

**CSCC Podcast Ep. 23:
“China’s Domestic Security Under Xi Jinping – Sheena Chestnut Greitens”**

Introduction:

Welcome back to the podcast of the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for the Study of Contemporary China. I’m your host, Neysun Mahboubi, and in today’s episode you’ll hear my conversation, on the topic of China’s Domestic Security Under Xi Jinping, with Sheena Chestnut Greitens—a leading expert on the politics of domestic security in Asian countries, who is now a professor of political science at the University of Missouri, and shortly to join the faculty of the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas.

This episode comes to you at a difficult time for countries around the world, in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, and at a particularly fraught moment for the United States, which this past weekend has produced scenes of violence and despair, across the nation, including here in Philadelphia, that shock the conscience. For both sets of reasons, it is natural that even greater attention will be paid, going forward, to questions of domestic security—which already have so much grown in prominence over the past two decades. As much ink as has been spilled on this topic after 9/11, the global war on terror, the color revolutions and the Arab Spring, and the emergence of new surveillance technologies, one can be certain that much more is sure to be written now in connection with the dramatic events of just the first half of this year.

As these reflections proceed, we are likely to find new levels of prominence, and scrutiny, afforded to China’s approach to its domestic security—alongside the greater levels of prominence and scrutiny afforded China more generally these days. This topic merits deeper consideration within China itself, too, given that one of the hallmarks of Xi Jinping’s leadership tenure, since 2012, has been the notable strengthening of the state’s coercive architecture, through which it endeavors to control Chinese society. More precisely, as outlined in Sheena’s March 2019 essay for the China Leadership Monitor, Xi Jinping’s administration has substantially restructured the legal and institutional frameworks underpinning China’s domestic security, while also tightening central discipline over security personnel, and pioneering new technology-based methods for surveillance and social control. Perhaps nothing better symbolizes these developments than the large-scale security measures undertaken over the past few years towards the Uighur population in Xinjiang province—which of course have included mass detentions in so-called “re-education training centers”, but also high-tech monitoring outside of those camps (through facial recognition, biometric collection, and machine learning) that reaches truly dystopian levels.

When the full scale of China’s governance failures in connection with the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan first became apparent in late January, it appeared to many observers, including myself, that the crisis might provoke some rethinking of the approach to domestic security that finds its culminating expression in Xinjiang. From today’s vantage point, however, we can see that the Chinese state has instead made use of the crisis to push its methods of social control even further, in ways both high-tech and low, against fairly limited pushback from Chinese citizens. And it continues to find success in exporting some of those methods, relating to so-called “big-data” and mass surveillance, to other countries as well. Of course, this story remains dynamic, and

what may lie ahead we cannot know for sure. But the present moment—which includes the National People’s Congress’s controversial endorsement last week of the drafting of a new security law for Hong Kong—does seem a particularly opportune time to take a closer look at how ideas about domestic security have developed under CCP rule, what are the institutions that embody them, and where (to the best we can foresee) the future may lead for China’s internal security, and perhaps our own.

I can think of no one better suited to address these important themes than Sheena, and I was delighted to have the opportunity to discuss them with her when she visited the University of Pennsylvania in May 2019, to speak at the CSCC’s annual conference (back when in-person academic meetings were possible). It proved to be quite an extensive conversation—as regular listeners will have come to expect from this podcast—drawing, among other things, on the comparative perspective Sheena explored in her 2016 book, “Dictators and their Secret Police: Coercive Institutions and State Violence” ... as well as the research on “preventive repression” in Xinjiang that she later published in the journal *International Security* ... and the research on China’s global surveillance exports that she just published with the Brookings Institution’s Global China Project. We also got to bring into the discussion Sheena’s important work with our mutual friend Rory Truex, on repressive experiences among China scholars, published last year in the *China Quarterly*.

So, there is a lot here. I’ll let you jump into it in a moment, but there are two things I’d like to underscore before that: First, I’m so pleased that the comparative dimensions of our conversation extended to the United States, and included our shared concerns about the kinds of policing dynamics which have burst into the U.S. national conversation, right as this episode goes live. Second, I’m optimistic that fair-minded listeners will appreciate the degree to which we avoided the analytical trap of “OMG China” that you will hear Sheena elaborate further in our conversation. There is tremendous complexity in this area, which can be obscured by easy rhetorical tropes, and hopefully you will agree that the discussion you are about to hear navigates that complexity in as carefully reasoned a manner as possible—and in so doing provides useful and important context to the fraught issues confronting all of us today.

Finally, let me just add that you can expect a bunch of new CSCC Podcast episodes over the summer, conversations recorded in-person before the pandemic, and now edited by a terrific new sound engineer we’ve brought onboard the team (and who I’ll introduce as we get to those episodes). So I hope you will look forward to those ... after enjoying *this* conversation with Professor Sheena Chestnut Greitens.