

China testing facial-recognition surveillance system in Xinjiang – The Guardian November 2019

Chinese surveillance chiefs are testing a facial-recognition system that alerts authorities when targets stray more than 300 metres from their home or workplace, as part of a surveillance push that critics say has transformed the country’s western fringes into a high-tech police state.

Authorities in Xinjiang, a border region that is home to China’s largely Muslim Uighur minority, have been experimenting with the “alert project” since early 2017, according to Bloomberg.

The programme, which matches faces caught on surveillance cameras to a watchlist of suspects, is the work of a state-run defence contractor that is developing software designed to help predict and thwart terrorist attacks before they occur.

“A system like this is obviously well-suited to controlling people,” Jim Harper, a counter-terrorism specialist and former US homeland security official was quoted as saying. “‘Papers, please’ was the symbol of living under tyranny in the past. Now, government officials don’t need to ask.”

The Bloomberg report is the latest to detail the cutting-edge techniques being rolled out as Xinjiang becomes a real-life laboratory for surveillance. Other methods include the harvesting of biometric data, smartphone scanners, voice analysis and compulsory satellite-tracking systems for vehicles.

“They are combining all of these things to create, essentially, a total police state,” said William Nee, a China campaigner at Amnesty International.

No journalist’s visit to Xinjiang now goes unnoticed. An Associated Press correspondent was stopped by police during a recent visit and told his movements were being remotely tracked with surveillance footage.

During a 12-day tour of China’s “total surveillance state”, the Wall Street Journal’s vehicle was hemmed in by police after cameras spotted its out-of-town number plates.

When the Guardian visited Xinjiang last spring its journalists were summoned to meet police within minutes of checking in to a Kashgar hotel and told that reporting was forbidden without official permission.

One exasperated local said Xinjiang had become hell: “I would prefer to

be a Syrian refugee than Chinese.” Yang Shu, a terrorism expert at Lanzhou University, said Xinjiang’s dire security situation was an open secret and surveillance could provide “powerful clues” to help catch those causing the violence. “High technology can guarantee security without interrupting people’s normal activities,” Yang said.

Beijing argues such controls are necessary given repeated eruptions of violence, which authorities blame on Islamic extremists but which activists believe are partly driven by repression of the Uighurs.

“People should really pay attention to this because they could easily use the same tools of surveillance elsewhere in China, or for export. A lot of these companies will naturally want to grow their businesses and sell this technology to other authoritarian countries, or even democracies, that are looking for the same tools of control..”