Title
The Great Debate of the Digital Age: Liberty, Security, and COVID-19

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9vv589bd

Author
HUANG, OLIVIA

Publication Date
2021

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation
University of California,
Irvine

The Great Debate of the Digital Age:
Liberty, Security, and COVID-19

A Thesis

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Urban and Regional Planning
in Social Ecology

by

Fangyangzi (Olivia) Huang

Thesis Committee:
Professor Scott A. Bollens, Chair
Professor David Feldman
Chancellor’s Professor Jeffrey Wasserstrom

2021
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................. 1

PART I: THEORIES ............................................................................................................. 4
  The Harm Principle ........................................................................................................... 4
  Confucianism and Collectivism in China .......................................................................... 5
  Individualist Culture in the United States ......................................................................... 6
  The Concept of Social Control .......................................................................................... 8
  Mannheim and the Benefits of Centralized Control .......................................................... 9
  Individual Freedom vs. Collectivism ............................................................................... 10
  Summary .......................................................................................................................... 12

PART II: THE DIGITIZATION OF SOCIAL CONTROL WORLDWIDE .................................. 13

PART III: THE DAWN OF CHINA’S “INVISIBLE EYES” ....................................................... 14
  Cultivating Model Citizenship: China’s Social Credit System .......................................... 16
  Preparing for the Next Contagious Crisis: China After SARS .......................................... 18
  Summary .......................................................................................................................... 20

PART IV: DIGITAL SURVEILLANCE IN THE U.S. ................................................................. 21
  The COINTELPRO Program and the Death of Jean Seberg ............................................ 23
  The Rise of the United States Surveillance Community .................................................. 26
  Digital Surveillance Since 9/11, and the USA Patriot Act ............................................... 27
  Summary .......................................................................................................................... 29

PART V: COMPARING CHINA AND UNITED STATES’ RESPONSES TO COVID-19 .......... 30
  Making History: China, Technology, and COVID-19 ...................................................... 30
  The U.S. Divided during COVID-19 ................................................................................. 33

RESEARCH ........................................................................................................................... 36
  PART I: RESEARCH QUESTIONS ...................................................................................... 36
  PART II: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY ................................................... 36
    Specific Aims and Significance ....................................................................................... 36
    Research Approach, Design, and Methodology .............................................................. 37
    Data Analysis Strategy .................................................................................................. 38
    Ethical Considerations ................................................................................................... 39

INTERVIEW ANALYSIS .................................................................................................... 40
  THEME 1: PERSONAL DEFINITION OF FREEDOM ....................................................... 41
    American: ...................................................................................................................... 41
    Chinese: ....................................................................................................................... 42
  THEME 2: DEFINING FREEDOM IN THE DIGITAL AGE ................................................ 44
    American: ...................................................................................................................... 44
    Chinese: ....................................................................................................................... 46
  THEME 3: THE IMPORTANCE OF FREEDOM TO INDIVIDUALS ................................. 48
    American: ...................................................................................................................... 48
    Chinese: ....................................................................................................................... 50
  THEME 4: VIEWS ON COUNTRY’S SUPPORT OF INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM .................. 52
    American: ...................................................................................................................... 52
    Chinese: ....................................................................................................................... 54
  THEME 5: THOUGHTS ON COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS ...................................... 57
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thanks to my family, my friends, my acquaintances, my professors. Thanks to the great thinkers and writers from the past and today, And every existence in this world.
You inspire me to see the beauty of diversity, And I shall treasure this world as it is.
Our society is cruel sometimes, But believe in our inner freedom and strength Because they can help us overcome external challenges, Make compassionate decisions, And see the light beyond all darkness.

a reminder

*It is not our abilities that defines who we are,*
*it is our choices.*

(J. K. Rowling
*Harry Potter*)

and hope

*For to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains,*
*but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.*

(Nelson Mandela)
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Great Debate of the Digital Age:

*Liberty, Security, and COVID-19*

by

Fangyangzi (Olivia) Huang

Master of Urban and Regional Planning

University of California, Irvine, 2021

Professor Scott A. Bollens, Chair

*Human perceptions of certain concepts can be manipulated, altered, and transformed by the environment and culture in which we live. This thesis investigates the validity of this statement from different cultural perspectives, focusing on American and Chinese views on liberty and security in the digital age. Through 50 in-depth personal interviews, the study finds that culture and personal experience shape individuals’ values and opinions in significant ways. Specifically, the study analyzes public perceptions of the use of digital surveillance in the U.S. and China in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In sum, Chinese interviewees are more likely to yield personal freedoms for the sake of their families, communities, and country, especially in times of life-threatening events. In contrast, when faced with potentially fatal circumstances, Americans tend to value their personal freedom more than the collective, which presents significant challenges in how Americans cope with the collective tragedy of COVID-19.*
INTRODUCTION

The terms “liberty” and “freedom” in the eyes of most English speakers are usually interchangeable, although “liberty” tends to be used more frequently in a political context than “freedom.” For some theorists, however, the two terms are different in fundamental aspects (Pitkin, 1988). Meanings of philosophical terms such as liberty and freedom are malleable and constantly evolving in complex entanglement with a host of socio-political issues.

Despite the increasing debates on the differences between liberty and freedom, this thesis considers them as conceptually identical and uses them as such. Two concepts of liberty have been established: negative liberty and positive liberty (Berlin, 1969), this essay uses one single definition as the touchstone for liberty: “Personal autonomy...means freedom to conduct one's life without paternalistic or moralistic interference by the state” (Moller, 2006, p. 761). Most people consider individual freedom a fundamental right, yet governments have challenged this right through social control measures since the creation of states, such as surveillance and censorship. The emergence of the technological revolution brought a new tool for limiting individual freedom: digital surveillance. As the use of digital surveillance increases, it deepens the quagmire between personal liberty and security.

Digital surveillance has benefits in particular political contexts. For example, digital surveillance can reinforce national security and citizens’ collective consciousness in a country such as China, where social control prevents instability caused by “excessive” individual freedoms in places such as the U.S. However, the ongoing debates between what is good and bad, or right and wrong, lay in the perceptions of the definitions of individual freedom(s) relative to other important societal challenges. This project undertakes a comparative analysis of China

Such an attempt to focus on China and the U.S. is cogitative, as both states have been controversial yet indispensable entities for social control and individual freedom theories. The most recent global event—the introduction of the novel COVID-19 pandemic—added another sophisticated layer to China and the U.S.’s digital surveillance states. China’s digital surveillance measures applied during the COVID-19 pandemic have been praised for their effectiveness, which has appealed to some countries. However, success in one state does not mean that it is applicable in others, nor would it receive compliments from highly democratized societies and human rights activists. In spite of that, the unity, cohesiveness, and efficiency expressed throughout the state of China and its people during virus control are incontestable. In contrast, the U.S.—the state that advocates individual freedom as a foundational attribute—has showed a deficiency in unity and leadership during this time, resulting in a tragic and possibly avoidable loss of life.

How and why do people from different cultures perceive liberty and security differently? And why do this matter, especially in the digital age and in crises? This thesis offers the beginning of the answers to these questions. That beginning is both historical and philosophical, and so too is this thesis. It is historical because to understand where we stand, we must understand where we have been; and it is philosophical because it is our way of thinking about human, life, society, and politics. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the use of digital surveillance in our modern state, during the novel COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in China and the U.S., and comment on the effects of its control on citizens’ perceptions of individual freedoms and collective consciousness. An investigation into both Chinese and American
cultural backgrounds, and their historical and current surveillance policies, helps lay a foundation for the understanding of their social control measures. Historically, various ideologies have prevailed in China at different periods of time. For the purpose of this paper, however, the term “Chinese” refers to individuals who have being socialized within the current ruling version of Chinese culture, that is, the Communist based People’s Republic of China. Likewise, the American history is a patchwork of different beliefs, ideologies, and cultures, but in this context, “American” represents people who live within the existing framework of the democratic U.S.

I hope this thesis will contribute to the great debate over liberty and security in the digital age while motivating people to seek and conceptualize freedom independently and develop an appreciation and respect for different perspectives.
PART I: THEORIES

The Harm Principle

In his essay *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill states that “the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others” (Mill, p. 1869, p. 17). This assertion, known as the Harm Principle, articulates a principled limit on societal interference with private citizens by allowing only considerations of “harm to others” to contribute to the justification of social interference. Mill states that “as soon as any part of a person’s conduct affects the interests of others prejudicially, society has jurisdiction over it, and the question whether the general welfare will or will not be promoted by interfering with it becomes open to discussion” (p. 75). The Harm Principle becomes crucial when governments establish policing and other methods of regulation over their citizens. Undoubtedly, the Harm Principle should be a part of social order; otherwise, chaos would ensue as people define for themselves what constitutes “harm.” Nevertheless, concerns can arise when authoritarian governments use the Harm Principle to justify the implementation of stringent social control.

As long as the government deems something as having the potential to harm others, it can justify implementing measures that will prohibit such ramifications before they arise. Many regulations are in place to protect citizens from valid threats to safety. For example, in the European Union, the risk of eating genetically modified (GMO) foods is used as justification for the government’s rigorous testing on such foods before making them accessible to the public for consumption (Holtug, 2002).

However, countries can take this application of the Harm Principle to an extreme. Russia is an example of a state that uses the Harm Principle to justify excessive social control, which
can include physical surveillance, online tracking, and censorship of the media over their citizens. Vladimir Putin maintains tight control over the media as a means to prevent Russians from hearing any negative perspectives or outright attacks on Putin’s government. This has been defended by Eduard Sagalayev, the President of the National Association of Russia TV and Radio Broadcasters: “...it is not a question of censorship or restrictions, but of the media being guided by the principle to do no harm” (Burrett, 2011, p. 66).

**Confucianism and Collectivism in China**

When examined side by side with individual rights, there is a significant difference between Chinese and American approaches to social control. The foundation of Chinese social control is based on Confucius’ social doctrine, which seeks “to restore order and peace through moral and political reforms” (Rojek, 1989, p. 142). To achieve this goal, according to Confucius (551-479 B.C.), one must establish a social hierarchy, and individuals must be subordinate to their families, as well as to the state. This morality also emphasizes individual obligation instead of individual rights to the family and the state, and self-control that leads to social harmony. From this principle comes the idea of collective consciousness, defined as “the set of shared beliefs, ideas, and moral attitudes which operate as a unifying force within society” (Collins, 2008, p. 93).

At the same time that Confucianism was growing in China, a formal legal system was eschewed in favor of rule by “men of virtue” (Rojek, 1989, p. 142). Under this system, the individual privacy or personal liberty—essential assets for many Americans—is to be controlled for the overarching goal of Chinese social existence. This philosophy continued for thousands of years and was later infused with Marxist-Leninist ideology during Chairman Mao’s authority.
Although Mao aimed to create a socialist state mirroring the Soviet Union, he firmly rejected the tenet of Marxism that advocated for the bureaucratized model, as he constantly thought and acted as a military commander. It was out of this mentality that Mao constituted an informal social system called “the politics of command” (p. 145) that promoted mass organization and mobilization.

**Individualist Culture in the United States**

The *Library of Congress* suitably described American values as following:

The American republic was founded on a set of beliefs that were tested during the Revolutionary War. Among them was the idea that all people are created equal, whether European, Native American, or African American, and that these people have fundamental rights, such as liberty, free speech, freedom of religion, due process of law, and freedom of assembly.

These values foreshadowed the establishment of various defensive clauses included in the First Amendment and the Fourth Amendment. It was based on the unprecedented events of the American Revolution and its conflated beliefs, S. M. Lipset—a prominent sociologist and political scientist—concluded that Americans’ overriding emphasis on the significance of individualism, particularly the individual freedom of thought and action, was generated through the nature of the exceptionally institutionalized state (Grabb et al., 1999, p. 531). Lipset named this American belief system “Americanism” or the “American Creed,” or at Grabb et al.’s suggestion, a self-interested liberal individualism. Provocative claims from other writers such as Robin M. William Jr. and Alex de Tocqueville corroborated the idea of such a distinct American-style individualism, which “emphasizes the individual personality rather than group identity and responsibility” (Fischer, 2008, p. 363).
To many writers, the self-interested liberal individualism, as Lipset applied, has been an essential value since the nation’s founding. However, others have identified an earlier form of a “far more group-oriented and socially responsible set of cherished ideals at the core of Revolutionary America society” (Grabb et al., 1999, p. 519). A collective study indicated that, despite the widespread practice of personal liberty, early American value systems advocated for the merit of civic responsibility and an others-regard mentality. For a genuine “liberty” to be achieved in the state requires virtuous actions by the citizens, who must be “willing to sacrifice their private interests for the sake of the community” (Wood, 1992, p. 104). This alternative interpretation of individualism not only sheds itself of the narrow, self-interested value, but it resonated with the belief in “republicanism,” which asserts that a better society can be reached through the participation of serving the public good by free individuals (Grabb et al., 1999).

To this day, individualism remains an amorphous term that has been applied differently in different cultures (Grant, 2017, p. 312). The moral outlook of self-interested liberal individualism has dominated contemporary America (Harrist & Richardson, 2014), which has generated tensions both in the moral education system and in social conditions in various ways. President Donald J. Trump, for example, is an exemplar of the genuine liberal individualism that has pervaded the U.S. society. Even after so many self-oriented policies that specifically benefited the wealthy rather than the working class (a promise upon which he campaigned in 2016), millions of Americans supported Trump and his reelection campaign. He has constantly lied (for example, suggesting that people can “inject disinfectant” to kill the virus) to Americans’ faces, especially regarding COVID-19, and he has even encouraged people not to wear masks in the name of individual rights and freedom. In this example, we see that many people value the value of “Americanism” over facts, logic, and scientific public health measures.
The Concept of Social Control

The act of controlling individual behaviors is not a novel concept, nor is it unique to human society. The term “social control” was introduced in sociological literature in America in the late 19th century (Hollingshead, 1941). Since its introduction, the concept of social control has “undergone various conceptual transformations” (Deflem, 1992, p. 1), yet no definition was agreed upon by sociologists (Meier, 1982). In sum, early studies viewed social control as a social condition that involves various mechanisms to ensure social order and stability (Deflem, 1992). Several aspects of the term have been commonly tackled in literature: 1) social control as a “description of a basic social process or condition; 2) its mechanism in maintaining social order and compliance with norms; and 3) social control as a means to interpret social order” (p. 35). In the early development of the concept, Edward Ross and Charles Cooley made major contributions to the literature of social control theory. Ross described social control as a “sine qua non”—a necessary means to ensure the continuity of society—due to societal problems caused by the selfish nature of individual actions (Hollingshead, 1941, p. 224). Cooley, on the other hand, centered his attention on the relationship between personal development through the matrix of control in a cultural and organizational complex. These definitions positioned social control in a more positive angle, which praised its necessity in social contribution to the reciprocal relationship between society and individuals in order to create a more cohesive sphere.

Governments worldwide have exercised social control through various measures, including censorship of the media, restrictions on free speech, and sometimes lying to their citizens. Famous examples from history include the Communist leaders Lenin and Stalin, Fascist dictator Mussolini, and the Nazi chancellor Hitler. Ultimately, these leaders were removed in
favor of democracy, although there is a strong evidence that Russia still controls the people under a veil of “democracy.” According to Spitz, a hallmark of democracy is the “presence of opposition as a fundamental and constructive element of government” (Brewer, 1949, p. 465). In contrast, the authoritarian leader “possesses [of or has the] capacity to recognize and accept all present and future truths, an assumption as alien to the reason and the experience of mankind as it is necessary to the maintenance of the authoritarian claim” (Kohn, 1949). In short, regimes throughout history have used social control to rule and manage the state, albeit in less obvious ways today.

In 1979, Michel Foucault and his breathtaking work, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1979), magnified a different perspective of social control. Foucault’s notions, including “disciplinary society,” “micro-power,” and “power/knowledge,” deconstructed both analysts’ liberal conceptions of prison for humanistic advancements, and the Marxist notion that defines penalty as “an epiphenomenon of the mode of production” (Lacombe, 1996 p. 332). The deconstruction of what people previously reviewed as essential organisms of social control—the prison system and productivity—depicted a dehumanizing nature of social control that is “unambiguously oppressive.” In Foucault’s theory, social practices that objectify, classify, and normalize individuals and institutions created a “disciplinary power” (p. 33) is embedded in the entire social structure, which is manifested through different levels of life, including school policies, cooperate cultures, social norms, religion, and politics.

**Mannheim and the Benefits of Centralized Control**

According to Karl Mannheim, “social coordination is like orchestral harmony” (Mannheim, 1936, p. 263). In Mannheim’s opinion, the end goal for social techniques that
formulate systems of control is not to create a society of conformity, but rather a coordinated, collective responsibility and necessary unity among societies. He used the term “planned freedom”—an oxymoron that in itself creates conflicts and debates—to conceptualize a genuine dynamic of human society based on social knowledge and cooperation. Mannheim’s belief in a more centralized regime does not ask for arbitrary tyranny of the social force that is commonly used among dictatorships. In fact, he believed that the intellectual use of social techniques and knowledge would not abandon ourselves as individuals, but instead mold individuals who can maximize skills and abilities while thriving as a whole, individuals who are “human in a deeper sense” (p. 268).

Although born a German philosopher who lived in a customarily individualized and democratic country, Mannheim’s centralized social theory that resonates with the totalitarianism-style of polity was neither fortuitous nor impulsive, as he depicted:

...the clumsiness of our society in which different man-made institutions frequently clash and different moral codes continuously lead to conflicts, is reflected in the rising tide of neurosis in the individual and in disastrous panics and crises in international relations (p. 268).

*Individual Freedom vs. Collectivism*

In the seminal state of modern society, the concept of a centralized system of control formed feuds about the ideology of individual freedom. From an economic point of view, F. A. Hayek condemned the effectiveness and practicality of a “conscious social control,” or what he called “social engineering,” which is associated with the centralization of all relevant social knowledge in a single entity (Hayek, 1935). Hayek stated that the ultimate dispute between politicians/scholars/planners for this issue is a moral one that lay under the method of resource distribution. He pondered “whether a rational utilization of our resources requires central
direction and organization of all our activities according to some consciously constructed ‘blueprint’” (p. 41). In opposition to Mannheim’s collective effort that avoids societal chaos, Hayek argued that the use of an intelligent and appropriate legal framework combined with other tactics in an individual-based economic market was the best way to preserve positive and effective competition, guarantee freedom, and avoid totalitarianism. Hence, most existing social problems and crises are due to the negligence of such prerequisites.

Karl Popper, an influential philosophers of the 20th century, buttressed Hayek’s contention against the authoritarian ideology. Popper used the terms “holistic” or “utopian social engineering” to convey the message that the centralized social formation intends to conduct the entire process of social development to a certain ideal state; it is inevitable for such a state to use institutional interferences to “organize human impulses” and “control the uncertainties created by human factors” (Popper, 1957, p. 71). Popper asserted that holistic engineering’s rejection of individualism and centralized rule of a few is likely to lead to dictatorship and authoritarianism (Popper & Gombrich, 1994). To reach the end goals, leaders of authoritarian states must remove a tremendous amount of criticism concerning the social measures that have been applied to the country’s development. However, this suppression of criticism could also expunge similar amounts of constructive opinions. Predicaments caused by a holistic engineering system, besides those mentioned earlier, include the dilemma of choosing the leader’s successor, the problem of defining the “ideal state” (p. 161), and the loss of organic character.

In The Open Society and Its Enemies, Popper classified such hierarchical and totalitarian states as “closed societies,” which are as ancient as our civilization itself (p. 1). What Popper lucidly advocated, in contrast, is what he identified as the “open societies” (p. 173), which date back to the democratic Athens of the 5th century B.C.E. Although Popper recognized the internal
stability, shared common life, and military prowess a closed society is trying to achieve, he beseeched to emphasize the values carried out by the open societies, including individual beliefs, values, freedom, growing knowledge, and critical scrutiny. In the end, deconstructing a closed society into an open society might induce feelings of isolation, uneasiness and anxiety, but Popper believed that those feelings are not only necessary, but also “the price we have to pay for being human” (p. 176).

