



EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF  
CHINESE STUDIES 2 (2019)

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— M. WOESLER, ED. —

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- THE CHINESE  
SOCIAL CREDIT SYSTEM
- CHINA-SPAIN RELATIONS  
DURING THE TRANSITION  
PERIOD (1976-1982)
- THE PAST  
IN THE PRESENT
- CHINESE LITERATURE  
IN ROMANIA

## European Journal of Chinese Studies 2 (2019)

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# The Chinese Social Credit System

Origin, political design,  
exoskeletal morality and  
comparisons to Western systems

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## Abstract

In 1999, Lin Junyue (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) developed a “Social Credit” scoring “System” to enhance trust and reliability in the Chinese market economy and strengthen social cohesion, individual ethical behavior, and political stability. In 2002, after the first experiments (in 2000) and fine tuning, Chinese president Jiang Zemin propagated this system in a public speech. In 2014 it was announced

that every citizen and company would receive a unique ID and a score in 2020. The score (black list, no list, red list or even points), would indicate the holder’s financial and economic trustworthiness, as well as their filial piety and political loyalty. Low performers would be restricted, especially in mobility (access to planes, high speed trains etc.) and punished with public shame. High performers would be rewarded. This type of combined disciplinary and controlling society creates an exoskeletal, extrinsically motivated moral lead and reduces intrinsically motivated moral rule-following.

## Key words

social credit system, trust, reliability, Chinese market economy, experiments, unique id, piety, political loyalty, low performers, mobility restriction, public shame, exoskeletal ethics, intrinsically motivated moral rule-following

## 1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has experienced a remarkable economic boom. In the course of this,

negative phenomena such as product piracy, patent infringements, trickery, labor exploitation, and environmental pollution have been noted, and there are persistent complaints about corruption in the public administration and the party apparatus (Wedeman 2004) – which have also been analyzed as systemic (Zhu 2012).

Representative surveys (Wang 2008) and analyses (Zhang 2003) have noted a lack of trust in the country's citizens, enterprises and organizations. Since the beginning of the 21st century, regional test runs of a system for social trustworthiness, with list- or points-based assessments for citizens and organizations, have been carried out (<http://www.chinacredit.gov.cn>).

In 1999, the professor of economics, Lin Junyue (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences), developed the idea of a “social credit system”. From around the turn of the millennium, it has been tested and Lin has monitored its implementation. (Lin 2015, Louvet 2019, Settelen 2019).

Lin is very pleased with the results; he is sure that a movement like the “yellow vests” in France could have been prevented if the social credit system had been implemented there as well. The basic

idea behind the system, he says, is to ease the burden on prisons, because critics are quickly encouraged to 'mend their ways' by hints from their acquaintances (social nudging). Lin hopes to export the system to “capitalist countries”. He claims that Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Poland and Chile have already signaled interest (Louvet 2019).

In 2002, in a plenary speech at the XVI Central Committee, President Jiang Zemin justified the introduction of a Social Credit System as a way to promote a free-flow economy (Jiang 2002). In 2007, the State Council officially decided to introduce it. In the Anglophone context, the term “Social Credit System” (SCS) was coined. Large internet technology companies competed for the official state contract along with private commercial point systems (e.g. Alibaba's Sesame Credit system) and different point scales. In 2014, the State Council announced the implementation of the SCS nationwide by 2020 (State Council 2014). Over the course of time official texts have always asserted that the SCS corresponds exactly to the respective current political orientation or terminology, such as the “Chinese-style

socialist market economy” or Xi Jinping's ideas (Xi 2014).

In fact, since 2017 (these are the earliest documents the authors could find), companies which had wanted to register their business in the PRC were already given only one number, the SCS number. Under this one registration number, data from various authorities are stored centrally, so that all data can be accessed under one number. (Woesler 2021)

In China, for millennia, trade has been based on trust, which often has to be built upon human relationships. In Internet commerce, this lack of acquaintance has been successfully replaced by ratings in the PRC. This experience is to be transferred to the whole society with the SCS.

The SCS not only includes financial criteria in its assessment, like the “credit history” in the U.S. and Schufa/Credit reform in Germany, but also, in much greater detail, incorporates almost total surveillance: civil and criminal violations (payment morale, punctuality of tax returns and payments) and misdemeanors (such as parking violations, jaywalking, sitting in the wrong seat in the subway), are included along with social behavior, such as the obligation to

visit one's parents. It assesses political loyalty by monitoring social media, social contacts, friendships, and interactions by and with party members. (Woesler 2021)

makes the finely graded SCS ranking of a company much more meaningful than the broad AAA ratings of American rating agencies and makes it interesting for stock speculators, funds, mergers and acquisitions, for tracking down takeover candidates, filtering applicants for large tenders, and for industrial espionage.

While foreigners and foreign companies are only part of the system if they have residency in the PRC, SCS is only one system to monitor people and organizations, as can be seen by Chinese operations outside of China (McGregor 2021).

