SRHE Society for Research into Higher Education

Surveillance imaginaries among Chinese taught postgraduate students studying in the UK: tools for elicitation and initial findings

Research report

April 2026 – revised June 2026

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Acknowledgements

I would like to wholeheartedly thank my colleagues Nuala Broderick and Elena Moore for their immensely important contributions to the research described in this report. This research grew out of a previous project with Prof Jen Ross of the University of Edinburgh, who has continued to collaborate with me on the issue of surveillance capacities in Higher Education throughout the period of the project and who contributed to paper for the Oxford Research Encyclopedia on Technology and Society described below. I also want to thank web designer Pat Lockley, who has been very generous with his time.

Finally, I am very grateful to the Society for Research in Higher Education for providing the funding that allowed this project to take place and for being patient when life got somewhat in the way.

Executive Summary

This report examines how surveillance practices and capacities in Higher Education (HE) may be imagined, understood and responded to by Chinese taught postgraduate students studying in the UK. Departing from its original goal of directly capturing students' perceptions, the project instead developed a set of context-sensitive tools designed to elicit what Lyon (2017) terms *surveillance imaginaries*: the shared assumptions, expectations and anticipations through which people make sense of monitoring, data collection and institutional oversight. The process of the development of these resources also resulted in the (co-)creation of a set of stories that being the work of directly exploring Chinese international postgraduate students' surveillance imaginaries.

The work is motivated by two intersecting concerns. First, surveillance capacities in HE have expanded significantly in recent years through the widespread use of digital platforms, learning analytics, AI tools and data-driven institutional processes. These developments are not only technical or administrative; they carry with them moral and political implications relating to power, trust, autonomy and the purposes of higher education. Second, existing research in this area has largely been conducted from and explored Western perspectives. There is comparatively little understanding of how students whose prior experiences are shaped by different sociocultural contexts—particularly those in which surveillance is more normalised—may interpret these same practices.

The project therefore focused on Chinese postgraduate students in the UK, a group that is both numerically significant and likely to bring different expectations of surveillance, shaped by histories in which monitoring may be understood not only as control, but also as protection, moral guidance and the maintenance of social order.

Methodological development

As the project progressed, it became clear that directly investigating students' perceptions, even using an approach based on Participatory Speculative Fiction (PSF), required a far more sensitive and contextually informed design than originally anticipated. In response, the project took the time to carefully develop a context-sensitive elicitation methodology.

The PSF process was co-developed with a group of "insider" informants with experience of Chinese educational and cultural contexts. Together, we designed a set of prompts and scenarios grounded in everyday learning situations (e.g. using virtual learning environments, submitting assessments, engaging with AI tools or attendance monitoring systems). Importantly, explicit terminology such as "surveillance" or "privacy" was avoided, reflecting both linguistic limitations and the potential sensitivity of these topics.

The prompt structure directs attention to data generation, access and use through indirect questioning, encouraging participants to construct short fictional narratives. Although the online tool developed for this purpose remains in progress, 15 stories were generated through sustained engagement with informants and are used here as the basis for initial analysis.

Key findings

Analysis of the stories suggests that the imaginaries emerging in this project are strongly shaped by moral and relational narratives that differ in important respects from those typically reported in Western literature.

A recurring trope is that of surveillance as care. Institutional monitoring is frequently understood as an extension of a parental authority that seeks to guide behaviour, maintain order and support individuals. This aligns with broader narratives in which rules and oversight are associated with moral formation and social stability.

Closely related is an assumption that, in the absence of monitoring, individuals may default to undesirable behaviour. Surveillance is thus positioned as necessary for ensuring compliance and protecting the collective good. Stories also reflect a clear sense that there are boundaries governing acceptable behaviour, even when these are not explicitly stated, and that transgressions may carry consequences.

At the same time, these imaginaries are not unambiguously positive. The stories reveal strong currents of anxiety and uncertainty, often linked to perceived opacity in how systems operate. Participants frequently assume that data are not only collected but actively observed and acted upon, leading to heightened sensitivity to institutional signals.

This produces a tension around visibility. In some cases, being seen—monitored, recognised and responded to—is associated with care and protection. In others, the possibility of being watched generates anxiety, particularly when the criteria for judgement are unclear. Conversely, invisibility may be experienced as neglect or abandonment.

A further important finding concerns the ways in which these imaginaries shape behaviour. Several stories illustrate a shift towards performative compliance, where students engage in visible activities (e.g. logging into systems, uploading work) not primarily as part of meaningful learning, but to demonstrate adherence to perceived expectations. This is particularly evident in contexts linked to visa compliance or academic progress monitoring.

The stories also highlight the risks associated with ambiguity and opacity. In the absence of clear explanations, students may infer the existence of “sensitive topics” or hidden

rules, even where none are intended. This has implications for participation, as students may avoid certain forms of engagement in order to minimise perceived risk.

Implications for practice

Although exploratory, these findings have several potential implications for those working with Chinese postgraduate students in UK HE.

First, there is a clear need for transparency. Students may assume that extensive data collection is occurring and that it is being used to monitor and evaluate them at an individual level. It is therefore important to communicate clearly what data are collected, how they are used, and—crucially—what they are not used for.

Second, the findings suggest that being unseen may be as concerning as being surveilled. Opportunities for meaningful interaction with staff, and for being recognised as an individual, are therefore likely to be particularly important.

Third, clarity of communication is essential. Vague or informal language, and unexplained institutional actions, may lead students to infer rules or risks that were never intended. This includes clarity around expectations, processes and the purposes of different systems.

Fourth, expectations relating to behaviours, dispositions or “graduate attributes” need to be signalled carefully. In contexts where rules are understood as moral imperatives, students may interpret such expectations as strict requirements, potentially generating additional stress.

Finally, it is important to recognise that mechanisms such as student voice activities may be interpreted differently. Rather than spaces for critique, they may be seen as opportunities to demonstrate compliance and good citizenship.

Conclusion

This project demonstrates the importance of attending not only to surveillance practices and capacities in HE, but also to the imaginaries through which these are interpreted. For Chinese postgraduate students (and indeed others) studying in the UK, these may be shaped by moral narratives in which surveillance may be understood simultaneously as caring, necessary and potentially anxiety-inducing.

The findings underline the need for culturally informed approaches to teaching, learning and student support, and point to the value of further work using participatory and speculative methods to explore how different student groups make sense of increasingly datafied educational environments.

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, interest in and concerns about surveillance cultures (Lyon, 2017), practices (Beetham et al., 2022) and capacities (Wilson & Ross, 2026) in the Higher Education (HE) sector have grown. Developing alongside related work on aspects of the digitalisation of HE, this body of research has a distinctive character. While it shares interests and concerns with research on data privacy and ethics in HE (see, e.g. Florea & Florea, 2020; Park & Vance, 2021), it goes beyond questions of safety and safeguarding, rights and responsibilities. Like emerging research on platformisation and assetisation in HE (e.g. Jiménez & González, 2026; Komljenovic, 2022; Komljenovic et al., 2025; Noteboom, 2025), it is animated by a sometimes declared, sometimes implied set of *political* questions, including questions of ownership, exploitation and profit, but extending to questions about freedom, subjugation and the changing purposes of HE itself.

Some of this research (e.g. Gourlay, 2024; Ross & Wilson, 2023; Wilson & Ross, 2023; 2025) has explored perceptions of and responses to surveillance practices and capacities among people working in HE, in order to ask questions about whether the increasing availability of surveillance capacities might be re-shaping academic work. Importantly, this work has recognised that our perceptions and responses are shaped not only by what is *known* about a system or environment's surveillance capacities, but also by what is *imagined* and commonly-held anticipations and assumptions – what Lyon (2017) has termed *surveillance imaginaries*. These govern what we believe about the extent and purposes of data gathering and monitoring, the physical and behavioural boundaries that are being policed, and the likelihood that surveillance may trigger actions or interventions. Perhaps not surprisingly, in the anglophone literature, much of this work has been conducted from the perspective of academics working in liberal democratic contexts (see, e.g., Wilson & Ross, 2026 and references therein). However, we might expect not only the deployment and intended uses of surveillant capacities but also surveillance imaginaries to depend strongly on issues of culture, power dynamics and hierarchical structures.

Researchers have started to explore students' experiences of and responses to digital data collection and surveillance capabilities in HE institutions (e.g. Noteboom, 2024; Slade & Prinsloo, 2014). While some have examined international students' experiences of surveillance in relation to visa and immigration policies (Brunner, 2023; Walsh, 2019), there has been little effort to understand the intersection between differing cultural surveillance expectations, imagined surveillance capabilities and students' acculturation and pedagogical experiences.

The project described in this report makes a start on understanding these dependencies. The project chose to focus on students from China because it presents a clear example of a country where social norms and expectations around surveillance differ from the UK

(Ollier-Malaterre, 2023). Chinese students studying in the UK also represent a significant fraction of the large number of international students, particularly at taught postgraduate levels (Bolton et al., 2024; Hegarty, 2014; Meur et al., 2014). Although there are concerns about the financial stability of this situation in the UK (House of Lords, 2023; PwC, 2024), there have been many co-benefits, particularly in increased efforts to internationalise and diversify HE curricula and the value of internationalisation to home and international students alike.