Summary

In a highly populated society, where resources are scarce and unequally distributed, there is a need to galvanize academic research into a more comprehensive understanding of the great debate between liberty and security. Unequivocally, the current global political sphere does not statistically validate the democratic state of America, as we can observe from the incessantly intensified COVID-19 cases, as well as the increasing cultural, racial, and economic conflicts across the nation. It is evident that people in the U.S. and other highly democratized countries are unlikely to capitulate political ideologies germane to totalitarianism. However, a myriad of diatribes toward Chinese centralized control cannot deny its more stable and malleable society. Morals aside, in fighting public health crises like the current pandemic, the Chinese style of social control has created a consensus among its already collective populace. The U.S., in comparison, is overwrought by its doubtful and volatile citizens who share imperceptible commonalities and national identity.
Part II: The Digitization of Social Control Worldwide

Social control is one of the most primary sociological concepts, and it is deeply embedded in the formation of political states since the beginning of human civilization (Deflem, 1992). From America to Africa, countries at all levels implement social control measures for various reasons, these include power, profit, security, and order. The contemporary world is wrought with the manifestation of the digital age: technology, which has bolstered the fortress of social control power, especially since the last half of the 20th century. The dramatic proliferation in technological tools used for social control after the 9/11 attack parallels the intensification of control on an international level. The augmented expenditures for the development and spread of tools, such as facial recognition systems, enhanced travel and border control, and increased database-based risk management schemes and information-sharing among private and public sectors. These measures have profoundly altered our society, including the expectations of the relationship between individuals and the state.

One of the most innovative techniques of social control is digital surveillance. Countries all around the world have utilized surveillance for decades for a multitude of reasons. Strategically placed video cameras can record and discourage potentially criminal behaviors; examples of this include red-light cameras that catch driving violations and hidden cameras at ATMs that document those who try to rob patrons as they withdraw money. This type of surveillance is intended to protect citizens by enforcing laws that are in place to prevent physical and emotional harm. Taking the Harm Principle’s tenets further, surveillance is commonly used as preemptive defense from perceived and real political enemies. An early form of surveillance, or more accurately, espionage in the U.S. was applied during the Civil War, when both the Union and Confederate armies utilized wiretapping to intercept messages and strategies (Wu et al.,
Currently, surveillance is an integral component of many government’s defense procedures. When used in these ways, surveillance can be considered a beneficial tool in society.

There are, on the other hand, risks involved with governmental use of surveillance. Once citizens get used to surveillance, they might become more tolerant of the government using the data in ways that pose more risk of abuse (Volokh, 2002). Proposals to let the government connect cameras to facial recognition software, keep the recordings indefinitely rather than just recycling them after a few days, and merge the data in a centralized database—measures that some officials could indeed abuse—might become more politically viable once cameras in public places are a part of our daily lives. Slippery slope arguments are often overstated, but in a legal and political system that relies heavily on precedent and analogy, the slippery slope is a real risk. Moreover, once the government invests money in cameras, voters might want to get the most bang for their buck by having the police store, merge, and analyze the gathered data. This slippage is not inevitable, but it is a reality. With such power of surveillance comes the potential for misuse and abuse. As citizens, we are cognizant of both positive and negative possibilities, but we accept this risk because we are convinced that the tools are valuable.

**Part III: The Dawn of China’s “Invisible Eyes”**

In 1979, with the introduction of the digital age, Deng Xiaoping opened the “door” to bring Western information to China for economic and political gain; this is known as the Open-Door policy. However, as Deng famously stated, “If you open the window for fresh air, you have to expect some flies to blow in” (Reiff, 2016). Sparked by the inception of the Internet and citing various political, cultural, and economic justification, the government instituted significant
censorship among the internet content. That censorship has grown steadily over the past two decades into the “Great Firewall,” a colossal censorship program that intended to protect its citizens from foreign “contaminations” (Griffiths, 2019).

Another component of maintaining government control in China involves country-wide data collection, otherwise known as the “Golden Shield Project” (GSP). Beginning in 2000, the GSP was intended to be a “comprehensive database-driven surveillance system that could access every citizen’s record as well as link national, regional, and local security together” (“The Great Firewall,” 2011). The rationale behind the GSP was craftily presented as the “adoption of advanced information and communication technology to strengthen central police control, responsiveness, and crime combating capacity, so as to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of police work” (Walton, 2001, p. 6). Most recently, facial recognition and other technologies have been applied to monitor every citizen’s movements around the country.

Since 1989, the government in China has developed a surveillance state, with intensified tactics that include “more police, more forces, more intelligent information, spying, [and] face recognition” (Ma & Rui, 2019). These tactics have largely helped the state circumvent a multitude of political vortexes, national security crises, as well as public health issues. Today, China functions with a “sophisticated system of social control built on advanced surveillance technology, public apathy and stifled civil society” (Ma & Rui, 2019). This set of “invisible eyes” is omnipresent throughout China, watching out for criminal activities, as well as those who dare to swim against the stream.
Cultivating Model Citizenship: China’s Social Credit System

Since its release in 2011, Black Mirror—a British science fiction television series—has published five seasons of daunting episodes, showcasing dystopian future societies wrought by the unanticipated consequences of technologies. The topic of one of its episodes, “Nosedive,” has been widely compared by Europeans and Americans alike to China’s current Social Credit System, spurring huge controversies over the role of social control in those countries. Yet, China’s reality is far from the insinuated predicament, although it can start to take a downturn if not carefully managed.

In 2014, China’s State Council aimed to develop a nationwide, sophisticated, and multi-systematic Social Credit System (SCS) by 2020. When complete, the system assigns each Chinese adult a credit code alongside the existing government-issued ID card. The primary purpose of SCS is to promote affirmative economic and moral behaviors among individual citizens, discourage fraud, and improve governance and social order, which aligns with China’s socialist and core values, including hard-working, respecting the elderly, and patriotism (Kshetri, 2019). Unlike capitalist-based credit systems, China’s SCS system tracks, assesses, and rates (in numbers) a person’s trustworthiness and creditworthiness based on a broad range of individuals’ economic and social activities, including their financial data, shopping habits, travel history, criminal record, and social media behaviors. Based on this rating system, the Chinese government can easily trace and predict subversive actions and target and punish individuals with bad credit while others with good records can be rewarded (Xiao, 2019). The “blacklist” documents people with bad credit, which then restricts them from access to various services, housing, get credit to start a company, or being eligible for certain jobs, because high-status positions are usually subjective to minimum credit scores. At the same time, the “redlist” lists
people with good scores encourages civil behaviors and contributions to the society by rewarding (commonly handled by commercial entities) individuals with numerous benefits, including receiving expedited services such as medical insurance, discounts at a local business, lower rate utility bills, and invitations to certain events (Kshetri, 2019, p. 17). The SCS as a role model reaches the public, the private, and the social sectors alike (Lee, 2019). Besides its rating on individuals, the SCS also assigns a universal credit code to organizations and companies for various purposes, including registering tax payment, production, distribution, e-commerce, transportation, and other activities.

By 2019, 43 cities in China implemented the pilot version of SCS (Kshetri, 2019). The accomplishment of such a program relies strongly on the collaboration between the government and private companies which were approved to help create the system’s frameworks, namely Alibaba (who developed the “Sesame Credit”) and Tencent. However, there is no national credit-score criteria, and even the SCS’ names used by each municipality vary; the only commonality among each SCS is their reliance on data collection and digital surveillance from smartphone and internet usage. Notably, every Chinese is entitled to access to everyone else’s credit score through “Credit China”—a website that offers free access to credit information and scores of individuals, companies, and organizations (Lee, 2019).

Due to the state’s drastic promotion and implementation, big data technology and centralized data infrastructure have become indispensable components of Chinese society. By 2020, the SCS was fully on track for 1.4 billion Chinese citizens (Liang et al., 2018). Since its implementation, this “new normal” has gradually changed China’s dynamics in public discourse and media discussion on digital surveillance (Lee, 2019, p. 956). Although still in its infancy, the all-encompassing SCS spurred serious interdisciplinary interests and concerns among scholars,
including 1) a focus on personal privacy and information security, 2) an increase in information asymmetry between those who do and do not hold the data, and 3) difficulties in incorporating various platforms and tools into one comprehensive system (Liang et al., 2018).

Preparing for the Next Contagious Crisis: China After SARS

With the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) pandemic in 2003, the Chinese government faced a different type of challenge: contagion. In contrast to previous homegrown threats to authority in the social and political realms, SARS represented a danger not only to the specific aspects of the society but also to the livelihood of the entire populace.

The SARS epidemic in 2003 caught China off-guard, and it highlighted the weaknesses of the country’s existing pandemic response measures. First, a lack of awareness of the virus allowed rapid transmission during the early stages, which was then enhanced by a dearth of helpful information from the government on how to battle the virus. At that time, there was no practical way to monitor the movement of infectious disease in China, and valuable data from the beginning of the outbreak was lost due to this deficiency (Feng, 2009). Although the government soon instituted interventions such as mandatory mask-wearing, social distancing, and contact tracing, it was too late to contain the spread. As a result, the virus reached almost 30 countries, infected more than 8000 people, and killed almost 800 (Cooper, 2020).

Subsequently, SARS ignited a host of recommendations for improving early detection and control of pathogens, and China has established a complex set of standards and measures to detect and control major health threats in a rapid fashion. New regulations included pandemic influenza planning and surveillance, increasing global security, improving lab and surveillance networks, and revising International Health Regulations (IHR). There have no updates on the
IHR since 1969, but 194 WHO states approved the new revisions by 2005, which went into effect in 2007. SARS highlighted the need for a global and multilateral response, and the WHO has since established and directed one (Wei et al., 2016). There is also a rapid development of numerous web-based infectious disease surveillance systems to track the incidence and spread of infectious diseases worldwide. (Choi et al., 2016). Realizing our vulnerability to these crises, strengthen public health surveillance to provide early warnings has become a primary focus point of leading experts since 2002 (Morse, 2012).

In particular, since SARS in 2002, China built the largest disease surveillance network in the world—a management system for public health emergencies that better defines command systems and responsibilities of officials at various levels. (Wei et al., 2016, p. 3). Public health workers can report anything they consider relevant (unusual) to public health authorities, including the central national level CDC (Qiu, 2018). After the outset of COVID in December 2019, the Chinese government accelerated its use of digital technology “to include epidemic monitoring and analysis, tracing of virus sources, epidemic prevention and treatment, and resource allocation.” (Wu et al, 2016, p. 4).

In addition to increasing medical surveillance post-SARS, China increased its use of surveillance measures in cities to monitor citizens’ movements. Presumably, the goal would be to analyze the data and determine if there is something worth alerting the government. Techniques include a vast facial recognition system, face and fingerprint databases, and apps (such as “Fengcai”) that scan citizens’ and visitors’ phones for suspicious activity. (Mozur & Krolik, 2019). A tracing app called Health Code has been linked to 900 million users across 300 cities in China. The app “help[s] governments identify people potentially exposed to COVID-19” by assessing “people’s contagion risks based on factors like travel history, duration of time spent
in risky areas, and relationships to potential carriers.” In these ways, China hopes to prevent the spread of infectious diseases before they turn into another SARS or COVID.

**Summary:**

The Chinese government has overcome many historical conflicts through tactics that are controversial in the eyes of observers and may even be considered insensitive. The excessive use of technology, by American standards, especially Information and Communication Technology (ICTs), including digital surveillance, censorship, and media, engenders inflated debates both within the country and overseas. However, do these efforts prevent Chinese people from accessing the truth? Or do they stop Chinese people from criticizing their government?

According to Andrew Mei-Mín Lee, an Australian-Chinese scholar and writer, restrictions on criticism of the state is not necessarily the case. In his essay “Tibet and the Media: Perspectives from Beijing.” Lee stated that although there are strong censorship and internet monitoring in China, as well as the fact that certain inappropriate blogs have been spotted and deleted immediately by the Internet Police, criticisms of the government exist as always. Some examples include the exposure of powerful officials’ misconduct, such as the misuse of public funds, failure to respond to crises like earthquakes, and even some officials’ attempts to sexually assault waitresses (p. 215).

China, a state that has survived thousands of years of wars, revolutions, and now globalization, still remains an impenetrable fortress. Within it, the majority of Chinese people share a steady patriotism and ethos. The insidious COVID-19 pandemic has most recently spotlighted China’s extraordinary collective efforts and attitudes in the success of fighting national crises.
Part IV: Digital Surveillance in the U.S.

The establishment of the Bill of Rights in 1791 set the United States apart from other countries of the time by bestowing its citizens a multitude of personal rights (Volokh, 2002). Inarguably, the First Amendment is one of the most essential clauses that marks the state as an impeccable political asylum for those who search for freedom of speech and the press, religion, and other personal rights. Unfortunately, while people enjoy their supposed individual freedom(s), the U.S. government and its secret surveillance programs have spontaneously revealed their nefarious disguises through various affairs. In fact, the U.S.’s digital surveillance system is so rigorous that it almost tarnished its own reputation for being a democratic state. Unlike many authoritarian states where social control and digital surveillance are widely acknowledged, the U.S.’s approach to maintaining national security and social order is more insidious; in fact, they are sometimes the country’s legislative principles. Nevertheless, these measures do not overshadow the good deeds that the U.S. government has accomplished for protecting its citizens from international threats on a daily basis.

The origin of U.S. surveillance can be traced back to the colonial period from the mid-17th century based on the Puritan ethics of New England (“National Research Council,” 2007). In the late 18th century, the federalist government of the United States imposed one of the earliest forms of censorship and social control. The Alien and Sedition Acts of the 1798 was established to squelch the growing anti-federalist sentiments that proliferated the populace at this time (The Alien and Sedition Acts). This set of four laws suppressed immigration and castigated American citizens who publicly criticized the federalist-controlled Congress, particularly through newspapers. The federalists claimed the Acts were intended to protect “national security and
confidence in the government in a time of war” (Leibiger). These Acts, which created uproar over the First Amendment, demonstrates that even the U.S. was not immune to the forces of social control.

As a further mode of social control, the U.S. government utilized surveillance as a political tool before and during the Civil War; for example, the Union and the Confederacy bugged into each other’s telegraph lines to filch messages (Wu et al, 2002). As the government’s reliance on, as well as the power of surveillance continued to grow, privacy was introduced as a legal right during the mid-20th century. This right was then formalized, advanced, and promulgated after WWII, a period when surveillance exponentially mushroomed as an effective countermeasure for the unceasingly computerized and centralized surveillance. Nevertheless, the legitimacy of privacy rights did not stop the exhaustive aggression from the government’s surveillance measures; after years of evolving—on both intensity and scope—surveillance is now an “inescapable feature of daily life in the United States at the start of the 21st century” (“National Research Council,” 2007, p. 349).

Surveillance has classically been used for military purposes, but its functions have expanded beyond the theater of wars over the years. Since Theodore Roosevelt’s administration, the practice of intelligence has been used for political purposes, especially for foreign policies; it was then expanded for domestic supervision and internal security in the 20th century (Wu et al, 2002). Soon, under President Truman’s instruction, an authoritative source for centralized civilian intelligence organization—The Central Intelligence Group (CIG)—was formed in 1946. The following year, after a series of discreet congressional debates, President Truman ratified the National Security Act of 1947, starting a consolidated national security framework.
A period of the most aggressive increases in the centralized digital surveillance system began in the late 1950s, when the power of database aggregated uncounted information that benefited various institutions. Soon the government became a computer zealot; sectors such as the Internal Revenue Services (IRS), Social Security Administration (SSA), US Military, and the Bureau of the Census, among others, were the largest and foremost consumers of data collection. Concurrently, the federal government boosted its loyalty surveillance with computer technologies; groups including the communists, black rights activities, and antiwar protesters were primary targets as well as tools for justifying security records operated by the federal government ("National Research Council," 2007).

Beginning in the 1980s, technologies not only soared but also globalized. The interconnection and cooperation between tech companies and government departments facilitated the normalization of digital surveillance practices. From grocery store checkouts to airport check-ins, data collected from our everyday lives no longer requires a federal-level operation; rather, personal information automatically fuels into the spider-web computer system imperceptibly as they interact with countless digital surveillance appliances (p. 364). The promulgation of the Privacy Act of 1974 generated a silver lining that aimed to protect individual privacy from government surveillance. Nonetheless, the Patriot Act of 2001, created immediately after the tragedy of 9/11, has permanently granted the U.S. government a tenacious power of digital surveillance over foreign threats and its own citizens ("USA Patriot Act").

The COINTELPRO Program and the Death of Jean Seberg

When old-school suppression measures failed to counter the radical political insurgency that swept the U.S. during the 1950s and 1960s, the FBI (more specifically, the then-notorious
FBI Director, J. Edgar Hoover) founded the top-secret counterintelligence program COINTELPRO (syllabic abbreviation derived from Counter Intelligent Program) to sabotage and eliminate progressive political activities and dissenters (Churchill & Wall, 2001). An NPR archive revealed that strategies used in the COINTELPRO program were incisive and manifold. Among the purposes of the program was “to disrupt, discredit, and defame perceived political radicals” (“COINTELPRO and the History of Domestic Spying”). According to COINTELPRO documents, five groups were winnowed for inquisition: the Communist Party, the Socialist Workers’ Party, White Hate Groups, Black Nationalist Hate Groups, and the New Left. Aimed at impeding the rise of the black movement, the program pinpointed Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. until his assassination in 1968, while Huey P. Newton—the leader of the Black Panther Party—was soon displaced. Indubitably, the FBI and the COINTELPRO specifically targeted the Black Panther Party, which generated a total of 233 out of 295 documented actions undertaken by the program and caused irreparable detriments to the organization (“COINTELPRO and the History of Domestic Spying”).

The battle between COINTELPRO and the Black Panther Party resulted in an unexpected death that soon became a contributing force in fighting against the program’s ostentatious attacks on personal rights and privacy. Jean Seberg, a soulful but ill-fated Hollywood star, was found dead in 1979 with a suicide note next to her decomposing body. Her death, however, was far from accidental nor natural: it was found to have a confound entanglement with the FBI and COINTELPRO. The tragedy began when Seberg was introduced to the Black Panther Party by her secret lover Hakim Jamal, a charismatic black activist. Seberg soon became deeply involved with the group and its political movement (Macnab, 2020). Seberg’s frequent donations to the
Black Panther Party outraged the FBI, which made her an instant target for scrutiny, so much so that FBI records stated, “Jean Seberg… must be neutralized” (Finney, 2020).

The FBI was so concerned by the perceived “threat” that COINTELPRO conducted a pervasive investigation of Seberg between 1969-1972 which included tracking and following Seberg’s movements and wiretapping her phone (Finney, 2020). Meanwhile, upon learning that Seberg was pregnant, the FBI set out to destroy her reputation by delivering various falsified and vicious messages to newspaper columnists; they, in turn, printed slanderous reports that Seberg’s pregnancy was due to a scandalous affair with a high-ranking member of the Black Panther Party. Such stern aspersion devastated not only her reputation, but Seberg herself, who fell into depression following the death of her premature baby (who in fact was fathered by her French husband). Haunted by the miasma, Jean Seberg committed suicide in August 1979 at age 40. Later, in September, the FBI acknowledged that the besmirch of the late Jean Seberg was part of the COINTELPRO program (Rawls, 1979).

