



PC: Jernej Furman.

The Surveillance Vaccine

Surveillance, Censorship, and the Body under Covid-19

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One of my companions throughout the Covid-19 lockdown has been Gushi.FM (故事FM, storyfm.cn), a podcast that is an oral historical archive, a diverse digital memory bank with stories of poverty, exploitation, coming out of the closet, and much more. At its heart, Gushi.FM is about giving people a voice. The podcast's coverage of Covid-19-related events began on 26 January with the episode 'The Lockdown Diaries of Five Wuhaners' (五个武汉人的封城日记). Over the following 30 episodes, 14 were explicitly about Covid-19, each one of them telling several stories. During this period, Gushi.FM went from being an archive exploring the past to engaging in future-oriented memory work.

By mid-March, I had already heard of foreign friends and students leaving the United Kingdom of their own volition or under pressure from parents due to worries over the British response to Covid-19. Although many people I spoke to feared the journey home and would miss their lives in England, they still left. This 'should I stay or should I go' dilemma was at the heart of episode 341 of Gushi.FM (Kou 2020). The final story of the episode was that of Maoxiaoqian, a student studying in Scotland who by then had returned to China. When Covid-19 began spreading, she 'didn't think it was a big problem' and 'decided not to go back' as she did not imagine 'it was going to go crazy'. Only after the British authorities discussed

‘herd immunity’ as a viable strategy did Maoxiaoqian decide to flee to China. Speaking from quarantine in Shanghai, she said:

To be honest, I don't regret coming back to China, because right now the UK government is just, a bit ... terrifying. So, I feel that coming back to China [despite the danger, and sitting close to someone confirmed with Covid-19 on the flight] is a bit safer really. After these two weeks of quarantine are over then ... everything will go back to normal!

Maoxiaoqian had something to say to others who found themselves in a similar situation:

To those fellow students in other countries, I hope they can look after themselves; be careful ... and I hope other countries can take knowledge-based approaches to combatting this problem. I also hope that in China we can get better soon, we're almost at the end of the pandemic. I hope we can add oil and defeat the pandemic!

In the following months, the idea of China being a safer space than the United Kingdom as Covid-19 spread gained considerable currency among broader circles. In another instance, a British evacuee from Wuhan named Matt Raw, who had returned to the UK on a celebrated evacuation flight in late January, had to say: ‘It feels a little bit like out of the pot, into the fire’ (Murray 2020a). Raw noticed a blasé attitude to Covid-19 in the United Kingdom, and soon felt that they ‘made the wrong decision coming back’ and ‘should have stayed in China’, which has done ‘everything right’ (Murray 2020b). Raw believed that the British government was ‘slow to act’, that it could have done so much more, and that it ‘really only has itself to blame for the situation’. In short, Raw felt he had ‘made a bad choice’, resulting in him being cared for by ‘the same government that wanted us to take public transport back home after the flight [from Wuhan] landed’ (CGTN 2020).

Overt Surveillance, Biopolitics, and Ethics

To help think through Maoxiaoqian's and Raw's experiences and desires, this essay will discuss surveillance, biopolitics, and social imaginaries related to governmental responses to Covid-19. In doing this, I hope to consider why, in a period where virus and censorship converged to create a legitimacy crisis for the Chinese government, technologies that may otherwise be considered repressive came to be desired as technologies of ‘vaccination’ (Esposito 2008). In this short essay, I do not dispute a responsive—or even reactive—authoritarianism thesis, nor do I condone mass surveillance, but I wish to consider how governmental responses are interpreted by individuals and eventually gain their support, even if they involve enhanced surveillance. The essence of my argument is that governmental responses to Covid-19 that heavily survey the body—and thus life—are imagined to possess an ethics of care. While individuals may protest against and critique malignant forms of surveillance, the effect of life being saved through surveillance seems to override feelings of anxiety.

