

The Social Credit System: Is Technology Helping China Legitimate and Augment Authoritarian Rule?

Introduction

Walking around the streets of Beijing, it is hard to go by without noticing the very physical presence of the party-state. Red banners cover most pedestrian bridges that blanket the city's many mega junctions connecting its jam-packed modern highways. These banners have writings on them in white – most of which are political slogans that declare the wisdom of the incumbent chairman of the party – Xi Jinping. Of course, these crossings are also peppered with CCTVs – for monitoring road congestion below and security purposes, they say. With the integration of the facial recognition technologies to these cameras recently, which are also linked to the database of more than twenty million residential permit regulations and national identity cards in the area, local security officials can now routinely track down individuals of concern with a degree of efficiency and accuracy only paralleling those imagined in an Orwellian fiction. (Li South China Morning Post 2018)

Perhaps, China's taking what George Orwell used to warn us against the dangers of advances in information technology as a how-to-guide. The notion of having telescreens watching and recording the moves of every citizen alongside billboards with a caption "Big Brother is watching you" was depicted in his Novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In part, absurdity of the level of state intrusion was conveyed and warned against through the totalitarian state Oceania's emphasis on via the 2+2=5 metaphor, where the absurd is enforced to be true. Yet, this seems to almost mirror this mode of state presence of these banners and cameras in contemporary China. (Zhou South China Morning Post 2018)

The advent of the Social Credit System nicely complements the plethora of innovations in security tech and the objectives of spatial dominance currently sought in the Middle Kingdom. The System comes in multiple variants developed by and serving the purposes of state and commercial bodies both independently as well as jointly. But, they both operate as reputation systems. Just like a conventional financial credit system, the Social Credit System is used to publicise risk profiles of individual agents. However, its scope via and for which value judgements are derived utilises information beyond the financial sphere and mobilises social information such as income levels and behavioural records. For example, a commercial variant of the Social Credit System used by Sesame Credit - Ant Financial – a financial subsidiary of Alibaba, uses information ranging from the credit

scores of one's social group, education level and purchase history to determine whether they are desirable customers for whom they allocate privileges such as deposit free bookings to hotels and loans with subsidised interest rates. (Botsman 2017)

The state variants likewise use such information. There is yet to be a single national level Social Credit System as it is currently undergoing pilot programmes across 43 cities and municipalities under the National Social Credit System Construction Plan 2014-20 (thereafter referred to as “SCSCP2014-20” or “the Plan”) (社会信用系统建设规划纲要 *bhèhuì xìnyòng tǐxì jiànshè guīhuà gāngyào*).

However, the principles of using this behavioural record keeping and scoring spans across state and societal spheres and the objective of normative alteration in these spheres are made clear. According to SCSCP2014-20, it seeks to promote “integrity/honesty” (诚信 *Chéngxìn*) and make the whole of society more “trust-worthy” (守信 *Shǒuxìn*) through a system of incentives that “praises honesty and punishes dishonesty” (褒扬诚信, 惩戒失信 *bāoyáng chéngxìn, chéngjiè shīxìn*) for individuals, companies, government officials and judges to “promote economic growth” and “further the credibility of the government”. (SCSCP2014-20) Although the specific political context under which this system is developing will be addressed later to fully appreciate what the Social Credit System intends to do, which will of course be touched upon later in this paper, the underlining direction via which technology is developing in relation to politics in these instances appear to be aiding authoritarian regimes sustain themselves via augmenting means via which it can assert its security apparatus and dominate varieties of space both physically and others.¹

¹ Please note that significant amount of research conducted for this article was in part done so as part of my thesis submitted for the completion of my MPhil degree in Modern Chinese Studies.

Conversations on Technology and Politics, and Chinese Politics.

The relationship between technology and politics is a continually evolving one. The conversation over it recently has been primarily centred around the theme of disruption. Notwithstanding the Silicon Valley catchphrase of bringing disruption to established industries, our current feeling towards this subject, at least for those observing polarising strands of Western political discourse, is that such inventions such as social media have led to polarisation of democratic politics and developments of iconoclast political movements. From Donald Trump’s message to realign itself to global treaties and “drain the swamp” to Brexiteers’ hatred for everything EU or foreign, fringe movements that were once the laughing stock of politics have now come back to haunt the mainstream. (Davey & Ebner 2017)

Likewise, the means of politics have changed too. The reports of cyber-attacks on US elections and deployment of Cambridge Analytica’s targeted ads based on data mined from social media using academic psychology research working on the Brexit and Trump campaigns, the technological advances now provide new avenues to disrupt the democratic process. In addition, with trolls and conspiracy theorists creating their own bubbles of outrage and discourse on platforms such as twitter and various chatrooms, all appear to have at least led many to question whether these innovations in information technology have led to conditions unfavourable for democratic systems to persist. The American newspaper Washington Post’s now logo caption “democracy dies in darkness”, adopted in the aftermath of the election of Donald Trump, evidence a notional presence of this sentiment. (Farhi 2017)²

Yet, it was not too long ago where there was much optimism for technical advances and its relationship to democratic polities. Towards the end of the Cold War as Francis Fukuyama hailed the end of democracies, the now cliché example of the comparison between the East German Trabant and the West German Beetle car models were used to demonstrate the superior innovative capacities of democratic systems over that of planned economic/authoritarian political systems fronted by the Soviet-led Eastern Bloc. Furthering this, it was thought that authoritarian governments and socialist systems often lacked the signalling functions that markets provided. (History Workshop Journal 2009; Butler 2010) Conversely, the impact of technology on political systems were too seen as one of progression towards greater participation. For example, the 1992 US presidential candidate Ross

² It must be noted that this phrase is used more for the American political context. However, it was decided this captured the point rather well.