It is important to recognise that students' understandings of and responses to wider learning environments are shaped by prior experiences and social norms, including around surveillance practices. For example, those who have lived in countries with high levels of political and social surveillance, such as China, former Soviet states or authoritarian regimes in South America and elsewhere, may see surveillance as more normal, or more threatening, or both. As Chinese students represent the majority of international (postgraduate) students in the UK (Bolton et al., 2024), their understandings and experiences are important.

The prior experiences and expectations of Chinese students in relation to surveillance cannot be assumed to be the same as domestic students, as surveillance and attitudes towards it emerge from and are embedded in different sociopolitical, historical assemblages. Ollier-Malaterre (2023) describes how surveillance in China is part of the everyday, growing from 'deep historical roots' (p. 1), drawing on 'the most recent technological advances' (ibid.), and conducted in partnership between state and commercial companies. With one for every 12 people, China has the largest number of CCTV cameras per citizen in the world (p. 2). Facial recognition is used to facilitate cashless payments, and there is a government objective to build a universal social credit system. While discourses and narratives around surveillance in the UK and other Western countries are almost always about mistrust and resistance, in China there are strong narratives of protection, moral quality and cohesion (Ollier-Malaterre, 2023).

The original goal was to explore the surveillance imaginaries of adult students from China studying at postgraduate level in the UK and to consider the implications for their acculturation into the UK HE sector. However, as the project unfolded, it became clear that this goal required the kind of sensitive, nuanced and informed research design that could only be co-developed with people with "insider" experience. As a consequence, the project instead developed resources that can be used in the elicitation of surveillance imaginaries in future, alongside a suite of (speculative) fictional stories that were co-created with insider informants during the resource development process.

This report is structured as follows. Section 2 begins with a review of prior research on surveillance in HE and proceeds with a subsection on research specifically focused on surveillance imaginaries in HE. This is followed by a review of a previous study of surveillance imaginaries among Chinese citizens in the broad context of digitally-enabled

surveillance practices employed in China and related prior research. This analysis leads to the suggestion that *morality* is key to the narratives of surveillance that people tell themselves. Because morality emerged as such a central feature, it was important to design data generation processes that were sensitive to this.

Section 3 of the report describes the emergent research design and participatory speculative fiction (PSF) process developed in the project. It includes a description of how input from key informants was combined with the prohibitions, affordances, (cyborg) identities and practices reveal by a disclosive ethics (Introna, 2014) that unpacks the moral and political agency embedded in the surveillant technologies at work in contemporary HE. This was a critical step before designing the prompts and processes used in the PSF, as what emerges in PSF is strongly dependent on the choice of prompts.

Section 4 then presents a selection of the stories generated in this project, alongside analysis highlighting key findings. It concludes with reflections on the stories and recommendations for those working in the HE sector.

2. Background

This section presents background on two key aspects of this project: surveillance practices and capacities in HE, and citizens' narratives of surveillance in China.

2.1 Surveillance practices and capacities in Higher Education

The first step in this project was an exploration of contemporary surveillance capacities and practices within the HE sector. Here, "surveillance practices" is understood in Zuboff's terms, that is, as part of a broader "surveillance capitalism" that 'claim[s] … private human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioural data' (Zuboff, quoted in Laider, 2019). Following Beetham et al. (2022), this reports defines surveillance practices in HE as:

- the rendering of student and educator activities as behaviours that can be 'datafied';
- inequalities of power that exist between data owners/companies and the people whose data are being collected, analysed, managed and shared;
- the insertion and intensification of data-based and data-generating digital platforms into the core activities of universities, and the normalization of vendor-university relationships (which tend to privilege vendor profit-making)

In this report, the term "surveillance capacities" refers to the potentials for surveillance practices that are present within technologies, physical infrastructure and organisations, whether they are acted upon or not. Attention to everyday academic practices suggests that there are many opportunities for extraction-through-surveillance in HE, some harvesting information about and from staff, some from students, others from prospective students and external partners. This report focuses on those that draw in and on students.

Monitoring, and sometimes explicit surveillance, have always been a component of formal education. Knowledge and ability are measured through assessments, results are recorded and progress is tracked, both at the level of individual students and for whole cohorts. In the secondary education sector, additional surveillant activities focus on behaviour and compliance, such as the use of playground monitors and prefects, and also house structures that create a loyalty basis for compliance. It can be argued that in earlier decades, the transition from school to HE involved a decrease in surveillance and an increase in freedom and autonomy. Students experienced a pedagogical shift from tightly defined curricula (whose contents and goals might be stipulated and controlled at the national level) to liberal and critical traditions of scholarship. At the same time, they expected (and were expected) to transition to unsupervised adulthood in both their academic work and private life.

Developments in the first quarter of the 21st century have (perhaps unintentionally) eroded these freedoms (see, e.g., Furedi, 2016; Nybom, 2003; Scott, 2018). HE curricula are more tightly defined through intended learning outcomes, sometimes also at the national level, e.g. through agreed threshold learning outcomes (Schulz et al., 2023). Expectations around progress and feedback are more tightly defined through mandatory formative assessments, the use of rubrics, feedback templates and required rapid turn-around times. Students' academic and personal lives are increasingly supervised and/or governed through attendance monitoring, formative assessment processes, required participation in online forums and increased concentration of housing in specially constructed student residences.

This shift in the culture of HE is both facilitated by and necessitates the spread of monitoring and surveillance. New Managerialist thinking and practices (Deem, 2020) promote the belief that collecting and processing quantitative data will lead to standardised practices, quality control, increased efficiencies and standardised experiences for students. This kind of perspective sees universities as both optimisable systems and competitive actors in a marketplace of academic reputation and students. This has in turn led to the widespread desire to adopt data-driven Business Intelligence practices (Bouwma-Gearhart & Collins, 2015; Guster & Brown, 2012).

As Wilson and Ross (2023, np) described, surveillance practices enrol actors at all levels of HE:

Students' presence and movements in both virtual and physical campuses are increasingly the subject of close monitoring. … The data that allow for surveillance are generated and captured from many sources, including visits to university websites, engagement with institutional learning management systems, assessment submission and outcomes data, library use, extension requests, email traffic, use of software such as Microsoft Teams and more.

For students, there is no option to reject such monitoring and data collection (Wilson & Ross, 2026), as HE is simply not accessible without agreeing to submit oneself to these practices. Equally importantly, universities are rarely transparent with students about what data collection and processing, precisely, they are submitting themselves to.

In their (2022) position paper, Beetham et al. articulated four intersecting types of risk associated with surveillance practices and capacities in HE:

1. Risks is to learners and relationships with learners through the undermining of trust. This type of risk includes various constructions of students that border on stereotypes, such as "students-as-cheats" implied in the design and use of plagiarism-detection systems (Introna, 2014; 2016; Zwagerman, 2008) and "students-at-risk", made on the basis of behaviourist metrics. It also includes the

risk of undermining students' trust in the distinctive critical quality of HE that may be inherent in the reduction of learning to performative online behaviours.

2. Risks to academics and professional staff. Some of these have immediate impacts on students and their experiences of HE. For example, over-reliance on student evaluations of teaching and assessment outcomes in making judgements about individual staff performance or decisions about course and programme provision may limit what experiences are available to students. Similarly, deconstructing academic work into component parts and making it possible for some of these parts to be automated, including task-setting and feedback in personalised learning environments, changes the nature of students' experiences of teaching. Wilson & Ross (2026) also note the automation of processing of students' requests for extensions, which distances them from academic staff and makes it harder for students and their circumstances to be "known".
3. Risks to broader norms of justice through the widespread use of technologies that are created through outsourcing and gig-work, and through embedding of data-extraction-driven technologies.
4. Risks of increasing inequalities as disproportionate harms are experienced by already-marginalised groups, as exemplified by the demonstrated racial bias of facial recognition technologies (Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018).

Since Beetham et al.'s work, the necessity for some surveillance practices has diminished, such as counting building occupancy and remote proctoring that were driven by the social distancing requirements imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, universities do not appear to have reduced their reliance on systems with surveillance capacities or their desire to collect data. At the same time, new technologies have emerged that radically increase the scope of surveillance capacities and shift the balance of extraction to third parties, in the form of generative AI. Since the early phase of Covid-19 and the transitions that were initiated at the time, the majority of research on surveillance in HE has concentrated on the following areas: remote proctoring, Learning Analytics (LAs), platformisation and generative AI tools. Within this, some research has concentrated on surveillance practices directed towards students that aim to ensure compliance with rules and regulations (e.g. visa monitoring and remote proctoring) while other research has concentrated on practices that are sometimes positioned as care (such as LAs).

For those practices employed in the pursuit of compliance, recent research has highlighted the ways these feed into the risks to relationships of trust identified by Beetham et al. (2022). HE has become involved in the policing of international student visa compliance through various surveillance and monitoring mechanisms including class attendance registers and doctoral student check-ins. Despite protestations that this is a new and unwelcome trend (see e.g. Raji, 2022; Walsh, 2019), Brunner (2023) argues

that this is merely the most recent example of HE's involvement in border imperialism. The technologies used in remote proctoring have been subject to significant critique (Barrett, 2022; Coghlan et al., 2021; Giannopoulou et al., 2023; Khalil et al., 2022; Lee & Fanguy, 2023; Shioji et al., 2025) in relation to their construction of fairness and association of pedagogy with authoritarianism (see Lee & Fanguy, 2023 for a somewhat terrifying description of two proctoring systems). Confirming Beetham et al.'s fourth type of risk from surveillance practices (2022), research suggests that such practices are particularly acutely felt by already-disadvantaged groups such as female, neurodiverse and disabled students (Barrett, 2022; Pilgrim, 2024; Shioji et al., 2025).

