THE RISK
OF ARTIFICIAL
INTELLIGENCE:
CHINA EDITION

BY **Filip Jirouš**

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The risk of Artificial Intelligence:

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We should be worried about China's AI capacities, not only because it enhances the powers of the Party-state, but also because it is exporting its population control technology and policy abroad.

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Introduction

Big data is the new oil. Artificial intelligence (AI) is the new electricity. Some would say that or use a similar analogy. While the big data simile might not work entirely, especially as only few companies and states actually managed to employ big data analysis meaningfully, the AI-electricity likening serves well. Just like in the early days of electricity, nobody knows much what to do with AI, but everybody is investing into it and imagining how it can all change our lives. The only real winners so far? The companies that provide the hardware and tools to run the magic box.

But even if AI turns out to be a game changer it is foretold to be, it might not be all magical. There are fears that AI will destabilize society in the ways that the original industrial revolution caused in terms of job loss and poverty. Humans might not be replaced only in general work tasks. More worrying is the AI use in decision-making processes, including those that involve killing people, as already showcased in Gaza and Ukraine. The state abuse of AI and automation for security and society control have already been scrutinized in the democratic world.

Some countries have already started drafting legislation that would limit the ethical and other unforeseen damage of this new technology. The first comprehensive AI regulation –EU's AI Act passed in March– introduces the concept «trusted AI», where systems based on this technology would have to prove even its non-technical aspects are not

harmful. The legislation will also require companies to maintain high levels of transparency in order to avoid discrimination and other harmful effects.

However, authoritarian regimes have completely different approach to AI. And one particular dictatorship invests a lot into its AI future –the People's Republic of China (PRC). From 1984-like security measures, to making up for labor force shrinking, to replacing unreliable and uncontrollable human factor in governance and military. AI is the electrification that can make all the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) dreams come true. And we should be worried.

> **GAMES WERE ITS FIRST MAJOR FIELD, AND THE FIRST AI BEAT THE WORLD CHESS CHAMPION GARRY KASPAROV AT HIS OWN GAME ALREADY IN 1997.**

The magic box

For all the recent craze, AI is nothing new. Turing (hence Turing Test) and others created the concept already in the 1940s and 1950s. The field was officially founded in 1956. Moreover, most of us have interacted with AI long before the new gold rush. Games were its first major field, and the first AI beat the world chess champion Garry Kasparov at his own game already in 1997. However, this was a supercomputer, technology still relying fully on algorithms (designed tasks), even with large computing power. So, what is this new trend?

IBM, one of the largest multinational tech company, defines AI as «technology that enables computers and machines to simulate human intelligence and problem-solving capabilities». The main difference, however, is that the new AI relies on machine learning, where algorithms are only used for the information gathering using generalising data. When prompted to create output, the AI platform takes criteria from what it learnt, weighs them and creates output dependent on the quality and depth of the consumed data. The process is mostly approximation and unlike traditional software, in its details (i.e. how the system came to exactly this conclusion) is not entirely understood by its creators. The technology has been used in the form of weather apps, virtual assistants like Siri, analytical software, or any kind of autonomous function in a vehicle.

AI has been improving due to advancement in hardware and software operating faster with bigger datasets, thus increasing the scopes of possible learning for the AI platforms, while increasing their computing power. However, it is the generative AI what has been making the headlines. ChatGPT, OpenAI's 2022 platform, where GPT stands for Generative Pre-trained Transformer is probably the most (in)famous example. These models feed large data sets to large artificial neural networks (mimicking the structure and operations of neural connections in biological brains) to give them the capacity to answer prompts. These requests or questions can range from providing data to creating images and sound.

> STANDARD INTELLIGENCE TESTS PUT CHATGPT AT SOMEWHERE BETWEEN 100 AND 130 IQ, CERTAINLY NOT A GENIUS MAGIC BOX THAT WILL TAKE OVER THE WORLD AND TAKE REVENGE ON THE HUMANITY FOR MAKING IT DRAW OBSCENE PICTURES.

But is the AI going to take over the world like in the *Terminator* or *Matrix* series? Well, not exactly. The current stage of AI is nowhere near a human's capacity, especially when it comes to encountering new situations. It is limited to its data sets and –quite literally– cannot think out of the box. AI is, however, useful at automatization of menial and basic tasks that its engineers train it to conduct. This can be anything from manufacturing cars to searching or sorting data.

Standard intelligence tests put ChatGPT at somewhere between 100 and 130 IQ, certainly not a genius magic box that will take over the world and take revenge on the humanity for making it draw obscene pictures.