The SCS appears to be a strong extension of the concept of punishment for venial offenses, such as misdemeanors. The SCS aims to change the trust (from Latin *creditum* “that which is entrusted in good faith”) in a person or institution. Sanctions are imposed (the publicly visible score and, since June 2018, full names of black listed people on <https://www.creditchina.gov.cn>) through privileges (preferential treatment

in rental contracts, visa applications, tax declarations, etc.) or exclusion, comparable to the ancient shard court (ostracism); inclusion and exclusion include not only financial credits but also social participation such as the use of high-speed trains or airplanes and a more or less smooth handling of official procedures.

Western reporting has so far been limited to the 2014-2020 phase, mostly in the form of criticism towards the evaluation criteria (such as principles that are highly problematic from a Western perspective like political loyalty). It has portrayed and criticized a system of near total surveillance and a lack of rule of law, a disregard for data protection and privacy, and has been mostly focused on dramatic individual fates (as in the event of system failures or draconian punishments).

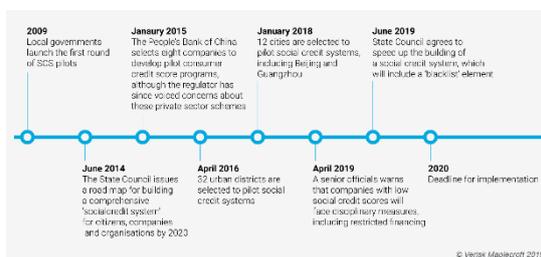


Figure 1: In this illustration by Nazalya 2019, the social credit system is thought to have started in 2009 or later. In fact, conceptualization began in the 1990s with first test-runs around 2000.

Due to the language barrier, the international community has only been able to take note of a very small section of the materials which have been available to the Chinese public for much longer than generally known (from as early as Jiang's speech in 2002). If these documents are included in an assessment of this system, the picture becomes much more complicated. It becomes clear that although the SCS began with the goal of promoting the economy, it has gradually and systematically expanded to include the general trustworthiness of all actors – including the government – in all areas of society and for all concerns.

At its core, the SCS enables the free movement of capital and rapid decision-making on production processes, while, at the same time, maintaining the overarching control of the state (and thus the party) and enforcing a political canon of values.

But the SCS also has an external effect; it creates the conditions for participation in world trade under capitalistic principles on a sound business basis. From the outset, the SCS was designed, and strictly operated, with a view to its computerization. (Woesler 2021) With the advent of the global internet (and its

Chinese, partly delimited variant), it can now find its technical realization.

Thus, the SCS integrates subsectors of Chinese society and at the same time shapes the external relationship of the People's Republic of China to globalized capitalism. It shows itself to be in harmony with the traditional values of Confucianism and the state ideology of historical materialism (which sees the economy as the basis of all social development). While this is alienating to international, especially Western understanding, it does demonstrate why the SCS is enforceable in the PRC. However, neoliberal and parliamentary countries should not overlook the fact that they too know monitoring and evaluation (which, incidentally, provided models for the Chinese SCS through its rating systems).

The basis of this article is a translation and evaluation of extensive official (and unofficial) documents, which chronologically document the source and emergence of the SCS since 2000, trace the systematic expansion from assessment criteria and application fields initially based solely on economic aspects to society as a whole, and describe the motivation and objectives of the system (document collection

published as Woesler 2021). These documents discuss the assessment categories and the actions assessed, the authorities involved and cooperation with global companies. They furthermore reveal the focus on operation and information implementation and discourse on both the impact internally (on the Chinese state and its people) and externally (on international trading partners).

For the text selection, we first reviewed all official documents that could be found with Chinese and Western search engines, and we also followed up on tips from CCP members and overviews of thematically relevant portals of sites in Germany and China. The texts were then assessed and evaluated according to their relevance. The results of the evaluation have been incorporated into this article.

## **2. Origins, Objectives and Scientific Analysis of the Social Credit System**

The SCS has been widely implemented but not yet extensively studied scientifically. In this paper, we therefore look at the conception of the system, trace its genesis, and approach its essence in terms of conceptual definition.

Considering the lack of trust in Chinese enterprises in the global market (as well as the lack of trust in the domestic market due to fraud and criminal behavior) and in an effort to improve reliability for enterprises, individuals and government institutions, the PRC began to build SCS in 2000, and planned to be fully implement it by 2020. SCS operates on a data collection system and automatically combines and analyzes data from bank accounts, video surveillance, purchases, tax returns, movement profiles, traffic and social behavior (such as mandatory parental visitation), chat histories, and use of Internet media in general. When considering “social behavior,” it apparently goes beyond Western and international credit score aspects. By negatively rating critical chat posts and befriending dissidents, positive political expressions of opinion are also encouraged. In addition, a list of sanctions, including public black lists based on the idea of “public shaming,” are used as “sticks and carrots” for citizens and businesses.

The localized translation “social credit system” is not self-explanatory and does not quite get to the heart of the matter. In fact, when Western readers think of the

term “social credit,” they think of points for social commitment such as those that can be earned during university studies (which are called “social credit points” in reference to the “credit points” for studies). Such points are not included in the evaluation of the study program, but they can document voluntary commitment, e.g. on a diploma supplement. The Chinese term, xinyong “信用”, (sometimes chengxin “诚信”) does stand for “credit” in the sense of a credit card, but it can also mean “trust,” “reliability,” “trustworthiness,” “loyalty” and “political loyalty”. Alternative translations for SCS could therefore be: Social Compliance Scoring System or Societal Credibility/Reliability Index, etc.