In contrast, the surveillance capacities of LAs have been put forward as "solutions" to various "problems" since their early development, and are more often presented as technologies through which care can operate. However, several authors have suggested that they contribute to the risk of reducing learning to performativity and so students' trust that they are engaging in a *higher* education. As Gourlay (2024: 1048) notes,

[learning analytics] alters the very ontological status of the student, who unwittingly becomes a digital document … [the student's] being, is in a sense contaminated, by this intervention, and she can no longer exist outside of the baroque entanglements of digital surveillance

The functions and characteristics of LAs are closely related to and overlap with the increasing platformisation of teaching and learning in HE, a process which may also risk the space to discuss sensitive topics. For example, Hamamra, Qabaha and Daragmeh (2022) show how the shift to online teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the suppression of discussion about topics including sexuality, politics and religion, because of a sense of 'multilayered surveillance from the students, parents and online learning centralized management offices'. They conclude that:

Surveillance shatters the illusion of liberation many literacy educators thought they have gained in online education; indeed, the instructors' testimonies highlight their internalization of panoptic surveillance that derails the liberating purpose of education. (2022: 460)

Although as yet a nascent research topic, there has been some attention paid to the nexus between generative AI and surveillance. Generative AI brings new possibilities for surveillance, as a user's questions can be logged, stored and processed to feed the development of generative AI models and tools. It also drives new surveillance practices in universities that have not yet worked out how to deal with generative AI's implications for notions of authorship and originality. At the time of writing (April 2026), I have been unable to find published research that addresses the former issue. In relation to the latter, initial work by Luo (2024; 2025) explores new forms of surveillance enacted by HE institutions in order to ensure that students' work is their own rather than AI-generated.

Luo describes how generative AI is positioned as a threat to originality, continuing a dynamic previously associated with the use of plagiarism detection software. As universities move to require student declarations about their use of AI with every assignment submission, and some demand evidence including chat records, students fear that acknowledging use of AI will result in lower grades.

2.2 From capacities to imaginaries

Taken as a whole, this research on surveillance in HE highlights the multiple ways in which practices and capacities are available, inescapable and increasingly normalised. It also suggests ways that this may undermine liberal models of academic freedom. However, this framing betrays a bias towards value systems that are recognisable as Western, prioritising democracy and autonomy. This was something that I became acutely conscious of in my previous work with Professor Jen Ross (Ross & Wilson, 2023; Wilson et al., 2022; Wilson & Ross, 2023; 2025). This research, which grew out of the activities of the *Higher Education After Surveillance* (HEAS) network[1], sought to explore surveillance *imaginaries*, rather than practices, among educational technologists and academics working with and involved in the roll out of technologies with surveillance capacities. Lyon describes surveillance imaginaries as:

shared understandings about certain aspects of visibility in daily life, and in social relationships, expectations, and normative commitments [which] provide a capacity to act, to engage in, and to legitimate surveillance practices … Surveillance imaginaries are constructed through everyday involvement with surveillance as well as from news reports and popular media such as film and the Internet. They include the growing awareness that modern life is lived under surveillance, that this affects social relationships in many ways (2017: 829)

Imaginaries thus go beyond the practices and capacities to incorporate shared anticipations, expectations, assumptions and norms. To access these, our previous work developed a participatory speculative fiction (PSF) process that used an anonymous online storytelling platform to elicit imaginaries in short story form from participants. (The method and its adaptation to the current project is described in more detail in Section 3.)

Our findings (Ross & Wilson, 2023; Wilson et al., 2022; Wilson & Ross, 2023; 2025) shared the concerns raised in Section 2.1 but with added specificity and a clear illumination of the emotional depth characterising relationships to surveillance capacities. Participants created stories in which protagonists responded to surveillance cultures and practices in different ways, ranging from acquiescence through obfuscation to outright

[1] https://aftersurveillance.net/

resistance, but also including enculturation, embrace and adoption of surveillant practices as ones own. The fears that animated many of the stories we received were about loss and power: loss of control, de-professionalisation and loss of the right to anonymity, but also concerns about the increasing influence of non-academic interests, whether that be private sector, Government or law enforcement, on HE, and the potential for HE's academic purpose to be subsumed by other agendas, including security and wellbeing.

If such feelings and responses are shared widely, then we might expect them to have a profound influence on *students'* experiences of HE, as well as those of staff. As Beetham et al. (2022) and others have cautioned, the erosion trust is a real risk for HE, and if students assume they are operating in a trustless and disempowering environment, it may shape how they behave and what they believe they are expected to do in ways that may undermine aims to develop autonomy and criticality, for example. However, these findings are reflective of the perspectives of HE staff interested and perhaps concerned enough to want to contribute a story to an online platform that presented itself as part of a project investigating surveillance in HE. In addition, although the tool was anonymous, the nature and reach of the HEAS network and the participant engagement activities that we employed meant that it is highly likely that the majority of the stories published on our site originated from participants working the UK or North America. Compelling though the findings may seem to be to frankly like-minded Western academics such as myself, it is important to recognise that these same assumptions, hopes and fears may not be shared by everyone. Students may entertain different surveillance imaginaries to staff. They may be less aware of the surveillance potentials and capacities that Section 2.1 describes; but they may also be less firmly anchored in traditions of privacy and academic freedom that pre-date the rise of the internet, social media and digital capitalism. It is also important to recognise that value systems that do not centre Western democratic traditions operate in many parts of the world.

2.3 Chinese citizens' narratives of surveillance in China

The previous sections summarise research on surveillance in HE They thus paints a picture of the potentially surveillant situations in which students in HE might find themselves. This section turns to surveillance in a different context – that of everyday life in China. This is essential background to any effort to understand what factors are likely to shape the surveillance imaginaries of Chinese students studying in the UK, and thus their expectations of surveillance and their responses to signs that surveillance practices are or may be in operation.

This section presents key findings from the literature about attitudes to and understandings of both surveillance and privacy. A primary source is the interview-based study carried out by Ollier-Malaterre (2023), which explored surveillance imaginaries among adult Chinese citizens working and living in a range of (mostly urban) places.

Ollier-Malaterre identified two key narratives, which she labels as “anguishing” and “redeeming”. It presents a critical appraisal of Ollier-Malaterre’s account, drawing out findings that are most relevant and reframing the analysis to highlight implications for the design of data generation and analysis approaches in the present study.

To understand the factors that shape the narratives that Ollier-Malaterre (2023) describes as anguishing and redeeming, it is first necessary to consider some features of Chinese history. As an ancient and geographically and culturally diverse country, a complete account is beyond the scope of this report. However, it is important for what follows to understand the centrality of the notion of civilisation not merely as an advanced state of social and cultural organisation, but as the ongoing process of becoming civilised. In this understanding, civilisation consists not only of increasing urbanisation, social stratification, and social and cultural administrative structures (Clark, 2005) at the societal level, but also of manners, civility and integrity at the personal level.

There is a strong tradition in Chinese culture that China has a special relationship with civilisation. *Wu-Yue*, or the Five Great Mountains, which form a central part of Chinese historical narrative, are said to originate from the body parts of Pangu, ‘the first being and the creator of the world’ (Xueqin & Mathieu, 2014, 37). In this view, China is thus the location of the origin of the world, making it special within the world. Of course, many other countries and cultures claim forms of exceptionalism, but the mountains also served as the connection of the world to heaven, and thus China is also closer to heaven than elsewhere. Indeed, the mandate of heaven could be understood as a fundamental belief in Confucian China (Zhang, 2026). This narrative has been adapted and adopted in the formation and service of different dynasties and regimes spanning around 3000 years, including being most recently coopted as part of the current “Centre of Heaven and Earth” discourse (Zhao, 2024) through the creation of the eponymous World Heritage site. Its roots, evolution and contemporary meaning are thus complex and not uncontested. However, there is a consistent connection in the Chinese cultural imagination between China and heavenly power, and via that, a particularly spiritual form of civilisation and citizenship. Ollier-Malaterre associates this with her observation that some of her interviewees insisted that ‘China is different, and therefore Western reasoning does not apply … China is the only world that is located under the light of heaven and therefore civilised, the others being left in the dark’ (2023, p. 130).

This persistent sociocultural narrative informs socialism’s presentation of rules and the valuing of rules as part of the pursuit of civilisation. Moral integrity is understood as a ‘core socialist value’ rather than as mere compliance with laws (Cheung & Chen, 2022, p. 1145), and there is a ‘fusion of law and morality in Chinese thought’ (Ollier-Malaterre, 2023, p. 43). Obedience – including anticipatory obedience (Snyder, 2017) – can be made more likely by the prospect of shame created by having one’s misdemeanours made public. As a consequence, integrity is critical for self-esteem. This also suggests an

explanation for the narratives of both resentment and shame that Ollier-Malaterre describes. A generalised sense that non-Chinese people do not know (enough) about and often misunderstand China couples with openly-articulated narratives of national humiliations including invasion and colonial exploitation. It also combines with more suppressed but nevertheless real knowledge of the failures and violences within the system, such as the Great Famine era (Yang, 2023) or the Tiannanmen Square massacre (Lui, 2000), which may be seen as a betrayal of the civilising purpose and trajectory.