Outsourcing the human factor(y)

But AI can kill and affect human lives in both positive and profoundly negative ways. This happens especially when we outsource the human factor in decision making to a machine. Not only this dehumanises the process itself, but makes any output «scientific», somehow magically reliable. Furthermore, humans avoid the ethical dilemma by outsourcing responsibility and accountability to a machine. This is an ethical quagmire.

And nowhere is it as deep as in military and law enforcement use. An Israeli-Palestinian investigation from this April found that the Israeli army used a system called Lavender, which «marked tens of thousands of Gazans» as viable targets for military strikes. Sources cited by the report stated that two weeks into the stage of the Israeli-Gazan conflict that began in October 2023, the army approved the «kill lists» generated by Lavender, despite its previous status as a mere «auxiliary tool». The system has a 90% accuracy in «identifying an individual's affiliation with Hamas», which was deemed sufficient for the army to treat such recognition as a kill order «with no requirement to independently check why the machine made that choice or to examine the raw intelligence data on which it is based». The sources stated that many of these targets generated by AI were killed in their private homes, leading not only to killing people with no ties to Hamas, but also massive amount of collateral damage. This is likely the reason behind a massive death toll of the ongoing stage of the war.

> **« UKRAINE HAS BEEN TURNED INTO AN AI LAB BY WESTERN TECH COMPANIES. AI TOOLS HAVE ASSISTED UKRAINIAN OFFICIALS IN IDENTIFYING ALLEGED COLLABORATORS WITH THE INVADING FORCES. AI IS HELPING THE MILITARY TO OPTIMISE TARGETING AND RISK ASSESSMENTS FOR STRIKES.**

Ukraine has been turned into an AI lab by Western tech companies. AI tools have assisted Ukrainian officials in identifying alleged collaborators with the invading forces. AI is helping the military to optimise targeting and risk assessments for strikes. Ukraine is experimenting with basic drone AI, in order to limit the damage caused by communication jamming (standard drones cannot function without constant tasking by its operator, usually communicated through radio signals). But again, this use generates ethical issue. Who is responsible for the inherent mistakes in target selection?

The risks of using AI for military purposes is something that an initiative led by the US and the UK is attempting to address. A November 2023 declaration (here in Spanish) signed by 31 countries states the need for «a principled approach to the military use of AI» and minimisation of «unintended bias and accidents» by ensuring transparency of such AI systems and creating safeguards to prevent malfunction-generated killing of innocents and undue escalations.

The bias is a major problem as AI was found to amplify classic human biases, such as racial or sexual through its generalising nature. A 2016 [investigation](#) by ProPublica, a US-based media outlet, found that AI used to predict the risk of future crimes in prosecution, was biased against African-Americans, giving them much higher risk scores than comparable white defendants. A recent *Nature* [article](#) concludes that AI generates racist and sexist output.

Apart from security forces abusing AI (including in facial recognition), another theme is prominent in the debate on the increasing use of this technology –social justice. If the impact of AI and Internet of Things will truly be as profound as some claim, hundreds of millions might be replaced by AI and find themselves jobless. In this area, *The Expanse* book series provides a not so unimaginable future –almost everything is created by some form of AI, while the majority of Earth's population lives in poverty, entirely dependent on social benefits.

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Brave New World

Contemporary China is often likened to the state of *1984*. People often imagine a world full of cameras, constant, soul-crushing surveillance and random restrictions intended to isolate the individual and make them feel crazy. While the modern Chinese society bears some resemblance to the fascist dictatorship –pretending to be socialist– that George Orwell described, another two decades older dystopian book might be closer to how (especially Eastern) China feels nowadays.

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* tells a story of a strictly hierarchical society with major differences in the life of lower and upper castes. Especially the upper strata are kept in line with state-sponsored consumerism and clear examples of what is correct and favored in life choices. It is easy to be a conformist and a reader might be tempted to think that the lives of some of the main protagonists might be worth the lack... of freedom. Freedom in politics and freedom in individual life choices.

While, arguably, Chinese society allows for individual life choices, there is still strong pressure from the state trying to impose its morality in many ways beyond what can be observed in even the more conservative-minded democratic states.

However, it is the other part of the book that fits well here —convenient consumerism intended to limit the desire for political freedoms. When everything is just an app away, modern, fast, and affordable, why would a modern materialist person care about the lack of suffrage and legitimate representation?

Xinjiang – China section *1984*

But not all parts of the Chinese dictatorship are all consumerism and fun. The Orwellian model certainly applies in some cases and in some areas.