After the Seberg incident, exposures of the COINTELPRO surged, and diatribes from Congress and the public condemning the pernicious operations eventually ended the 15-year secret surveillance program in April 1971 (“FBI”). Although the termination of COINTELPRO explicitly showcased the pernicious capabilities of the government digital surveillance system, domestic espionage from government agencies continued and widened. In fact, the Watergate scandal demonstrated that even the most trusted official in the U.S. government, the president (Nixon), was guilty of utilizing forms of surveillance to undermine his political opponents (Emery, 1995).
The Rise of the United States Surveillance Community

The National Security Act of 1947 opened the gate for wide-scale surveillance of both citizens and foreigners alike by the U.S. government. The act reorganized the nation’s defense and intelligence services, providing a “comprehensive program for the future security of the United States through the integration of the policies and procedures of US military, intelligence, and national security agencies, and the coordination of national security policy (“The National Security Act of 1947,” 1947). The act established the National Security Council, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the position of Director of National Intelligence (DNI), the National Counterterrorism Center, and many other avenues by which the government could access highly sensitive information.

In 1952, President Truman issued a secret directive to create the National Security Agency (NSA), which consolidated surveillance activities at the behest of the Defense Department. The NSA belongs to the “Intelligence Community,” a coalition of 17 intelligence agencies under the DNI’s supervision. However, having not been created by Congress, the NSA is not subject to congressional review, a status that has enabled the NSA to become the most secretive intelligence agency in the U.S. One of the NSA’s missions is to protect and formulate codes, ciphers, and other forms of cryptology, which was done in relative secrecy during the first two decades of its inception. However, during the 1960s and 1970s, the U.S. brought pressure from the public to enhance private citizens’ right to information. The 1966 Freedom of Information Act was followed by an Executive Order from President Nixon in 1972 that “[attempted] to formalize a process for declassification of national security information” (Parsons, 2020, page). These were mostly symbolic gestures, as widespread surveillance continued both in the U.S. and abroad.
The Watergate Scandal of 1976 increased scrutiny of federal intelligence operations, but the NSA remained largely off-limits. Despite a Supreme Court ruling in 1972 that the Fourth Amendment provided protection from “unreasonable searches and seizures” (“Factbox”), in 1978, Congress passed the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, which set up the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court (FISC) to “consider requests for secret warrants for domestic spying.” Surveillance continued and was revolutionized in the 1990s when the intelligence community joined the information superhighway of the internet. The internet allowed intelligence agencies to collect and permanently store “metadata” on a new, massive scale, and the scope of government surveillance has only deepened in the decades since.

**Digital Surveillance Since 9/11, and the USA Patriot Act**

The year of the 9/11 terrorist attack profoundly altered the surveillance state of the U.S. In the name of national security, President George W. Bush passed the *USA Patriot Act* hastily (45 days) after the attack. The purpose of the Patriot Act was to “deter and punish terrorist acts in the U.S. and around the world, to enhance law enforcement investigatory tools, and other purposes” (“USA Patriot Act,” 2001), which ultimately led to a myriad of changes to U.S. surveillance laws that significantly expanded the power of law enforcement in surveillance and investigation. This change entitled the government to spy on not only sources of threats but also ordinary American citizens in four searching areas: records, secrets, intelligence, and “trap and trace.”

The Patriot Act, however, was just one part of much more extensive and secret surveillance begun by the NSA in 2002, called the Terrorist Surveillance Program (TSP). NSA did not disclose the TSP’s existence until 2005, when a New York Times investigation
uncovered that the NSA has been monitoring individuals’ records, including financial records, internet usage, travel records, medical histories, phone and email records, among others (Sinha, 2013). Under the guise of the Patriot Act, the NSA had enabled the U.S. government to grow into an undisputed, centralized threat to personal privacy and civil rights. For instance, under the Patriot Act, the FBI can issue NSLs (National Security Letters), without judges’ approval and procure evidence of alleged crimes through secretly conducted physical search or wiretap on American citizens; the FBI has issued 192,499 NSLs between 2003 and 2006 alone (“Surveillance under the USA/Patriot Act”).

In 2005, the government began to enforce the wiretapping law passed in 1994 during the Bill Clinton presidency that required U.S. cell phone carriers to establish surveillance programs among their networks; in this way, the government can demand access to all texts, phone calls, voice messages, and GPS movements if they deem it appropriate (Thompson, 2011). Similarly, a series of news reports in 2009 uncovered the NSA’s misuse of the FISA Amendments Act to compile domestic communications from targeted groups of Americans (Shamsi & Abdo, 2011). Moreover, these search orders are unchecked power from the government that requires no reasonable suspicion for criminality, no identified “possible causes,” no warrant before breaking into someone’s property, and most troubling, the government can demand individual records from any entities, including bookstores. Subsequently, the Patriot Act subverted personal rights and privacy from both the First and the Fourth Amendments (“Surveillance under the USA/Patriot Act”). This massive level of digital surveillance combined with technological advancement has induced a so-called “national surveillance state” (Professors Jack Balkin and Sandy Levinson), which elucidates the overarching power of the U.S. surveillance system and its pernicious manipulation on its citizens post-9/11 (Shamsi & Abdo, 2011).
Summary

William W. Keller, a former security analyst for the U.S. Congress, labeled America’s current political state a “secure democracy” (Keller, 2017, p. 2). In Democracy Betrayed, Keller collected a myriad of evidence to validate how this unaccountable security system has fundamentally compromised democratic values. The “secure democracy” not only works closely with military operations but is also deeply embedded within legislative and political functions. In some ways, this sophisticated nexus proves to be a modern liberal democratic system, yet without checks and balances, the internal security runs like an omnipotent and authoritative outlaw.

After Edward Snowden unmasked a trove of secrets in 2013, including more than 20 covert NSA surveillance programs and tens of thousands of documents (Keller, 2017), he restoked the debate between security and liberty. As a result, especially after the digital revolution and the 9/11 attack, the use of digital surveillance formed a watershed between public and government opinions. For some, the “secure democracy” is necessary to ensure social order, state security, and counterterror; others, confronted by the depletion of personal information tracking and sharing, led to an outcry for structural change. Taking all aspects of digital surveillance into account, including its thwarted attacks, lives saved, terrorist and criminal organizations destroyed, and cost, for example, the effectiveness of these programs is statistically unquantifiable (Cayford & Pieters, 2018). As such, public opinions constitute a major component of the evaluation of surveillance effectiveness.

Simply put, if the public feels that digital surveillance measures can keep them safe, they will assess those measures as positive and become more willing to sacrifice their privacy and
liberty in exchange for safety and security. For instance, a 2013 poll found that “citizens are willing to make the trade-off between civil liberties and security to the extent that they perceive a terrorist threat and to the extent to which they trust governmental authorities” (The New York Time). Another poll in the same year by the Pew Research Center (2013) reported that “the public’s bottom line on government anti-terrorism surveillance is narrowly positive,” where 50% respondents approved of the government’s collection of private date as an anti-terrorism effort, while 44% disapproved. In addition, evidence shows that acceptance of government surveillance drastically increases directly after terrorist events, such as the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing (Landler & Sussman, 2013). However, in the face of global enemy—COVID-19 pandemic, many Americans today have shown little to no trust or interest in digital surveillance, despite its potential public health benefits.

**Part V: Comparing China and United States’ responses to COVID-19**

*Making History: China, Technology, and COVID-19*

Since President Xi’s accession in 2012, he has promoted a new era of digital bulwark in China. Considerable numbers of laws (such as the Cybersecurity Law of 2016) and regulations have passed from the central government, for both individuals and corporations to accommodate the increasingly intensified restrictions on cyberspace and personal behaviors. Hence, digital surveillance programs, such as facial recognition, the Social Credit System, and the “Skynet” project—the largest video-surveillance network in the globe—were developed to corroborate and ensure an “omnipresent, fully networked, always working and fully controllable” (Xiao, 2019, p. 57) system. Moreover, applications of other technologies such as AI, big-data analytics, voice-recognition, and DNA data collection are also escalating exponentially. The effectiveness of such
a comprehensive system of state surveillance even encouraged President Xi to advocate for the “China Model” of the social governance system in 2016 (p. 62). Little did the government know that these arrangements would play a major role in battling the unprecedented global event—the COVID-19 pandemic seven years later.

It is notable that, only two decades after SARS, China has “made remarkable progress in responding effectively to disease outbreaks” (Nkengasong, 2020, p. 310). This has been demonstrated through the Chinese government’s response to the COVID-19 outbreak. Besides the indisputable improvement on case reporting between SARS and COVID, China has proved its ability to learn from the past (specifically, the failure of SARS) and quickly adapt to critical events through various aspects: the timely decision to close the seafood market in the city of Wuhan (where the virus was first observed), soon followed by a nationwide lockdown, and the rapid development of national and international consortium to help analyze the virus and make public policies.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic in China, hundreds of millions of cameras were set in public places (Cadell, 2020), and mandatory check-ins with digital surveillance apps have become part of citizens’ daily routines. “Health Code,” the most famous Chinese virus-tracking, color-based QR code, was developed by numerous tech giants including WeChat and Alipay and became widely used by local governments soon after COVID-19 began. The app requires users’ personal information, including ID number, home address, history of being exposed by virus carriers, and symptoms. It then analyzes data through collecting information manually entered by the users, calculates trends and possible risks, and distributes information on the app to notify the users automatically. The app uses collected metadata to determine the user’s next move by showing one of three colors: green, yellow, and red. These color schemes are created for
determining each user’s risk level: with a green QR code, the users can go in and out of spaces safely, while yellow and red codes alert for medium and high risks that put the users under seven to 10 days’ self-quarantine, during which they are not allowed to enter public places. Simultaneously, data collected through the app—especially individuals’ locations—is shared with the local government, especially the police; local authorities also require people to display their app in all circumstances: supermarkets, ride-hauling, office building, school, community gate, and so on. Facial recognition technologies are also used in some communities to corroborate the Health Code app, where only residents with green codes can enter the gate.

_Amnesty International_ reports that travel throughout China has also been increasingly monitored during the pandemic (Ko, 2002). The government justifies such increased surveillance as a means to keep track of people infected with COVID. Citizens are required to show proof of identity before using the city subway system, a mode of transit that had, to that point, remained (relatively) anonymous. People are tracked wherever they go, including movie theaters and other public spaces. Traffic, rail, and flight information is so detailed that one’s location can be accurately pinpointed within three rows of their seat on a train or plane. In addition, different provinces often use different software, meaning that people have to download multiple apps and share even more information with the government.

Under such intensive digital surveillance, as well as the citizens’ collective consciousness, their trust in the government, and swift adaptation to new environment and technology on a national level, the COVID-19 virus was able to be diminished miraculously within one month (1/23/20-2/28/20) in Hubei province where the outbreak started. Total reported cases of the virus in China spiked on February 2nd, but by February 14th, a significant downturn had taken place (Zhou et al., 2020). Because of a highly conscientious and deliberately planned
strategy that moves through highly controlled phrases, only after three months since the national lockdown in February 2020, people’s lives went back to normal, and mainland China, with the exception of Hong Kong, has remained open both socially and economically ever since. Although the state is experiencing new virus outbreaks periodically, China has reported significantly fewer deaths and cases compared to the rest of the world, making the combat with the COVID-19 pandemic one of its most successful memoir in the history.

The U.S. Divided during COVID-19

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S., compared to other countries, has seen a disproportionate number of deaths related to the disease. While the U.S. accounts for 4% of the world’s population, it has suffered 22% of deaths from COVID-19 (Leonhardt, 2020). Specifically, the death rate from COVID in the U.S. is 100 times that of China. This discrepancy can be explained by an ineffective and almost nonexistent national response in the U.S. to the pandemic. There have been numerous contributions, including the divisive nature of politics in the U.S., misinformation from the government and the media, an absence of a consistent and national strategic plan, an inequitable health care system, and obscure messages to the American public. The day after the first diagnosed case in the U.S., former president Donald J. Trump informed the public that “We have it totally under control” (Leonhardt, 2020). In late February, he asserted that “[the virus is] going to disappear. One day—it’s like a miracle—it will disappear” (Leonhardt, 2020). Again, on July 28th, he claimed that “large portions of our country” were “Corona-free” (Leonhardt, 2020). During these periods, Trump constantly questioned the necessity for wearing masks, denied Dr. Fauci’s—the director of NIAID since 1984—warnings and recommendations, such as stay-home orders and closing businesses and
schools. At the same time, without concrete scientific evidence, Trump promoted medical disinformation, including the effectiveness of drinking bleach and taking hydroxychloroquine as countermeasures for the virus. These are only a few examples of his falsified proclamation that had in part led to a profound confusion and public distrust of the government. These comments, along with encouragement from the media (social media, newscasts, and others), have formulated “a large partisan divide in the country, with Republican-leaning voters less willing to wear masks or remain socially distant” (Yamey & Jamison, 2020).

In addition to the contradictions and inconsistent messages in policymaking, the public’s opinions toward governmental rules are also highly diversified. The core issue behind such a poor response is the American tradition of prioritizing individualism over societal restrictions that has been ingrained into the culture for centuries. An BBC analyst described it felicitously: “In the midst of the pandemic, a small piece of cloth has incited a nationwide feud about public health, civil liberties and personal freedom. Some Americans refuse to wear a facial covering out of principle, others in this country are ‘enraged by the way that people flout the mask mandates’” (McKelvey, 2020). With COVID-19 as a backdrop, “Americanism” is magnified by the political divide.

According to BBC News, mask-wearing is part of political manifestation, “an arena where scientific evidence is often viewed through a partisan lens” (McKelvey, 2020); while the majority of Democrats support the idea of wearing masks, most Republicans refuse it in support of their leader, Trump. Not only has the fight over masks caused numerous accidents between individuals, but it has also contributed to a crushed U.S. health system unlike any that preceded it: by the middle of August, there were a total of more than five million cases nationwide, a loss of over 16,500 lives, and a daily increase of more than 50,000 new cases. “...this is the
consequence,” said Dr. Jared Baeten, an epidemiologist and vice dean at the University of Washington School of Public Health, “we don’t succeed as well as a collective” (Leonhardt, 2020).

In contrast to China’s tactics to control the virus—complete lockdown, mandatory mask-wearing since early stage, law-enforced use of tracking devices, to name a few—the U.S. has not yet deployed noticeable countermeasures, especially digital surveillance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although debates about surveillance and civil liberties have gained momentum since 9/11, the concept of individual freedom remains deeply imprinted in American culture; it is a soundly built palisade that, when situations like the pandemic arise, “American individualism” can turn into a juggernaut against its own people, as many find themselves caught in a “catch-22”—people do not want to be told what to do to preserve individual freedom (such as mask-wearing), but by doing so, their freedom is stifled because the society cannot fight the enemy collectively without everyone putting the good of society in front of their right to personal freedom—even temporarily. As a result of these excessive individualism attitudes, highlighted by the Trump Administration's encouragement for flouting restrictions, the virus has spun out of control.
RESEARCH

Part I: Research Questions

1. How and why do people from different societies/cultures define liberty and liberty in the digital age differently?
2. To what degree do citizens perceive the effectiveness of digital surveillance practices in maintaining social order and protecting the state and its citizens?
3. Can liberty and security coexist in the views of citizens?

Part II: Research Design and Methodology

Specific Aims and Significance

The aim of this study is to gather information about U.S. and Chinese citizens’ thoughts and feelings regarding liberty, security, and their governments’ use of digital surveillance, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Looking back at feudal society or the early societies post-civilization, no one possessed what we called personal freedom in terms of property rights or freedoms of speech; powerful people (such as nobles and kings) could always seize properties and incarcerate commoners as soon as they acted or spoke evil against them. Therefore, liberty is a manifestation of people’s yearning for personal control in the civilized world. This definition is subjective and personal, as each individual formulates his or her own definition of liberty relative to a lifetime of distinct cultural, economic, educational, and religious experiences. In today’s world of constant monitoring and surveillance due to the development of technology, our freedom, including the privacy to our information, is being challenged more than ever. This study used interviews as a tool for collecting qualitative data from everyday citizens. By getting a glimpse into people’s daily lives as subjects of digital surveillance, the study aims to
understand the relationship between the governments and their citizens in the digital age, and why and how do the policy implementations affecting people’s thoughts and behaviors. I believe this is vital to helping people understand the current situation while also opening their eyes to the inevitable consequences in the future.

*Research Approach, Design, and Methodology*

This study utilized two qualitative research methods: analysis of existing literature and personal interviews of private citizens. Literatures were collected through university databases, journal articles, scholarly books, newspapers, and other formats. Fifty in-depth interviews were conducted to gain insights into citizens’ perspectives of the phenomenon, each lasting for 45 minutes to two hours. The demographic makeup of interviewees ranged in age from 23 to 73, and represented a diverse cultural, educational, occupational, religions, and other backgrounds (for details, please refer Appendix B). Due to the limited timeframe, convenience sampling and snowball strategy were applied. Subjects were typically strangers, or first- or second-degrees acquaintances of the researcher. In order to gain balanced insights from both perspectives, the subject pool consisted of an equal number of 25 American and 25 Chinese people, all currently residing in the U.S. or China. All conversations were voice-recorded through telephone or apps such as Zoom, Skype, and WeChat. All interviewees’ responses remained anonymous and confidential.

The interviews focused on conversations with private citizens who are neither academically nor politically active. The rationale behind this targeted group was that, although laypeople sometimes lack a deep understanding of political science and other social-related issues, they are directly influenced by political decisions. These effects are then spontaneously
reflected in their personal beliefs and behaviors. Interviewees were exclusively for people age 18 or over. The first part of the interviews was a set of close-ended questions regarding the interviewees’ demographic and background information such as age, nationality, religion, level of education, and travel history; this information is crucial in understanding the formation of individuals’ worldview. The second part of the interviews were open-ended questions intended to gain specific insights from the interviewees.

A qualitative design is invaluable in philosophical and cultural-related topics, and it allows for creative exploration in content and freedom in interview responses. Open-ended questions ensured that participants could speak freely and not be limited to a defined line of thinking or time limit. In addition, scrutiny into existing literature about past events provided not only a basic understanding of the political and cultural stands of the two countries, but the knowledge served as a beacon for interpreting current policy-making rationale.

**Data Analysis Strategy**

The researcher took notes of participants’ responses and asked their permission to record the audio of the interviews. Having audio recordings allowed the researcher to focus on the participants and their answers during the interviews rather than getting distracted by the note-taking process and possibly not hearing essential data. This process enabled the researcher to produce a more reliable and concrete result. Data collected in Chinese were translated into English, and then all data were categorized by themes. Following protocol, codes were interpreted, and the researcher summarized the findings relevant to the project.


Ethical Considerations

The interviewer discussed the nature and aims of the study with the participants prior to recording and ensured their understanding of the project. All questions or concerns raised by participants were answered, including their personal rights, risks involved in the study (which was minimal), and the possible positive impact this research study would inspire. Due to the nature of the study, which could cause concerns among individual citizens, all responses remained anonymous and unidentifiable throughout the study. In addition, interview questions were modified to pose in a casual and moderate tone to not influence a political agenda or bias or activate a defense mechanism.
INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

Interview questions for this study were presorted into different themes for coding. There were 14 total themes, but after carefully scrutinizing the 50 transcriptions, a filtrate collection of 10 themes remained for analysis in depth. Conversations over these themes were coded to present either summative, symbolic, or evocative attributes. In this section, every theme is documented to compare American and Chinese views with summary paragraphs that describe recurring answers from each group, followed by excerpts of particular content of dialogue that stood out during the interviews. For the analysis, subjects were assigned a number, one through fifty, based on the sequential order of the procedure. The purpose of this section is to see whether there are any cross-sections between Chinese and American views on the same content and explore the reasons behind such similarities or discrepancies. This segment is intended to be entirely objective. Any personal observations were included in a latter Discussion section.