Perot, indeed thought this would have been the case. The ideas of developing an “electronic town hall” where voters could engage with politicians directly on issues as they gave speeches remotely from their homes seemed revolutionary and seemed it would aid the democratic process by furthering voter engagement. (Elshtain 1992)

This idea that the spread of information beyond the bounds of state control would inevitably lead to active civic engagement is something that is assumed here, and by others too. From projects such as Radio Free Europe to American CIA sponsored campaigns sponsoring dissidents in Eastern Europe aided the preparation of posters and pamphlets cut across the censorship imposed in such polities, this view that ideological contamination would help destabilise authoritarian rule was a strongly held Cold War era assumption policy makers held on to. (MacEachin 2000) During the Arab Spring, disorder protests proliferated primarily through social media such as Twitter from 2010. In December that year, protests which started in the streets of Tunis proliferated across the Arab world. With it bringing down the Egyptian and Tunisian governments in a few months, the idea that rapid proliferation of information was helping the development of civic activism against authoritarian regimes came to fruition. As study on the relationship between social media and politics during the Arab Spring wrote: “A significant increase in the use of the new media is much more likely to follow a significant amount of protest activity than to precede it”. (Wolfsfield et al 2013)

However, in 2016, Turkey saw the first case of authoritarian restoration and stabilisation achieved through social media – President Erdogan, successfully countered a military coup by speaking directly to the people to mobilise against the military coup. (Srivastava 2016) It was an unprecedented means of a counter-coup, a means of politics perhaps only comparable to Mao’s mobilisation of the Cultural Revolution where he incited anti-government activism via directly communicating to the people. (MacFacquhar 2006)

Such a development begs the question – can technology if deployed to help sustain and legitimate authoritarian rule, and if so can we move beyond this disruption narrative to one showing broad possibilities and where understating information technology platforms, particularly social media, as mediums of communication rather than its primary driving force? In doing so, this paper seeks to counter the narrative of a democratic retreat and authoritarian revival in the age of social media that is emerging in contemporary discourse on politics. (Kurlantzick 2013; Washington Post 2016; Economist 2018) Moreover, it seeks to present a case study to suggest that technology can be used to, at least in theory, stabilise a political process within an authoritarian context. Hence, it is not the very

medium of technology that is, by its nature, disruptive. Rather, its impact on a particular polity and therefore politics depends on the individual practices of power and dissent.

This move away from whether a development within and across polities help authoritarianism or democracies seems to be quite binary in its epistemological formation and complements a recent trend in the study of Chinese politics to studying the practices of power as opposed to systems. This was the case for the field of Chinese politics where many scholars assumed China to eventually democratise, following the great “Third Wave” of democratisations. (Nathan, 2004) Indeed, one American China scholar noted this problem while confessing the shortfalls of his own beliefs as he retrospectively acknowledged that in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen crisis “many China specialists and democracy theorists – myself among them – expected the regime to fall to democratization’s ‘third wave.’ [But] instead, the regime has reconsolidated itself.” He then went on to say that recognizing then that the “causes of its resilience are complex,” Nathan nonetheless went on to single out the degree and nature of the Chinese regime’s institutionalization – which he defined in terms of the “adaptability, complexity, autonomy, and coherence of state organizations” – as playing the determinative role in ensuring its suppleness and survival through the Deng Xiaoping era, and beyond. Nathan’s 2003 observations about Chinese party-state institutions were in keeping with the findings of a growing number of other studies within the broader field of comparative governance. (ibid; Shue & Thornton 2017)³

This of course approach to the study of Chinese politics is now gaining traction. From Elizabeth Perry’s note of CCP’s politics based on controlled disorder and protests, and Lee Ching Kwang’s analysis of means of authoritarian states bargaining with protestors to Patricia Thornton’s more historical analysis of the traditions of normative state-making, where she found there to be a pattern in Chinese politics from imperial times to late Mao era, where the state sought to legitimate itself via portraying as the moral agent of the polity, the study of Chinese politics through the medium of analysing individual practices power, as opposed to systems of is gaining traction. (Heilmann & Perry 2011, Perry 2007; Lee & Zhang 2013; Thornton 2010; Shue & Thornton 2017).

This is of course not a purely intellectual development. In fact, much of Chinese intra-party discourse on modernisation is based on how to transfer “western techniques” to suit local conditions both within China generally in contrast to the outside world, but also to specific regions. (Goodman 2015) In the

³ Shue & Thornton 2017 also note this limitation and suggests more of a meandering approach to understand politics as opposed to binary paradigms.

absence of any academic attention which the Social Credit System has received, thus far, in addition to the increasing contemporary relevance of and interest on the conversation over how technology, practices of power, and agents and subjects of the incumbent regime itself interact with one another, this paper seeks to fill these gap. Through observing the designs of the Social Credit System through publicly available Chinese policy documents, official press releases and commentaries provided by both Chinese and existing English language materials, this paper seeks to contribute two conversations. One concerns the conversation over the relationship between politics and the accelerated development of information technology, particularly in relation to social media (though it is only a social media insofar as it involves individuals, as well as companies and agents of the state, helping compile as well as reacting to information published on particular agents, as opposed those platforms for socialised interactions enabling conversations and connections). The other is in relation to cataloguing what the Social Credit System is and how that is designed to help legitimate the state. In turn, I argue that the development of technology is, thus, neither a pure source of political anarchy, nor one of political authoritarianism. Rather, they provide new avenues to develop practices of power, legitimation and augment authoritarian rule of by Chinese Communist Party.