In considering this, I start with the idea of surveillance imaginaries. According to David Lyon (2018, 33), ‘surveillance imaginaries provide the sense of what living with surveillance entails’. These imaginaries are related to ‘shared understandings about certain aspects of visibility in daily life, and in social relationships, expectations and normative commitments. They provide a capacity to act, to engage in and to legitimate surveillance practices’ (Lyon 2018, 43). They influence how people—including legislators, surveillants, and those surveilled—imagine what surveillance is and its uses. The key point is that technologies that can be used for surveillance can be imagined in multiple ways. When thought of positively, such technologies are rarely understood in terms of surveillance—they

become technologies of surveillance only when imagined negatively. The move from covert to overt surveillance is central to a change in imaginaries, and it is when surveillance stops being covert that anxieties emerge. Covid-19 surveillance bucks this trend, with surveillance *as* surveillance embraced as something that helps the human flourish and that therefore should be embraced—good gaze surveillance.

To think through overt surveillance as a desired practice of governance, it is helpful to consider it as an overt form of ‘biopolitical’ governance. Biopolitics is concerned with how governance becomes involved in the giving, preservation, and flourishing of life—what Foucault (2003, 241) calls ‘the right to make live and to let die’. Biopolitical practices are often diffuse, performed by a number of institutions and at different scales. Family planning is perhaps the most famous example of biopolitical governance in China, a system supported by neighbourhood surveillance (Fong 2016). In the case of China’s Covid-19-related surveillance, the multi-scalar government, tech corporations, gatekeepers, and the self all play a role in this. While not the first case of overt biopolitical governance in China, Covid-19 is affecting the entire population regardless of gender, ethnicity, or class, and has resulted in life-sustaining practices of governance becoming impossible to ignore.

However, China is not exceptional. Overt biopolitical governance is occurring simultaneously around the world and taking heterogeneous forms, with different policy decisions being enacted regionally, nationally, and sub-nationally. This heterogeneity is obvious to anyone following mainstream or social media, and for many people evaluating success is relatively simple: where are people living and where are they dying? Based on these evaluations, ethical judgements can be made on how life is and is not preserved. Judging the ethics of a strategy may also lead to revising one’s evaluation of the institution implementing the strategy—often governments. For some individuals, such as Raw and Maoxiaoqian, choices can then be made with regard to which

overt biopolitical regime to live under. From this we can begin to understand what ethical positions are emerging during the pandemic.

Good Gaze Surveillance

For both Maoxiaoqian and Raw, the pandemic meant dealing with the British government. In the early period of the crisis, the British authorities went from being unresponsive to having an unusual response—a strategy of ‘herd immunity’. This strategy would let the virus spread in a somewhat controlled way—at-risk groups were told to self-isolate—in order for the population to develop widespread immunity. The hope was that this would enable the country to move beyond Covid-19, protect the people against a ‘second wave’ through immunisation, and enable the economy to return to normal. This strategy came into place alongside a failed attempt at ‘track and trace’, the positive name given to Covid-19 surveillance measures.

Both strategies were openly panned by those within and outside of the United Kingdom, and experts doubted whether immunity would even develop (Basu 2020). Not only was there heterogeneity of ‘expert knowledge’ within the country, but the World Health Organisation (WHO) was also providing its own guidance, and people like Maoxiaoqian and Raw had access to scientific discussions from within China as well. By March, the expert knowledge provided to citizens within China was relatively uncontested (unlike in the UK), and the WHO had publicly supported the approach taken by the Chinese authorities. This is reflected in Maoxiaoqian’s and Raw’s comments that other governments follow evidence-based approaches. Transnational individuals such as Maoxiaoqian and Raw make decisions about which expert knowledge and state strategies to trust. While uncontested knowledge may play a role in decision-making, it is clear that both Maoxiaoqian and Raw found the British strategy of herd immunity unsettling. As

individuals, an approach built on the principle of ‘letting die’, where the death of an individual is fine, could be considered harmful. Either one of them could be the herd’s sacrificial lamb. More broadly, in a herd immunity strategy with very little ‘track and trace’ surveillance, care for the individual seems totally absent. The individual body, and the life it holds, is imagined not to matter to the shepherd.