Note that each question regarding the state/country or government is directed at the subjects for the country in which they now live. For example, if an American lives outside the United States at the time of the interview, say in China, then his or her answer is categorized within the China sub-sample.
Theme 1: Personal Definition of Freedom

American:

Freedom is an abstract term by definition; however, 68% of American interviewees considered it an “ability” to attain and use. This “ability” is usually associated with speech, thoughts, actions, religion, free will, the pursuit of dreams and life, and expression. The bottom line is that there is no free lunch in obtaining anything. 16% of people believed that the power of individual freedom should only be exercised with the premise of not hurting another conscious being. Nevertheless, because humans are a social specie who are constantly dependent upon and involved in group activities, 28% interviewees believed that there is no ultimate or absolute freedom. Following their declarations, these interviewees also listed various elements, either personally or societally, that create different constraints including personal beliefs, social and communal expectations, the government, cultures, economies, history, financial, physical, and emotional factors. Subject 41 also made a comparison to the prehistory society, stating that even in the tribal life, “it probably has laws and regulations that if people crossed them, they would get in trouble for it.”

It is worth noting that 12% of interviewees said that they cannot or do not know how to define freedom because the definition of freedom varies a lot and is dependent upon whoever uses it. Common throughout the interviews was the perspective that many people usually take freedom for granted as they go through their day-to-day lives.

Two specific conversations caught the attention. The first is when subject 40 described freedom as a very “quirky” term, where “a lion in a cage is free in certain boundaries. I’m a free human being, but I’m not free to fly like a bird and swim like a fish.” And the second one is
when subject 47, felt that there is a difference between liberty and freedom, where freedom is internal while “liberty is granted by the government or something.”

**Chinese:**

Broadly speaking, Chinese interviewees’ definitions of freedom are radically different from those of American interviewees. First, all of them labeled freedom in a virtual sense, as either an abstract or “imaginary concept” (48%), an intangible or indescribable “thing” or “feeling” (40%), or an untamed state of life (12%). Seven (28%) considered freedom as a basic human right (e.g.: right to choose, right to believe, and right to love). Second, 21 out of 25 (84%) of the Chinese interviewees conveyed the message that human actions are, and should be, carried out under certain “frameworks,” “limits,” or “boundaries,” including laws, regulations, cultural influences, and social order. Under these frameworks, people shall enjoy the freedom to either do whatever they like (28%) or don’t do whatever they don’t want to do (16%). Equally noticeable is that more than half (52%) of Chinese interviewees believed that any forms of freedom need to be based upon the premise of not infringing or harming others.

Similarities appeared when most of the Chinese interviewees explained why they think that living under certain frameworks are necessary. One common argument is that everyone holds a different definition of what one should and should not do. “Everyone’s moral baseline is different, so they see many things differently, including freedom,” said subject 16. For him and three others who agreed on this term, it is precisely because of the differences between people’s cognition and moral limits that society needs to restrain people’s behaviors through the forms of law and regulation. He then used Singapore as a perfect example, pointing out that Singapore has stringent enforcement against littering, including fining $300 to those who discard small items
outside, such as cigarette butts. “They do so because some people think it’s their freedom to do those things. They don’t care about the impacts of their actions on society, but others do,” he continued to explain, “morality is subjective; we can’t really restrain people’s minds, so there comes the law to regulate behaviors that might harm the society at large.” Subject 17 and 21 collaborated with him, appraising social constraints for protecting society. “If people can do whatever they want,” subject 21 said, “they will make a lot of mistakes, and such a state would not bring any benefits to the development of individuals and human society.” In some ways, he even considered social restrictions as an agent to protect individual freedom, although such restrictions might prove counter-effective if overreached or insufficient:

Strict restrictions are in fact restrictions on the freedom of the bad guys to protect the freedom of the good guys. Of course, if the limits are too high, it can also affect the freedom of good people, such as Iran, whose overarching code of conducts extends to even the dress code; while countries like the United States that are more tolerant of what people can say and do are more vulnerable for crimes.

Extending the above comments, subject 45 described that freedom is endowed with two social attributes: convenience and security. “Because freedom is bounded by the law to achieve a relative freedom, for ordinary people, if there’s no limit to how easy it is to live their regular lives, it’s freedom.” She lamented on how brutal this world can be, where some groups of people or communities might be hindered or even threatened by society because of their race or skin color or be subjected to unfair and inadequate social treatments for reasons such as disabilities. She then concluded: “Freedom is related to one’s own sense of experience and is influenced by the culture at the same time.”

One comment associated with a profound philosophical remark caught the attention, when subject 14 tenderly confided her understanding of the world:
Once people have ideas or desires, they are no longer free, because the force derived from that desire will force people to act. The act itself is a trade-off, because any action is subject to various social and environmental conditions. Even if we eliminate all the desires, we still have our physical bodies, which requires food and water to stay alive.

Among all the prolonged and detailed conversations, subject 38 used a short but precise and delicate sentence to point out a core issue that lies within this theme: “There is an extremely fine line between freedom and selfishness.” This fine line determines behaviors that are either self-centered or responsible for others.

**Theme 2: Defining Freedom in the Digital Age**

*American:*

Considering freedom as a fundamental principle, 32% of people persisted that the definition of freedom is and should always be immutable regardless of the circumstances. However, 44% of interviewees were convinced that the digital age has ultimately changed the meaning or the “border” of freedom. By granting people access to more information and platforms while enabling anonymity, many people (42%) acknowledged the digital age for providing more options and opportunities for people to express themselves and their ideas, in so the digital age has magnified the concept of freedom. On the contrary, 16% of interviewees gave opposing opinions, arguing the fact that there is much less or no complete freedom in the digital age, either because of the omnipotent online censorship or because of the inevitable and irretrievable digital footprint that people are leaving behind for governments and tech-companies to track.

Four symbolic statements emerged during this theme. The first one regards the fake news and misinformation online, and how government and tech companies censor and guide people’s
worldviews. Subject 15 revealed that nothing is real in the digital age because people can fake and filter their postings. She also lamented on how our visions and values have been unconsciously influenced by big institutions such as the government, news companies, and social media companies, including their policies on what we can or cannot post online (such as hate speech or things about Nazi). Then she said:

I agree with such conduct, because it aligns with my code of conducts…Another interesting thing is that [although] we have the ability to put on whatever we want, it doesn’t mean that the people or audience we wanted to have is going to see it. Because companies like YouTube is censoring it, they decide who’s going to get paid, promoted, or pushed. The background analytics [of the] social media companies are really geared towards ad promotion and making money.

Echoing subject 15’s code of conduct, subject 34, a mother of two young children, showed her concerns for online information. She feared for her children being monitored and bombarded by the money-driven companies, so she expressed a deep appreciation for a certain amount of digital surveillance as a means to protect the minors from cyberbullying, pornography, and other mind-bothering threats. This paradox has been pondered repeatedly by many interviewees, and most of time people only figured it as a piece of thin ice where the level of digital surveillance is hard to define. But, with an optimistic mind, some learned to accept the fact and live more “freely” than others knowing themselves being monitored at all times, as subject 24 laughed indifferently:

I used to worry about this a lot until I realized that there are so many digital surveillance on so many people, you actually matter very little. It’s like the psychological fallacies where we think we are self-important, but tech companies and governments just see people as points on a map, unless you are an outlier.

Similarly, subject 31 displayed general acceptance of the worldwide digital surveillance situation. However, his information provided us a specific phenomenon demonstrating that the degree of constraints changes in accordance with our social status:
A couple weeks ago during the election, the resident was being censored. When it comes to large ideas that can move a concrete movement for people, I think you are going to run into a lot more restrictions, because of the effects that it can have on that. You are going to hear more about political figures being muted when posting sensitive materials than the smaller individuals.

*Chinese:*

One might presume that, with more internet controls, Chinese people’s views on freedom are bound to change in the digital age. In reality, more than half (56%) of Chinese interviewees held their ground, affirming that freedom as a principle of their lives would always remain the same. This turned out to be aligned with their values stated in theme one, where freedom is only relative in this world due to the natural connectivity between people and their society, as well as their general responsibilities toward others. Some of them affiliated sophisticated emotions related to the digital age, revealing their discomforts and growing concerns for the steadily out-of-control circumstances in the cybersphere. “My definition remains the same, but I can’t help but feel that people are becoming transparent day by day…” subject 46 groaned. “Freedom doesn’t change,” subject 44 concurred, adding that “what has changed is the proliferation of unknown factors, which have thrown us into passivity.” However, many of them learned to accept their conditions unperturbed. “…Your thoughts and actions need to keep pace with the times,” subject 45 told me with a light-hearted tone while doing daily chores in her apartment. “Changes in society, such as changes in payment methods (digital pay), create convenience and security for many but if you lag behind, like if you don’t adapt to these new lifestyles, they become your own obstructions.” Agreeing, subject 17 projected an air of self-confidence and calm when she accepted that our lives are largely out of our control:

There is no way I can stop the digital age from happening nor prevent myself from being affected by what it produces. The age is progressing, and this progress may be what I want, or maybe not, but I am still me no matter how it changes. So
as long as I have an independent personality, these external situations will not change my definition of freedom.

Few (16%) believed that freedom in the digital age is different or less than the period before because whatever people do, they would leave a “trace” or “footprint” (subject 2, 11 & 14) that will be tracked and monitored, such as phone calls, emails, online searching history, travel history, online order receipts, and GPS locations. “It’s inevitable,” subject 11 affirmed, “because everything is connected now, and you have to use technologies to survive.” One interviewee, subject 8, suggested that not only is freedom different in the digital age, but it is, literally, “not the ‘real’ freedom anymore:”

Our freedom has been defined and framed by external factors such as the government, media, and private companies like Google and Facebook, which [creates] a controlled freedom, a falsehood. The point is that no matter what we do, we have been inculcated or brainwashed by them. In such an environment, we do everything under a formed set of habits; whatever we think otherwise is to anesthetize ourselves.

20% of the Chinese interviewees held opposite beliefs, claiming a total absence of freedom in the digital age. Some argued that it is reasonable to impose limitations and regulations on what people can do in the digital age because, according to subject 12, “a lot of so-called ‘free speech’ contain personal attacks or cyber-violence, which might cause destructive impacts to others’ lives.” They also observed a growing amount of self-censorship everywhere, including the U.S. “People are afraid of speaking out themselves whenever it’s related to racial issues,” subject 12 explained about her experience in the U.S. “When their words are against the mainstream ideologies, people will attack them online, which could extend to physical harms if they find out their locations.” She then concluded with a hope that, because everyone has their own views and ideologies, “it’s best if people can ‘seek commonalities while reserving differences, to tolerate each other instead of change whoever’s different from ourselves.”
Theme 3: The Importance of Freedom to Individuals

American:

Answers of interviewees under this theme show the ingenuity of the human language. Apparently, the intensity of the concept varies from person to person, ranging from important, quite important, very important, incredibly important, to crucial, super important, extremely important, and all the way up to “one of the most important concepts that humans can possess.” Among those answers, “very important” is the most frequently used phrase (44%), and only 12% described freedom as the most important concept. Reasons for why freedom is important to individuals also differ quite extensively. Common answers included that freedom is good for innovation, productivity, creativity, and mental health “as it creates a sense of entitlement and ownership.” Subject 28 mentioned in a universal manner that “there’s a beauty in diverse voices and hearing them speak, which is the understanding of the world;” And subject 35 thought that freedom is a watershed that distinguishes humans with other animals:

Without freedom, I don’t think humans are able to fulfill what they’re supposed to do in terms of pursuing their own life…I think that if we were the same as all other animals, then it probably wouldn’t matter if we were free, we wouldn’t really have a deep enough cognitive understanding [of] what that means.

One significant contributor to the different levels of importance in freedom lies within the environment and culture in which the interviewees live. For instance, subject 20 is an Iranian American, and she bravely shared a surprising family story with me. She told me that her whole family had to escape from Iran due to her uncle’s entanglement with the previous government before the Iranian Revolution; her uncle, specifically, fled the country on the back of a donkey for weeks. Yet, her feelings about freedom were unanticipated: “You would think coming from a culture that has no freedom, I would certainly have an answer for this, but I don’t, I only think that freedom is a part of life, and you wouldn’t have to always be scared of living if there’s no
freedom.” Even “made in the U.S.,” subject 24 admitted that he did not know why freedom is so important to him, but he knew that his strong sense toward freedom grew out of the American culture, where the concept of freedom as a universal ideology was “repeated over and over again.”

Unlike most interviewees who gave me static or invariable answers, subject 27 remarked that the importance of freedom might change over time through personal experiences and choices:

At a younger age, freedom was a lot more important to me, because I had the ability and freedom to dream and try different things, and even if I fail, I still have an opportunity to start over. The older I’ve gotten, the more I feel like I dream, I get more accepting of the state that I’m in, that I can’t go do everything I want because I already have all other responsibilities that have now been tacked on my life.

But eventually, he showed no regrets in his life, admitting that he took his own freedom away by making certain decision, whether to date this girl rather than another, or had to pay for higher mortgage because he chose to live in California instead of Texas.

One excerpt of conversations with subject 32 features an interesting perspective for this theme which marks freedom as a subjective concept:

Subject 32: Freedom is very Important, but it is also subjective. People living in other parts of the world might have different or less freedoms than I do, they might have a different type of freedom, and maybe they’re just as happy as I am because they and I don’t know what it’s like to feel otherwise. So how do I know what freedom actually is? I don’t know, for me, it’s just a feeling
Interviewer: Do you know how to describe that feeling?
Subject 32: I don’t know, it’s a spiritual thing. There might be hard and definitive answers out there for these questions, but I’m definitely speaking from the heart.

Coincidentally, subject 49 answered the last question from the above excerpt by saying that the government, compared to other people or institutions, is the main culprit behind the
scenes that has ultimate control over many things. So, feeling free for him was when the state or the government performs its duty in a way that is align with and represent the people’s interests.

Chinese:

Answers from my Chinese interviewees, similar to those of Americans, also showed the subjectivity in their understanding of freedom. There were seven (28%) people who rated freedom as “important” while eight (32%) people said it was “very important.” Common reasons included: 1) Freedom can bring out passion, compassion, and creativity, 2) It offers reasons or goals to pursue one’s own life, 3) Having freedom is psychologically heathy, and 4) “It proves that we are humans, not machines” (subject 17). 44% of interviewees admitted that, freedom “must” be important, but they do not know exactly how or why it matters, only that “it’s something humans are yearning for throughout history,” or “people’s desire for freedom is universal or natural.” Remarkably, when discussing this topic, many people would go back to the previous theme, the definition of freedom, by which they kept reminding me that freedom only exists within a certain framework.

Six (24%) interviewees told me that their definitions of freedom change over time. They attributed such changes to their life experiences and people they met. For instance, subject 4 told me that when she was young, that is, when her self-awareness was not so strong, she did not know how important it was to be able to speak freely on the internet; “but after I went abroad,” she raised her voice with confidence, “I learnt that there were so many different people and different lifestyles in the world from different cultural backgrounds. I then gradually realized that I had the right to choose and that I had many options to choose from.” She was not the only one. Most interviewees who had cross-cultural or comparable experiences, such as learning, working,
and living abroad, usually expressed a deep appreciation for how those experiences have widened and even transformed their worldviews. “I used to care a lot about what other people think and ignored my own feelings,” said subject 44 with a grateful smile. “But my American boss, she’s the opposite of our collectiveness culture, she’s very straightforward and individualistic, and she taught me how I should focus more on myself to be happy, free, and efficient.” Then, subject 45 made a powerful statement that inspired me to consider our society as a whole:

Once you have a contrast, you will feel how lucky a person is to have certain things in life, and how important freedom is. If I were a black person living in the U.S., I could imagine the unequal and unfriendly attitudes they have to endure…It indeed is a very lucky thing to be born white in the U.S.

On the other hand, this kind of contrast does not always have to be so gloomy and political, things that can remind us the importance of freedom usually happen in our daily lives. “Depends on the situation,” subject 18 said vaguely, “I don’t have as much freedom in the workplace as I have in my personal life because I have to make decisions for the best of my clients and my company, which is okay; freedom is relative. What is important to me is that I can have my freedom to make my own decisions when I’m off work.” One, subject 37, touched on a deeper philosophical term, relating our perceptions of freedom to awareness. “After many things that have happened, I don’t remember exactly what things…these incidents created contrasts that made me realize, ‘oh, this is freedom.’ And that initiation of consciousness, the realization of freedom as a substance, will augment the importance of freedom over time.”

Few (16%) confessed to me that freedom is not something they think about on a regular term, either because they have always lived a relatively free environment, or their lives have always been a methodical, unexciting chore. Only subject 43 gave me a more concrete answer. “I don’t think about it because I am not a big fan of politics,” he responded detachedly. “Freedom is
a concept of politics; it has always been. Everyone would be free without the structure of politics (and government).” And lastly, been the only one who said that freedom was not as important, subject 14 told me that although freedom is something she will always long for, “it’s never achievable because it’s only a presumptuous concept.” And she chucked: “But of course, I still want to take breaks whenever I want!”

**Theme 4: Views on Country’s Support of Individual Freedom**

*American:*

We can see some interesting and diverging insights from this theme because not all of the American interviewees were living in the United States at the time of the interviews, three interviewees are currently living in China. This exposure to Chinese culture influenced their consideration of an issue that is understandably one-sided for the rest of the American interviewees. As a group, the breakdown of Americans’ responses to the above question regarding to what degree the government encourages freedom is as follows: 48% support, 33% don’t support, 10% used to support, and 9% partially support. As for why people think that the U.S. supports or encourages them to pursue their freedoms, some told me that freedom is rooted in the fundamental American culture, and some revealed that such ideology has been inculcated into people’s deepest unconsciousness through state media and propaganda.

What is intriguing is that many people from the same group who believe in that viewpoint also simultaneously agreed with those who stand on the opposite side of this spectrum (the “don’t supporters”), as well as those who think that the U.S. partially supports the ideology. Sixty percent of subjects shared a view that some people in the U.S. society are more privileged than others economically, and therefore enjoy more freedom than others. According to my
interviewees, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and religion all play a big part in environmental justice, from which rights and freedoms are been neglected or encouraged. Provocatively, while the “supporters” asserted that America was founded on the concept of freedom, some “don’t supporters” appeared to be antithetical to such a belief. Subject 1 said that “our government controls a lot of things in my life and takes away a lot of my liberties and freedoms…they are taking our wealth and giving it to people in their own circles.” Subject 33 concluded, “…this country is not based on freedom. It is like a carrot dangling in front of you, where you keep having that American dream that you want and that you keep grasping for, but you never really could get a good grasp on it, because it’s really not fair.”

Continuing the discussion of this issue, subject 50 laughed acidly at her situation as a black person in the U.S. (she preferred to be called “black” over “African American”), and that factor alone has already limited the freedom she can attain:

At the end of the day, your freedom either is given or is not… (as black people) we can move around, and we’ve been told that we are free to do this and that, but we are still in some type of captivity in this country, because of the way we are treated.

Similarly, subject 47—of Hispanic descent—expressed her sadness and frustration over the continuous but also inconspicuous systematic racism in the U.S. society that limits her freedom: “Being a Hispanic is…a weird gray area where we are not always actively discriminated against, but we are in a much more shrouded way that you can’t really tell, nobody really cares about us.”

As the political and cultural divides have intensified, more people have concluded that the freedom in the U.S. is deteriorating over time. Subject 35 blames such a decrease to the singularization of viewpoints on “consolidation of money and power” within the government, academia, and private enterprises. He elaborated:
People with money and power don’t want other people to be free because it is antithetical to their whole way of life. It just becomes easier for people with money and power to spread their own ideas; there are fewer speeches allowed while the powerful (commercial) proliferate.