The Social Credit System – Background and History

As Wolfsfield et al suggested, political context of civic action, are as important as the very mediums themselves, which are magnified by the newly emergent Social Media platforms, which led to dissent during the Arab Spring. (Wolfsfield et al 2013) In this case, given that this is essentially a state mobilisation to create a technology driven system, to understand the concerns behind the Social Credit System as a project, it is important to deal with the context.

As defined previously, the public variant of the Social Credit System is a national scale reputation system. It intends to achieve a wide range of objectives. These include furthering the credibility of state institutions, reducing commercial transaction costs, building a viable financial credit data base and increase state capacity. These are to be achieved via enforcing behaviours associated integrity through a reward and punishment system, thereby normatively reconditioning individual agents and thereby the whole of society improve their “credit ratings”. (SCSCP2014-20)

The idea for a reputation system and a credit system enforcing normative governance agendas has been around for some time. In the 1990s, a working group at the World Economics and Politics of the Chinese Academy of Sciences developed the idea of a Social Credit System. They discussed plans to put in place a credit rating system at the national level, which is something that China is not fully equipped with to this day. (Meissner 2017) Lin Jinyue, who is often referred to as the pioneer of this argued in his “Theory of the Social Credit System” that China should build a credit rating system with Chinese Characteristics and the scores it assigns should be made not just factors concerning financial history, but other factors including personal character as well, to ensure financial security. (ibid)⁴ This system was trialled in Shanghai in 1999. However, nothing of any significance was developed. (Shanghai Municipal Congress 2009)

⁴ More specifically, Lin, Junyue 林钧跃 (2012). “社会信用体系理论的传承脉络与创新” (Development and Innovation of the Social Credit System Theory). Credit Reference 1 (162); Ye, Xiangrong 叶湘榕 (2015). “国模式社会信用体系建设的创新与挑战” (innovation and Challenges: Building up a Chinese Social Credit System). Innovation 4 (9), pp25–32; Lin, Junyue 林钧跃 (2015) http://www.cac.gov.cn/2015-10/28/c_1116956896.html

The system made a comeback in the early 2010. (The Economist 2016)⁵ Private companies began running their own Social Credit algorithms to monitor its customers and further their sales. For example, two leading players in this market, China Rapid Finance and Sesame Credit, are both subsidiaries of the much larger e-commerce companies Tencent, the parent company of WeChat, the Chinese equivalent to Facebook and WhatsApp combined, which has over 850 million users, and Ant Financial, a financial subsidiary of much famed Alibaba Group. (Meissner 2017) These companies operate their own social credit systems to further their own sales. This is in part because they have no reliable credit agency that provides accurate credit references on their customers in China. (Meissner 2017)

Consequently, companies such as Tencent and Alibaba have built their own credit records of their customers from which they derive ratings and have used to incentive further purchases to customers they judge to be reliable. For example, individuals using Sesame Credit are measured by a score ranging between 350 and 950 and using an algorithm.⁶ The precise details of the method used to calculate such scores are unavailable publicly due to the fact they are trade secrets. Even as they cooperate with government bodies to develop algorithms for the public variant of the Social Credit System, the companies have been reluctant to fully disclose even to governments as to how they calculate their Social Credit scores. (Borak 2017)

However, the companies do disclose the general categories of information they use to judge a customer's credit rating. These include social, economic and behavioural factors, or more precisely, the scoring categories are named: "characteristics, behaviour, connections, history and performance". While these categories are vague, the fact is that social connections, economic performance and one's consumption patterns are monitored through an algorithm. These indicate the expanded of scope of data from which these credit scores are derived to their conventional financial variant, as mentioned before. Should an individual score favourably, they are offered privileges ranging from discounted train tickets and deposit free hotel reservations to financial loans. Individuals with scores above 700 can apply to travel to Singapore without supporting documents and those with scores 800 are even entitled to deposit free loans up to 50,000 RMB (£5,700) and can apply. (Botsman 2017) However, unlike the currently proposed government variant, it does not contain a punishment mechanism. In

⁵ With the e-commerce industry heating up, data, behaviour-based credit system to fill the void of the absence of a consumer credit market and the emerging big.

⁶ It is important to note that currently a wide range of social credit Systems exist in parallel both at government and societal operations.

short, the scope of the Social Credit System in the private sector are limited to customer data monitoring and product promotions. (Borak 2017)

After noting the success of these private Social Credit Systems, government bodies too became interested in developing their own variants with the help of such companies. (The Wired 2017)⁷ It was viewed as a way by which to borrow the credibility which technology platforms facilitated in the private sector to aid government approaches to governance as well as to create a reliable credit information database. (Pieke 2012) As mentioned before, the latter is something which China has long lacked and many ways this was responsible for the stunted growth of its consumer credit industry. (Meissner 2017)

However, pilots quickly drew controversy as an instrument of political control and not one of social utility. One pilot that ran in 2010 in Suining county, Jiangsu province, trialled an automated citizen record system. It awarded people points for good behaviour such as winning a national award of some kind. Conversely, citizens would be deducted points for anything from minor traffic offences to “illegal petitioning of higher authorities for help”. (The Economist 2016) Those who scored favourably on this system were given rewards such as fast-track promotion at work or queue-jumping rights on public housing waiting lists. The pilot not only ran into the problem of accurate data-tracking, but to many, the Social Credit System appeared to be an overt means of surveillance which on the face of it used inaccurate information to deliver rewards and punishments. It was explicitly criticised for including political data by the state-run newspaper China-Youth Daily (a major party publication) and it was even labelled a failure by Beijing Times. (Ibid)