The British herd immunity approach differs significantly from the Chinese government’s strategy, which focuses on surveillance, mobility management, and contact tracing (CCTV 2020). In this strategy, the individual’s body takes centre stage, an intimate surveillance that resonated with both Maoxiaoqian and Raw. This way, the individual body comes under intense scrutiny through a number of surveillance systems, including those experienced everyday, such as QR-code and smartphone-based surveillance, as well as systems rarely experienced but extolled in the media, like contact tracing. Chinese health surveillance controls everyday mobility through algorithmic sorting of those most likely to be infected, creating a constant reminder of the body being cared for and human life being extended. In extreme cases, such as lockdowns or quarantines, the body is not just under scrutiny—it is taken control of for the safety of the individual and the rest of society. This is a form of bodily governance both Maoxiaoqian and Raw seem happy with.

These two strategies have different affective dimensions to them, as we can see from Raw’s and Maoxiaoqian’s responses. Even after failure in January and February, the Chinese response inspired a desire to be seen by the good gaze surveillance apparatus. The British response, on the contrary, inspired fear and regret, and a desire to flee. These strategies for combatting Covid-19 are unequivocally governmental, and they result in Raw’s and Maoxiaoqian’s antipathy towards the British government and implicit admiration for the Chinese government’s response. This admiration is widespread within China, according to recent surveys by Wu (2020). Furthermore,

recent surveys by the Manchester China Institute suggest that this sentiment is shared across a group generally more critical of the government, i.e. international students (Fan et al. 2020; Peter Gries, personal communication on 9 July 2020). Survey responses show that Chinese students in Manchester feel grateful to the Chinese government for their handling of Covid-19, and that they consider Western political systems to be less effective in fighting the pandemic. In other words, the saving of life during Covid-19 made overt surveillance practices something to be desired, not feared, a reversal that in turn influenced how respective governments are imagined.

Censorial Anxieties

In January and February 2020, covert censorship of social media and social communications—censorship built on surveillance—became overt. A central figure in this was Wuhan-based doctor Li Wenliang. By mid-January, Doctor Li had already shared information that a SARS-like disease had been discovered. Screenshots of his warnings had spread and Doctor Li had been interrogated by agents of the public security, who had demanded he sign a statement admitting to ‘rumour-mongering’. As the virus spread, Li’s fame as a whistleblower who tried to save lives grew, as did anger over how he was treated. Before the end of January, Doctor Li had been admitted to the hospital and diagnosed with Covid-19. On 7 February he died of the disease, leading to mourning and anger across the nation. As the health crisis worsened, messages, posts, and pictures related to both the virus and Doctor Li (as well as other whistleblowers) were being censored in increasingly obvious ways, and Weixin accounts were being suspended at an unprecedented rate. These events made the censorial system and its malignant foundations impossible to ignore. After all, what had been censored as ‘rumours’ were unequivocally ‘truths’, and surveillance-enabled censorship

was stopping the communication of potentially lifesaving information. In this case, surveillance was hurting, not helping, people.

So impossible was this censorship to ignore that citizens came together to create archives of Covid-19–related censorship, using archival spaces outside of China’s digital territory to guarantee the safety of these memories. For the archivists, this memory activism was not to remember their past, but to help those in the future remember their present—an attempt to create a memory of that which was violently erased through a system of surveillance and censorship. As one Chinese memory activist repository notes:

As the censorship in China, no one can conduct free speech right. People will forget something.

This little project remind us, maybe just me, not forget this disaster which CCP (China Communist Party) should take much more responsibility than anyone.

All reports from mainstream media, which some will be erased by CCP someday. But the INTERNET never forget. (Lestweforget 2020)

The practices involved in this memory activism resemble those that I researched in 2017, when data on the forced evictions of Beijing’s so-called low-end population (低端人口) were recorded by hundreds of volunteers and stored outside of China for safekeeping (Morris 2020). In a long-image (长图)—i.e. an article transformed into a scrolling picture—shared on Weibo, the organisers of the 2017 memory project explained that they were doing this because the ‘biggest characteristic of this era’ is ‘the collective amnesia of event after event, some make themselves forget, and others are forced to forget’. They believed that people need ‘to put just a tiny bit of effort into keeping these memories alive’. In both 2020 and 2017, when violence towards the body and the violence of censorship became impossible to ignore, any illusions of care were shattered. In both cases, when violent governance

was impossible to rationalise away and the illusion of care shattered, spaces for counter-movements emerged, which in turn prompted the authorities to detain those involved in memory activism projects (Li 2020).

