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Government as God

Hell is when you're in the Truman Show and you know the cameras are watching. Incessant State surveillance has long been a part of Chinese life, but recent advancements in facial recognition and artificial intelligence have made possible a social engineering experiment on an epic scale. China has been testing its "social credit" system for five years and plans to implement it country-wide in the year 2020.

A credit score in the United States is a number that serves as a proxy for the creditworthiness of a person. An algorithm accepts inputs like payment history and debt burden and spits out a number that quantifies the likelihood of debt repayment. The social credit system in China is similar in its aims – quantifying trustworthiness – but is far grander in scope and potential. The social credit score is calculated by studying every dimension of a person's life that the State can get its hands on. In addition to examining medical, criminal and academic records, the State uses a high-tech toolbox of data mining algorithms, facial recognition, and AI to study the citizen like a bug under a microscope.

To understand the social credit system, one must first come to grasp the nature of the surveillance state. It is all about the eyes. The Chinese government has 170 million of them: CCTV cameras with their budging lenses perched atop buildings and poles like gargoyles. They watch you, follow you and worse, recognize you and judge you. The Economist reports that people are named and shamed for offenses like jaywalking by having their picture and name appear on electronic billboards. Violating the law will reduce your score and performing what the State calls "heroic acts" will increase it. It is not just exceptional behaviors – crimes and heroic acts – that determine your score. Rather, every mundane choice made in everyday life will be subject to scrutiny.   A senior official of Alibaba, one of the companies working with the State to engineer the algorithm, has said that purchases can affect your social credit in real time. He said that buying excess alcohol or videogames may indicate dependence and that buying diapers may be a sign of responsibility, and that points will be added or deducted accordingly. In a world where the State has eyes everywhere and the algorithms are kept secret, one must be either ever-vigilant of one's actions or internalize the constant surveillance.

It's all about the eyes, and the cold uncomprehending algorithm that peers through them. The millions of bulbous unblinking CCTV cameras pour raw data into a nebulous algorithm which will churn out a three-digit number for every citizen enrolled in Sesame Credit, one of the social credit schemes currently operational in China. The China correspondent for ABC News, Matthew Carney has interviewed one such enrollee, Dandan. From Dandan who has a score of 770 out of 800, we learn about the privileges that accrue from having high social credit. We learn that she does not need to place a deposit to rent a house or book a hotel room and that she receives shopping discounts.

The score is not only determined by one's own actions, but also by those of the people around them. It creates an incentive for people to rat out their friends and family if they were to show anti-government tendencies – not only to gain points for party loyalty, but also to insulate themselves from the actions of their rebellious peers. Since actions like donating to charity, volunteering and caring for aging parents are rewarded while actions like drunk driving and academic dishonesty are penalized, one may come off with the impression that the system is benign since good actions are encouraged and bad actions are condemned.

However, it is critical to note that it is not "good" versus "bad" actions. It is in fact, "State approved" versus "State disapproved" actions. Liu Hu, an investigative journalist who has solved murder cases and exposed government corruption, tells ABC news about the effects of having low social credit. Liu accused a government official of extortion in 2015 and lost the defamation case that ensued. He was ordered to pay a fine, which he did. When the government levied an additional fine, he refused to pay and so, he finds himself is under effective house arrest due to the resulting low social credit. People with low social credit find that they are unable to travel because they are barred from booking flights and making train reservations. Their internet access too is restricted. The party outline sums it up by claiming that the social credit system will "allow the trustworthy to roam freely under heaven while making it hard for the discredited to take a single step".

This is what social engineering looks like when the powerful technologies of the 21st century are brought to bear. The State now has the means to be all-seeing and all-knowing. A spokesperson for YITU, a biometrics firm working with the government told The Economist that their facial recognition technology can soon read facial expressions. This might mean that your barely perceptible downward curl of the lip when you pass by the town's Party Office with its crown of red banners or that joke about Chairman Mao you made at the dinner table will come back to bite you when you find that you are not allowed on the subway. It is tempting to dismiss the social credit system as an eventuality in the West because such an idea would find no purchase in a democracy. However, as Frank Pasquale pointed out in his talk at Purdue University's Dawn or Doom conference in 2018, the social credit system makes winners as well as losers. If it so happens that the number of people who think they will win – correctly or incorrectly – exceeds the number of people who expect to lose, then such a system may very well be adopted democratically. In a democracy, each citizen carries the responsibility to keep their eyes open and oppose the creep of State surveillance and algorithmic governance, if a digital tyranny is to be avoided.