Basically, the evaluation of complex phenomena in metric systems (Beer 2016) must be understood as a reduction that creates a corresponding psychological, group-dynamic, and extrinsic (mis)incentives, and thus changes, which are similarly (and indirectly – as social nudging) controls; the manipulation of behavior.

### 3. Contextual embedding in “social management”, phenomenology and political slogans

The PRC government is currently building a software system to govern the nation (Digital System for Society Management DSSM, officially called “social management”). It consists of:

- an (declaredly complete) surveillance system and centralized collection of all accessible data including movement profile, identity recognition, payments, communication, behavior (preferences), and motivation (desires, dreams, values and ideally, thoughts, with the first experiments of brain scanners in workers' hats having started in Shanghai and Beijing);
- algorithmic and Big Data analysis;
- an information system to inform (and lead) citizens;
- a motivational system (unconscious advertising / “priming”, social credits for political loyalty); and
- a sanctions system which includes awards with privileges (red lists), automatic censorship, black listing (public shaming), restriction of mobility, imprisonment, gag orders, and, for capital crimes, capital punishment

(estimated at up to several thousand executions per year, e.g. for tax crimes and for political reasons with, purportedly, deterrent effect). SCS uses the slogan, “Hamper every move of low-performers.”

The “Social management system” aims at achieving the following results:

1. It is to be artificially intelligent;
2. (ideally) fully automatic, with decisions (including court decisions) made by algorithms that are mainly based on correlation rather than causality;
3. capable of learning from successes and mistakes to optimize itself,
4. employed through indirect communication with users (since the system works best when unknown to the user, e.g., disease probabilities are already discovered by correlation, but not necessarily communicated); and
5. employment of data exchange between humans and machines, as well as between machines.

The legal framework, in the PRC, suits massive data collection, as data protection and data security are guaranteed for the state, but not for the individual. Since the government and the bureaucracy are (mostly) built by officials, often technocratic, of a single party, which has the leading role in all areas of society. The result being that the highest position in a company or an academic institution is the party secretary, not the company director or the rector of the university.

The software-based scoring system is supported in real life by education, which includes indoctrination and propaganda, and by the state guidance of every citizen from preschool to retirement and beyond. Ten percent of school classes, university courses, and on-the-job training at party schools, (for nonparty members as well) upwards from the rank of department head or dean, are dedicated to ideological indoctrination.

Students must first become soldiers. Military camps are located near university campuses. The ever-expanding universities are moreover assigned new campuses outside the city gates.

Citizens are shaped by ideological training, subjected to psychological pressure, and swayed by group dynamics towards digital, external control. SCS inventor Lin says that, instead of the state imprisoning people, under SCS, community members nudge them towards expected behaviors. The main motivating factor is patriotism. In school and university education one of the lessons is that the PRC has had to overcome 150 years of oppression by the West to return now to the self-confidence and the former glory of a world power. Privileges and honors are conferred on citizens with high scores. For example, Figure 2 shows posters on the roadsides of the SCS model city of Rongcheng promoting “model citizens” with their pictures.



Figure 2: Presentation of Model Citizens in Rongcheng (Chiu 2019).

#### 4. SCS test runs

In various regional test phases, individual facts were cited for point deductions and gains. Figure 3 is an illustrated overview of a test in Suining.

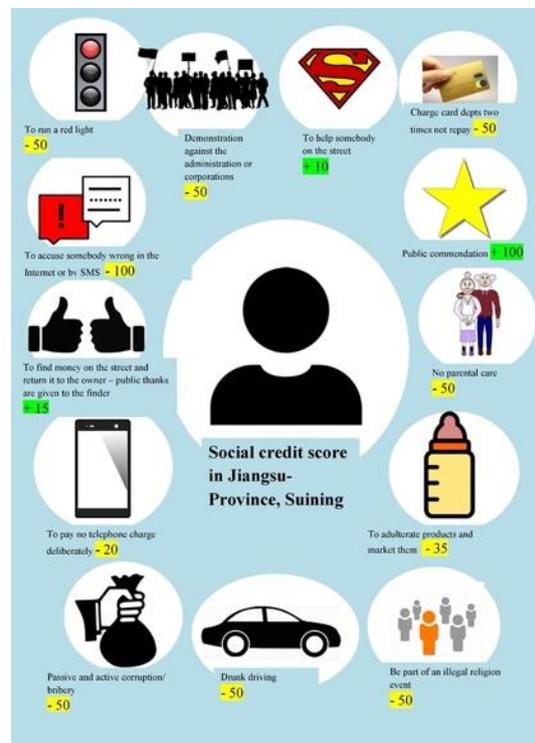


Figure 3: Gain and subtraction of points in an SCS variant (Pohlmann 2018).

The factors assessed include tax declaration and payment morale, repayment of loans and credit cards, payment morale for utility bills and court fines; adherence to traffic rules and to family planning requirements, fare evasion, scientific and volunteer activities, reverence for parents, criminal record, interaction on the Net with other netizens, fidelity of posts, and shopping behavior (see figure 4).