Despite this, the Xi Jinping era came, a renewed emphasis was made on the Social Credit System. In 2012, the mandate for creating a Social Credit System was moved from a joint ministerial conference to the NDRC and the People’s Bank of China (“PBoC” – this is China’s central bank and financial regulator). (Ibid) Even with such criticisms and due to the success of less controversial experiments at municipal levels such as those in Dezhou and Rongcheng, a national level plan was thereafter published by the State Council in June 2014. (finance.youth.cn 2017) It is a project that is coordinated by the influential Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms. (Meissner 2017) It is a body that has thus far dealt with the most politically sensitive issues in the country including SOE supply-side reforms among others and is headed by President Xi Jinping himself. (Ibid)

⁷ It must be noted that government attempts were put forward as early as 2007 and then subsequently in 2012.

Moreover, this group works in conjunction with PBoC, and other departments to implement the Social Credit System. (China Policy 2017)

Although direct reference to the Social Credit were made frequently by the members of the State Council and NDRC, this oversight from the heart of the Chinese party state indicates a significant degree of political will that is being invested into the project. Indeed, with 43 cities and districts being designated as Social Credit System pilot zones, the sheer scope of this project is vast and it is likely to remain that way. (Meissner 2017) The SCSCP 2014-20 laid plans to establish a national level social credit system to be operational by 2020. (SCSCP2014-20) Subsequently, in January 2018, 12 cities were selected as model demonstration cities. (sohu.com 2018) Rongcheng, in Shangdong province and Hangzhou, were two of the twelve. Although the latter is of no surprise as it is the home of Alibaba, the fact that Rongcheng, a municipal level metropolis, whose is the only city to have “fully implemented basic Social Credit System enraptures”, the system has developed fast and the central government has clearly demonstrated its will to pull this off.

What does the Social Credit aim to do – why is it being made?

To reiterate the definition of the Social Credit System, the state variant of the Social Credit System is a national scale reputation system. Its scope covers agents in both state and societal spheres including government officials, businesses, individuals and judges. (SCSCP2014-20) It seeks to normatively condition all agents of state and society to be more “trust-worthy”, and measures and targets both “trustworthiness” or “credit levels” of individual agents based on their behavioural records. In turn, rewards and punishments are allocated according to set thresholds of points allocated to certain agents. With this incentive system, the SCSCP2014-20 states that it aims to “raise the credit levels of whole society” that is governed by the “rule of law”, “make honesty honourable and dishonesty disgraceful”, improve state capacity, establish a financial credit system and further economic development. (SCSCP2014-20) Given the wide spectrum of state and societal agents concerned as well as the concurrent material, functional and normative improvements to advance the economy, state and society, the System’s broad spectrum of objectives show that it intends to achieve a plethora of objectives through tackling this what the party-state calls the “crisis in sincerity” on the Social Credit System website. (creditchina.gov.cn 2018; People’s Daily 2018 – one of many mouth piece media institution in China)

This stems from more historical routes as it is the multiple series of crises the party state has faced since the end of the Cultural Revolution. Although this was a rather complex affair, it was a period of ideological extremism and civil disorder which official had left more than a million dead. With mass assaults targeted at what they saw as “bourgeois” and counterrevolutionary elements, it was a scarring experience in particular for the Chinese intelligentsia. (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2006) The call for violence was in part instigated by Mao Zedong, the chairman himself, against large parts of the party state’s institutions and leadership. As Rodric MacFarquhar, one of the fathers of modern Chinese studies notes:

“Because of the Cultural Revolution's destructiveness (1966-1976) and the resultant decimation of the Chinese Communist Party, Deng and the other surviving party elders, who were returned to power after Mao's death in 1976, sought to abandon Maoist policies that they had previously supported. After the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee in December 1978, most of the elders rejected not only Mao's utopian visions of the egalitarian society of the Great Leap Forward and the unending class struggle of the Cultural Revolution but also the Stalinist model of state control of the economy, collectivisation of agriculture,

and emphasis on heavy industry that had followed since the 1950s.” (Macfarquhar in Goldman & Macfarquhar 1999)⁸

This affair resulted a power struggle in which more pragmatic individuals led by Deng Xiaoping took over after the death of Mao. Under the largely informal, yet firm, leadership of Deng Xiaoping, a body of Chinese statesmen contributed to what many now consider to be the origins of today’s Chinese economic miracle – the Reform and Opening. Although this line of explanation simplifies much of the complex dynamics of the period, it was a period one could argue that was dominated more “liberal” tendencies. Affairs such as Democracy Wall protests of 1978/9 and even the protests at Tiananmen Square in 1989 against corruption alongside calls for democratisation, signalled the optimism for a more democratic brand of politics at them time. (Brodsgaard 1981) Likewise, with the marketisation of the economy away from socialist planning and retreat of the central government from the regions which in effect created a relatively federal structure of governance not only led to vibrant economic development and policy experimentations as well as innovations, it also signalled a political mood that lost faith with Marxist politics and the disorder and dysfunction came with it. (Goldman & Macfarquhar 1999)

