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China Enacting a High-Tech Plan to Track People

By [KEITH BRADSHER](#)

SHENZHEN, China, Aug. 9 — At least 20,000 police surveillance cameras are being installed along streets here in southern China and will soon be guided by sophisticated computer software from an American-financed company to recognize automatically the faces of police suspects and detect unusual activity.

Starting this month in a port neighborhood and then spreading across Shenzhen, a city of 12.4 million people, residency cards fitted with powerful computer chips programmed by the same company will be issued to most citizens.

Data on the chip will include not just the citizen's name and address but also work history, educational background, religion, ethnicity, police record, medical insurance status and landlord's phone number. Even personal reproductive history will be included, for enforcement of China's controversial "one child" policy. Plans are being studied to add credit histories, subway travel payments and small purchases charged to the card.

Security experts describe China's plans as the world's largest effort to meld cutting-edge computer technology with police work to track the activities of a population and fight crime. But they say the technology can be used to violate civil rights.

The Chinese government has ordered all large cities to apply technology to police work and to issue high-tech residency cards to 150 million people who have moved to a city but not yet acquired permanent residency.

Both steps are officially aimed at fighting crime and developing better controls on an increasingly mobile population, including the nearly 10 million peasants who move to big cities each year. But they could also help the Communist Party retain power by maintaining tight controls on an increasingly prosperous population at a time when street protests are becoming more common.

"If they do not get the permanent card, they cannot live here, they cannot get government benefits, and that is a way for the government to control the population in the future," said Michael Lin, the vice president for investor relations at China Public Security Technology, the company providing the technology.

Incorporated in Florida, China Public Security has raised much of the money to develop its technology from two investment funds in Plano, Tex., Pinnacle Fund and Pinnacle China Fund. Three investment banks — Roth Capital Partners in Newport Beach, Calif.; Oppenheimer & Company in New York; and First Asia Finance Group of Hong Kong — helped raise the money.

Shenzhen, a computer manufacturing center next to Hong Kong, is the first Chinese city to introduce the new residency cards. It is also taking the lead in China in the large-scale use of law enforcement surveillance cameras — a tactic that would have drawn international criticism in the years after the Tiananmen Square killings in 1989.

But rising fears of terrorism have lessened public hostility to surveillance cameras in the West. This has been particularly true in Britain, where the police already install the cameras widely on lamp poles and in subway

stations and are developing face recognition software as well.

New York police announced last month that they would install more than 100 security cameras to monitor license plates in Lower Manhattan by the end of the year. Police officials also said they hoped to obtain financing to establish links to 3,000 public and private cameras in the area by the end of next year; no decision has been made on whether face recognition technology has become reliable enough to use without the risk of false arrests.

Shenzhen already has 180,000 indoor and outdoor closed-circuit television cameras owned by businesses and government agencies, and the police will have the right to link them on request into the same system as the 20,000 police cameras, according to China Public Security.

Some civil rights activists contend that the cameras in China and Britain are a violation of the right of privacy contained in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Large-scale surveillance in China is more threatening than surveillance in Britain, they said when told of Shenzhen's plans.

"I don't think they are remotely comparable, and even in Britain it's quite controversial," said Dinah PoKempner, the general counsel of [Human Rights Watch](#) in New York. China has fewer limits on police power, fewer restrictions on how government agencies use the information they gather and fewer legal protections for those suspected of crime, she noted.

While most countries issue identity cards, and many gather a lot of information about citizens, China also appears poised to go much further in putting personal information on identity cards, Ms. PoKempner added.

Every police officer in Shenzhen now carries global positioning satellite equipment on his or her belt. This allows senior police officers to direct their movements on large, high-resolution maps of the city that China Public Security has produced using software that runs on the [Microsoft](#) Windows operating system.

"We have a very good relationship with U.S. companies like [I.B.M.](#), [Cisco](#), H.P., Dell," said Robin Huang, the chief operating officer of China Public Security. "All of these U.S. companies work with us to build our system together."

The role of American companies in helping Chinese security forces has periodically been controversial in the United States. Executives from [Yahoo](#), [Google](#), Microsoft and Cisco Systems testified in February 2006 at a Congressional hearing called to review whether they had deliberately designed their systems to help the Chinese state muzzle dissidents on the Internet; they denied having done so.

China Public Security proudly displays in its boardroom a certificate from I.B.M. labeling it as a partner. But Mr. Huang said that China Public Security had developed its own computer programs in China and that its suppliers had sent equipment that was not specially tailored for law enforcement purposes.

The company uses servers manufactured by Huawei Technologies of China for its own operations. But China Public Security needs to develop programs that run on I.B.M., Cisco and [Hewlett-Packard](#) servers because some Chinese police agencies have already bought these models, Mr. Huang said.

Mr. Lin said he had refrained from some transactions with the Chinese government because he is the chief executive of a company incorporated in the United States. "Of course our projects could be used by the military, but because it's politically sensitive, I don't want to do it," he said.

Western security experts have suspected for several years that Chinese security agencies could track

individuals based on the location of their cellphones, and the Shenzhen police tracking system confirms this.

When a police officer goes indoors and cannot receive a global positioning signal from satellites overhead, the system tracks the location of the officer's cellphone, based on the three nearest cellphone towers. Mr. Huang used a real-time connection to local police dispatchers' computers to show a detailed computer map of a Shenzhen district and the precise location of each of the 92 patrolling officers, represented by caricatures of officers in blue uniforms and the routes they had traveled in the last hour.

All Chinese citizens are required to carry national identity cards with very simple computer chips embedded, providing little more than the citizen's name and date of birth. Since imperial times, a principal technique of social control has been for local government agencies to keep detailed records on every resident.

The system worked as long as most people spent their entire lives in their hometowns. But as ever more Chinese move in search of work, the system has eroded. This has made it easier for criminals and dissidents alike to hide from police, and it has raised questions about whether dissatisfied migrant workers could organize political protests without the knowledge of police.

Little more than a collection of duck and rice farms until the late 1970s, Shenzhen now has 10.55 million migrants from elsewhere in China, who will receive the new cards, and 1.87 million permanent residents, who will not receive cards because local agencies already have files on them. Shenzhen's red-light districts have a nationwide reputation for murders and other crimes.

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