camps. They weren't temporary facilities. Initially, we thought that this was going to be a permanent state of affairs. And then in 2019, they started letting some people out of the camps and started shutting down some of the camps. I mean, they still have them. There's still an immense amount of control in Xinjiang, but it's less than it was, and it's a counterfactual. I mean, if there hadn't been the attention paid to it, would they have done things differently? It's hard to say, but I believe that had an effect.

Andrea Chalupa (43:44):

So public pressure worked from the outside world.

Josh Chin (43:48):

To a certain degree, yeah. Yeah, I think China does respond. For years I covered human rights in China and it was always a question for human rights activists and people who wrote about human rights in China whether it had any effect, right? Because obviously China was not going to become more democratic. It was moving towards less respect for human rights, not more respect for human rights. And so, you know, people often questioned themselves, but I had multiple instances in which I'd talked to individual activists and dissidents who'd been imprisoned in China who said that they noticed when they were being written about because their lives would improve; their conditions inside prison would improve, they would get softer pillows or they'd be given a nicer bed, or they would be given better food when they were in the news. So there is some effect. It may not be the sort of liberating effect that people hope for, but China does pay attention.

Andrea Chalupa (44:36):

That's really interesting. Do you think, especially given the disaster that Putin has created for himself in Ukraine, do you think China will invade Taiwan?

Josh Chin (44:46):

[big sigh] I mean, that is the big question. I think it's impossible to say at this point. I mean, certainly China has been paying a lot of attention to Ukraine. They've been taking a lot of lessons. Taiwan has also been taking a lot of lessons from Ukraine, and so is the US. And so I think that conflict has really made people think a lot about how a conflict in Taiwan would play out. And, of course, that would be a much more devastating conflict because it would potentially involve the two strongest militaries and two largest economies in the world confronting each other. I think, for that reason, I don't think either side would enter a conflict lightly, and I hope they never do.

Liza Lin (45:22):

I think that's the million dollar question that everyone's trying to speculate, but I do feel that unless you have access to Xi Jinping himself, you will never know the answer.

Andrea Chalupa (45:33):

I wanna close by asking, what advice do you have for people in terms of taking measures to protect themselves or just be aware of surveillance as they go about their lives in a Western democracy or going into a country with sliding democracy? If you don't mind sharing or whatever you can share, what tips do you have in terms of like your mental checklist of what to be aware of and how to operate?

Josh Chin (45:59):

Yeah, you know, it kind of depends on who you are and what you're doing. I think a general principle is that if a government really wants to surveil you, to break into your devices, to find out about you, it can. Governments just... They have those tools, they have that ability. What you can do as an individual is to make it a pain in the ass for them to do it. Governments have limited resources. Even with AI, even with big data they still have only so many resources they can devote to tracking people. And so if you make it a pain to track you, then they may decide that it's not worth it. So that could be things like using a password manager, making yourself hard to hack using, you know, encrypted chats if you're having sensitive conversations.

Josh Chin (46:44):

Again, I mean, a lot of this applies to journalists and is maybe not applied to other people, but if you have conversations you want to keep private, use encrypted chat apps and just sort of be aware of what sort of systems exist in your area. And then the other thing I would say is—especially if you're an American—lobby your local lawmakers to pass privacy legislation because I really think it's the sort of thing that ultimately can only really be solved at the legislative level. You just need to have, as Liza said, checks and balances in place. And so the most important and powerful thing you can do is to make sure that your representatives know that that's a really important issue to you.

Liza Lin (47:24):

Yeah, and I guess to add to that, you know, make it known that you're monitoring them. If you see surveillance cameras coming up and there's no explanation, ask, Why are they there? Why are they being installed? How long is the data being kept? What is it being used for? What are your rights? These are just very simple questions, but just knowing that people care about them, it's more likely to make law enforcement agencies more inclined to be responsible with them. The most ideal, obviously, would be a situation where you have an agency that is not linked to the police themselves to serve as some sort of watchdog, just to make sure that every year they hold the police responsible and they ask what and how these systems are being used for, and if these systems are being effective at all. That's obviously the holy grail. But in the absence of that, it's important to make it known that you're watching this. And the other thing that's really important is to support free press and to support democratic institutions, you know, reporters who dig under the hood to figure out what these systems are being used for or to point out any abuses. I think that's very, very critical.

Andrea Chalupa (48:39):

What about TikTok? Should Americans, Europeans, the rest of the world, should we be on TikTok or should we stay away from it?

Liza Lin (48:46):

This is my personal view: It's right to be asking questions, not just of TikTok but obviously of other social media companies as well (Meta, YouTube, Twitter) asking how are their algorithms, because algorithms are such opaque things. The ordinary person on the street will never be able to understand how they work. It's always good to push companies for transparency, and it shouldn't just be limited to a Chinese company. I think it should be open to all Western, even western social media companies.

[outro theme music, roll credits]

Andrea Chalupa

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