Yet, with this vibrancy brought with it its own brand of disorder. Despite the introduction of introduction of private firms and marketisation of sections of the economy, the gradual pace of it led to the presence of what some academics called “two-track” reform process. (Wedeman 2012) This meant that the remnants of the command economy retained much of the powers of administrative and economic patronage. In fact, one of the most widely credited with the success of this brand of bureaucratic capitalism was the Town and Village Enterprises (TVEs) as the economy moved towards developing a light manufacturing sector. (Naughton 1995) While it is not the focus of this paper to cover this subject in detail and the above explanation is indeed a vastly simplified narrative of China’s economic marketisation, it was such examples of blurred and close lines between private and public that was the legacy of China’s reform and opening. When the Chinese Communist Party still utters the words Socialism with Chinese characteristics, it signifies a brand of politics here there is closely integrated relationship between the state and those operating in the private markets, despite its marketisation and reforms of its economy. (Goldman & MacFacquhar 1999)

⁸ The Historiography of this affair is actually inconclusive. Despite its significance, the rapidly developing chaos which swept the country created an event that was supremely complex and true blame has been allocated in a similarly diverse manner by others. However, the party state actually indirectly allocates Mao, in their attempt to move on from the traumas of the Cultural Revolution. For more information see the translated document “Resolution on Certain Questions in Our Party’s History since the Founding of the PRC (Jun. 1981)”. <https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/cpc/history/01.htm>

Although this achieved the benefit of stability and economic growth on one hand, in the absence of ideological policing and even effective and authorise oversight, corruption festered in China since the “Reform and Opening” of the economy began in 1978. State assets were appropriated for private gain and officials, particularly those within the communist party and state institutions benefited. For example, in 1995, then the Bijing Party Secretary (equivalent post to a provincial governor), Chen Xitong, who was a member of the party’s core leadership was caught raking millions of dollars in “commissions” from real estate developers. (Wedeman 2012)

Indeed, these became serious points of contentions. Protests regularly emerged condemning such acts. This tension climaxed to the Chinese Communist Party’s near-death experience in 1989. Student protestors took to the streets and demanded the state to publish the details of senior party officials’ and their families’ financial affairs, alongside other political demands. (Zhang et al 2001)⁹ With this affair ending in bloodshed and the focus being given towards regime survival, corruption wasn’t tackled in any meaningful sense then. In fact, during Deng Xiaoping’s southern tour, when he attempted to bolster support with the support of the army for the party to continue economic reforms via emphasising the replacement of “politics in command” with “economics in command” and cement his legacy, he also emphasised the need to sustain one-party rule. (Goldman & MacFarquhar 1999)

The issue of corruption became even more endemic, thereafter. Although this is somewhat of a difficult metric to track, the corruption perception index in China is a good indicator to observe an account of this phenomena. Although corruption did exist in alternate forms prior to the economic reforms, its proliferation since 1978 was one of exponential character. In the late 1980s, this was so much so a slang for “official profiteering” emerged (guandao). (Wedeman 2012) Although there were numerous ad-hoc attempts by the state such as those in 1982 and then again in 1986 as well as 1989, to clamp down on corruption, the number of officials charged with corruption increased substantially. In 1980, the Supreme People's Procuratorate (the Chinese national prosecution service) filed some 9,000 corruption-related cases in 1980. By 1989, this had increased to 77,400. Although this declined after a wide range of lesser offences were decriminalised after the revision of the criminal code in 1997 to 32,000, it was a problem that was hard to stop. (Ibid)

⁹ It must be stressed that the origins of the Tiananmen Square Incident had complex origins beyond corruption, even though it was no doubt a major grievance.

This issue of corruption climaxed to a full-blown political crisis with the Bo Xilai affair of 2012. Bo Xilai was a self-promoting former party secretary of Chongqing, a province of more than 40 million inhabitants. (Barmé 2012) He attended China's most prestigious Peking University and upon graduation he fast displayed his talents as a populist politician. He suffered through his tenure in the countryside like many of his generation. (Ibid) In fact, he was at the same work location in which Xi Jinping was sent to. Despite this, Bo pandered to what some might call “maostalgia” – a nostalgic mourning of the passing of the old ways of socialism, by revving red flag waving parades of children – a common sight in the Mao era. (Ibid) He mirrored some the developments in China today, crafted a personalised brand of populist politics and engaged in supposedly ferocious as well as successful anti-corruption campaign on his own turf. It was a high-profile affair, which was even later given its own name – Chongqing Model. (Ibid) Indeed, such success made Bo a fast-rising star in Chinese politics. With his success seen as the Minister of Commerce between 2004 and 2007 and thereafter the Party Secretary of Chongqing between 2007 and 2012, in the run up to the Standing Committee selection of 2012, his eyes were set on the top jobs. (Ibid)

However, his wife and later he became linked to the murder of a British businessman Niall Haywood. With the former mayor of Chongqing now claiming refuge at the British consulate in Chongqing, investigations came and from there Bo fell from grace. It was no secret that the Party Secretary Bo was living a lavish lifestyle. His son attended Harrow and Oxford on top of their lavish life styles, but, more importantly, given that he was at the time of his fall a leading contender for the presidency, the revelations which the subsequent investigations made public revealed systematic corruption at the highest levels of power. (New York Times 2012) Of course, this was on top of the fact that the economy was facing the slowest pace of growth in decades. The existential threats such a crisis could pose should it emerge again was recognised by then the departing president Hu Jintao. In his address to the party at the 17th Party Congress in 2012, he stressed that the importance of tackling corruption throughout the party – something that was rarely uttered in Chinese politics as he noted that a failure to tackle corruption could prove “fatal to the party”, and that the party should “aim higher and work harder” to solve this issue. (China Daily 2012; BBC News 2012)