Subject 34 also shared some recent personal experiences that both she and her friends received on the internet and even physical attacks from speaking out their political opinions. She mentioned that there is a tendency to target religious practices during the COVID-19, such as banning church meetings and declaring that certain policies have been made to target specific groups: “Why can people sit in a plane for hours at a time but not church? It does not make sense!” In the end, she blamed the widening gap and increasing hostility between different interest groups to be the result of political polarization and expressed a deeply concerned attitude: “I came to from a communist country (Czech Republic) where people were telling me whom we can vote for. I thought this was a free country, but now I feel like I am attacked for having different beliefs than other people.”

Chinese:

I need to discuss this theme from two perspectives: those who live in China and those who don’t. Unlike my American interviewees of which only five live outside of America, 12 of Chinese people I interviewed are long-term residents of the U.S., or at least they frequently travel back and forth between the two countries.

Many (58%) of those who live in the U.S. credited the country for its support of individual freedom. “They support freedom because it is the most fundamental value of the country,” subject 39 stated. “America does not need to encourage such ideology (freedom),” subject 5 explained, “because this country, through its political and legal systems, provides everyone with the environment and space to fully imagine and act on their own behalf.” Subject
44 thought that the highly individualistic characteristic that permeated the U.S. society is the manifestation of a free society. “Everyone thinks of themselves all the time,” she said, “and the American society respects that: they respect you as an individual, and it is okay to refuse to participate in certain social activities. But in China,” her tone tightened, “sometimes you just feel like you have to deal with this or that and all those social relationships…but that is just the cultural differences.” Subject 43 laughed ironically but wholeheartedly and said, “Of course the U.S. encourages personal freedom! It’s just like everywhere: when you brainwash the people with certain concepts or values to a degree, it becomes freedom!” Three interviewees believed that even in the U.S., freedom is not absolutely guaranteed. “Maybe the U.S. gives you more freedom than anywhere else, or at least they make you feel that way,” subject 37 shrugged unsympathetically, “but there are still many things you cannot do.” Living in the U.S. since age 13, subject 38 acknowledged that the U.S. indeed highly regards freedom, “but I’ve seen what consequences freedom can cause (such as violence and gun issues), and those are what Americans are willing to sacrifice.” Two people didn’t think the U.S. limits the freedom they seek, nor does it encourage freedom in particular. “Everyone’s pursuit of freedom is different,” subject 12 told me. “My pursuit of freedom is not very high, so these existing frameworks have no effect on me but may affect others.” “I always feel that people’s pursuit of freedom is ultimately subjective,” subject 21 concurred. “If a country is more tolerant with a sturdier legal system, then people are more likely to achieve their personal freedom.” A car enthusiast, subject 21 then gave me the example of the self-modified cars, telling me that it is legal to modify vehicles in the U.S. but not in China; for that reason, he felt freer in the U.S., although whether or not he can achieve that freedom is dependent upon his financial status.
What about the 13 people who live in China? Well, 52% of them felt that China, for the most part, supports their freedom. Many people felt that, from a developing perspective, China’s openness and freedom are indeed increasing. For instance, subject 13 described how China’s current framework, especially its economic system, is “equipped to allow people to freely pursue their rights, powers, and ideal ways of living.” Subject 6 agreed, acknowledging that China encourages the entire population (not on an individual level) to pursue freedom in terms of personal finance and economic growth. “Although,” she confessed, “our welfare may not be as good as some foreign countries, but to encourage employment is to encourage personal wealth and in so freedom.”

Two people, similar to those who live in the U.S., are enjoying their comfortable lives due to their freedom. “Personally, the freedom I seek is among the most basic needs, for example, to travel. At present, what I want is supported by the state.” Sub 18 echoed these sentiments, stating that “it’s probably because I don’t have strong desires for things some people want, like higher needs.” Others accept that China, because of its historical, political, and social conditions, is temporarily unable to be fully inclusive and forgiving in certain aspects of society. But that does not hinder China’s societal and moral progress. Subject 17 rationalized China’s current view towards freedom as an understandable: “Overall, China does have the environment to support freedom, but we have different standards for freedom because of our cultural values and traditions.” Subject 16 agreed. A retired competitive bicyclist, subject 16 thanked the Chinese society for supporting his dream to become a professional athlete when he was young. “I think as long as you possess the ability to achieve something, and you can grasp the opportunity when it comes,” he told me confidently, “everything is possible in China.” Then, he asked me to put China’s history into account:
I think we should view China as more of an aggregation of vast cultures rather than a country like Britain because China has a very large number of ethnic groups, and each ethnic group has its own culture. For thousands of years in China’s history, these people have been at war, fighting, compromising, and learning from each other; they kept evolving…which is now a synthesis that contains 56 ethnic groups. That’s why it’s not easy to talk about freedom without thinking about our history and how we become what we are today.

**Theme 5: Thoughts on Collective Consciousness**

**American:**

Perhaps some democracy-based countries view collective consciousness as an abstract term that is not part of daily discussions, but overall, more than half (64%) of American subjects thought that collective consciousness is “important,” “very important,” or “crucial” to the development of a state. There were different reasons reported for this thinking. Most of the interviewees believe that on the road to social development and advancement, collective consciousness is most likely to contribute to high efficiency and productivity in the government and contribute to economic growth. Three people considered society or the state as a “living organism,” that everyone’s in it together, and their “actions and responsibilities all have an impact on somebody else” (subject 15). In this sense, collective consciousness can help create certain national identities and build inclusive, harmonious, and stable social environments. From a different perspective, some interviewees believe that it would be much harder to face challenges such as wars, national security crises, or pandemics without collective consciousness (subject 28, 30, 41).

24% of American interviewees considered collective consciousness as two sides of a coin, where it can be good and bad depending on the circumstances. For instance, some believed that collective consciousness is only helpful in the formation of a state or a country, as it brings people together, but its significance diminishes as the state evolves. From here, their viewpoints
converged with other dissenting voices. “If everyone’s thinking the same way,” subject 26 asked me, “then where’s all that information go? How can we make sure that society’s going forward, and [ideas are] not just… wasting away?” Resonating with this statement, subject 25 (representing also six other respondents) expressed that having neither too much nor too little collective consciousness is going to damage the society:

If you got too much (collective consciousness), then you have a problem where you don’t see any of other issues or threats…On the other hand, if you have too little grasp of that collective consciousness in a society, then you will have too much of a divide. This is kind of happening in the U.S.

It’s worth noting that two Americans were against the idea of state government. They did not necessarily describe themselves as anarchists, but they argued that the nature of a state is counterfeit, as politicians try to control people through parasitic and oppressive measures. Subject 40 made some assertions: “…the state is promoting immoral, unprincipled, power-hungry people to its highest rungs. That is somewhat of a destabilizing force to a strong and powerful state. If there is no government, then there is no state, just free people.” Again, this perspective was reported by a small minority of interviewees.

Moving on to whether they think that the United States embodies the idea of collective consciousness at present, 55% of Americans who live in the U.S. believe that there is absolutely none. “America is one of the most polarized and divided countries, anywhere ever,” said subject 40. “The U.S. would like to think they are collective, but I do not think they do,” subject 33 echoed. She notes how the U.S.’s plan was to build a place where everyone could achieve their American dreams and freedom, but because of “the way that this society has become,” everybody’ is divided in this country. Five interviewees blamed the Trump administration and its policies for further ripping apart the collective consciousness in the U.S.; many suspected that this divide is driven by the combining force of individualism, a capitalist economy, politics,
technology, and especially the news media; some interviewees also argued that the American divide is deeply rooted in its racial history. Overall, American interviewees consider the nature of this issue as primarily political rather than social. On the other side, the few (15%) who were confident that the U.S. has collective consciousness held trust in the U.S. democratic system and its founding principles. They believe that the mainstream U.S. would always share a collective consciousness in free speech, free assembly, free beliefs, and a tolerance of different cultures and opinions (subject 10, 35, 48). “The country is called ‘United,’” said subject 26, “and you don’t have to have collective consciousness to be united. When I think about collective consciousness, I think of a library, where you got a collection of novels in one place, and that they all represent different thinking.”

At the same time, five (25%) Americans remained neutral on this topic. They claimed that the U.S. society as a whole is largely divided as two or several different (political) subgroups, in which each group’s values are vastly different from the others, forming their unique collective consciousness. “…we exist in this tension of this “low level Civil War” all the time,” sighed subject 40. He explained that there is a natural tendency in people to “self-segregate and self-silo,” so that they can avoid interactions with or be around people who disagree with or challenge them.

In comparison, American interviewees who now live in China or other parts of the world held divergent and fascinating perspectives. It was not surprising to see that all four Americans who now reside in China agreed that there is a strong collective consciousness in mainstream Chinese society; however, because China is so big and diverse, it is hard to achieve a singular collective consciousness among all, which, according to both subject 24 and 23, is similar to
other large societies, including the U.S. Having majored in Chinese during college, subject 23 illustrated a stimulating fact:

You look at how many civil wars China has had, how many different countries have existed within what is now modern China. If China didn’t have a force of political correctness and people were allowed to choose how their societies governed, in my opinion, you will see a very splintered China… people agree on having the Communist Part to rule them; if they didn’t, the country wouldn’t be rich or united. It’s true, I’ve got to agree.

Echoing subject 23’s understanding of a more centralized Chinese society, subject 3 told me that his perceptions of collective consciousness have changed over time since he moved to China in 2014. He explained:

…it really depends how you perceive these policy changes. As long as the government is working the stuff that I agree with, in terms of COVID, in terms of gun control, in terms of green energy and that kind of stuff, I think that is a good thing. There’re potential risks… so there’s both sides. It really depends [on] who’s in charge and what they decide to prioritize.

Chinese:

This study has showed that, regardless of their residence, collective consciousness has a relatively high position in the minds of Chinese respondents. Among them, the number of people who described collective consciousness as “important” or “very important” are both 12, which makes up a total of 24 (96%) respondents who believed that collective consciousness plays a momentous role in the development of a state. Most of them have similar reasons for this. For example, one subject stated that “a country or a state is, above all, a collective being of people (subject 11).” Another (subject 9), recited his favorite metaphor: “The collective is like the tree trunk, and the individual is the branch, which will soon dry up once it leaves the trunk.” Because the state is made up of people, then collective consciousness can act as a catalyst that unifies and strengthens people and their power, both intellectually and physically. And in doing so, the
society can function and develop more efficiently, because collective consciousness can “reduce the consumption of social resources” (subject 38), “help achieve things that individual or a small group of people cannot achieve on their own” (subject 2), enhance social responsibilities, and encourage “public participation and voluntary contribution to the society” (subject 18).

Conversely, if a country lacks collective consciousness, if “everyone’s consciousness is scattered or people only care about themselves, there would be a “lack of national identity” (subject 9 & 13), cohesiveness, and human connectivity that might potentially thwart the development of the state.

A few examples from of my interviewees can vividly explain, why, for many Chinese, collective consciousness is an essential component of the development of a group. This philosophy can be applied to small groups, such as families and companies, as well as groups as big as a country. First, subject 4 admitted that she did not think collective consciousness was important before the pandemic because during peaceful times, people don’t think about the utility of the government and how it might benefit their lives. “Only when unrest and catastrophic events strike,” she said proudly, “will you realize what the existence of government means.” She then affirmed the strong collective consciousness shared by everyone in China during the COVID pandemic:

The government is powerless if the people don’t trust or agree with their terms. So, when you look at how China as a whole has contained the virus so fast and our lives went back to normal quicker than any other countries in the world, you see the virtue of collective consciousness.

Another (subject 6), believed that the heroic acts and certain changes in people’s behaviors during the pandemic was a manifestation of collective consciousness:

We have witnessed a lot of stirring and emotional acts during the outbreak, especially with our health care workers. The public has also changed a lot. Before the pandemic, the public’s awareness of public health might not be as much as
Europeans...but that way of thinking has dramatically changed: people are willing to cooperate with the government and help others...98% people listened to what was suggested by the health professionals and the government and self-quarantined voluntarily.

Having lived in the U.S. for nine years, subject 11 had seen many “inconceivable” behaviors based on the society in which people were raised:

I knew an American who applied for government funding after his injury, and then he stopped working. I don’t know whether he or people around him thought it was a smart and proud act to keep taking money from the government without working. But I don’t think that’s a good mentality because if everyone stops working, then who’s going to create social value? Whereas Chinese are very hardworking in nature, and we despise that kind of value.

Heretofore, three compelling statements evolved during this theme, providing alternative insights upon which to ruminate. One interviewee touched on the state or country being a mere fictitious concept that lacks real substance (like a car or water), and it necessitates collective consciousness to solidify the concept into something tangible. Another interviewee only recently moved to the U.S. and confirmed that collective consciousness is indeed an indispensable aspect of the development of a state, and it is a universal concept that has infiltrated Chinese society. This interviewee was the only Chinese subject to report “50% disapproving such a concept” and pinpointed some negative facets of collective consciousness:

I think individuals must prioritize themselves first, because only by molding ourselves to be someone capable and dependable can we start helping others. Second, focusing too much on the collective will certainly strangle individualities. Many times, the positive blips formed by individuality become advantages in serving the group, including creativity.

As a country built upon Confucianism for thousands of years, it was only natural that the majority (77%) of people who live in China conveyed a strong sense of collective consciousness in their ideologies. In addition, the successful management of the novel COVID pandemic has, again, brought forth the virtue of collectiveness among the Chinese people. China is considered
one of the most collective nations in the world, but it is not an ideology that is exhibited universally among citizens. However, many interviewees argued that the Chinese are very unified in the face of disasters. Although, one interviewee pointed out that China was, for a prolonged period of time, a monarchy where only the Emperor’s consciousness mattered, not the collective ones; this thought has also crept into China’s current state. This opinion was later reverberated by subject 45, who revealed that, for whichever state or country, the public’s collective consciousness is infinitesimal; what is really important is the collective consciousness of the selected few, such as the politicians, elites, scientists, and intellectuals, who can make critical decisions and drive the rest.

Those who live in or frequently visit the U.S. also formed a consistent view, although pessimistic. Among those, 83% have seen either a total absence or only some presence of collective consciousness in the U.S., at least in the current stage of the pandemic. This conclusion was typically based on their observations in the highly polarized state manifested in recently political and social events, including the U.S. election, the Black Lives Matter protests, and the COVID pandemic. Few of these interviewees mentioned that collective consciousness is not shared by the collective population, but rather exists only in groups that have common interests at heart, such as the democratic versus the republican parties. Nevertheless, two people believed that the U.S., because of its constitutional statutes against totalitarianism and the public’s awareness of the benefits derived from the country, is in and of itself a demonstration of collective consciousness.

Notably, one comment elucidated a rare moment away from the normative mode of thinking, when the movie zealot subject 14 said:

Quite interestingly, I think Americans’ values may be a little more collective [than the Chinese] because their films always depict Americans that refuse to give
up on any individuals in a war, whereas Chinese films usually emphasize more of a personal sacrifice in wars, which advocates martyrdom for the sake of the collective.

**Theme 6: Perspectives on Digital Surveillance**

*American:*

Six Americans, including all four who now live and work in China, reported having seen an increase in digital surveillance since the onset of the COVID pandemic. These respondents have noticed such measures as contact tracing (a general term that encompasses the identification of everyone who may have come in contact with a person with COVID) and an increased presence of surveillance cameras in their workplaces and/or residential areas. None of the 19 Americans who live and work in the U.S. have reported seeing an increase in digital surveillance, although one subject played a very meaningful role in the study because she happened to be doing contact tracing work on the outbreak in California. In this way, she was an example of the increase of digital surveillance in the U.S.

All of the Americans living in China reported that even before the outbreak, the surveillance infrastructure in China was already in place; therefore, they were not surprised to see new forms of digital surveillance in response to the pandemic. One such creation is the “Health Code.” It is understood that the app was suggested by the government during the outbreak to download and use with a real-name system. Areas including restaurants, hospitals, office building, shopping centers, and schools all mandate citizens to show their color code before entering the area during the high-risk period. This software not only quickly and effectively targets people who may be infected or have the potential for being exposed, but also provides information about outbreaks on a national scale.
“How effective do you think the ‘Health Code’ app is in containing the virus?” I asked the interviewees. “…that’s probably one of many reasons that China has been able to contain the virus so well. The main ways that they have is the Health Code,” subject 24 exclaimed. “It's actually really cool,” subject 3 giggled, “because it makes people aware of the fact that they are been tracked, so they would feel more responsible.” I then asked them how they feel when they have to put their information including real name, phone number, and address in the App. One respondent showed his understanding by saying that “as long as I know they are helpful for containing the virus, I’m okay with giving up this information…largely, I’d say that I don’t mind too much because I recognized that giving up this data has helped protect China from wide scale coronavirus outbreak.” Several respondents pointed out that this is not new, even in the U.S., as “Google and Facebook have our information too.” Continuing, one American added disdainfully, “It’s not like there’s anything different about who has your information and which information they have and how they use it.”

During the interviews, a lot of American interviewees showed disbelief in data coming from China, such as how many COVID cases they really have. But the four Americans living in China seem to be able to provide some references to this. They all agreed that the Chinese government made the right choice to control the outbreak through digital surveillance and high-pressure tactics. While they were skeptical at first, and “the system is not perfect and there are many points of contention,” the government was able to minimize the cases to almost zero at times. As subject 3 described (in October 2020): “Yes, COVID started here first, but it’s under control; and yes, we’ve had so much surveillance and so much app tracking, but if you look our numbers now, we’re back to normal. So, I think that proves that it was effective.”
Finally, all four U.S. respondents in China agreed that the Chinese government prioritizes people’s safety when making these policies. Two of them believed that the people of a country are closely related to the economic development of this country, so the government must put people’s lives and health and safety first in order to protect the development of the whole country. It is important to note that three out of four have expressed a feeling that the Chinese government is taking better care of its citizens than the U.S. or other governments, which can have a political foundation:

The government needs support from its people, and they do so by taking care of the people. Chinese people consider health and safety much more important than other societies because the government has convinced them that. When you have media constantly telling you something, people believe that there’s nothing more important than that, it is the same with the U.S. government.

Another respondent provided a more personal and social viewpoint that came out of her quarantine in China: “The [Chinese] government, in some ways, takes care of us better here than [the U.S.], and the social net here is stronger. Yes, I was stuck in my house for two weeks, but at the end of the day, I didn’t feel my freedom was taken away. The quarantine was worth it.”

In contrast, when asked if the U.S. government put people’s safety first, 50% of American respondents answered either “no” or “absolutely not.” The vast majority of them felt that the federal government has not only failed to take any measures to protect its citizens, but that many of the decisions they have made have put people in a more dangerous environment. “Trump told us to use bleach,” subject 50 laughed grimly. “He considered his election as the priority, not people’s lives, not COVID.” Echoing this sentiment, another respondent said, “Are you kidding? Wall Street is more important for my government…as long as it is making money, people’s safety is not important, otherwise we would have the lockdown.” She emphasized that Trump was ultimately a businessman in this regard.
Moreover, others believed the pandemic issue was completely politicized: because it happened to be during the U.S. election year, so the government spent more energy worrying about the outcome of the election and how to get more voting through means of pandemic strategies. Only one American seemed to be on the government’s side: “I chose to believe that this government’s action was meant for a greater purpose and it has achieved a common good. There’s always going to be pros and cons that come out of every single decision. And even though we can look at results and ask whether it’s the right decision, there’s no way to go back and see what would have happened if you went down the other road.”