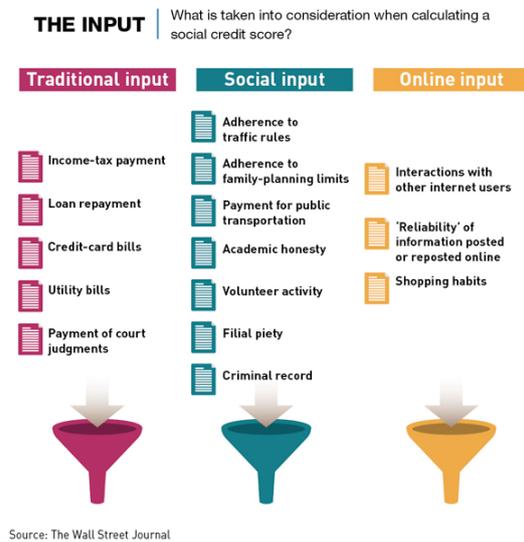


Figure 4: A systematic illustration by the Wall Street Journal (McAllister 2019), which categorizes aspects of Chinese sources. The Western way of illustrating reminds one of the “Nuremberg funnel”.

The aspects under which those subjected to the SCS are judged correspond to the sources originated in the PRC (Chinese Government Web 2014 ff).

Citizen control, according to our observations and consistent reports from private sources, can be broken down into the following stages.

## 5. Framework

### 5.1 Disinformation

Studies by Harvard University and others have proven that Chinese internet users do not have access to approximately 17% of the internet (Zittrain 2003, Qiang 2011, Bamman 2012). Many scandals in the PRC, including food scandals, corruption and even the outbreak of the Coronavirus are often later revealed to have been covered up.

Most people in the world today live in filter bubbles. These filter bubbles in the West are created by IT and social media companies. The combination of user profile analysis and automatic mechanisms for distribution and advertising result in users preferring “fake news” and conspiracy theories over truth. Although users believe they themselves still have the control, it is actually the people in the IT and social media companies, that have the highest level of control. The result is the polarization of societies and a refusal to engage in discussion and reflection on one’s standpoint. The filter bubbles in the PRC lead to political stability, patriotism, a new pride. Both, the US and the PRC filter bubbles nourish an attitude of polarization

between the United States and China. In certain areas, however, where the different content of education and PRC filter bubbles lead to incompatibility with international work force requirements or international competition (such as the acceptance of research papers in journals and awards like the Nobel Prize), it is crucial that the Chinese government reconsiders its policy of certain filter bubbles so that Chinese citizens and Chinese companies are not disadvantaged in global competition.

Recent historical events are deemed “sensitive”. Thus it is that the PRC has not yet come to terms with the Cultural Revolution and the peaceful demonstrations for democratization in 1989, with the latter being classified as “counterrevolution” in subsequent PRC history.

Contemporary international politics, for their part, are played out differently by the PRC overseas. This is especially the case with the exercise of its power in the UN Security Council, its exploration of Africa, its geostrategic projects such as the “One Belt One Road”, its involvement in the islands in the South China Sea, and its policy towards the Hong Kong question.

## 5.2 Brainwashing

The term “brainwashing” in English is one of the few Chinese loan words, originating from Chinese “xinao” 洗腦. It was first used by Edward Hunter in 1950 to describe PRC policies of compelling submission and cooperation.

Ideological indoctrination begins in kindergarten and continues through kindergarten, preschool, elementary school, junior high, high school, college/university with a tutor for each student and adult through working life, retirement, and unto one’s death.

Now every Chinese citizen must spend about ten percent of her / his study time or work time in ideological education, and, in case one has achieved a higher position in one’s job, even in party schools. Often their will is broken at preschool age, sometimes during their military training.

The methodology of will-breaking is simple. For example, students have to learn by heart that the state capitalist economic system in the PRC is a “socialist system”. This contradicts students’ knowledge of economics, but they are asked to learn this

factually incorrect term so many times without explanation, and are subjected to pressure exercised as deterrent, complete with tutoring and group dynamics processes until they resign and parrot something they know is factually incorrect.

Mao Zedong said in the 1950's: "600 million people [...] are poor and blank. [...] On a blank sheet of paper, free of flaws, the freshest and most beautiful characters can be written. The freshest and most beautiful pictures can be painted." (Mao 1958)

This tradition is obviously still alive.

### 5.3 Surveillance

The Social Credit System does not create any additional surveillance, although it profits from the existing and expanding surveillance system. In China, cameras in public spaces are almost omnipresent. When asked about the many cameras, people react instantly with the official reasoning that the more cameras there are, the safer the place. Traffic rule violations and other violations often are caught on camera and then analyzed for their relevance in regards of the social credit system (Louvet 2019).

There are discussions on how far eye-tracking of elementary school students during class, mobility trackers and other tracking apps for them and elderly people, can be used by teachers, relatives and others. However, there is also a growing civil resistance against overboarding surveillance.