The anti-corruption drive that came followed under Xi Jinping, saw an unprecedented number of officials and party cadres being disciplined. With more than a million government officials having had disciplinary actions taken against them, some commentators even called this China's second Cultural Revolution. With the fall of Chinese political heavy weights such as the former member of the standing committee and security chief Zhou Yongkang, such descriptions indeed were quite fitting,

though inaccurate to the actual causes of the events themselves, as it introduced a new set of norms where no one was immune from this weight of the anti-corruption campaign. (South China Morning Post 2015)

Yet, this was only one of many scandals and crises that rocked China since Deng's Southern Tour. Recurrent governance crises kept the party state-on its toes. When the state decentralised and partially withdrew from social spheres, one of the consequences of in part linked to corruption was the degradation of state-capacity, for the central state to deliver a desired policy objective in the region. From HIV outbreak of the late 1990s, the SARs epidemic of 2003, the Sichuan Earth Quake response as well as the baby-formula scandal of 2008, the chemical plant explosion in Tianjin in 2015, and more recent faulty infant vaccine scandal all produced significant number of fatalities (except the last one) and repeatedly demonstrated the party state's inability to regulate society effectively because of incompetence and corruption. (Shue & Thornton 2017; CNN 2018)¹⁰ Likewise in a more administrative sense, its inability to effectively deal with regional interests, protectionism, or even raise higher revenue from regions and most importantly of all corruption, affirmed the many crises of state-capacity stemming from both the outside and within since the Reform & Openings began. (Walder 1995) These problems pose the regime with a paradoxical question – how does one stop such crises which are detrimental to the “credibility and prestige of the regime” (as described on the SCSCP2014-20) while keeping the benefits of a local policy experiments and economic success which the party state's “performance legitimacy” is based on? (SCSCP2014-20; Zhu 2011)

Although such crises deflected responsibility away from the party state and unanimously allocated blame on defective and morally deficient individuals, the fact concerns over competent policy implementation, tax payments, food and drug safety and industrial safety are explicitly mentioned across central government discourse and policy publications on the Social Credit System indicates its relevance. Adding to this, the government's frustration over ineffective measures previously rolled out to tackle such matters are aired in the SCSCP2014-20 as it states:

“the main problem is that . . . credit records are gravely flawed. . .and the social consciousness of sincerity and credit levels tend to be low. . .grave production safety accidents, food and drug security incidents, commercial swindles . . .and fraudulent financial claims are not being stooped despite repeated bans. . .” (SCSCP2014-20)

¹⁰ Almost a million vaccines for children were found to be defective in China.

Then, it appears that the Social Credit System is the most ambitious and systematic attempt to tackle such matters. Despite its rather totalitarian flavour (where totalitarianism is defined as the presence of a totalising state in affairs both public and private), it comes out Communist China's moral soul-searching mission of late – riddled with scandals concerning both in the state and societal spheres. With the former including commercial and private fraud to general anti-social behaviour to the latter including judicial as well as administrative corruption and incompetence, the project appears to be a way for the party state to seek to expand state capacity and tighten its grip on political legitimacy.

How does the Social Credit System work?

The Social Credit System seeks to promote this individual integrity, government capacity and credibility via a three-fold process. Firstly, the Social Credit System morally frames functional, legal and social obligations on individuals, companies and agents of the state and then adds or subtracts scores based on a score range. Secondly, individuals who achieve score points at either bottom or top thresholds of the Social Credit points spectrum are placed in either Red or Black lists for their respective moral standing, the fact of which are thereafter is publicised (both those in the Black and Red lists, as well as those in between, though the former receive more attention). Finally, reward and punishments are allocated through the mobilisation of state and societal actors, which is in part enforced by the points-incentive system imposed by the Social Credit System itself. In short, the System creates a panoptic network of information projection, which in its design aspires to normatively recondition agents to behave “sincerely” and comply with the directions set by the central state both within state and societal spheres. I shall now go through these individual stages one by one.

Normative Framing of Functional, Legal and Social Obligations.

The moral framing of functional and social obligations can be seen in the SCSCP2014-20 as it states that competent policy mandate delivery by officials and cadres are framed as a form of “promise keeping” for “government credibility and prestige” – things that are deemed of existential and moral importance. Thus, the Social Credit System agendas a moralised objective of “raising the credit levels of whole society”. These not only shows the integrity as a matter of societal grievances and governance problems, but also as issues of political imperative. The frustration over the weaker government capacity is shown. Both governance and state-capacity concerns are directly linked to the lack of individual integrity in the SCSCP2014-20. (SCSCP2014-20) Consequently, the logic here links legal compliance to that of a moral standing and creates a pathways of blame deflection for societal ills and wider policy problems towards individuals, away from the larger party state. As the SCSCP2014-20 document and wider media commentaries elaborate and repeat this very line: “the damages such acts of insincerity damage the economy as well as the credibility and prestige of government”. (Ibid; jrjz.com 2017)

Mirroring this normative emphasis, subjects that are covered by the Social Credit System are framed in a moral manner. For example, individuals and companies can be scrutinised and deducted points for unfulfilled contractual and tax obligations via the Social Credit System. Such matters are worded as moral deviations or as acts of “trust-breaking” and the term “credit” is equated to that of level of trust-worthiness. (SCSCP2014-20) State Council's "Guiding Opinions on Leading Brands to Promote the Upgrading of Supply and Demand Structure" states that it is the purpose of the Social Credit System to raise the awareness of the integrity of the whole society and the credit level and create a social environment of honesty, self-discipline, trustworthiness and mutual trust Promote the building of credit standing of companies. (cicn.cn 2018)