At the same time as this dominant narrative of moral civilisation, there is a widespread assumption within Chinese culture that ‘people are calculating individuals and therefore need to be governed via rewards and punishments that are made public’ (Ollier-Malaterre, 2023, p. 43), and that they have ‘poor self-restriction’ (ibid., p. 73). Rules, and associated punishments for transgressions, are thus seen as necessary corrections and controls on these behaviours, and as an inevitable part of social stability: ‘people should be treated as children, with punishment acting as education’ (ibid., p. 62) but also with guidance and the intention of moral formation. Rule-setting can occur at the level of the family unit as part of an act of parental care – and thus other authoritative bodies that are involved in rule-setting and compliance take on a parental role – both civilising and protective. Compliance is thus associated with progress, including economic development (ibid., p. 80).

It is important to note that the rules may not be known and may even be opaque – indeed, it has been suggestion that opacity in relation to rules is an active strategy of the Communist Party (Ollier-Malaterre, 2023, p. 169) – and this can sometimes cause anxiety about whether or not one is keeping to them; but there is also a belief that, because the rules are determined by what is morally proper behaviour, they will only be broken if one is doing something that is morally wrong and that one ought not do.

Surveillance, then, enters “naturally” as part of a rules-based order. In China, it is often seen as an integral part of the paternalism necessary to the effective functioning of the civilising forces described above, part of an open and widespread attempt to instil, maintain and promote both civic virtue and consciousness of virtue (Creemers, 2022). As well as contributing to the positive building of civilisation, progress and trust, surveillance is also positioned as a way to predict and so prevent or mitigate security risks, thus benefiting society by increasing stability.

The practice of authorities keeping files on particular individuals dates back to the Han dynasty, which developed a system for recording the personal information, activities, rewards and punishments of government officials. These were standardised and expanded during the Tang dynasty, made more detailed and elaborate in later dynasties, and began to include photographs as well as written records at the turn of the 20th century. The Communist Party under Mao extended the records to include ordinary

citizens 10 years before the Cultural Revolution, and the new *dang'an* system included personal, academic, professional, political and other information about individuals across the country. Shortly afterwards the *hukou* household register was introduced, which is now used to determine access to housing rights and other benefits on a geographical basis. These records include detailed information including gender, ethnicity, religion, place of birth, place of origin and blood type alongside physical characteristics, marital status, academic qualifications, military service record and so on, and are linked to people's personal ID cards with fingerprints and biometric data (Cassiano, 2019).

Surveillance through the *dang'an* and *hukou* were used as repressive tools under Mao, and are still used as a means of political control and repression in contemporary China (Huang & Tsai, 2022; Xu, 2021), particularly in regions such as the province of Xinjiang, where it is used as part of a programme of ethnic sorting and discrimination against Uyghurs (Leibold, 2020). This is despite a shift from "social management" to "social governance" (Ollier-Malaterre, 2023, p. 41) that accompanied the transition from centrally-planned to market economy. As Ollier-Malaterre points out, this:

required the decentralisation of employment relationships across numerous employers and the trusting of strangers in an impersonal way. This shift disrupted economic relationships in China, which had previously been built around networks of work colleagues and family, in which reciprocal obligations (guanxi) entailed almost automatic trust. (2023, pp. 41-2)

Unfortunately,

Substantial issues emerged, such as firms defaulting on their debts … or not paying migrant workers' wages, frequent product frauds, including a deadly infant milk powder fraud that still traumatises families, and endemic corruption of local governments and entrepreneurs. (2023, p. 42)

These situations, all of which feed into the trope of the naturally ill-disciplined Chinese people requiring moral guidance and correction from an authority, led to a perceived need to find alternative ways of establishing trustworthiness and trustable relationships. In a move that Ollier-Malaterre likens to *buona fama* in Renaissance Europe, this has been one of the causes of and justifications for China's recent experiments with digitally-based, quantitative social credit systems (see, e.g., Creemers, 2018; Liang et al., 2018). These have been explicitly positioned as ways of increasing and validating people's and organisations' trustworthiness, sincerity and reliability for payments or creditworthiness.

Both historically and in the present, top-down, database approaches to surveillance encapsulated in the *dang'an*, *hukou* and social credit systems are accompanied by bottom-up systems. The ancient commune system, which involved groups of families monitoring each others' behaviour and bearing collective responsibility for any crimes,

evolved into well-documented mutual surveillance and reporting during the Mao era. Now, there is a ‘grid management’ system (Leibold, 2020, p. 50), which involves area-based policing by ‘grid captains’ (ibid.) and security officials, grassroots security patrols, gates and boundaries, facial recognition technology and ‘convenience police stations’ (ibid.). Of course, the distinction between top-down and bottom-up becomes increasingly blurred by technological affordances, as security cameras and CCTV feed into facial recognition software and database entries.

Attitudes to surveillance are thus coloured by its entanglement in Chinese society and culture. There are various related cost-benefit analyses to consider, including exposure versus pay-off, as good behaviour may be rewarded just as bad behaviour is punished; intrusion versus recognition, as not being recognised may be an unwanted form of invisibility; and privacy versus convenience, especially in situations where making one’s data available to another organisation leads to the ability to access services seamlessly, as is the case with the highly successful combined social media and commercial service platforms. Indeed, allocation as well as the deduction of points in the social credit system is only possible with monitoring. But material self-interest is perhaps not the key driver for acceptance and even welcoming of surveillant governance. As one of Ollier-Malaterre’s interviewees tells her (2023, p. 73),

Now China has developed into a stage where the material needs are not the priority, we are more focused on the spiritual things … so all kinds of information, from the internet, from people traveling abroad, has helped our people realise that some of our deeds from the past were not good, and made us better in our behaviours

As well as a rules-based, moral order, another strong driver for culturally different responses to surveillance and surveillance capacities is attitudes to privacy. There is no exact equivalent of the single word “privacy” in Mandarin. The term *yǐnsī* is perhaps most commonly used as translation, but it has stronger connotations of secrecy than the English word. Because of Chinese cultural norms around familial, social and communal visibility, secrets are considered more morally dubious than in Western democratic cultures, and thus a desire for privacy, seen as a desire to keep something secret, raises suspicion. Although privacy laws have been introduced in the past few decades (and indeed strengthened following the excessive collection of data by private companies during the Covid-19 lockdowns), these are framed as allowing ‘the tranquillity of natural private persons’ lives’ (Creemers, 2022) which allows for a circumscribed interpretation of what degree of non-privacy might threaten ‘tranquillity’. Indeed, Lu (2005) suggests that when privacy is valued, it is more as an instrumental than an intrinsic good.

One final important factor that influences attitudes to monitoring and surveillance in contemporary China is attitudes to technology and perceptions of its role as an instrument of progress and improvement. Ollier-Malaterre (2023, p. 43) describes ‘techno-positivism’ as a ‘distinctive trait of social governance’:

that is, its framing of technology as the solution to all human problems … Cybernetics and systems theory contends that the scientific engineering of society can trigger self-correcting responses. Blurring the boundaries between state and society and between the public and the private domains nudges citizens to adjust their behaviours. In turn, when everyone conducts themselves in ways appropriate to their position in society, harmony can be achieved. (2023, p. 43)

All of this gives some explanation for data suggesting that concerns about surveillance and privacy are much lower in China than in Western democratic countries (Su, Xu & Cao, 2022). Ollier-Malaterre (2023, p. 31) cites statistics suggesting that 82% of people in China are in favour of CCTV, 60% in favour of email and internet surveillance, and only 9% against widespread use of facial recognition technologies.

Recognising the historical and cultural antecedents described in this section may help to explain Ollier-Malaterre's main findings, which she describes as "anguishing" and "redeeming" narratives of surveillance. These represent descriptions of technology-based surveillance that prioritise rationales that, on the one hand, relate to national and personal humiliations and loss of face, and citizens' personal and collective moral shortcomings; and on the other, turn to the government and technology as civilising and progressing forces. Morality, understood as being of good moral quality, civility, obedience and integrity, is thus the cornerstone of surveillance imaginaries in the Chinese context. This may be contrasted with the centrality of freedom, agency and self-determination that animate the surveillance imaginaries in previous work based largely in Western democratic contexts (see, e.g., Hinchliffe, 2021, Lyon, 2017; Ross & Wilson, 2023; Selwyn, 2022; Wilson & Ross, 2023; 2024; 2026).

Ollier-Malaterre (2023)'s data also suggest an important difference in attitudes depending on whether surveillance could be perceived as diffuse or targeted, and whether benefits and disbenefits are accrued at the level of social or the personal. For example, while there seemed to be high rates of approval of mass surveillance, which can be more easily incorporated within narratives of *national* civilisation and progression, there was less support for being singled out for individual surveillance. Similarly, if information harvested is used for the common good, that was more acceptable than if it is used for personal benefit, particularly for individual financial profit. Going further, it appears that '[v]iewing digital surveillance as a potentially useful principle does not mean that participants accept surveillance at it applies to them personally nor that they live well with it' (p. 179). Indeed, Ollier-Malaterre argues that the high approval ratings for surveillance in China commonly quoted in the literature 'can be understood as respondents' conscious cognitive views on surveillance', divorced from the emotional impacts of being singled out for or exploited by surveillance, and thus that 'they obscure citizens' costly defence mechanisms and unpleasant emotional responses' (p. 268).