When asked about the degree to which the government should implement digital surveillance to combat COVID, the American interviewees’ views varied widely. Those who approved of the use of digital surveillance during COVID generally believed that digital surveillance could help scientists understand the virus and its route of transmission better, and that digital surveillance could also provide timely information about the outbreak to avoid people going to high-risk areas. However, even if they find digital surveillance useful, some believed such technology to be a slippery slope which can be misused. For example, one respondent stated that the government could potentially “have an impact on the Constitution” when it uses digital surveillance, because it could be used as an “excuse to expand their power to control and cane the population.” Another respondent commented on the pros and cons of digital surveillance, adding to the complexity of this issue: “digital surveillance can come into different forms. It can be invasive, but if you ask whether the government should try to stop predators like pedophiles or child traffickers, then yes, use it. To be honest, if everyone just did what they’re supposed to do, then digital surveillance wouldn’t be needed.”
Some interviewees compared the U.S. strategies in dealing with the pandemic to other countries, namely China, Korea, and Singapore. Although many of them admitted that they don’t know how effective digital surveillance could actually be and that it might certainly not happen in the U.S., they genuinely believed that such measures could be recommended and tried especially during the early stage of the pandemic. “There are alternatives,” said one respondent, “[but] it (digital surveillance) should be used in cases when the virus is really, really, really bad.” Moreover, there was a notable fear among Americans about what the future holds for digital surveillance in the U.S. One subject pondered, “Will these expansions of government power and government surveillance be rolled back? History seems to indicate that they usually stay in place even when the crisis that they were implemented to address has passed.”

Chinese:

Answers from this theme have no contradictions or obscurities. All 13 Chinese interviewees and two who were in China during the interviews have seen a strong increase in digital surveillance, with a focus on the newly developed app “Health Code” (henceforth referred to as “the App”). However, timelines in which the App was implemented were not so consistent among the interviewees: some said it was put in use soon after the outbreak began, and some remembered it emerging around April 2020. Many of them told me that the process of adopting the app was not dramatic or hard because the “Skynet” and other surveillance systems were already in place prior to this pandemic. Without hesitation, 93% (14/15) confirmed the positive role that the App and other associated digital surveillance systems have played in combating the virus. They described the utility of these systems, especially the App, to be “affirmative,” “extremely effective,” “significant,” and “absolutely vital.” For them, digital surveillance,
including the App, were not only useful for tracking down positive cases and disclosing their origins, but also to identify people who could potentially contract the virus; once identified, they can be notified and advised to start self-quarantine as soon as possible, so as to prevent further spread of the virus. Many interviewees have also noticed an expeditious domestic dissemination and exchange of relevant medical information through different digital platforms.

Because of the effectiveness of these digital surveillance systems, most (87%) respondents in China expressed a high degree of approval and support for the measures taken by the government. However, two subjects were more skeptical, saying that it was impossible to evaluate such a draconian approach in the middle of the pandemic because there is no telling what measures are “right” or “wrong” under an unprecedented event. “We have sacrificed a lot,” subject 2 said, “but so far the Chinese approach to this pandemic seems to be most effective.”

An essential part of digital surveillance is to collect real, personal information to ensure the accuracy of data analysis. This universal requirement for whoever uses the App or other digital surveillance applications was also well-understood and appreciated for the majority of Chinese users. “You won’t be able to contain the virus without such a comprehensive tracking system,” subject 4 affirmed, echoing the sentiments of many others. For them, personal information, including ID number, address, phone number, and travel history, are necessary and appropriate demands for the digital surveillance systems to work effectively. As subject 6 explained, “We have to fill in the information truthfully, because if we can casually enter false confidence into the system, then it will also create a false security to ourselves, because others may also lie, then we might never know which high-risk area to avoid, and the spread of virus would never end.” Subject 13 also pointed out that it was not mandatory to use the App: people can choose whether they want to be monitored or not. “Then you’d better stay at home,” he
suggested earnestly, “otherwise it may not only affect your own life but also the others, because you have no knowledge of the outbreak.”

Indeed, there were people who cared a lot about their own privacy, but in the case of the pandemic, they were willing to yield for others’ and their own safety. “In fact,” subject 17 admitted, “I have always been very concerned about privacy issues, but during this outbreak I was more active and proactive to submit some of the required personal information, because doing so is both responsible for others and my own safety.” She then added something that a lot of my interviewees had stressed: “What privacy do you have in the digital age anyway? Almost all apps and websites require your personal information when you use them, so it is pointless to care so much about privacy anymore.” As one of the fastest-growing countries in the world, the speed with which China’s technology is developing has surpassed many first world countries. “You don’t have a choice in the digital age,” subject 14 added, “everything is connected and digitized in China. No one uses credit cards or cash now, so you can’t really do much without these systems.” In contrast to both subject 17 and 14’s pessimistic attitudes, subject 9’s optimism lightened the mood. Laughing at the likelihood of our personal information being disclosed in all circumstances, subject 9 said:

    Phone leaks can be cumbersome, but there are now features that block harassing calls. This information doesn’t have much of a negative impact, as long as the leaked information doesn’t affect my family, such as sending them fraudulent messages; I don’t think it’s a big problem.

He then left me a crucial point to contemplate: “For the people of our country, we personally do not have much privacy. It’s not that we don’t care, it’s just that our attitudes toward privacy isn’t as serious as it looks abroad.” Few (27%) interviewees worried less about privacy and more about the misuse of their personal information for other purpose. However, because these digital surveillance systems are certified by the government, they feel that their information is secure.
For most (87%) Chinese respondents, these extreme digital surveillance measures combined with quarantine were obvious evidence that the Chinese government prioritizes people’s safety over other factors. They argued that such a stringent approach would not be taken if not for the wellbeing of the public. It is also a widely shared opinion that many interviewees see a direct correlation between the people and the development of the country. “We the people are the country itself,” subject 16 said. “If the government doesn’t protect our lives, then people will die, and the economy will stagnate, resulting in the collapse of the whole society.” Many also remarked on the necessity of extreme digital surveillance control as a result of China’s high-density population. “Our approach might be appropriate and highly effective in China,” subject 22 informed me, “It is because China has such a high-density population; it has to go down that route or otherwise countless people will vanish, and it will also perturb the whole world.”

In the meantime, on the other side of the globe, Chinese who live in the U.S. were experiencing an environment that was vastly different from China. First, none of these interviewees noticed any practical measures or implementations of digital surveillance taken by the American government. Second, the majority (90%) of them thought the U.S. government did not act in an appropriate way in dealing with the pandemic, attributing the prolonged pandemic to be entirely a value-based man-made mistake. They cited a dichotomized cause for the situation: either a total absence of regulations and policies due to the excessive pursuit in freedom (50%), or a profoundly politicized health crisis caused by the 2020 election (50%), namely the Trump administration’s adverse incitation against the scientific and medical professionals. However, although disappointed about the persisting pandemic, many of them acknowledged that what the U.S. did was only to follow their foundational values—freedom, both personally and politically. “I cannot define the validity of the U.S.’ approach,” subject 37
reacted calmly, “they only did what’s right for themselves…although I’m sure that they could have done a better job.” Subject 5 concurred, announcing that the U.S. approach was clearly insufficient compared to China or other countries, “but in the light of America’s circumstances, when people demand certain human rights and freedoms, there are trade-offs.”

Third, views on whether the U.S. government prioritized people’s safety when making the policies were also at odds. 60% of my Chinese interviewees living in the U.S. denied such a notion, asserting that politics is all about personal or group interests. Subject 5 elaborated: “Because of the election year, the current administration will take into account the public’s views on the means of management…the government will choose to give up a lot of things that should have been done, because elections are the most important thing for the government.” Subject 43 agreed, suggesting that any U.S. administration would have achieved more if not during an election year. The other 40% who were positive gave credence to the U.S. government because their policies attested to the close affinity between them and the country’s core value—freedom and public policies in accordance with their democratic value. “I believe that every country in the world would like to protect their people’s wellbeing,” subject 21 replied. “The U.S. did. They had certain policies like wearing masks and curfews, but from a historic perspective, this country has always put freedom ahead of everything else.” Subject 29 also insisted that there is an unconditional link between personal rights, privacy, and freedom, which may explain why the U.S. government left the discretionary power largely to the state and people themselves.

In the end, understanding the practical and effective utility of digital surveillance in China, 80% (8/10) of Chinese interviewees who were in the U.S. advocated the use of digital surveillance in the U.S. during the pandemic. Many of them interpreted the lack of digital surveillance in the U.S. to the failure to see the severity of the virus, an unwillingness to “do the
right thing” in terms of politics, or a hypersensitivity to freedom. Some argued that as a young country, the U.S. has not yet realized that “…freedom is only a part of life, it’s not everything” (subject 38). Only two claimed stern oppositions to digital surveillance for the fear of being tracked, monitored, and stripped of freedom. Subject 29 paused meaningfully before he raised a rhetorical question: “The U.S. has the most advanced technology in the world, but its applications have lagged behind China for ages. Why do you think that’s the case?” Why indeed.

Theme 7: Americans’ Views of China and Chinese Views of America

American:

All of American respondents living outside the U.S. agreed that one nation could not borrow from the other when it comes to strategies to battle COVID-19 because the social and political situations between the two countries is so vastly different. One respondent stated, “The American government doesn’t have the authority to do what other countries can…the American government usually does what the people want them to do. If the American people don’t want surveillance, they wouldn’t do that, because if they do, they will get voted out.” Subject 25 is a policy analyst in a non-government organization in China and shared a very poignant personal view about politics; he argued that every single government’s priority is to stay in power, for as long as possible. He went on to say, “that doesn’t mean that these people are bad,” rather, these government officials are “just like you and me, it’s natural…another thing is just the American culture, people don’t want to make that kind of sacrifices.” In other words, the very nature of the U.S.’s political system would stop representatives from pursuing China’s surveillance based COVID approaches.
Subject 49, who currently works and lives in Germany, expressed a similar opinion in which he feels that German people are similar to Chinese people in that they have a great deal of trust and satisfaction in their governments. He stated that “Germans trust and are pleased with their government, so they will gladly hand out their information. They will do that knowing it is for the greater good because they have a collective consciousness, unlike Americans. People in Germany, deep down, are really proud of their country.” I was intrigued by his notion of trust and pride in Germans and Chinese being something that he seemed to suggest that Americans lacked. Following up, I asked him whether he thinks that Americans are proud of their country, and he laughed: “I only have the perspective of being black, some Americans feel proud to be Americans, but for the most part, I think people feel America as a whole doesn’t really represent everyone’s best interests in mind.” He went on to explain that much of his opinion has to do with the very nature of capitalism vs. socialism. He remarked that as a capitalist society, “Americans are more self-serving. While in socialist countries like China and Germany, I think people feel more of a sense of community; they feel that there’s an abundance, you can have yours, I can have mine, and there’s no reason to be selfish.”

In contrast, the views of Americans living in the U.S. varied widely on this topic. 30% of them were convinced that China’s approaches were worth considering, as they felt they were very effective, particularly its national lockdown. For them, the success of China’s strategy can be proven in the data it gathered and in the speed at which Chinese peoples’ lives went back to “normal” shortly after their initial lockdown. “I couldn’t comprehend why our government wasn’t disinfecting our city,” subject 20 joked bitterly, “I honestly thought ‘why didn’t you just use China’s approach to this pandemic?’”
Despite the significant percentage of these American interviewees being willing to adopt Chinese approaches, almost every one of them said that the desire to learn from China’s approach is virtually futile. As a whole, the group felt that this was the case because the American culture is so different from Chinese. Subject 27 highlighted this when sighing heavily and then saying that “I would recommend it in a perfect world. I won’t in reality because I know how Americans would respond to it. Even tiny rules will stir them to protest.” Subject 31 agreed with this view and reflected that “Sure, I will recommend it if it works, but dang … no one’s going to agree to it. I have some people that can find common ground with their ideas and what can be applicable, but complete lockdown and restricting everyone on what they can and can’t do? That just won’t happen here. He also touched on what he saw on the news, about China applying very restrictive lockdowns and sanitizing all public spaces and common areas, “I think they handled it better than we did,” he approved, “but at the same time, it also did take away a lot of freedom.”

From this same group, 35% (7/20) completely disagreed with China’s strategy and objected for reasons similar to those reflected above. This cluster of interviewees felt that China’s approach was too draconian, that the cultural gap between the two countries is too divergent, and that concerns for privacy issues would stymie any approach using China’s methods. These interviewees argued that ultimately, the U.S. government does not have as much power as the Chinese government to implement such policies. Moreover, they felt that the American people have no confidence in the U.S. government’s control of their personal information. They also stated that the American collective consciousness is not as strong as China’s, which means that even if a unified national policy came out, there would not be a consistent response from the people.
Among this group that completely disagreed with China’s approach being implemented in the U.S., four interviewees thought that although the Chinese government’s approaches were strict, taking such extreme measures was laudable and necessary because of China’s specific high population density and national conditions. These four felt that the Chinese government have studied the virus and came up with a practical approach that they then implemented in full force. Subject 10 stated that “I think that’s how they are as a group, they have more authority and power to enforce something that they feel is the right path. Whereas the United States operates on a much more freedom-driven basis. We let people make their own decisions primarily, because whenever the state needs to apply some strategies or policies, they will have to make people agree on them first.” He used the phrase “they (the Chinese government) came in with full force” repeatedly in our interview and was “pretty impressed by their effectiveness.”

However, he also reflected a similar belief shared by subject 1, who lacked confidence in the data shared by China, as he felt that “I don’t know how much of their statistics are accurate.”

Curiously, 30% of interviewees acknowledged that they were not well-informed on this topic. Some said that they did not have time to consider the issue because they were too occupied with their own businesses. Two interviewees argued that they did not usually keep up with world news since that is “out of their hands” and they were “trying to keep sane.” Many, including those who disapproved of Chinese strategies overall, pointed out that the U.S. media did not cover much about COVID outside of America due to a myopic focus on other political issues like the presidential election and the protests around the nation.
Chinese:

Whether or not people were well informed of the details of the other country’s policies seemed irrelevant to this theme, because none of my Chinese interviewees thought it would be possible for the other country’s approach to work in a different circumstance. The most enlightening answer was from subject 17:

This would never work, because it would be like nurturing a cactus in the sea. I also don’t think either China or the U.S. would ever induce to the other side’s idea, because the cultural and political natures of the two countries are too different.

This subtle characterization exemplifies the thoughts of 80% (20/25) of Chinese interviewees. In an extremely populated state, just the idea of proposing the U.S.’s “freedom-based” approach seemed absurd. “The efficiency of digital surveillance and other measures we use here [in China] will be extremely low if applied in the U.S., because they have a much smaller population density,” subject 44 stated.

The ongoing struggle in the U.S. notwithstanding, most Chinese never judged the U.S.’s pandemic policies for the country’s hardships. Instead, they expressed a profound sympathy, suggesting that “ideologies in a society are formed through history and culture; the United States has a constitution, China has a history of thousands of years, and they have different legal systems” (subject 2). Subject 4 also underscored a considerable cultural aspect that contributes to the incompatibility between the two countries’ policies:

We cannot replicate each other because our ways of thinking are too different. The Chinese are very collective, and Americans are individualistic. Our reasons to wear mask are not only to protect others but ourselves as well. So, when we walk down the road to see that someone doesn’t wear a mask, we will consider that person to be very selfish by showing a total disregard for other people’s feelings and wellbeing.
She stated that the same reason also applies to the broad veto against digital surveillance and quarantine policies in the U.S., because “many Americans don’t even want to wear masks; they see it as a violation of human rights and freedom. That is funny.”

In her late 20s, subject 4 lived in the U.S. for several years before returning back to China. She and many others with a similar experience understood Americans’ pursuit for freedom as a personal choice, but they also expressed a deep appreciation for the collective values in Chinese society. Like many interviewees in this group, she expressed that she would be buried by her own guilt if “my actions would imperil others’ safety in any way.” Chinese from the older generations could not relate to the reasons Americans cannot yield some freedom for their own safety. “I could never understand when someone values freedom more than life, and that’s the American value.” Born in the 1960s, subject 12 was astonished by some Americans’ “stubbornness,” contending that “you can have freedom only if you have life, because how can you enjoy freedom without being alive?” Subject 37 told me a similar story, reaffirming that it would be nearly impossible for the older generation Chinese to embrace the Americans’ values. Based on such a premise, subject 42 and many others offered a proposition: “Policies must be in line not only with local conditions and backgrounds, but also with the degree of acceptance of the people. It would be unwise and counterproductive to introduce China’s approach in the U.S. when they can’t even accept the mask.”

Finally, three people explained that they would not recommend the Chinese implementations during the pandemic because they were too extreme. “It was effective indeed,” subject 29 admitted, “but China has made great sacrifices in a short period of time. So, I’m not sure which one (country) made the better decision.” Subject 38 was opposed to neither approach, reasoning that both countries had endured great losses for their extremist measures, one for its
stringent control, and one for showing none at all. “Although,” he explained, “at the moment, it seems China’s more decisive and preemptive measures are better, because their sacrifice for greater freedom was only transitory.”

Theme 8: Perspectives on Sacrificing Liberty for Security

American:

American interviewees’ answers to this question were diverse, ranging from a willingness to embrace a complete sacrifice of personal freedoms to a willingness to sacrifice nothing at all. Responses were represented evenly from one end of the spectrum to the other, with two distinct exceptions: 1) When subject 10 said: “I don’t think I’m sacrificing anything to speak of, and I’m at liberty to wear or not wear masks. I’m willing to make choices that I think are smart and can save myself,” and 2) When subject 32 stunned me as she asked: “I don’t know how to measure liberty to determine that answer. How would I measure my liberty? How would other people measure liberty? Maybe you can ask ‘which personal liberty would I sacrifice?’ But I don’t believe we have to sacrifice our liberty for COVID, it’s not necessary (because it’s not that lethal).”

Three (12%) Americans who were willing to sacrifice most liberties for better safety, health, and security brought up some conditions necessary for their willingness to do so. These conditions included a set time frame of only three to six months (for quarantine, curfew, and stay-at-home order). Furthermore, it was reflected by subject 26 that this would be acceptable “as long as the freedom they’re removing is not going to prevent me from having shelter, food, water, and my necessities to survive as a human or live a healthy life.” Additionally, subject 33 remarked that it would be ok if “everyone
has to do it.” Subject 23 and 28 argued that it would be needed to ensure effectiveness in saving lives.

Subject 28 comes from a Russian background with multiple family members having served in foreign wars (including WWII). He passionately argued that “in times of war, you need to compromise, and I think it’s okay to sacrifice as long as you see your efforts paying off.” This mindset of willingness to sacrifice in a time of “war” was echoed in the five interviewees willing to essentially give up virtually all freedoms in order to prevent loss of lives. Subject 15 emphatically stated, “If you are dead, what’s the point?” Similarly, subject 27 responded, “I’m willing to sacrifice a lot if it (the virus) directly affects my life.” The wartime mindset was also echoed by subject 24: “In a crisis of wartime, pandemic, or any other national crisis, you have to sacrifice more freedom than you would normally want to.”

For subject 30, determining factors were the severity of the disease at the time and whether the government was transparent about its efforts. He complained about his distrust in government entities: “I think the other issue too is the spread of information…Is the government sharing this data of what’s really going on with the COVID? Or are they hiding stuff and then expecting you to blindly follow?” Subject 30 acknowledged his own financial privileges and admitted that it is easier for him to give up liberties than others who are less financially secure. Moreover, subject 49, who lives in Germany, correlated his choices to being of a more socialist mindset: “I would be willing sacrifice a good amount of liberty for other people’s safety. On a scale of 1 to 10, I’d give up 7. I’m more socialist in that regard.”

Interviewees in this group who were willing to only sacrifice some liberty or almost nothing at all cited “personal rights” to defend their reasoning. Overall, they argued that 1) mandated policies would be against their will, so it would be better if the government suggested
these policies instead, 2) wearing masks is acceptable, but a curfew (10pm - 6am) is too much of a restriction, 3) the pandemic is not that lethal, and 4) American people are used to a lot of freedom. Finally, subject 20 suggested that, “If you live in a more restrictive culture, it would be different because you are more afraid of the consequences of defying the government or the social norms, which makes you willing to sacrifice your freedom in these societies without an uproar (subject 20).”