Additionally, successive National Development (“NDRC”) and Reform Council and State Council (the latter is the supreme executive body and the former is subordinate to the latter which is responsible for developing policy matters vernaly vital for legitimation activities) Guiding Opinion documents and subnational level governments’ publications concerning the Social Credit System Social Credit System also repeatedly project the idea of implementing incentives to shape behaviour of individual towards this goal of a moral society as a means solving a variety of problems.¹¹ For instance, the State Council’s Guiding Opinions on Strengthening and Standardizing the Management of List of Jointly Punished and Prompt Believers for Trustworthiness and Guidance, released on March 2017, set out the criteria for “scientifically determining the list of rewards and punishments. . . to establish and improve the focus of integrity status of society”. (Caixin (2016) Similarly, editorials on mainstream media sources also make this link between the money driven lack of integrity and a winder governance issues clear. As one Caixin Editorial read:

“Most of today's Chinese people believe in "success is supreme" and believe that "success is the best deodorant". No matter which method you use, eventually you will be sought after and respected even if you can climb to the peak of wealth. . . Scandals can also be a certain step to increase awareness. Under the extremely utilitarian social consensus, on the one hand, the cost of moral hazard has been reduced to the lowest level, which has greatly increased the profitability of the business; on the other hand, the credit system of the entire society has almost collapsed, and the potential risks of the transaction have greatly risen.”
(Caixin 2016)

¹¹ These are policy guidelines to aid local governments’ interstation of an implantation process of policies

This line of discourse is reiterated at the highest levels of government. On 9th December 2016 General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized at the 37th Collective Study Session at the Politburo stated that “given the lack of honesty and credit, it is necessary to pay close attention to establishing a credit system covering the whole society.” (cicn.com (2018) Thus, variety of sources clarify the Social Credit System’s objective of normative improvements as its primary medium via which wider range of governance, political and economic agendas are to be addressed via framing it in a moralised manner.

Red and Black List System – A State-Society Mobilising Panoptic Normalising Process

This normative medium and its plethora of objectives are in turn enforced via a reward and punishment system. Individual agents, the SCSCP2014-20 states that, may have points rewarded or subtracted within a specified points spectrum for certain behaviours. Thereafter, should they reach certain thresholds they may be have privileges or restrictions allocated to them. The “Red” and “Black” lists identify those with agents with exceptional Social Credit scores both good and bad, and those agents are allocated most notable of rewards and punishments. In principle, when credit scores reach certain thresholds of positive and negative ratings, the agents in question are placed into coloured lists specified by the Social Credit System. (Ibid) “Red” lists are used for those who have contributed exceptionally to society, and “Black” lists are used for those who have not paid their obligations that they are due to society. (Ibid) It does so by allocating points, measuring levels of honesty with that based on behavioural records of individuals, companies and state agents. Should certain individuals or companies reach certain thresholds, they may be subject to certain punishments. The rewards, according to the SCSCP2014-20 document, can range from faster promotion for government employees as credit information are used within personal social credit information dossiers as part of their annual performance reviews, and deposit free hotel bookings and travel rights to popular holiday destinations to subsidised loans and preferential treatment in tender processes for companies. (SCSCP2014-20; news.163.com 2018)

Such information is integrated through the Social Credit System when respective state and societal forces such as government agencies, the courts, companies and individuals report the behaviour of certain agents via a regional Social Credit System platform website.¹² The data then is shared between societal and state actors with the latter doing so both horizontally – across local and central levels, and

¹² Websites such as the Rongcheng Social Credit information page allows search and reporting of credit information <http://www.rccredit.gov.cn/rccreditweb/index.jsp>

vertically – across departments and units. (finance.youth.cn 2018) As the SCSCP2014-20 states, the Social Credit System’s operation is said to rely on what its policy document calls the “*joint-construction*” with society: “*the main purpose of the Social Credit System are government promotion and. . .[its] joint construction with society. . .[where] the government is responsible for formulating and implementing plans. . .[while] social forces are encouraged to participate.*” (SCSCP2014-20) The Social Credit System imposes obligations of data sharing, publicity and the Social Credit Score related privilege and punishment allocation to both state and societal units.

With regards to data collection and relaying, there are three main sources of credit information and they include those collected by private agents such as e-commerce companies, national level banks, those collected by the PBoC and the information converted into measurable datasets from government departments at the central and subnational levels.¹³ The sources of these data originating from both state and societal forces and in each of the data types there is also a concurrent mobilisation of state and societal forces. For example, for the data gathered by private agents such as that of Alibaba alongside private credit referencing agencies, these are either centralised under the National Credit Information Sharing Platform (established in October 2015) or they work with PBoC, particularly for commercial credit information, to compile a centralised public ally accessible database of credit information.¹⁴ They are then subsequently divided under two publicly searchable data bases namely the National Enterprise Credit Information Publicity System, for information concerning credit scores of commercial organisations as well as their generic registration details, and Credit China Platform, the non-commercial credit score database. (State Administration of For and Industry and Commerce Website 2018)¹⁵

In addition, individual reporting of incidents of bad behaviour can be done on the municipal, provincial level and national level Social Credit System websites. Although no test-case for this individual level reporting is yet available for viewing on the currently available Social Credit System press releases and coverages, this principle of a rather panoptic oversight systems can be observed. Furthering this incompleteness of publicly available information on the System, it is not clear how the scores are calculated, and the publicity is concentrated on exceptionally dishonest businesses and

¹³ There were instances where reluctance and even resistance to these data collection activities imposed on e-commerce companies by the PBoC. In part, this was due to the fact that e-commerce companies often compete on the basis of how customer data they have, and how effectively they can utilise them to formulate sales algorithms. *China Policy* (2017) <https://us2.campaign-archive.com/?e=&u=3fd756a9629015f7becc6e127&id=8ac23a49d0>

¹⁴ For more on this, please refer to Jeremy Benthan’s work on the Panopticon and Michelle Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.