This background is crucial for recognising the possibility that Chinese international students studying in the UK may experience and imagine HE's surveillance capacities quite differently to staff who come from or have been habituated to Western liberal norms that view surveillance as instructive and freedom-suppressing by default. As universities develop guidance for e.g. safe online behaviours, data protection, privacy and compliance with plagiarism and generative AI rules, such differences may have a significant impact on how any guidance is likely to be interpreted. Expectations regarding surveillance may also influence willingness to participate in various learning and teaching activities, and the nature of that participation. They may also lead to expectations about how well students are "known", both to specific teaching staff and to the wider institution in which they are studying. These considerations are essential not only to understanding the data generated in this project, but also to the design of methods used to generate those data. The next section describes these processes.

3. Methods and emergent design

This section describes the processes leading up to the generation of primary data. It first outlines the key features of the version of Participatory Speculative Fiction used in this project. It then presents a disclosive ethical analysis (Introna, 2014) of the moral agency of surveillance technologies in HE, which was necessary to determine the characteristics required of the prompts used in the PSF process. Finally, it presents the prompts themselves.

3.1 Developing a PSF process to use with Chinese students studying taught postgraduate courses in the UK

This project initially set out to explore the surveillance imaginaries of Chinese students studying on taught postgraduate courses in UK universities. As will be described in more detail in what follows, the evolving understanding of the project team – myself and my colleagues Nuala Broderick and Elena Moore – meant that our plans evolved over the course of the project. In particular, our growing sensitivity to concerns that our target participation group were likely to have led to a prolonged period of methodological adaption and the design of a PSF process we could use to elicit imaginaries.

There has been growing use of speculative fiction to understand the potential social impact of technological developments on education (e.g. Cox, 2021; Markham, 2021; Priyadharshini, 2019; Selwyn et al., 2020). The fiction-writing and speculation in much of this work has involved researchers, rather than research participants. An earlier project with Jen Ross, described in Section 2.2, shifted authorship from researchers to research participants, drawn from educational technology and teaching staff (Ross and Wilson, 2023; Wilson et al., 2022; Wilson and Ross, 2023; 2025).

Following this work, the current project aimed to use fiction to enable participants to:

avoid relating straightforwardly true or factual accounts – to step away from the confessional or the accusatory, which might feel unfair, disloyal or even risky … [and] to create a space in which stories and representations could side-step these overly-simplistic narratives and allow for more nuanced descriptions, recognising the potential tensions between risks and benefits, different loyalties and priorities, and different versions of right and wrong. (Wilson and Ross, 2023, p. 306)

I intended to model the story-generation / imaginary-elicitation process in the current project on methods I had used in the earlier surveillance work and in a range of other projects using forms of PSF (Wilson, 2024; Wilson et al., 2024; Wilson, 2026). Each of these approaches involved the careful development of a set of prompts, which might be images, objects, questions or initial stories/scenarios.

This approach to both story-generation and analysis is grounded in a perspective that synthesises Deleuzian ideas of assemblage, emergence and immanence (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988) with concepts from social semiotics (van Leeuwen, 2005). This sees stories as contingent assemblages that draw in and connect up a range of cultural, social and epistemic resources, allowing flows of both knowledge and affect. The stories are created by participants in response to prompts which must be carefully selected, as they combine with participants' past experiences and present thinking to create the initial conditions from which stories – characters and narratives – emerge (Wilson, 2024). They are then analysed by the researcher using a form of assemblage analysis (Feely, 2020; Wilson, 2021) specifically adapted for fictions (Wilson, 2024; 2026).

In my previous work on surveillance in HE, the prompts were a set of questions that had been developed following a review of the key issues in studies of surveillance in HE to date. They were explicitly framed around surveillance, and invited participants to consider questions such as what the subjects of surveillance were, who was conducting the surveillance, who might benefit or be disadvantaged and how. As indicated above, there are several reasons why such an approach might not be suitable with students – and particularly Chinese international students – studying in the UK.

First, the focus on staff involved in the use or roll-out of educational technologies with surveillant capacities in other students (Ross and Wilson, 2023; Wilson and Ross, 2023; 2025) meant that participants in these studies were likely to be aware of at least the potential for data collection and use. In contrast, while some students may have access to data-driven dashboards showing records of their access to e.g. Learning Management Systems, many do not. Students may thus be far less conscious of the surveillance capacities of the systems they regularly use. Second, the relative normalisation of surveillance in Chinese society, including its overt practice through both top-down centralised database systems and bottom-up grid systems, is likely to mean that Chinese students may expect and respond differently to surveillance than those from Western liberal democracies. Third, as the review in section 2.3 highlights, a specific type of morality with an emphasis on rules-based order may be central to the surveillance narratives of Chinese students studying in the UK.

To inform design of a context-appropriate set of prompts, input was sort from a series of key informants. These informants were recruited through personal-professional networks of the research team (myself, Nuala and Elena). Nuala's casual teaching roles at various UK universities meant she had extensive experience of working on PGT courses with a majority of international (and majority Chinese) students, plus an extensive network of contacts with recently-graduated students. Elena's experience combined casual teaching roles in a UK university with her "day job" as a teacher of English as a Foreign Language in an FE context, largely to students who had come to the UK as recent migrants, including as refugees. My own previous course leadership of a very large PGT module

with more than 90% Chinese students meant I also had a large network of former students with whom I was still in touch. The institutional context meant some early-career colleagues were also recent graduates of PGT programmes. Following initial discussions within the team, we reached out to our networks to gauge interest in the project. Over the course of nine months, we achieved extended engagement with a group of informants who contributed to the project through structured conversations lasting between 30 and 90 minutes, followed by ongoing sense-checking and, in some cases, story (co-)creation. These included: two early-career academics from China working in UK HE institutions who had also studied at Masters and doctoral level in the UK; one early-career academic with several years experiences working as a tutor on a large PGT programme with predominantly Chinese students and experience of living in a non-democratic country; two Chinese students who had graduated from PGT programmes in the UK and were now studying at doctoral level in the UK system; one Chinese national currently enrolled in a PGT course in a non-UK, anglophone nation; and one adult student learning English in an FE institution who had lived in an authoritarian context before coming to the UK as a refugee. Because of our own experiences, we also considered ourselves to be “insider” researchers with valuable insights.

Initial conversations were used to draw out ideas about surveillance and the language that might be used to describe it, and to explore how readily Chinese PGT students might participate in prompt-driven speculative fiction. It quickly became apparent that the lack of direct cognates for words such as surveillance, privacy and monitoring meant that their explicit use in prompt materials was best avoided. Additional concerns emerged around language proficiency and the need to keep the data-generating activity simple enough to be able to do without detailed instructions. The kinds of real experiences that were shared during these conversations also made it clear that the prompts would need to direct imaginations towards activities and experiences related to learning in HE, to avoid raising concerns that the project was trying to probe experiences of more directly political forms of monitoring and surveillance.

Following these initial conversations, a basic structure was arrived at by the team, using both prompt questions and “seed” scenarios based on typical learning and teaching situations. However, it became evident that the scenarios would need to create spaces where some of the tensions between different value systems might become evident. In order to maximise the potential of this happening, I needed to find a way to make those tensions more visible and to turn them into elements that could be used in stories. It was at this point that I turned to Introna’s (2014) ideas regarding the role of figuration agencies in the moral agency of technologies. The next section describes how I operationalised this idea to help design the prompt materials.

3.2 A disclosive ethics of surveillance technologies in HE: revealing affordances, prohibitions, (cyborg) identities and practices

Collectively, the research into potentially and actually surveillant technologies in use in HE described in Sections 2.1 and 2.2 highlights how deeply embedded surveillant capacities and practices are and continue to become in the 21st century university. It raises concerns that are, at heart, questions of values and morals, and hence have strong political and cultural dimensions. Section 2.3 highlights the centrality of a particular view of morality and civilisation as rules-based to contemporary Chinese thinking. This section analyses the moral agency(ies) of HE's surveillance capacities. This analysis is critical to understanding the design requirements for a participatory fiction elicitation process that seeks to expose the collisions and contrasts between the different value systems that might be in operation. Such collisions are most likely to set up situations in which misunderstandings and tensions may arise for the students that experience them.

A range of approaches that are explicitly designed to reveal the political and ethical agency of surveillant technologies in HE have begun to be developed, including Zomer's (2026) use of a logics framework, Gourlay's (2024) material-documentary literacies approach, Wilson and Ross's (2023; 2024) Deleuzian assemblage approach and Introna's (2014) disclosive archaeology. This section adopts the latter because of its explicit articulation of (cyborg) identities and practices, which can form the basis of the prompt scenarios used to elicit imagined stories. Introna (2014) developed this as a method of analysing the moral agency of technologies, using the example of Turnitin in his original explication of the approach. The method has subsequently been applied to understand the moral and political agency of other sociotechnical systems, including reputation systems (Wilson & De Paoli, 2019) and LLMs (An, 2025). Building on these analyses, the following section sets out the main features and findings of a disclosive archaeology of practices (rather than a single tool/technology) that exemplify surveillance in HE. This approach has an explicit focus on (cyborg) identities and practices as well as agency and power, through use of the concepts of affordances, prohibitions and discourses.