As part of the general surveillance and not as part of the Social Credit System, even in school and university classrooms there are cameras. Foreign lecturers are currently told in job selection interviews: "Your predecessor in the position of foreign lecturer had expressed political

criticism of the system in class and was dismissed without notice”. Nevertheless, foreign lecturers are not yet required to undergo ideological training and do not have to become a party member or participate in party events. Funding applications for them, however, often contain statements by the party secretary. Foreign companies in China also have to offer the office next to the company director to the party committee.

But what about the situation for the Chinese, whose evaluated data in turn feed into the ideological tutoring or ideology sessions for students, or ideology sessions and training for faculty? The weekly ideology-centered sessions are often about studying the issues set forth by the leadership as well as self-reflection, self-criticism, honest repentance, and promises to do better. In fact, “self-criticism” has a solid ground in the PRC (for the tradition of “self-criticism” with its peak during the ‘Cultural Revolution’ see Dittmer 1973).

When self-criticism is combined with insights gained from data collection, a new level of communication has certainly been reached, that of media epoch 5.0 following Luhmann and Baecker (where 1.0 is orality, 2.0 script, 3.0 printing techniques, and 4.0

digitization). In media epoch 5.0 (term coined by Martin Woesler) the value of a communicative act does not consist any more out of the messages exchanged, but out of the analysis gained by algorithms to complete the personality profile of the participants involved in the communicative act. The human participant becomes an object of analysis with the first aim being to classify the underlying values, beliefs etc., the second aim that of predicting future behavior and the third aim that of changing this behavior and the underlying thoughts through priming, manipulation etc. towards the behavior and the underlying thoughts deemed more profitable to the group of people controlling the algorithms. The paradigm shifts from causes and results to correlations and predictions.

Chinese students receive 10% of their tuition in so-called 'core courses', in which ideology is taught in addition to sports. In addition, everyone has their tutor, often an older student, who watches for the expected ideological attitude.

In this controlled, steered world in a filter bubble, it would be hard to imagine a scene like the one that took place at universities in the PRC in 1989. Back then, fellow

students came into the classroom and asked everyone to join the demonstrations.

The regulations by the police chief from Xinjiang for education camps, which were leaked under the “China Cables,” regard repentance and self-criticism as essential for inmates.

The relationship between the individual and society is also strengthened by emotions, with the poles of fear at one end and of longing for happiness at the other.

The data gained by surveillance is analyzed using Big Data techniques and correlations are found. A profile is created that translates into both a threat level (the closer a person gets to 100%, the deeper is the color red which appears in the police's facial recognition goggles) and a poor social credit score.



Figure 5: Face recognition with pop-up boxes with danger potential (Wuollet 2018).

Based on these correlations, the algorithms make decisions about individuals. The PRC approach even attempts to take control of minds, generally believed to be the last bastion of free will. Artificial intelligence is apparently targeting values, dreams, beliefs and political views.

Here lies the qualitative difference between the PRC approach to control minds by means of intrusive surveillance measures analyzed by Big Data techniques and large IT companies in the developed world collecting data for commercial purposes, to learn about purchasing behavior rather than system-stabilizing or -labeling behavior.

It is unclear to what extent such a technology could work. It even sounds like the dream of surveillance fanatics. Nonetheless, basal affects, attention levels, a neurosensory dead man's button, all these are within the realm of possibility.



Figure 6: Brain scanners, Chen 2018.

Knowing that the devices you are wearing have such functionality also has an effect on individual behavior and psycho-emotional disposition. Shanghai technology company Deayea has confirmed that train drivers on the Shanghai-Beijing line, for example, regularly wear these brain scanners. (Chen 2018). Future study on the efforts of these brain scanners on the mental and physical health of these train drivers will illuminate further the tension between state control and authenticity of the individual.



Figure 7: Worker in a Shanghai Factory with work helmets, in which brain scanners were implemented (Chen 2018).

#### 5.4 Actions

Social media is censored in real time both with algorithms and manually. In the process, any expression of opinion with potential for collective action is censored. That is, the algorithm bases its decision

solely on whether something can become hype, not whether it is politically albeling (“hype control,” see King 2014, Hiruncharoenvate 2017, Sauer 2018). The results are directly translated into sanctions (see catalogs of sanctions e.g. in figure 8 and in Woesler 2021), which are mainly aimed at limiting the ability to move or act. This can make the individual's situation even worse. If, for example, someone is punished for not visiting her or his parents who live far away and s/he is no longer allowed to buy airplane or train tickets, a vicious cycle could result.

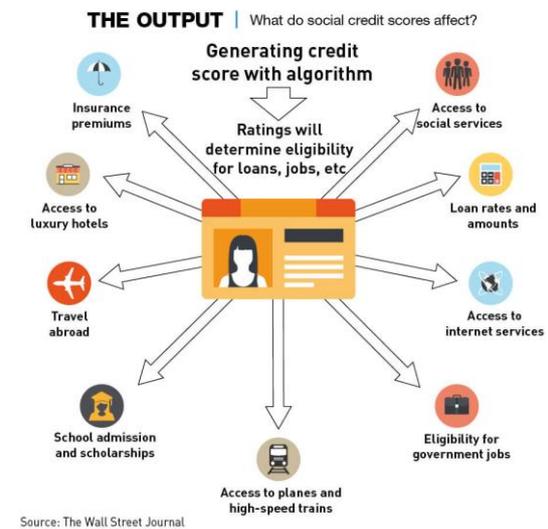
#### Catalog of stick and carrot

In 2020, the final version of the SCS went into effect. Prior to that, private companies applied to get the commissioning to develop the SCS with eight different variants of the system designed as an “application”, with the best-known being Alibaba's Sesame Credit System and Tencent's system.