> **THE CAMERAS, THE POLITICAL POLICE, THE THOUGHT CRIMES, THEY ALL EXIST BEHIND *THE BRAVE NEW WORLD* MODERN CONSUMERIST VEIL WHEN YOU ENDANGER POLITICAL SECURITY, A COMMUNIST-SPEAK FOR THE REGIME'S OWN SECURITY.**

As mentioned above, the best place to nurture materialism in China is the East, given its development and the presence of the elite strata that needs to be catered no matter what. However, once you venture beyond the ambiguously defined political red line, the Orwellian fascist state quickly emerges in your personalized version. The cameras, the political police, the thought crimes, they all exist behind the *Brave New World* modern consumerist veil when you endanger political security, a Communist-speak for the regime's own security.

Uyghurs, a majority Muslim Turkic nation occupying the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in Northwestern China, have been target of massive CCP persecution in two periods. First, during the 1960s Cultural Revolution, when anyone too different from the norm was considered a counter revolutionary. Religion was backwards barbarianism and Uyghurs —closer culturally to Uzbeks than Han Chinese[1] and geographically all too close to the hostile Soviet Union— were a prime target.

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1   Han is the major ethnicity in China, amounting over 90% of China's 1.4 billion population.

The persecution and suspicion stopped after Mao died in 1976 and the revolution with him, but only for a while. The 80s and 90s saw a mass of immigration from inner Chinese provinces and the Uyghurs only entered into a new phase of repressions –mixed in with colonialism. This phase would eventually evolve into a state-induced genocide.

Beijing ignored Uyghur calls for true autonomy and social justice. Instead, it exploited ethnic tensions stemming from its colonial practices, and ramped up security measures and social control. The violence and anxiety spiraled especially after the US War on Terror gave the CCP the ideal excuse to persecute the Muslim minority through its own People's War on Terror. Except the actual terrorism was mostly done to the Muslims.

> **THE REAL 1984 BEGAN IN 2014. PEOPLE STARTED DISAPPEARING AT NIGHT. PRAYING BECAME A CRIME. STUDYING RELIGION BECAME A CRIME. BUYING TOO MUCH OUTDOOR GEAR EARNED YOU A POLICE VISIT.**

The real *1984* began in 2014. People started disappearing at night. Praying became a crime. Studying religion became a crime. Buying too much outdoor gear earned you a police visit. Anything vaguely associated with being a stereotypical Uyghur Muslim made you a terrorist suspect. Police stations became so omnipresent that Uyghurs lives were confined between two police checkpoints, in some places restricting their movement completely. In the end millions ended up in concentration camps, reeducation centers, prisons or... dead. This is the Cultural Revolution 2.0 –silent, slow, without the spectacle but much more effective at destroying «backwards» and suspicious cultures.

But it was the technological aspect that gave Xinjiang the true Orwellian nature. Apart from facial and gait recognition surveillance systems controversially used elsewhere, China employed something special in the region. IJOP –or Integrated Joint Operations Platform– was employed early on in the post-2014 genocide, and reverse-engineered by the Human Rights Watch (HRW) in 2019. HRW found that the policing system used personal data obtained illegally (even by Chinese legal standards) through constant surveillance of «everyone in Xinjiang» to identify, detain and prosecute terrorist suspects. The IJOP was «monitoring every aspect of people's lives» once they were found suspicous,

for example when they «stopped using smart phones», failed to «socialise with neighbours» and «collected money or materials for mosques with enthusiasm.» IJOP's output would require security forces to restrict people's movement through checkpoints and even in cases where humans previously found a suspect innocent, repress an individual based on IJOP's magical assessment. Which was based on extreme biases and generalisations —what human rights advocates warn against in the rest of the world.

China's AI dream

However, in China, only few protest against the security applications of AI. Not only because it is near-impossible to stage any serious anti-government protest, but also because large segments of the population appreciate much of it. Especially when it comes to the Uyghur «terrorists». Private companies were boasting about their AI platforms' capacities to spot them even in Beijing —technology they even patented. And the state invests a lot into its AI sector, which is the world's third largest.

> « **FOR THE CHINESE STATE, SECURITY AND POPULATION CONTROL IS KEY AND THIS STILL REMAINS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT TOOLS TO KEEP EVERYONE IN CHECK.**

Out of the country's 15 billion USD spent on AI, up to 50% goes to computer vision, used for automated surveillance systems. For the Chinese state, security and population control is key and this still remains one of the most important tools to keep everyone in check. Again, China can become Orwellian quickly when you threaten political security.