The surveillance-enabled censorship of early 2020 stopped the spread of information about a deadly disease, rather than stopping the spread of the disease itself. Surveillance and censorship went from being actions that happened far away or to bad ‘rumour-mongers’, to becoming part of an overt biopolitics that was causing harm. In this case, the harmful censorial practices made the government an unethical institution malignant to life, and censorship came to be seen as a biopolitical practice to be contested. During this potential ‘Chernobyl moment’ (Zhang 2020), the rationale for surveillant intrusion into daily life became more difficult to articulate. Due to this, a space for political change appeared, with some commentators suggesting that an emerging crisis of legitimacy could rock the Xi Jinping administration (Haass 2020; Pei 2020). In the end, aided by the detention of those engaged in contentious politics, this space was not filled by reformers or revolutionaries, but rather by ethical surveillance practices. Through these practices—alongside large-scale opinion management—the palpable anger of January and February was alleviated, government legitimacy increased, and algorithmic, application-based governance further normalised.

The Surveillance Vaccination

In his reflection on the relationship between Nazism and homicide, Roberto Esposito (2008) uses the language of immunisation. Esposito argues that for the Nazis homicide was an instrument of regeneration, a practice that became essential to saving and renewing the vital forces of Germany. This was a horrific vaccine for an imagined disease. Vaccines are

hostile forces brought into the body to protect it against disease and make it stronger. But, there is a chance that vaccines can turn against the host and cause harm, eventually leading to the death of the body. The Chinese case is not nearly as entrenched in the biological as Nazi Germany—although the biological has been a key part of governance, and biological metaphor has been creeping into recent urban policy (see Sorace 2017; Haas 2017; Tu et al. 2019)—but Esposito’s ideas can still be productive in understanding the surveillance described above. The ‘body’ being protected may be the intimate scale of the human body, the city, the nation, or even the institutional body, such as the Chinese Communist Party. In this case, the government is using the vaccine of surveillance on the body—the Chinese society—of which it is a part.

In the above cases, surveillance is a vaccine for a number of bodily problems, and imagining surveillance as ethical or malignant depends on the body’s reaction to it. Successful vaccination can keep the government in power, but the vaccine can also produce an autoimmune response. Both of these reactions occurred in China during the Covid-19 crisis. Surveillance eventually enabled human life to flourish in the face of death, resulting in increased governmental legitimacy, but, before that, malignant surveillance was central to a ‘Chernobyl moment’ that possibly threatened the very survival of the Party-state. Through censorship, the vaccination produced an autoimmune response. Why did this occur? One reason is that through this inoculation, the government came to perceive a greater viral threat within its body, i.e. viral politics. Viral politics is a dormant virus that could become active and potentially result in the death of its host, i.e. the government. Censorship is designed to keep this virus dormant, but this may result in other viruses spreading. In January and February 2020, what were believed to be symptoms of viral politics—rumour and discontent—were eliminated through the surveillance vaccination. However, due to overt censorship, malignant censorial practices

became obvious to many. Impossible to ignore or rationalise, these practices were instead contested.

Following this, and perhaps unintentionally, a successful short-term vaccine for viral politics was found—good gaze surveillance. The vaccine included a lifesaving gaze towards the individual’s body and life desired by both Maoxiaoqian and Raw, stopping both Covid-19 and viral politics. Thus, the space for political change that emerged due to malignant surveillance was filled by an ethics of care. My research on the contested evictions of the ‘low-end population’ in 2017 showed that malignant surveillance can bring an end to (memory) activism, but the case of Covid-19 shows that a good gaze surveillance vaccine can also halt viral politics. The long-term effects of an ethical surveillance vaccine are still unknown, though ongoing research by Wang (2019) suggests that individuals are supportive of surveillance systems deemed to have ethical dimensions, such as social credit systems. Still, the effects of the malignant censorship that cost lives in January and February 2020 have not been dealt with. This malignant censorship affected many, and the long-term impact it will have on how surveillance and the government are imagined remains to be seen. ■

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