Regional trials of the SCS also use slightly different scoring bases and point levels. Ultimately, however, they are very similar.

In the final version of the SCS, the list of rewards cited include preference in government visits, visa applications (to Singapore, for example), insurance premiums, credit rates and levels, access to luxury hotels, educational pathways, and government offices.

The catalog of punishments mentioned are: the display of personal data such as photos or names in public spaces, (for example, in Shanghai at certain street intersections to deter pedestrians from ignoring traffic lights and on websites; the display of full names on black lists accessible e.g. on <http://www.creditchina.gov.cn>), general restriction of mobility, (such as the denial of airline tickets and train tickets); prohibition of entering public places with cell phone alerts, etc.; effects on lending, jobs, and so on. Even clan detention is not uncommon in the PRC.



Source: The Wall Street Journal

Figure 8: McAllister 2019.

Figure 8 is a systematic illustration from the Wall Street Journal (McAllister 2019):



Figure 9: “Public Shaming” is a common method in the PRC, as is shown in this app, which displays 119 people in the surrounding with full names (here partly anonymized), who owe debts. (Chris 2019).

## 6. Acceptance

Surveillance of the population of the People's Republic of China is carried out

blatantly and in full visibility to all. What seems unthinkable in the liberal democracies of the West (where it takes place more secretly, to a lesser degree and on a much narrower group of individuals), seems to be generally tolerated in the PRC. In fact, the acceptance of surveillance is more widespread than it is in the developed world.

According to a survey conducted by Freie Universität in Berlin (Kostka 2018), the Chinese are satisfied with surveillance, ideological brainwashing, and the social credit system. Although some of this satisfaction may be due to brainwashing, they give several reasons for their satisfaction. The general sentiment is that “I have done nothing wrong. Besides, when bad guys get caught, I feel safer. Above all, it will improve our society”.

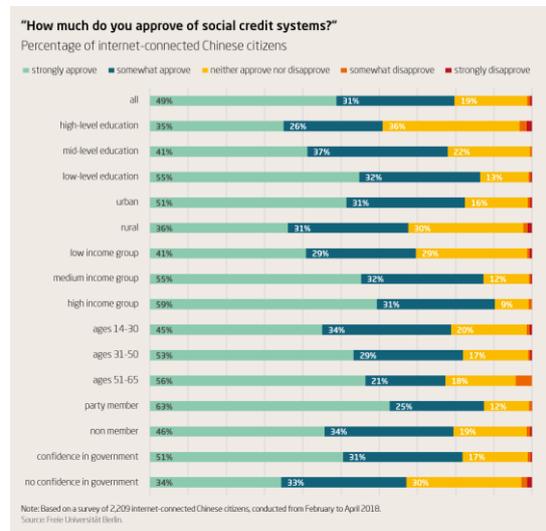


Figure 10: Free University of Berlin survey, February-April 2018, n:2209 Chinese internet users. (Kostka 2018).

A survey in the UK yields an unexpected result. If the SCS also existed in the UK, the majority of British people would end their online friendships if it improved their score.



Figure 11: Survey by ABC Finance Ltd. in Great Britain (Hemming 2019[?]).

But a survey in Germany reveals that most citizens in this country reject the SCS.

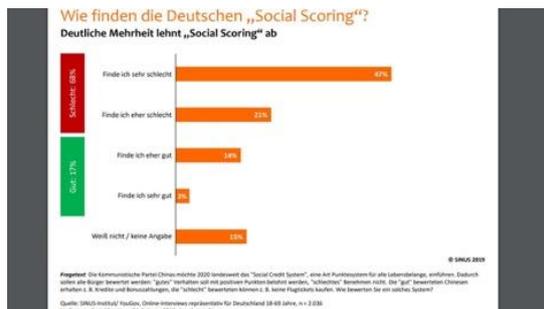


Figure 12: Survey of the Sinus Institute / YouGov, Online-Interviews representative for Germany 18-49 years, n=2036, February 4, 2019 (Inhoffen 2019).

Although data protection and data security are at the forefront of Western values, there is an incentive in some quarters to follow the Chinese path. The control system has proven to be more successful economically, and the need for security, unsurprisingly, leans towards a surveillance system. The Corona pandemic does the rest. In view of the considerable successes of Far Eastern digital surveillance technology, Western, especially German, data protection is under increasing pressure.

## 7. Discussion

### Behaviorism 2.0 ?

The psychological mechanisms of punishments and rewards in the SCS have a striking similarity to the Weltbild of Burrhus F. Skinner’s “behaviourism”, the once famous learning-theory paradigm of “operant” (or “instrumental”) conditioning that dominated American academic psychology between 1930 and 1960. Skinnerian behaviorism with its rigorous exclusion of the first-person perspective and its ban on intentional entities (e.g., feelings, thoughts, beliefs, values, reasons) turned out to be too reductive and simplistic with regard to many momentous issues within scientific psychology, psychotherapy, and pedagogy, and lost terrain due to the “cognitive revolution” of cognitive science and, within an altogether different tradition of scientific psychology, to psychoanalysis.