The technologies implicated in the surveillance practices and capacities identified above afford and prohibit a range of practices and experiences. Affordances include the ability to gain knowledge about oneself or another, including tracking study patterns, access to digital resources, physical whereabouts, use of a range of digital systems, academic networks and more. Possession of this knowledge then creates new affordances for teachers and learners such as opportunities to provide and receive personalised and/or responsive advice, recommendations and feedback, security against neglect and security against being lost within or out of the system. This can be compared to the associations

of surveillance with useful, productive and beneficial efficiencies, on the one hand, and practices of care, on the other, described in Section 2.3.

It might also be hoped that surveillance technologies afford fairness and equality of experience. Prohibitions include practices such as copying, misrepresenting the times at which one has worked or submitted work, and states such as privacy, invisibility, absence and anonymity. In this sense, they might also be expected to prohibit free-riding and favouritism. This, again, may be compared with the perception that surveillance is necessary to control a naturally ill-disciplined population.

However, all such claims must be considered alongside concerns that the algorithms in use and/or the data that train them are often themselves demonstrably biased towards certain ideal presentations of activity pattern. As Gourlay (2024) notes, surveillance technologies 'both act as vehicles and drivers of particularly ideological position regarding what constitutes 'good' or even 'ideal' academic performance' (1046) – that is, they encode normative prescriptions of the good academic citizen. Wilson and Ross (2026) suggest they are 'inherently reductive, relying on behaviourist proxies for more complex, private and internal experiences. The risk is that these proxies become more highly-valued than the realities they attempt to measure' (np). There is also a further risk that they define, including for students, what academic work consists of and where its boundaries lie.

The affordances and prohibitions of these technologies thus construct or at the very least promote certain (cyborg) identities and practices, depending on the use-context. For example, as discussed above, Turnitin and remote proctoring construct the cyborg cheat, both enabled and discovered by technology. Further, remote proctoring systems encode critical assumptions about what "good" students do and indeed who they are: quoting Swauger, Shioji et al. 'suggest that algorithm-based proctoring tools tend to expect bodies and behaviors associated with the "ideal student (cisgender, white, able-bodied, neurotypical, male, non-parent, non-caretaker, etc.)" and flag others as suspicious' (2025: 18). Thus, the aim of these technologies is to enforce compliance, and thus "good" students are inevitably also constructed as compliant. On the other hand, LAs and click-logging contribute to the production of the "online learner" (and teacher) as "engaged" (or innovative or vigilant). These (cyborg) identities are underpinned by valorisations of active learning that 'prize student interaction, and observable engagement, both online and in the face-to-face setting' (Gourlay, 2024: 1039). They thus produce (cyborg) practices: 'the engaged student is one who is always logged on, always clicking and swiping and posting, always directing their attention to the screen' (Wilson & Ross, 2026).

Turning to the final element of a disclosive archaeology, these affordances, prohibitions, identities and practices are entangled with a set of discourses, in particular in relation to trust. Together, they suggest that

trust is so fragile that we are safer if we rely on technology-based discrimination and judgement; that academic work and study are in need of policing; and that omniscience is a requirement for the success of that policing. These discourses of trustlessness and control are in symbiotic relationships with dictatorial notions of authenticity and transparency, which together result in the normalisation of permanent visibility and constant availability. Together, they result in discourses that prioritise closed feedback loops as both measurements of performance and accountability (SETs and the "you said, we did" response), and that position openness and unfinishedness as states to be avoided. (Wilson & Ross, 2026)

The promotion of the avoidance of trust 'ultimately reinforces the problematic assumption that educational fairness is an individual or interpersonal matter of responsibility and morality' (Lee & Fanguy, 2022, 486).

This analysis of the affordances, prohibitions, (cyborg) identities, practices and discourses that constitute surveillance practices and capacities in HE discloses a potentially powerful moral agency that may shape the experiences and understandings of students immerse in the systems that support them. It also lends itself to the construction of the prompts that might be used to elicit surveillance fictions. The best chance of revealing the places where Chinese PGT students' experiences of UK HE might be disrupted or distorted by their surveillance imaginaries were likely to be those in which the values systems enacted by the technologies were in tension with Chinese cultural and moral values. The following section presents these prompts.

3.3 The resulting story-generation prompts and web design

The seed scenarios presented below were designed both to reflect common teaching and learning experiences where surveillance might be possible and to enrol the prohibitions, affordances, (cyborg) identities and practices described in Section 3.2. Initial versions of some of them were shared within the team and with key informants, further refined, and shared again with those who were willing/able to provide more time. During this process, a suite of initial stories was co-created with input from the key informants.

The web-based tool used in the *Data Stories* project was adapted to incorporate this new prompt structure (questions plus scenarios) and the different intended user group/audience (Chinese and other international postgraduate students). The final form of the prompt materials was a set of 20 scenarios that could be browsed or randomly selected, and a set of common prompt questions that participants could respond to about their selected scenario, or about any other starting scenario of their own making. The prompt questions were worded so as to direct attention to possible data collection without using emotive words such as surveillance:

- What information, data or digital traces are or might be generated in this situation or interaction?
- Who might have access to them?
- Is anyone or anything recording what is happening? If so, who or what?
- What might the information, data or digital traces be used for?
- What might happen if there is a failure or breakdown in recording the information, data or digital traces?

The seed scenarios are presented in Table 1.

Learning and teaching context	**Seed scenarios**
Using Office 365	Yuxuan is enrolled in a Masters programme at a UK university. He has been at the university for just over a month. The first graded assignment of the programme is due in two weeks, and he has decided to ask his seminar tutor for help. He logs into his university's Office 365 account, navigates to Outlook and composes an email. As soon as he hits send, he worries that perhaps his tone was too informal …
	Ting's dissertation supervisor told her that she needs to spend a few hours a day working on her dissertation to meet the first draft deadline. He advised her to do all her work on the university's OneDrive system because that way it gets backed up, and if she

	shares a file with him, he can give feedback on it directly. Her dissertation is an extended literature review therefore she must read a lot. She's feeling stressed and is finding it difficult to focus, so hasn't done any reading or writing for a few days.
	Yaqin is working hard on her dissertation. She realises she doesn't understand something and needs some advice from her supervisor as soon as possible, but her supervisor is away for a conference. She contacts her supervisor by email using Office 365 and asks for a meeting.
Moodle use (accessing files, discussion forums, etc.)	Yiqin is enrolled on an undergraduate programme in a UK university. One of the courses she is doing at the moment includes some compulsory but ungraded posts on an online Discussion Forum. Yiqin is supposed to make a post of her own and respond to two other people's posts, but she has missed the deadline.
	Lucas is a lecturer in a UK university. He is leading a course for the first time and is very keen to make it engaging. He has adopted a flipped classroom approach and each week, he uploads pre-recorded lecture that he expects his students to watch before they come to class. Fred is now six weeks into the course: he watched the first video all the way through, but since then has only watched the first and last 5 minutes of each one.
Turnitin submission and grades/feedback	Hao has to submit an assignment through Turnitin. The assignment is due in two days, and he has a complete draft. He runs it through Turnitin and receives the similarity report, which highlights a few parts of the text. But the score seems low, so he is happy to go ahead and submit it.
	It's early January and Jiarui has received a notification that the grade and feedback for her final assignment from the previous semester's course is now available. She clicks through to the Turnitin Feedback Studio, where she finds not only her grade, but also feedback against a set of criteria and annotations on the file she submitted. She is confused by one of the comments and sends the marker a message.
ChatGPT or equivalent tools	Original thoughts… analysis… critical thinking… these words were haunting Kai's thoughts. She needs to submit an assignment in a few days. Reading is done, but she has no idea how to start to make her own arguments.
	Amelia has been using MS CoPilot to help her read academic papers by summarising the content, suggesting papers to read on specific topics and simplifying the language.

	Chen works hard, but she feels her English lets her down because her assessors have commented on her grammar and vocabulary. She has no time to improve them because assignments are due in a week.
	Zhi's goal is to become an academic, ideally a university professor in the future. He is doing everything he can to study well including using ChatGPT as a teacher. He asks ChatGPT to provide ideas for assignments.
Library visit (physical or virtual)	Ting's dissertation supervisor told her that she needs to spend a few hours a day working on her dissertation to meet the first draft deadline. He advised her to do all her work on the university's OneDrive system because that way it gets backed up, and if she shares a file with him, he can give feedback on it directly. Her dissertation is an extended literature review therefore she must read a lot. She's feeling stressed and is finding it difficult to focus, so hasn't done any reading or writing for a few days.
	Kexin is in the final stages of a degree in Sustainable Development. She regularly uses both the university library's search function and Google to find books and journal articles to read for her dissertation, which is on young women in rural areas and their access to education.
Attendance monitoring	Li's teacher must take attendance, so they display a QR-code on the main screen. Li has to scan this using her phone.
	Meiyu is unwell. It is a bit challenge to come to class today, but she knows her attendance must be recorded to comply with her student visa conditions.
Using an AI bot to transcribe and summarise a class (e.g. Otter AI)	Lisa is really enjoying the philosophy course she is doing at the moment. She's finding the reading fascinating and her lecturer seems very knowledgeable. However, sometimes she struggles to understand when he is speaking, because when he is excited he speaks very quickly, and he has an accent she is not used to. She has started to use an AI meeting assistant to generate transcripts and summaries of his online lectures.
Using a translation app	Chen works hard, but she feels her English lets her down because her assessors have commented on her grammar and vocabulary. She has no time to improve them because assignments are due in a week. Dongyin is reading one of the journal articles that he has been told to read before the next seminar. It is not familiar with the topic, and there are quite a few words he does not understand. He has been using a dictionary app, but progress is very slow.