Chinese:

Some circumstances changed my Chinese interviewees’ consideration of this issue. In a matter of life and death, 84% of my Chinese interviewees would be willing to sacrifice most or complete freedom in return for their own safety, including extreme self-quarantine measures: only going out for necessity, no assembly, mask-wearing in public at all times, and using digital surveillance as a monitoring and tracking device. This kind of large-scale sacrifice was not considered as an unconscionable bargain but rather a willful consent made through carefully calculated risk factors. Few (16%) respondents stated that they would only cooperate on a voluntary term and would not accept compulsory quarantine. For a spontaneous compromise to take place, the following preconditions (which were repeatedly mentioned among my interviewees) must be fulfilled: 1) the case must be fatal and contagious, 2) there must be mutual communication and understanding between the government and the people in order to obtain information, 3) pervasiveness—all everyone has to follow the same principles, 4) full access and support to basic needs such as food and utilities, and 5) only short-term (commonly refer to 14 days to 3 months) limitations.
Continuing to emphasize a spirit of collectiveness, many Chinese interviewees considered this type of sacrifice as part of their social responsibility. Subject 43 believed that “it is the citizens’ responsibility to sacrifice certain things for their country during crises.” This view was also shared by many who considered the net effect of sacrificing certain things as minimal, as subject 46 described, “For the sake of myself and for others, as long as there is the right to live, then I can sacrifice the right to freedom.” Though it might sound abstruse, subject 17 clarified such a regard as a culturally influenced mindset:

I think that people, as a part of society, should bear and perform their social responsibility. This outlook is inseparably linked to the educational and cultural environments in which we live. Our country is rooted in Confucianism, so even though each of us has some internal thoughts and needs for freedom, we have the concept of “putting the world first” in our bones, which I personally think is an honorable attitude.

She then pondered for a while, looked at me with hope, and asked, “Wouldn’t it be better if everyone put the safety of society first?”

Such an attitude was also shared and reflected through other conversations, wherein many believed that the feeling of “sacrifice” faded almost inevitably when they view these orders in a different manner. For instance, subject 44 said that she did not consider any inconveniences caused by the pandemic as a “sacrifice,” because “freedom is subjective, and I did so to save myself and my loved ones. There is no ‘sacrifice’ in that regard.” Subject 36 also declared that even if there was no mandate requirement to quarantine 14 days after a person’s arrival in China (which is the international travel guideline in China at present), “I would quarantine myself voluntarily and report my travel history to the community or government afterwards.”
Theme 9: Is Digital Surveillance Effective and Important for Social Order and Safety?

Americans:

One might assume that most Americans would be predisposed to oppose any actions or policies that would curtail their personal freedom. It would come as a surprise to those making that assumption that over half of my American interviewees showed support for complete or partial adoption of digital surveillance. Six people who expressed their strong support to implementing digital surveillance anchored their support to the technology being vital in helping to collect and analyze data for pandemic and criminal activities. They argued that it would be needed to: spot bad behaviors, catching crimes, and to clarify facts regarding rates of spread (diseases).

Recent violent events in the U.S. and worldwide also necessitated the need for digital surveillance. Subject 15, for instance, cited the example of the tragedy of the late George Floyd, he tried to prove that digital surveillance such as security and body cameras are indispensable in our daily lives. He said: “Without them, we wouldn’t know the true story, because how many people would believe that a police officer would place his knee on George’s neck?” In this sense, the utility of digital surveillance is not to prevent something from happening, but rather to offer alternative perspectives that can testify certain actions, overthrow false accusations, and provide justice to vulnerable individuals and groups. Others echoed this notion as well by stating that our smartphone can be used as a digital surveillance for the general public, because people can use their camera to record and upload footage online, then “the whole world knows about it, and they can be the judge on a global scale.” Some people referred to the Martin Luther King era, arguing that digital surveillance held the ability as a major component of social movements and sharing vital information. Subject 48 mentioned the beheaded French teacher, Samuel Paty, and how the
National Intelligence Agency was able to track down the criminals promptly in both France and Australia using online information. Furthermore, some interviewees have heard a lot about the use of digital surveillance in catching foreign governments’ interference with the U.S. election, which left them an impression that digital surveillance can be powerful to preclude certain international predicaments.

Following the same mentality that digital surveillance would benefit the nation as a whole, subject 27 noted on a more personal level, that the simple fact that people would know they are being watched would dramatically change their behaviors for the better. He made a compelling analogy, comparing digital surveillance to religious beliefs: “To me, it’s important for someone to have faith because that encourages them to do good; it encourages them to keep moving forward. So, you have faith either in yourself, or you have faith that somebody above you are watching over you. Same thing happens to human nature when it comes to this digital surveillance thing.” Subject 26 supported digital surveillance but simultaneously asserted that the American “freedoms” that are widely accepted as absolutes need not have such wide latitude and should be revisited by our representatives. He used social media as an example:

Facebook started to censor people because of untruthful information often having something to do with politics. It is not against the Constitution, because even though there’s freedom of the press, the press still needs to regulate… and the Amendments do need to be updated, they need to clarify at least: 1) what qualifies as freedom of the press? 2) what can people actually post? 3) and how can we regulate them?

Some (24%) showed an inclination to support digital surveillance because of its effectiveness in creating a safer environment. However, they maintained concerns for the potential misuse of digital surveillance products and subsequent societal corruption. Subject 10 proposed that there is nothing wrong with digital surveillance, because it would only affect criminals at loose; Subject 28 suggested that if people are okay without privacy both inside (e.g.:
Alexa, online censorship) and outside (security cameras) their house, then digital surveillance is not a problem; and subject 31 thought the validity of digital surveillance depends on what kind of information the government chooses to gather. Similarly, although subject 40 considered digital surveillance as both effective in maintaining social order and protecting the people, he also feared that it could be used as a tool to “keep people captive.”

Subject 25 pointed out that different countries use digital surveillance for different reasons, and in China, he reckoned that digital surveillance “is first and foremost used for political purposes.” For subject 47, digital surveillance can only identify and bring issues such as COVID and terrorism to light, but it cannot solve issues: “There has to be some kind of immediate response for digital surveillance, like watching cameras to be effective in maintaining social order, but I think it’s a tactic for diagnosing where there may be disorder, and then using that to figure out ways that you can make that better.” For the same reason, subject 7 provided the following analogy: “You (the society or government) can either be a really strict “mom” that’s always yelling at your kids, or you could raise really good kids that you don’t need to yell at. In the long run, it still depends on education and developing good citizens.”

Finally, there were six interviewees (24%) who were totally against the use of digital surveillance worldwide. Some believed that digital surveillance is a violation of privacy, while some were afraid that digital surveillance would take away their liberty because they would be constantly watched by institutions. One (subject 30) expressed his distrust in government and fear of giving it such a power; and both subject 23 and 32 doubted digital surveillance’s effectiveness in maintaining social order, “unless it’s by force, not by choice.” Subject 23 explained, “Citizens cannot be monitored all the time, and there are always ways around them (digital surveillance).” This issue also engendered two thoughtful responses. First, originally
being very certain for her negative response, subject 20 later reluctantly changed her attitude:

“Personally, I don’t need a tracking system to keep me in check, but there are people out there who either don’t believe this virus is real or they don’t believe that they can give it to anyone else. There are people out there who definitely need that surveillance.” Second, subject 30’s answer became a highlight for this study, as he enunciated the statement below:

The fear is that data won’t be used responsibly…Today, it’s okay that we are trying to track who may have been in contact with who. But tomorrow they might want to track anyone that’s been in contact with somebody who didn’t agree with the government. That’s a little scary. Yes, you could prevent a lot of atrocities from happening with the power of the surveillance, particularly with fake things or these pandemics, but digital surveillance can also create a scary place as well.

I took a deep breath, and was soon bursting with impatience to ask him the question linked to our last theme: “Do you think there can be a middle ground?” He laughed as if it was a joke and said solemnly, “Nobody in power will give up their power naturally without being forced to. It is natural for people in power to want to stay in power, and these tools can help them achieve that goal.”

**Chinese:**

The strong efficacy of digital surveillance during the pandemic and in preventing crimes provides ample evidence for confidence and support from the public, which is what most of my Chinese interviewees believed. All (100%) of them expressed a profound gratitude towards digital surveillance, recognizing it as not only highly valuable and effective, but sometimes even a necessary tool to maintain social order.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, many people say that without such large-scale and effective big data surveillance measures, the previous methods of employing manpower to manually collect information would never be able to control the spread of the virus...
in such a short period of time. Therefore, the effectiveness of the Chinese approach is precisely
due to its comprehensive digitization. “There are so many people in China,” subject 6 said, “you
can't manage this country without digitizing and systemizing billions of people.” Another
problem caused by a population of more than one billion is the uneven distribution of resources,
which leads to uneven levels of education. “Without proper education, some people will conduct
crimes based on their distorted aptitudes,” subject 9 said while shrugging his shoulders. “It is not
their fault, but that is why digital surveillance is important and necessary.” Subject 16 added,
“These systems don’t make much of an impact on normal people because surveillance is about
monitoring behaviors that are out of social norms. I don’t think you need to care about these
things if you don’t have a bad mind.”

Generally, the worthiness of digital surveillance is manifested first and foremost through
its ability to “identify suspicious individuals or groups, and in so prevent or even eliminate
harmful events and provide safer environment for the general public” (subject 11). This aspect
also applies to pandemic control, whereby China implemented more timely and strict controls
over the whereabouts of potential cases. However, others pointed out that digital surveillance
might not be as useful in preventing crimes and tracking down criminals because “you cannot
eliminate crimes from this world.” Subject 8 made an equivalent remark, highlighting the
widespread application of digital surveillance worldwide:

Let’s be honest, which country doesn’t have a digital surveillance system now? I
think if digital surveillance doesn’t have any practical effect, there would
certainly be countries that don’t use it, but I can’t name any country right now that
doesn't have such a system.

Although digital surveillance’s value has been widely acknowledged and appreciated, not
everyone is taking it lightly. In fact, 48 % of Chinese respondents depicted digital surveillance as
a double-edged sword. “There are two sides to everything; the value of something truly depends
on the price of its sacrifice,” subject 29 said plainly. In agreement, subject 42 argued that digital surveillance in nature is a powerful tool to protect the people and the country, “but it also makes us transparent as we lost our privacy.” Then she justified digital surveillance by asserting that “it really depends on how the government uses it and for what purpose.”

Interestingly, subject 39 described digital surveillance as an inevitable part of the social process for achieving a higher level of civilization. “The development of all technologies has some beneficial effects on human society,” he intoned, “but societies must also respond to it accordingly. Digital surveillance is a deterrent to harmful behaviors, but it requires legal regulation of the application of data.” He then identified an urgent need for a universally standardized regulation system on digital surveillance, reminding us that our global society has fallen behind the pace of scientific and technological advancement. “We cannot deny digital surveillance’s capabilities,” he suggested in fear, “but we will become its slaves if we let it out of our hands.”

Theme 10: Is It Possible to Protect the Country While Also Protecting Citizens’ Liberty?

American:

As broad as this theme is, it was framed as a yes-no question. In short, 40% of American interviewees were convinced that it is not possible for the government to protect the state as a whole without infringing on people’s liberty, while 60% of people responded positively. For those who are negative, COVID presents as an excellent example. Because of policies such as wearing masks and social distancing, they reluctantly admitted that the U.S. government has to infringe on people’s liberty in order to get the pandemic under control.
For some, the conflicts between people and people’s perceptions and interpretations of things determined that no policies could make everyone happy; and some (20%) who came to an agreement that nothing comes free in this world, argued that sacrifices and compromises are an inevitable process of governing people and maintaining social order—it is, as they described, a balance or trade-off between liberty and security. However, three of them held a belief that such a process, if maneuvered rightfully, could protect and maximize both the state’s welfare and individual freedom. Many interviewees defined the relationship between the government and the people as two entirely separate entities, which naturally generates conflicted interests between governmental activities (such as presidential election) and the will and liberty of the people.

“They (the government) don’t usually represent our wishes,” as subject 20 clarified, “they only need our votes for their own purposes.” Agreed, subject 40 believed that the government is ultimately parasitic on its populace and said: “The state or the government has an underhanded interest in keeping people calm and safe, because they need to keep them domesticated, distracted and divided.” He then argued that such a balanced state between liberty and governance only exists in some theoretical sense, such as a benevolent government or dictator.

On the other side of the spectrum, hope rises. However, one must understand clearly that there is a difference between being optimistic and being realistic. “I’m an optimist, so I believe the balance is possible,” said subject 48, “but I don’t know what it looks like. No country on earth has achieved such a situation.” His view was also shared by many others, including subject 32, who stated discontentedly: “Of course it is possible, but it is unlikely that the government will make that happen.”

For some, the possibility for government to protect the state and individual’s liberty at the same time can only be achieved through the public’s consent to compromise
certain degrees of freedom, because “at the end of the day, a country is just a collection of people.” Using New Zealand as a prototype, some interviewees illuminated that a free and democratic society can protect its country by people “agreeing to give up some liberties while retaining others.” Correspondingly, others acknowledged the difficulty in making public policies that everyone will agree with, so a universal compromise is inevitable to attain public safety, because liberty is only good “as long as it is for the collective good.” This attitude applies to many. Living in China, both subject 3 and 28 explained that the success of defeating the pandemic or any social crises requires cooperation between the government and the people. Hence, they never considered neither quarantine nor digital surveillance as an invasion of their liberty: “I see that as a way to protect people, because the quicker we can maintain or control like this the spiral, the quicker we get back to our normal lives” (subject 3). Subject 28 also revealed that, when she travelled back to China from the U.S. in March 2020, she was asked multiple times by the Chinese government whether she would be okay with various conditions. “It’s my own choice,” she continued, “I think those people (in the U.S.) who say that wearing masks is violating their human rights are also not okay violating others human rights, such as aborting, and gay marriage. But those are much stronger human rights than this.” Also living in China, subject 25 looked sharp, he admitted that Chinese measures were somewhat intrusive and draconian, but he also remarked on something that might be shocking in the eyes of Americans:

Of course, [the balance] it’s possible. Right now, because of China’s very strong leadership during the pandemic, and its ability to make the right decisions, I now have the freedom to do all kinds of things that many of my friends in the U.S. don’t have.

His answer brought me back to theme 7, when subject 49 described a scenario akin to this one, where he felt freer in Germany even though the country has more digital surveillance than the U.S. Curiously, this kind of feeling is expressed by Americans who live in societies that are
accused of being not as “free” as the U.S. Although it sounded more like a consequential relationship rather than a same-time-manner, the stricter measures taken by the Chinese and German governments during the COVID pandemic gained approval by all five Americans who live in those countries, because they regained their freedom soon after a short period of national close-down and a continued application of digital surveillance. Compared to their families and friends in the U.S. who still suffer from quarantine and curfews from time to time, a free life in China at the moment seems undeniably more appealing to them.

*Chinese:*

“The state is the people,” as many interviewees described. When a person views the state as a large aggregation of people, he or she is more inclined to believe that “protecting the state” and “protecting the people” are two compatible terms. As most of my Chinese interviewees reiterated throughout the study, every individual as part of the society has certain social responsibilities to carry out. Adding onto this is their attitude that the government has its duties to protect its people and their interests. However, only 28% of Chinese interviewees believed that such equilibrium can be achieved, because the interests of the government and the people are closely related. “Where is the country when everyone is gone?” subject 22 asked me, “I see no contradiction in it.” Subject 21 who live in the U.S. also believed that the country has largely achieved such a balance.

Yet, the same amount (28%) of people rejected such a possibility, arguing that these two terms are in total conflict with each other, especially in the digital age. Many interviewees trusted every government for having such an “utopian plan” at heart, but to act on it is impossible due to the nature of the state, which is naturally developed upon sacrificing certain groups’
interests. “You cannot make everyone happy” was a phrase restated over and over again. Besides, this conviction was testified and reaffirmed during the COVID pandemic. “We had to stay at home to help the country get rid of the virus,” subject 6 recalled quite proudly. “We would never stop it that fast if we only wanted for our own freedom.” Many believed that the Chinese government only made the decision to sacrifice everyone’s freedom temporarily for the sake of long-term prosperity, which was widely accepted as a prudent arrangement. 16% of Chinese interviewees, seeing digital surveillance being commonly used globally, suggested that the digital age has made this equilibrium a preposterous idea. While the state needs people’s information, or data in the digital sense, to forecast and prevent certain safety risks, people also need valuable information and warnings from government institutions as a safety net. “This is inevitable in the digital age,” said subject 14, “we both need each other, and the process is a trade-off.”

In the end, 36% of people replied with a vague term, “maybe,” hoping for the best, but also lacking confidence. “There is no way you can have literally everything you want in life,” subject 4 conceded begrudgingly. “Even in countries like the U.S., you will be deprived of the right to speak online if you have a huge influence over people.” She was referring to Trump’s Twitter account being cancelled. Others said that although the possibility of reaching such an equilibrium was low, the likelihood increases for countries that are more collective compared to ones that emphasize individualism.

To conclude this discussion, I use subject 2’s statement to emphasize some shared bewilderment that spread across interviews: “In fact, I am in contradiction with myself. I enjoy freedom in the U.S., but I do not feel safe; whereas the sense of security is strong in China, but I
am sometimes dispirited.” Moreover, despite strong opinions and assertions, most people ultimately feel ambivalence towards the trade-offs they face for “the good of the nation.”
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once said: “There are no facts, only interpretations.” This is not to say that facts do not matter, but that our interpretations of those facts matter more. His statement is true now in the digital age more than ever, when information and ideologies spread like wildfire. As the world is increasingly wrought with lies, fraud, misleading messages, hatred, and violence, governments strike back, launching digital surveillance systems in rapid succession to target felons and other suspicious activity. While numerous benefits (such as a decrease in crime rate in some places, not in all) have come with these technological advancements, so have unforeseeable but inevitable consequences: cybersecurity, isolation, mental changes, and potential infringement on individual rights and liberty. As the death toll began to climb globally following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the debate between liberty and security intensified.

The validity of using digital surveillance to contain the spread of the virus is a debate that differentiates itself from those of the past, adding an excess burden to the already insecure and troubled populace. As time passes, people witness the pandemic de-escalate at different rates in different regions where digital surveillance has been deployed. It has showcased that digital surveillance can be highly effective and valuable in some places but not in others. While China had already announced its accelerated recovery nation-wide back in June 2020, the U.S.’s devastation lingered on, resulting in countless deaths and ushering in a period of broad and deep discontent with its government. Many policymakers and activists, especially those from the West, investigated the omnipotent digital surveillance systems implemented in China and chastised its overarching power to violate privacy and human rights. Others, astonished by its effectiveness and efficiency in combating the pandemic, are starting to reconsider its legitimacy.
Alongside the debate between liberty and security, the question of “how can we reach the equilibrium?” seems even more complex in the digital age, as the definition of freedom continues to transform. Furthermore, freedom’s abstract nature lends itself to be subjective to every country, every culture, every group, and every individual. Therefore, in the light of COVID-19, before we start to judge other countries’ policies against the virus, we must understand the underlying causes as to why those countries use different approaches and resulted in different effects.

In its comparison of China and the U.S.’s counter-pandemic policies, this study has obtained findings pertinent to its three research questions:

1) How and why do people from different societies/cultures define liberty and liberty in the digital age differently? Finding: They differ because culture and personal experience can profoundly shape a person’s values and opinions. In general, Chinese people view freedom as a more abstract concept than Americans, who tend to frame freedom as an ability.

2) To what degree do the participants of this study perceive digital surveillance practices’ effectiveness in maintaining social order and protecting the state and its citizens, and why? Finding: Digital surveillance practices seem more effective and valuable in the Chinese’s eyes because their society is highly digitized, and their collective values support more robust governmental interventions in certain circumstances. In contrast, Americans consider digital surveillance a violation of human rights and freedom, so they hold strong objections to such an application.