In order to assess the normative properties of an SCS that make it an action-guiding regime, let us compare it to common morality (Gert 2005) and its normative properties. The SCS ostensibly represents ethical standards and norms, including common morality, e.g. moral rules like “do

not lie”, “do not cheat”, “respect the law”, “do your duty”. Yet other kinds of standards and norms can also be inserted into the scope of SCS’s compliance engendering power – for instance, politically desired standards and norms. The content of an SCS’s compliance engendering power can be selectively programmed at the will of the governments that deploy SCSs for shaping the behavior of their citizens as they deem fit.

Another interesting difference between the action-guiding force of motivationally internalized common morality and the action-guiding force of an SCS is that the former is subject to the constraints of rationality only in a weak sense (to act in morally right ways must not be irrational) whereas the latter is subject to strong negative constraints of prudential rationality (to act non-compliantly must be irrational). In comparison to social ethics and common morality, SCSs function more like positive laws with sanctions, and they prioritize a sense of conformity with any social convention that gets incorporated into the social credit point system and therefore is highlighted as being relevant for the stability of law and order in society.

Functionally, we can compare the SCS to an exoskeleton. This metaphor seems apt here: Similar to a physical or technical exoskeleton, the SCS is an apparatus that is external to the person and is designed with the purpose to support and amplify a person’s motivation for compliance with rules (here: compliance with rules that the government deems wise to program into the SCS) if the person’s intrinsic motivation turns out to be too weak for complying properly.

Note the dynamic nature of Chinese society, its rapid growth, disruptive cultural developments, partial cultural lags, normative fragmentation due to cultural simultaneity of asynchronous cultural elements, and, in particular, note the cardinal importance of avoiding what sociologists like Emile Durkheim and Robert Merton diagnosed as “anomie”. Anomie is social-pathological condition within society: Anomie means massive weakening or serious lack of well-entrenched social norms (moral and otherwise) that most members of the respective society find attractive to integrate into their self-conception and into their ideals of what living good lives should be. By being vital to the self-integration of

the majority of members of a society, such norms, by the same token, are vital to the social integration of the respective society and its paramount institutions (cf. Heitmeyer 2008, Powell 1970). Hence, the occurrence of anomie threatens peaceful and sustainable social integration, and politically ought to be avoided.

### **Output legitimation vs. input legitimation**

Democratic constitutional states also claim to have developed digitization to a network society, a “digital democracy” in order to strengthen what political theorists call input legitimation. These societies expand public discourse through social media, especially through microblogging. They foster an awareness of alternatives to established ways of life, political arrangements, and the status quo. With reference to civil society, digitization provides tools that contribute to maintaining a sense of civic freedoms, e.g. the freedom of association and freedom of expression.

Digitization can become a powerful motor of dynamic differentiations. Via massive digitization, pre-modern structures can be

modernized at great pace. Societies that have not yet developed, over a long historical period, certain valuable traits of modern societies (esp. political publics, democratic governance, rule of law, division of state powers) can do so more quickly by harnessing, in the right way, the forces of digitization.

European style Parliamentary democracies are concerned not only with their input-legitimacy but with their output-legitimacy as well. In output legitimacy, the focus is on political achievements in solving social problems. Citizens ultimately decide on the basis of output whether to re-elect or to dismiss the government in the next cycle of general elections. The relationship between input and output is ensured by democratic institutions, by control instances (parliaments, opposition, media, courts) and by political parties as responsive intermediaries between citizens’ demands and the values and decisions of politics.

Even though democratic constitutional states are increasingly focusing on output (post-democracy), there are clear differences from the PRC. The PRC is pursuing digitization for purely performance-based, output-fixated, social cybernetics. Typical of authoritarian systems, output

legitimacy is thus predominant for the PRC. There is state regulation and control or censorship of the offline and online world via algorithms and transparent social rankings. The use of behavior modification techniques leads to extensive self-disciplining and self-regulation (instrumental power - Zuboff 2019), which, in China, is tied to the supreme goal – to ensure the long term centralization of political power by the communist party.

The PRC pursues the social-cybernetic strategy to secure domination by the party. ‘Governance by Algorithm’ (Musiani 2013) thus forms the only strategy. A ‘governance of algorithm’ that digitizes the rule of law (which is not yet sufficiently developed even in democratic constitutional states), contradicts the political logic of the PRC, which pursues a rule by law.

## **Conclusion**

### **A Great Leap Forward in Virtue of Digitization?**

China aspires to become the world leader in digital infrastructure and in the application of artificial intelligence. This aspiration, plus the prestige connected to the vastly ambitious Silk Road project, has

made it seem attractive to try to export digital SCS technology (e.g., to Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Poland, Chile). Many states have placed requests for the system. A SCS-system has even been recommended to France (Louvet 2019). All this raises the question; Are global political weights being shifted? Is this the dawning of a new age of cybernetically supported statecraft? Can there be state capitalism without constitutionality characterized by economic neo liberalism? What does all this have to do with the digital?