Student evaluations of teaching	Yaz has received an email with a link to the end-of-semester student experience questionnaire for a course she has been enrolled in. She enjoyed some parts of the course but didn't like the group assignment. The final assignment for the course is due in a couple of days and she has a lot of work to do for other courses, too. She sighs as she tries to decide whether it is worth filling in the form.
Free	Make up your own initial scenario.

Table 1: the prompt scenarios developed in this project

The original plan was to make the story-generation tool publicly available and multi-language, including instances in English and Mandarin to start with. However, multiple technical challenges prevented the latter, and as the project developed it became clear that until the issues with the website could be resolved, students were likely to perceive it as clunky and user-unfriendly.

At the time of submitting this report, the website remains in development and so has not been made visible publicly. We have continued to discuss the project with our key informants. Without the availability of a fully-functioning anonymous story-generation site, we (Nuala, Elena and myself) felt that the potential power relationships that would be involved if we approached current students might both compromise the stories generated and put students under unintended pressure. Thus, while development continues, stories have been generated with key informants, either through our direct conversations (9 stories) or through independent fiction-generation sent to the project team via email (6 stories). To date, 15 stories have been generated in this way. A selection of these are presented in the next section, each accompanied by a brief analytical commentary. The creators were guaranteed anonymity and so no identifying information is given.

4. Selected stories and commentaries

This section includes selected stories and accompanying analytical commentaries. The stories have been selected because they illustrate a range of different understandings and responses that feed into the recommendations made in the final section.

4.1 Keep on playing

Setting: Digithieves office. Two ‘employees’ are looking at the same monitor.

Wait… What is this?

Not sure.

Oh, look, this is coming from AIchester university…

AIchester university? How is this possible?

Don’t know but look at the IP-address. It’s definitely AIchester university.

Hold on, hold on, yes, you are right. Oh, I see, there might be a pattern. Check for their activity yesterday.

Wait again ... Yes, they played yesterday, and the day before, and last week. Their activity is regular.

Can we get in?

Let me try…

Two hours later

Wow! Just look at this! Employee payslips, research data, university accounts… Marvellous! How is our little friend doing?

James, you are confusing me… They call it ‘malware’. There is so much to gather. AIchester university data keeps on coming…

Don’t stop the process until we get it all. Just think about it – one silly game accessed through the university network, and we are rich! We are going to make millions on this!

Commentary

This story clearly plays into the trope that people will default to bad behaviour if not controlled by guidance and fear of punishment or shame described in Section 2.3. There is an assumption underpinning the narrative that lax morals could have bigger consequences – that is, that individual failure may result in collective harm. There is also an assumption that there are bad actors who are on the look-out for and will take advantage of laxity.

4.2 No more bad kitchen smells

Wellbeing Journal, 12th January 2025

Today I have some good news to share.

As you know, when I first moved into Aspiration House, I had a bit of a problem. Alex, who lives in the same block as me, would keep things in the fridge that smelled bad. Really, really bad smelling things, like the mouldy cheese that English people like so much. And it made everything else in the fridge smell really bad too. And then sometimes he would get them out and cook with them and the smell would escape and get stronger, heated up and mixed with oil. Uggh! I couldn't go into the kitchen at all when he did that.

Anyway, you know this because I have told you before.

Many times.

And then one day the signs appeared. Signs with big, clear messages in capital letters: "Please respect the wellbeing of your fellow residents and avoid foods with strong odours".

I told you then that I didn't think it would make any difference and it didn't. Alex always says his food doesn't smell any worse than mine.

So he kept on buying his mouldy cheese and putting it in the fridge.

And I kept telling you each time he did.

And then today, I came home from studying in the Learning Hub, and there is not only anew sign, but also a new sensor fixed inside the fridge and two cameras mounted on the ceiling, one pointing at the fridge door and one at the cooker.

The new sign says that odour levels are being monitored and that anyone caught being discourteous to their fellow residents by storing and using foods with excessive odour levels will be sanctioned.

Now, I am pretty sure Alex will have to change his ways.

Commentary

This story highlights the importance of food cultures, perceived hygiene and sensory impacts. It conforms to both the notion that some people are more civilised than others, and the narrative trope that being watched reduces bad or uncouth behaviours. It also highlights a confidence that there are caring authorities who will act if you persist in reporting a complaint about the social or moral failure of another.

4.3 A tone of warm concern

Lee could feel she was falling further and further behind with her coursework. Everything had been going OK at the start of semester: her course had clear instructions about what to read and which vodcasts to watch each week, and although some of the articles were hard-going (boring, honestly), the group discussions in her seminars meant she usually left feeling she'd got the key messages, at least. But then the problems with her accommodation started, and things began to go wrong. She had been so worried, she'd not been able to concentrate. She sat in her room with a document open on her screen, but nothing seemed to go in. She'd tried using the screenreader to read things out loud to her but that didn't seem to help; she would start listening then drift off, distracted by her concerns, and find that 15 minutes had passed and she couldn't remember anything that the screenreader had said.

When the first assignment was due, she knew she wasn't going to meet the deadline, so she'd accessed the online form to request an extension. Everyone knew that these requests were processed by a bot, even if the university didn't admit it, and there was a helpful list of key words and phrases that would guarantee a 5 day extension posted on one of her WeChats. So she'd used some of these – 'high temperature', 'severe headaches', 'impacted my ability to study' – and got herself an extra week. But now the week was almost up and she was no further on with the assignment. To be honest, she had no idea where to start. The stress of dealing with her landlord took all her energy and she'd not been reading or even talking to her peers. For the past couple of weeks, even logging into Moodle had become too daunting.

Just then, a message popped up on her screen. It was from one of her lecturers. The subject line read 'Checking in' and the preview showed the start of the message:

'Dear Lee, I'm aware that you have an extension due to poor health, and I just wanted to check how you are'

Lee's cursor hovered over the message as her mind raced through the options. Finally, she tapped the alert and read her lecturer's message. The lecturer had noticed that Lee had not logged into Moodle, but her tone was one of warm concern rather than anger. Lee took a deep breath then hit reply …

Commentary

This story is consistent with the narrative trope of authority as a watchful, caring parental figure described in Section 2.3. It makes clear the entanglement of external and academic pressures, and links feelings of stress and anxiety to a desire for someone to care. It also flags up the transparency of university "innovations" whilst retaining an essential opacity about how to get the care the protagonist needs.

4.4 People who read this also read …

Xi walks into his room in Psi Block. He smiles as he takes a look at the familiar surroundings. He's the only one of peers to have decided to stay for his final year – everyone else moved out at the end of their first or second years, preferring the notional independence that came with living in draughty, damp and poorly-furnished shared houses, flats and bedsits.

Xi knows that his peers think it's a bit odd to want to stay in the student residence, surrounded by all of the first years – he could see some of the sneers when he turned down offers to join a group renting a shared house in the Old Quarter. But he wouldn't swap this room for anything. After all these months, it really knows him. It has learned how to adjusts the temperature, dropping it just the right amount during the night to ensure he gets a good night's sleep. And the simu-dawn, combining birdsong from home with the slow illumination of the walls, is another thing he wouldn't leave. He's not experienced any major episodes of anxiety and he's pretty sure this is because of the room's responses to his heart rate, skin temperature and moisture levels, breathing and so on.

But the thing that really keeps him here is the recommendations. The link-up between the room, the library and the Learning management System means that every day, the room's Voice tells him where he is in relation to the rest of his cohort in terms of reading, task completion and overall progress. Then it suggests what he should do for the day, including reminding him of any classes he's supposed to attend and any deadlines he should be working towards. Best of all, it suggests what media he should access. The simu-dawn disappears from the walls to be replaced by images and texts, and if he feels like it he can close his eyes and ask the Voice to read the text or narrate the visual imagery, or even just summarise the key points. The Voice's recommendations are based on what other students have been reading, not just in his own university but all over the world, in every university that uses the AmazonLibrary system. Xi is confident that as long as he stays in Psi Block, he will never overlook a text that will help him complete his studies successfully.

Commentary

This story illustrates the narrative trope of efficiency that underpins many arguments for the acceptance of digital surveillance – the idea that there is a cost-benefit analysis between privacy and efficiency or ease. It also raises the idea of being subsumed into a space that feels comfortable and personalised, to the point of completely negating the purpose of international study experience. All the signs monitored by the system result in environmental tweaks that keep Xi ever more deeply cocooned and away from the perhaps discomforting experience of trying to settle in a different culture.

4.5 Avoidance of sensitive topics

September 11th, 2024, Moodle, UofNorthville, first post by Qin

Hello Everyone! I am Qin! I am excited to be here and looking forward to this Masters programme. I am grateful for this WebQuest activity which will help establish our reflective learning community.

For my one piece of advice that I would like to share: we should all work hard!

The advice I would like to receive: where can I buy a good rice cooker in this city?

[This post received 227 replies, breaking all records for interactivity on UofNorthville's Moodle discussion forums.]

November 27th, 2024, email exchange between Qin and Dr A

Dear Prof A, I have been preparing for the course assessment by carefully going through the Moodle activities and resources, as you have advised us. I have seen that my first post on the Moodle forum and all the replies to it have disappeared! I wondered have I made a mistake when I am looking for it?

Dear Qin, don't worry, your memory is correct. I deleted this thread as part of a clean-up of the forums in advance of the External Examiner getting access to the site.