3) Can liberty and security coexist? Finding: Responses to this question showed a general pessimism, not only because people are inherently constrained by their society, but also because
the joined forces of the government, commercial companies, and the birth of the digital age have crippled the likelihood of liberty and security being in equilibrium.

The following section discusses the findings in the context of the study’s three framing topics: liberty, security, and COVID-19.

On Liberty

Every country has its foundational principle, or “propaganda term,” as some see it: the U.S. calls it “freedom,” and in China, people call it “unity.” Consider an archetype: “If you are a child and you did something wrong, you would be grounded in an American family, but in a Chinese family, you will be kicked out.” This analogy perfectly depicts that while many Americans fear nothing more than losing their freedom and autonomy, the Chinese might prioritize other things, such as family, community, and a sense of security.

Inherent to the American Constitution and culture, “freedom” has been inculcated deeply into the American people’s unconscious minds. Yet, due to its abstract nature, Americans are prone to substitute it with a more concrete essence: ability—the aptitude to do or not to do something. This materialization of the abstract consolidates the sense of self and individualism, which is itself evidence of constitutionalized empowerment. On the other hand, after thousands of years of infiltration, Confucius’ doctrine of morality, social order, communal values, and collectiveness permeate Chinese society. Within this environment, the sense of self and individuality subside, while concepts such as freedom become nothing more than a cryptic cognizance. A product of this collective mentality is the realization of connectedness, under which nothing can exist and prosper in isolation, and the society entrusts each individual with an amount of social responsibility for keeping their society safe and coherent. Hence, individual
freedom in the eyes of the Chinese is customarily considered a relative term that manifests only within inevitable societal frameworks.

Aside from cultural influences, the meaning of freedom might also be shaped by personal experience. For instance, being a minority, either in race, religion, class, age, or disability, one might face prejudices and constraints from all aspects of society. That is because we are all habituated to associate ourselves with people who speak our own “language,” while unconsciously, and sometimes intentionally, we cloak others with dissimilarities and preconceptions. As they often lack higher education, the less privileged can sometimes produce fragmented knowledge of the world. However, even highly educated people are regularly criticized for their biased views, for they are prone only to involve themselves with like-minded groups, creating exclusive echo chambers. Cross-cultural experience, including international travel and study, can carve people’s awareness of cultural and ideological diversity and expand the field of vision and inclusiveness. One perspective that might be easily neglected is regarding one’s work status. People who obtain managerial experiences, such as managers and business owners, might frequently find themselves trapped in the intractable dilemma of collectiveness and individuality, wherein the company needs creative ideas periodically, but obedient, loyal, and collaborative workers are also much appreciated.

Digitizing the physical world has engendered convenience and betterment in numerous aspects, but unanticipated hazards, including the utilization of constant digital surveillance, which continues to provoke and alter values that have long existed in human society. Although China and the U.S. have significant differences regarding values, the digital age brings up a commonality—disbelievers of freedom. The core issue of such disbelief comes not from its implementation but its intentionality. Due to constant lies, biased information, and money-
power-driven propaganda alike, an increasing number of people start to feel that they are losing both their internal and external liberties to monopolistic markets and parasitic governmental entities. With the impression that governments are the ones that can bestow and plunder the greatest number of individual liberties, many people also begin to lose their faith in governments that continue to fluctuate in their values and fail to fulfill their duties.

**On Security**

Which is more important: liberty or security? There is a subjective nature to this question. Although not all Americans consider freedom to be the most crucial thing in their lives, they usually care a great deal more than the Chinese do. It seems inconceivable for many Chinese, especially the older generations, that someone would value freedom more than life itself. For them, the utility of freedom can only be carried out as long as one is alive and well. Individuals as part of society contribute not only to economic and productional functionalities, but also to the state’s social and civil development, including public health and safety. Nevertheless, there is a universal and thorough understanding of humanity’s selfish nature, which helps to establish the justification for social control as a means to maintain social order and protect the public at large, as outlined in John Stuart Mill’s Harm Principle.

Mill’s Harm Principle serves its purpose well for cultures that perceive their governments as agencies for protection and development. The Chinese acknowledge that the people, the government, and the country are all inextricably connected; therefore, one cannot exist while leaving the others behind. With highly developed technological infrastructure and centralized managerial style, comprehensive digital surveillance systems in China received positive feedback for their effectiveness and efficiency. That power of social control is rightfully excised
in many Chinese minds to prevent harm and create unity in life-threatening moments, something that many believe is an intrinsic duty of the government. In addition, there is usually a consensus among the Chinese during major crises because they care for their lives and the lives of others so much, which is vital for such a populous country to survive against the worst adversity.

In contrast, the federal system of the U.S. lacks certainties for providing constructive instructions in times of uncertainty. Having various perspectives is indeed an admirable approach to governmentality, but producing any agreeable resolutions in such an environment is time-consuming and inefficient, which can result in an irrevocable loss. Today, U.S. politicians face great challenges from both internal and external sources, fighting against waves of political and cultural divides. With an abundance of biased media content, differentiation between the government and the people deepened, and the American people’s distrust and discontent in the government continue to escalate. Presumably, Americans are inclined to oppose government interference due to their individualistic value. Nevertheless, in the light of COVID-19 and recent cultural and racial tragedies, some people have started to question the inaction of the government, essentially demanding more actions and controls. Furthermore, one unpromising observation is that politicians often make decisions not for the wellbeing of the society, but on behalf of their political interests.

*On COVID-19*

Surveillance as an effective tool for controlling infectious diseases has been widely acknowledged since the early stages of technology. A 1992 report from the Institution of Medicine described that the “key to recognizing new or emerging infectious diseases, and to track the prevalence of more established ones, is surveillance” (Morse, 2012, p. 7). This notion
continues to infiltrate our current medical fields today, including the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), which defines public health surveillance as “the ongoing, systematic collection, analysis, interpretation, and dissemination of data regarding a health-related event for use in public health action to reduce morbidity and mortality and to improve health” (p. 7). Ironically, in opposition to the U.S.’s emphasis on individual freedom, this definition suggests a constant surveillance state targeted for major health crises.

Traditionally, surveillance was a labor-intensive, and often resource-limited practice (Morse, 2012). However, as seen in this study, adding digital elements has dramatically increased the efficiency of disease-focused surveillance in China. As a result, with a nationwide collaboration between the citizens and the government, China has largely fulfilled the purpose of public health surveillance elaborated by the CDC during COVID-19. Bolstered by the novel pandemic, China has established a meaningful case study for elite groups, including medical professionals and politicians, who promulgate related policies. However, refereeing such a method without a serious consideration into cultural and political situations might cause counterproductive and even catastrophic effects.

We must recognize that social control practices have long been an integral part of our society during the progress of civilization, and the composition of culture and social control forms the disciplinary power within our societies. Whether or not we acknowledge it, we are all subject to become “docile bodies” (Foucault) within such a framed fabric of society, only to different degrees based on each state’s distinct measures. Centralized social control might be a taboo for cultures that facilitate individual rights and freedom, on account of fear of a compelled social conformity and loss of self-identity. However, the unprecedented nature of COVID-19 might encourage people to reconsider the positive possibilities, although long dismissed, that
social control measures might effectuate: to create social coordination like the “orchestral harmony” (Mannheim) and to lift individuals above themselves. While people from certain societies, such as China, understand and appreciate the centralized digital surveillance systems to overcome the pandemic, the U.S. might forever hold a skeptical attitude toward it.

The different perceptions of Chinese and Americans in this regard result from multiple factors. First: the preexisting conditions. Rapid technological development in China, especially in the last 20 years, has almost wholly digitized Chinese people’s lives: from shopping groceries to a hospital visit, everything can be applied online, and rarely will anyone use cards and cash anymore. While the U.S.’s technology is on top of the world, its citizens hold little awareness of and concern for such technology being applied to digital surveillance of their personal lives. Second: people’s values and social views. Chinese think of life and community very seriously, so to protect themselves and others, most Chinese are willing to comply with certain social conformities and trade in certain things, such as freedom, for security. In contrast, the legal and constitutional system in the U.S. has encouraged Americans to value their individuality and personal rights. Thus, public policies, regardless of their intentions, have restrained abilities to influence people and their liberties. Third: people’s view of the government. It is customary for the Chinese to think that the government’s responsibility is to protect the people, promote social development, and improve people’s quality of life, so they also entrust the government to make policies that can benefit them. In contrast, many Americans have a general lack of dependence and trust in the government; coupled with profound political and cultural divides, Americans are less likely to access unbiased and trustworthy information and visions. When we recognize these primary conditions, we may find every policy is subject to extenuating circumstances.
In the end, the chance for liberty and security to coexist in the face of life-threatening crises seems possible for some but not for others, especially during the digital age. Putting the digital perspective aside, how people define and construe their relationships with society, especially their social responsibilities, and their relationships with the government, can significantly influence their perceptions of the relationship between liberty and security.

**Summary:**

In the digital age, we are constantly being judged as individuals, groups, and societies, and there are always external temptations trying to change the way we are or how we have been. Sometimes, those different voices offer us alternative realities that might direct us to better paths, but sometimes they do not, because they are only opinions shaped by particular cultures, and those suggestions might not only be futile but even hostile to our development.

We sometimes want to change many things to align with our own values, but things rarely work that way, for we are all different. We can only make the right decisions and policies based on our distinct circumstances—history, culture, and values shared among the people, and not make radical changes based only on our sentiments of what we wish. There are many cases in which the road to utopia has been turned to the road to hell, such as the Iranian Revolution. Traditionally, ideologies take time to evolve; but the rapid pace of the digital age disregards timetables, replacing continuity and stability with uncertainty and contradiction. However, the digital age has also brought about technologies that can be valuable for various purposes, such as digital surveillance. Yet, as for all other tools made for convenience, digital surveillance can be easily abused against the public and their liberty. Therefore, who uses it, how it is being used, and our attitudes toward it become the key issues for generations to come.
While factors such as culture influence our social acceptance of how much freedom we are willing to trade for security, limits on digital surveillance can be changed in a split second. Can there be an equilibrium between liberty and security? If so, how? They stand today as two important open questions and challenges.

Limitations

As a preliminary study, this paper acknowledges that, due to the limited timeframe and sample size, it is impossible to provide a generalization to the world at large. However, this study tries to open the door for discovering the more complicated relationship between culture, experience, mentality, morality, and their impacts on social development. It will be significant to understand how different social classes, educational levels, religions, sex, poverty levels, and other specific aspects of life might influence our mental receptiveness to certain concepts. This thesis aims to shed light on the debate between liberty and security in the increasingly digitized society. Although this study strives not to be biased and does not aim to judge or criticize any particular governmental structure or policies, the nature of the topic is inextricably linked to politics that is closely tied to everything we encounter.
CONCLUSION

There are different types of evil. One: some rational individuals might make conscientious choices to commit heinous acts as small as school bullying, and as horrific as genocide for the purpose of establishing and maintaining total power over others. Two; there are certain people whose impulsive bloodlust comes not from their conscious choices, but rather from an unfortunate biological deviation (such as neurological disorder caused by a tumor pressing on the nerve) or psychological malfunction (such as psychopaths and pedophiles). Three: the emergence of countless villains are the byproducts of the degraded society that engenders the potentialities to breed vile thoughts against humanity. This is even more true in the digital age in which misinformation and evil ideologies can prevail. In unpredictable crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, our current digital surveillance technologies might be practical to detect and track down the first two kinds of evil and the infectious diseases, but it cannot restrain the third type of evil, which arises from ill-natured environments; that power remains with the culture and society in which people live.

While information becomes one of the greatest assets in the digital age, it forces civilization to face its greatest challenge of the modern time to see through our own narrow-minded opinions and focus only on facts. While new facts are constantly evolving, values and opinions are less malleable. Changing them requires time, patience, and effective techniques, especially for values that have existed for thousands of years. Civilization must respect different cultures, and cultures also need to make proper accommodations to survive as part of civilization’s advance. No matter how powerful digital surveillance is, we need to consider the continuity of human civilization thoroughly and find solutions for existing hazards. Over population, over production, over consumption, brutal wars, destruction of the natural
environment, poverty, lack of education, uneven distribution of resources, power, human rights violations, and some across-species infectious diseases are all human-made problems that cannot be solved by digital surveillance, but only by their creators—us, and in particular, the policymakers.

Will this tragedy of more than 500,000 American lives lost provide an impetus for the individually inclined to work together when another such pandemic occurs, or will the gravity of COVID-19 be relegated to an unfortunate moment in the past? Some cultures’ focus on individualism may prevent the ability to address collective problems. To disentangle such an impasse, we as individuals have to realize that the environment in which we live is not the sole determinant of our values and actions. Sustainable development and continuity of this world requires individual decisions made by consensus, not compromises. Perhaps this world is a turbid place, but our inner strength and freedom can empower us to see beyond the darkness and help us make choices in life of what we should do and how we can become better. We have to realize that changes start within us, and we all, little by little, can make our societies better and safer places to live. When the social environment becomes safer, healthier, and more inclusive, the debate between liberty and security might not continue to be characterized by the conflict of cultures, values, or visions. Instead, it may be resolved through mutual understanding, respect, and compassion.
Appendix A: Interview Questions

Introduction

Hi, thanks for taking the time to join me today for this interview. The purpose of this interview is to collect information for my master’s thesis, which focuses on public opinions about digital surveillance and personal freedom, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. This interview will be recorded and translated after the process is over. Recorded information will remain anonymous and confidential. I also want to inform you that, for the ethical purposes of human-subject research, you have the right and freedom to refuse answering specific questions that make you feel discomfort, as well as withdraw from this interview at any time. Before we start, do you have any questions regarding this interview?

Part I: Demographics and Background Information

Demographics

1. How old are you?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your nationality?
4. Where do you live right now? (Country)
5. What is your religious affiliation?
6. What is your highest level of education?
7. What is your profession?
8. What language(s) do you speak?

Exposure to other Cultures

1. Have you travelled abroad before?
   a. If Yes:
      i. Where have you been and when?
      ii. What was the purpose?
   2. Have you ever been to America/China before?
      a. If YES:
         i. When did you go and how long did you stay?
         ii. What was the purpose?
         iii. What are your impressions of Americans/Chinese and American/Chinese culture?
      b. If NO:
         i. What are your impressions of Americans/Chinese and American/Chinese culture?
**Part II: Thoughts on Liberty and Collective Consciousness**

1. **What is your definition of freedom?**
   a. How would you define freedom in the digital age? Will there be anything different?

2. **How important is freedom to you and why?**

3. **Do you think the country you are living in encourages you to achieve the degree of freedom that you desire? Why or why not?**

4. **Have you heard of the term “collective consciousness?” What do you think it means?**
   
   *Collective Consciousness: the set of shared beliefs, ideas, and moral attitudes which operate as a unifying force within society*

   a. How important do you think collective consciousness is to the development of a state?

   b. Do you think the culture of the country in which you currently reside embodies the idea of collective consciousness? Why or why not? In what aspects?

**Part III: Thoughts on Digital Surveillance and Safety during the COVID Pandemic**

1. **How do you feel right now in general about the trend of the pandemic in your country and globally?**

2. **How do you feel the pandemic has affected your daily life and personal liberty? In what ways?**

3. **Have you noticed an increase in digital surveillance since COVID began, such as security cameras, facial recognition, and tracking apps?**
   a. If YES:
      i. What are they?
      ii. How effective do you think these applications are in constraining the spread of the virus? How?
      iii. Most of these digital surveillance applications require your personal information, such as your ID, phone number, and location. How do you feel about this?
      iv. Do you think your government has acted in an appropriate way?
      v. Do you think your government has your safety as a priority when it makes these policies? Why or why not?
   b. If NO:
      i. Do you think your government has acted in an appropriate way? And is it effective?
      ii. Do you think your government has your safety as a priority when it makes these policies?
      iii. Do you think there should have been digital surveillance for controlling the virus? Why or why not?

4. **How do you feel about Chinese/American strategies in dealing with the pandemic? (total lock down, tracing app, health code, etc.)**
   a. Would you recommend Chinese/American strategies to be applied in your country? Why or why not?
b. What do you think about Chinese/American people’s reactions to those policies?

5. How much would you sacrifice your liberty for security in times like this?

6. Do you think wearing masks and using tracing apps should be a personal choice or mandatory?

Part IV: Conclusions

1. How do you think the pandemic will affect the landscape of the global society?

2. What measures, if any, that were adopted/increased during the pandemic will remain?

3. Do you think your government will be prepared when the next pandemic/crisis hits? Why? Why not?

4. Do you think digital surveillance practices are effective in maintaining social order and protecting the state and its citizens? Why?

5. Finally, do you think it is possible for a government to protect the country while also protecting its citizens’ liberty?

We have now covered all the interview questions. Again, thank you again for participation! Before I stop the recording, do you have any questions or thoughts regarding the topics we discussed in this interview? What are some topics or questions you think are worth discussing in the future?
## Appendix B: Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Residence</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Profession</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>American (A)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>Real Estate Investor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>USA/China</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Business Owner (International Trade)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Merchandise Planner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>International Retailer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>USA/China</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Retired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A (Columbian)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>IT Consultant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Project Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>High School Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Business Owner (Tourism)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Financial Analyst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>USA/China</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Financial Investor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Assistant Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>A (Half Chinese)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Entrepreneur (Sports)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Pilot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Designer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Chemical Engineer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Photographer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>A (Iranian)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Pilot Controller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A (Iranian)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Mortgage Originator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A (Caucasian)</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Government Relation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Policy Analyst For NGO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Loan Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A (Chinese)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Sales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>A (Russian)</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Product Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Retired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A (Half Korean)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Software Engineer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Marketing Analysis &amp; Real Estate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Program Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>A (Mexican)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>COVID Contact Tracer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>A (Czech)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A (Half Chinese)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Law School</td>
<td>Attorney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Software Engineer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>Residence</td>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Profession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Data Scientist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Business Owner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Business Owner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Paragliding Instructor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A (White)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Data Analyst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Business Owner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Buddhism</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Business Owner (International Trade)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Regulatory Specialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Personal Trainer, Sex Consultant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>A (Porto Rican)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>Operation Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>A (Mexican)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>Truck Driver/Artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A (Black)</td>
<td>Germany/USA</td>
<td>Daoism</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>Industrial And 3D Designer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>A (Black)</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Baptism</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Government Contracting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Additional Demographic Information**

At the time of the interviews, 13 of the Chinese interviewees lived in China, 12 either lived or frequently travelled between China and the U.S.; 20 of the Americans lived in the U.S., four lived in China, one split his time between the U.S. and Germany. For languages spoken, 90% (45 out of 50) are either bilingual or they speak more than 2 languages, and majority of them are a combination of Chinese-English, or English-Spanish. Furthermore, all 50 interviewees reported having traveled abroad experience, either for leisure, studying, or international business purposes. Of the Chinese interviewees, 21 had visited or lived in the U.S. while 4 had not. Conversely, of the American interviewees, 7 had visited China while 18 had not.
REFERENCE


https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6294&context=jclc


https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.183


Ma, Josephine, & Rui, Guo. (2019). Why There is Only a Remote Chance of a Repeat of China’s Tiananmen Protests. *South China Morning Post.*

Macnab, G. (2020). *How Hollywood star Jean Seberg was destroyed by the FBI.*
https://www.inkl.com/news/how-hollywood-star-jean-seberg-was-destroyed-by-the-fbi


https://ssrn.com/abstract=2327806


United States COVID-19 Cases and Deaths by State. (n.d.). *CDC online*. 
https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/102720


https://www2.law.ucla.edu/Volokh/cameras.htm


https://doi.org/10.1155/2016/5717108


https://doi.org/10.1093/cid/ciaa725