It would truly be a significant leap forward, possibly even a successful one this time, if digital technology led to a rapprochement between, or even reconciliation of, socialism and capitalism, and if a former developing country could rise to become a global economic leader, if the transition from the third world to a digital first world succeeded. The SCS could certainly play an important role in this.

It is debatable whether the digital transformation of technicized societies based on the Internet already marks a post-modern era, or whether these developments are an unfolding completion of modernity itself (Eposito 2002:287 ff). Terms that were introduced to describe

modern society, which was, and is, still characterized by the printing press, must first of all be used to describe the new conditions with a tried and tested repertoire of terms, because we do not yet have appropriate newer ones. For Elena Esposito, it is also the argument for still speaking of our times, including those in China, as modern:

Since we have so far dealt with a model characteristic of modernity, it is obvious to speak now of an investigation in the field of postmodernity [...]. This labeling is all the more significant because it reveals, more than in any other case, the ambiguous characteristic of the concept of postmodernity, and precisely through its connotations of succession, of overcoming, and ultimately of novelty, it belongs to the conceptual apparatus of modernity (which is, after all, virtually obsessed with novelty and change). The talk of postmodernism thus remains within modernity and confines itself to merely giving it a new term. (Esposito 2002:287, transl. M. Woesler)

But that would be impressive enough if the PRC does succeed in making a leap from a

pre-modern society into the digital future of humankind!

The concept of protocol is a key concept for understanding communication in the internet and digital information processing more generally. Alexander Galloway described how our society has reached its current stage of development under the rule of protocols:

“How would control exist after decentralization? In former times control was a little easier to explain. In what Michel Foucault called the sovereign societies of the classical era, characterized by centralized power and sovereign fiat, control existed as an extension of the word and deed of the master, assisted by violence and other coercive factors. Later, the disciplinary societies of the modern era took hold, replacing violence with more bureaucratic forms of command and control. [...] Deleuze has extended this periodization into the present day by suggesting that after the disciplinary societies come the societies of control”. (Galloway 2004:3) “[P]rotocol is how technological control exists after decentralization.” (Galloway 2004:8)

Control and power are maintained via protocols. The SCS provides a pertinent

example of what such power can amount to.

Protocols as instruments of power characterize what Deleuze called societies of control that replaced what Foucault had analyzed as disciplinary societies: “You don’t need science fiction to imagine a control mechanism that indicates at every moment the position of an element in an open milieu, animal in a reserve, human in a company (electronic collar). Felix Guattari imagined a city in which everyone could leave his apartment, his street, his neighborhood thanks to his electronic (divisional) card, through which this or that barrier opens; but the card could also be invalid on a certain day or for certain hours; what counts is not the barrier, but the computer that detects the position - allowed or not - of each individual and performs a universal modulation.” What sounded like science fiction in 1990 has long since become, and even surpasses, such a reality.

It is protocols like the SCS that provide control of people and institutions (Warnke 2019). With Galloway, we think that such regimes of control appeal more to desire (and fear) than to reflective reason: “Protocol is not a superego (like the

police); instead it always operates at the level of desire, at the level of ‘what we want’.” (Galloway 2002:241). We want to be connected, to communicate, to travel, to consume, and if we score too low, a SCS would exclude us from all these goods: we become immobile, cut off, and finally even excluded from the community of our cultural peers.

Note also that protocols act impersonally. No one can be blamed for an operation of exclusion, not even any party functionary in particular. Technic protocols function anonymously, impartially and, if you will, ruthlessly. A properly implemented and reasonably programmed SCS may therefore be a viable means for curbing rampant corruption.

Niklas Luhmann characterizes the media epoch (which supersedes the epoch of the book and the printing press) by its leading medium, the computer. Computers split the perceptible into a surface and an immeasurable depth. Communication using computers deactivates the interpretative act of distinguishing a message from its information: to the computer, everything is just data. The act of understanding or misunderstanding, inherent in human communication and so tremendously

productive, collapses into a data processing that no longer has the intermediate tones of creative communication between humans. It merely operationalizes only digital analysis and correlation-based decisions by algorithms to social operation or its rejection (Luhmann 1997:302ff, cf. Baecker 2007). However, in our present media epoch – call it 5.0 – artificial intelligence tackles the last resorts of humanness, like thoughts with consciousness and (self-)awareness, values, beliefs as well as (emotional) personalities, reflected in profiles, avatars and simulations.

Small wonder that a behaviorist, cybernetic, ethic seems to be the appropriate one for such a society.

If humanity wants to survive, it needs to master the new technologies, if only because certain techniques of digitally amplified surveillance might prove necessary in order to prevent digitally enhanced terrorism set at erasing human civilization. The question simply is, whether or not humanity wants to use its newly acquired digital powers to stabilize the central governing political agency of a nation by providing exoskeletons to the citizens, or to find mechanisms that permit

as much individual freedom as possible and pose only as few restrictions as are necessary. Why not employ digitization in what is truly the general interest of all individuals and groups – the interest in realizing a sustainable future for humanity?

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