November 27th, 2024, WeChat group post from Qin

Hey everyone – I think I accidentally talked about a subject that is sensitive for UofNorthville. Prof A deleted my post when I asked about rice cookers, and all the replies as well. She said it was part of a clean-up operation! I never thought this could be a problem but now I don't know what to do – I am really scared, I don't know what the consequences might be. But maybe we should all avoid talking about this from now on?

Commentary

This story illustrates how unintentional messages might be read by students trying to decode vagueness, which might be seen as deliberate opacity. It conforms to the narrative trope that there exist sensitive topics (see 2.3) – categories of things cannot even be mentioned, let alone critiqued, and that there may be no obvious logic or reason behind this but the consequences of transgressing may be serious.

4.6 Graduate attributes

I am worried that I will not be allowed to graduate.

The University of Middle City, where I study, has four Graduate Attributes – the fours Cs, Creativity, Collaboration, Compassion and Confidence.

I know I must develop and demonstrate these before I graduate.

I think I am a little bit Creative, sometimes, at least. I make cards to send to people and people are usually glad to receive them.

I am not so sure about Collaborative – I really don't like when we have a group assignment, I always end up doing most of the work.

I guess I am Compassionate – I felt so bad when my friend thought he was going to fail an assignment, and that is why I helped him write it.

But I am not confident, especially not about being Confident.

Commentary

In this story, the protagonist is so used to being metricated that they assume that they must demonstrate outcomes if the educational environment asserts them as outcomes. In this case, the university has a set of graduate attributes that include outcomes that might be both difficult to measure and indeed impossible to achieve as permanent attributes in all situations and contexts. The implication is that HE institutions may need to be very careful of what they signal to students about expected behaviours and dispositions.

4.7 Through a lens, darkly.

Huimin loved her course, her fellow classmates, and just being at university in the UK. Her supervisor — whom she always addressed in emails as 'Dear Supervisor,' no matter how many times she told Huimin to call her Angela — was warm, friendly, and took a real interest in her. It felt almost like friendship. Which was why, at times, the weight of responsibility to get things right, often led to feelings of anxiety for Huimin and she sometimes missed deadlines and delayed having meetings with her.

Then came the email.

'Hi Huimin, I've submitted a Cause for Concern form as we've missed a few milestones. It's just university protocol. I want to make sure you're supported – you might need an extension to your submission deadline in August, so it's good to have some evidence now. But I do need you to send me the two draft chapters, we discussed, as soon as possible. I need to see your progress.'

Another email arrived—this time from a compliance officer:
'You have been flagged. You are required to attend a visa engagement meeting. Please be prepared to provide evidence of your academic progress.'

She began to panic. Was her supervisor's Cause for Concern form shared beyond the course admin? Were their conversations—about homesickness, about feeling overwhelmed—now part of some invisible system that determined her right to remain on her course?

In their next meeting, she asked her supervisor, 'What exactly goes into the form?'

The supervisor looked uncomfortable. 'Just basic observations. Missed meetings, lack of submissions. It helps the university to show UKVI that we're monitoring your engagement and progress.'

Huimin started to behave differently. She logged in every morning, even when she had nothing to do. She uploaded fragments of writing—half-formed ideas, just to show she was working. She replied to emails within minutes. Her day became a performance of activity, of visibility, shaped by the possibility that someone, somewhere, was watching — not with interest, but with an agenda. She didn't know what counted as enough, only that falling behind meant being reported and flagged.

In her meetings with her supervisor, she smiled, said she was fine. She submitted rushed drafts just to keep a trail. She didn't mention her feelings of despair, or how her work felt disjointed and rushed.

It wasn't about learning anymore. It was about not being flagged.

She didn’t feel unseen. She felt too seen but not known or understood.

The system didn’t really know her name, only her logins. It didn’t read her drafts, only time stamps. It didn’t ask why she missed a deadline, only recorded that she had.

And in that system, there was no space to explain, no one to ask why she was struggling — only whether she met the requirements.

She realised she wasn’t writing to express ideas anymore. She was writing to remain.

Commentary

This story expresses a concern with visa monitoring and security. However, perhaps its most important characteristic is the way it signals how an expectation of a parental authority might lead to the interpretation of a friendly tone and perhaps a desire not to scare a student with harsh words as signs that the student is nowhere near transgressing a boundary. As a consequence, the moment of boundary-crossing and the action the actions that triggers come as a shock and a cause for a substantial shift to performative obedience to rules.

5. Discussion and early recommendations

The stories included above, along with the others generated to date in this project, illustrate a range of narrative tropes that are consistent with the narratives of striving for good morals and civilised behaviours highlighted in Ollier-Malaterre's (2023) study. These include assumptions about:

- a caring form of surveillance being exercised by a parental authority that aims to shape the good behaviour of individuals;
- a caring form of surveillance being exercised by a parental authority that aims to maintain order and stability;
- the ill-discipline of people if they are left unmonitored or unguided;
- the existence of boundaries;
- the potential for punishments or other negative consequences when boundaries are transgressed;
- the reality of some kinds of bottom-up as well as top-down surveillance.

These tropes offer a significant contrast to the kinds of concern about loss of privacy, threats to autonomy and threats to freedom that animate the surveillance imaginaries among staff in HE described in previous work (Ross and Wilson, 2023; Wilson and Ross, 2023; 2025).

The stories also suggest that it is best to understand visibility, like privacy, as a distributed, networked practice (Marwick & boyd, 2014). In many stories, concerns about invisibility are as profound as those about visibility, and both are enacted as unstable characteristics in a networked assemblage of human and technological agents.

Of course, it is important to note that because the original aim of this project was to explore the ways Chinese PGT students in the UK might imagine, perceive and respond to surveillance practices and capacities, and so the stories included above are those that most closely reflect the themes emerging from conversation with key informants from China.

The stories are also interesting in their omissions. The stories do not describe the kind of physical surveillance that sees its most egregious examples in remote proctoring, and that formed a powerful current in the prior research cited above. This may be because of the much less frequent use of exams, and so less obvious need for remote proctoring, in postgraduate contexts.

Despite the inclusion of seed scenarios based around use of generative AI, only one of the stories created to date picked up on those scenarios. This story was created by authors with experience of Russian, rather than Chinese, forms of surveillance and

discipline, and so has not been included in this report. Indeed, the widespread concerns about threats to and changing valorisations of essentialist notions of authenticity and originality are absent from the stories. It will be interesting to see if these emerge if and when new stories are generated.

5.1 Early recommendations

Because the story-generation tool is still being developed and is not yet open to public use, the stories generated to date are unlikely to cover all the surveillance imaginaries entertained by Chinese nationals studying at postgraduate level in the UK. However, taken in the context of the analyses presented above, they do highlight some important issues that should be considered in relation to these students' adaptation and acculturation to the UK HE context.

The following observations and associated recommendations can be made to academics and professional services staff responsible for supporting students through their studies in the UK.

1. Many of the stories generated in this project are animated by profound currents of anxiety and insecurity. This will probably not be surprising to academic and professional services staff, but it is important to acknowledge this as a backdrop against which curriculum and assessment and student learning support activities are designed.
2. It is likely that some students will assume that someone is not only gathering data about them, but also actually paying attention to it. It may therefore be important to be transparent with students not only about what data are collected about, e.g., attendance, library use, and LMS use, but also the uses to which it is put and, importantly, *not* put; the unit of analysis in data processing (i.e. statistical or individual) and consequent actions (i.e. whether data might trigger interventions at the level of the individual or whether it is simply used to generate cohort level reporting).
3. Feeling completely unseen and unattended to may be more scary for some students than feeling watched. It is easy for students to feel invisible and unknown, particularly when they are part of a large cohort on a one year degree. Opportunities need to be offered for students to develop meaningful connections with staff, who may be seen as fulfilling a parental guidance role.
4. Students may seek a certain lack of privacy in order to be able to demonstrate compliance with rules as a signal of good morals and citizenship. The provision of opportunities to do this may help reduce anxiety.

5. The use of class reps and student voice activities may be seen as opportunities to demonstrate compliance and good citizenship rather than spaces for open critique. This needs to be borne in mind in both the design of such activities and the analysis of any data they generate.
6. Imprecise, vague or colloquial language and opaque reasons for particular actions may mean students infer rules, boundaries and potential transgressions where there are none. Clarity and transparency are therefore essential.
7. Expectations about the development and assessment of e.g. graduate attributes or particular dispositions and values need to be set very carefully and transparently. Because a duty to meet expectations regarding good behaviour is deeply embedded in Chinese culture, if expectations are signalled, students may try hard to meet them. This may result in additional levels of stress and anxiety if those expectations are impossible to meet.
8. The importance of the family unit in Chinese culture, including as a site for the setting of rules and the exercise of care through mutual abidance of rules, may mean that for some Chinese students, the act of leaving home may be significantly disorienting. Rather than necessarily seeking independence-as-freedom, some students may actively look for and expect mutual abidance of rules as a sign of care and respect. This may have important implications for expectations around shared spaces such as student residences, libraries and other learning spaces. Induction activities may be designed that surface these assumptions and allow an explicit intercultural dialogue to develop.
9. Rules may be understood as expressions of expected civilised behaviours. A lack of explicitly articulated rules may thus be interpreted as signals that the things they govern do not matter, rather than as opportunities for autonomy. Care may be needed in signalling when students are being given the opportunity to set their own boundaries.

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