But what some call «techno-authoritarianism» is not limited to ensuring everybody follows the law and does not protest. The CCP uses AI to optimise its bureaucracy, in order to guarantee basic material standards for its citizens. Furthermore, corruption and inefficiency of officials has been a major problem of the dictatorship. Prior to Xi's rise to power, the distrust between central government and local officials often led to separate data collection, and similar duplicating efforts. Now, even Party-state cadres and their work activities are closely monitored. Limiting the human factor is purely good in the Party's view.

Limiting the human factor is the goal also in military affairs. According to a 2023 [report](#) by a Singaporean scientist focusing on Chinese military and security, the PRC military «thinkers envision future wars as conflicts between unmanned weapon systems operating autonomously with limited interference from human operators.» They argue that human decision-making should only dominate the strategic level, where AI would be limited to an advisory role.

Furthermore, automatisation and robotisation may be the only solution to China's looming demographic crisis. The country's population [dropped](#) for second year in 2023, this time by 2 million people. But unlike Western countries, China cannot treat the aging of its population and lack of workforce with immigration. Foreigners have very limited rights in China and citizenship can normally be awarded only to children of Chinese nationals. Thus, as of 2020, the country [hosted](#) only 1.4 million immigrants, with 40% from Taiwan, Hong Kong or Macao. If Chinese economy is to remain stable and sustain the Brave New World-style system, it must replace human workers with machines.

> **« EVEN IF UKRAINE IS THE AI LAB FOR WESTERN COMPANIES, IT STILL CANNOT COMPARE TO WHAT HAS BEEN XINJIANG FOR CHINESE TECH COMPANIES. ACCESS TO COMPLETE DATASETS ABOUT THE LIFE OF THE REGION'S 26 MILLION RESIDENTS, ALL AVAILABLE FOR EXPERIMENTING AND INNOVATION.**

Communism is scientific, unlike ethics

While China may lack in innovation and technology compared to the Silicon Valley, Chinese companies have two major advantages —the amount of data available and the lack of the ethical boundaries. Already in 2017, the government identified AI as a major tool for building up its strength and capacities in the Developmental Regulations on a New Artificial Intelligence Generation.

Even if Ukraine is the AI lab for Western companies, it still cannot compare to what has been Xinjiang for Chinese tech companies. Access to complete datasets about the life of the region's 26 million residents, all available for experimenting and innovation. Additionally, the state provided the private companies with large subsidies to build and maintain the AI-powered internment camp that is the region. Uyghur Geno-

cide is what made China the top exporter of surveillance equipment, especially AI-power systems like facial recognition cameras.

And the lack of ethical standards is not limited to surveillance. In 2018, a Chinese biophysicist announced that he genetically modified two children. International pressure made Chinese authorities detain and sentence him to three years, but he is now back working in genetics. However, China conducted genetic experiments on human embryo as early as in 2015. It is likely it will continue doing so, as the technology can improve humans. And the CCP sees humans mainly as a resource.

The democratic burden

The Western model of governance is not ideal. Neither is liberal democracy. Western states also often abuse their powers and conduct immoral actions. But it is the only system providing space for an open debate. Protests can easily have real impact. Furthermore, Western states have shown almost unique ambition for self-regulation, despite how often they stop at words.

> **UYGHUR GENOCIDE IS WHAT MADE CHINA THE TOP EXPORTER OF SURVEILLANCE EQUIPMENT, ESPECIALLY AI-POWER SYSTEMS LIKE FACIAL RECOGNITION CAMERAS.**

The democratic debate on morality and potential negative consequences of employing ground-breaking new technology is critical. It should prevent major excesses and in cases where we start to play God —such as genetics, or creating robotic minds— it might just be capable to ensure we remain human.

The authoritarian regimes work differently. The goals of China, Russia, and many others, is building up capacities (regardless of morality and potential consequences) and revisionist and imperialistic expansion.

While the world debates safety of genetically modified plants, Chinese scientists have been experimenting on human embryos. While the world discusses privacy issues concerning facial recognition, China has such systems all over the country. While the West is attempting to regulate military application of AI, however declarative it may be, China wants completely autonomous AI systems on the tactical level of warfare.

We should be worried about China's AI capacities, not only because it enhances the powers of the Party-state, but also because it is exporting its population control technology and policy abroad. And a free-thinking person cannot desire to live in a system modeled on the two major dystopian classics. Democracy is key.

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