¹⁵ accessible through creditchina.cn.

individuals – this is done by press releases and sponsored articles on local media outlets. However, a breakdown of an individual's acts of reported sincerity and insincerity can be viewed or directly reported via these publicity platforms. With the data made available, the dual mobilisation of state and societal forces enables the execution of the reward-and-punishment system.

In turn, the obligations are then passed onto state and societal forces to enforce its reward and punishment systems. For example, societal activities that require identification checks on individuals such as for the purposes of hotel bookings and train ticket purchases now have integrated social credit referencing into its operation. These include booking hotels to purchasing train tickets. Individuals can be rewarded through discounts on train and plane ticket purchases and deposit free bookings of hotel rooms as well as an easier access to foreign holidays. While businesses and local governments can gain access to government endorsed lines of cheaper credit. (finance.youth.cn 2018)

For officials and party cadres can see their career prospects improve. Conversely, punishments can entail anything from the denial of travel rights and demotion or expulsion from government posts or party memberships to denial of loans for personal or commercial use. For example, in Rongcheng, individuals and companies were given discounted interest for their good credit records. In one instance, individuals were either denied or given discount of as much as 30% in interest rate on a loan. (Ibid) Likewise, companies with good credit scores were to be given preferential treatment in tenders and those who were blacklisted were not allowed to even participate in a tender. (Jiangmen City Government Website" 2018) For officials, though these cases are hard to find the more detail, there were instances of officials being dismissed and candidates for party membership being removed from their posts and categories due to poor credit ratings resulting from traffic violations. (sohu.com 2018)

Perhaps most disturbingly, a blacklisted individual can have the wrath of state and societal forces mobilise against them in more intrusive manner. There are reported cases in Binhai County, Jiangsu province, where phone companies and government agencies forcefully changed individuals' phone ringtones with government created messages alerting nearby persons of the individual's untrustworthiness for unpaid court fines. (Xinhua 2017) In a similar fashion, details of individuals with their mugshot photographs have been publicised in town squares as a method of naming and shaming dishonest individuals. (Figure 1) Such excessive publicity creates significant intrusion of privacy and inconvenience to individuals in the name of societal level normative changes. However, these are in turn used to encourage self-restraint among state and societal actors towards a new normative benchmark. Repeatedly stated concepts of industry self-discipline (企业自我约束 qǐyè

zìwǒ yuēshù) if not “self-regulation”, “public participation” lead to “mass supervision” convey the conceptual formation of the Social Credit System’s aims. (SCSCP2014-20) While these are general principles of self-reinforcement and discipline, by mobilising agents across state and societal spheres against one another these terms of “panoptic” nature are quite fitting in describing the operational principles of the Social Credit System.

This panoptic element can also be seen in the spheres of administrative discipline. The SCSCP2014-20 states that there is an “urgent need for a system to limit and supervise the use of administrative powers so that they are lawful and are “mutually constraining and coordinating”. And where it could through “greater transparency, expanded public participation and public hearing systems” can “strengthen social supervision to constrain the use of power to improve government credibility.” (SCSCP2014-20) One guiding opinion document, mirroring the SCSCP2014-20, specified the basis on which local government officials, party cadres, local governments, government agencies, alongside judicial officers’ Social Credit scores are to be judged. These include how effectively these agents fulfil their duties in implementing policies, how compliant they are with regards to the boundaries of administrative power so that they don't abuse it, and, finally, how well they keep the “trust of society's subjects”. The precise categories outlined include but not limited to actions that adhere to their mandate towards “budget controls “and “statistics transparency”, under “mass supervision.” (SCSCP2014-20; Chinese Central Government Website gov.cn 2017) Such information will be used to allocate resources between governments, while for individuals working within the government, the information will be taken into consideration as part of their annual performance reviews and thus be linked to their career progressions. Although this point is not observed as vividly as some other more commercial elements or societal elements in its publicity, it is very much present in the SCSCP2014-20 document. (SCSCP2014-20)

Rongcheng – A Case Study

Beyond the conceptual and discursive data, one case study can best demonstrate the above elaborated normative, normalising, state-society mobilising and panoptic nature of the Social Credit System – the case study of Rongcheng. This is the best publicised example of the Social Credit System in action. Rongcheng, a municipal level city in Shandong province, was chosen as one of twelve demonstration cities – an *exemplar par excellence* of the Social Credit System implementation. The city allegedly demonstrated the most comprehensive implementation of the Social Credit System to date in China. (finance.youth.cn 2018)

Since 2012, in Rongcheng, varying forms of policy matters concerning integrity were linked through the Social Credit System in the city. For example, banks were encouraged to participate in the data collection of organise a “double check” system as part of commercial lending procedures where by. (Xinhua 2018) This double check system required a lender to go through its local branch of the PBoC as well as regional Social Credit System database as put into contact via the regional offices of SAIC. This requirement to go through a local extension of a central government body, was also referred to as private banks such as the CIBC helped government collect data on policy areas conveyed by intra-central ministerial memorandums of understanding signed conjointly with the PBoC and the SAIC such as that of honesty of taxi drivers. (finance.youth.cn 2018)

Black-lists were used against taxi drivers who scored lowly in their credit ratings and were punished through the denial of services as essential utilities and the benefits of newly emerging consumer credit lines. Likewise, companies were also given credit scores concerning with regards to their regulatory compliance and other morally graded activities. They can access credit more cheaply than those who are less legally compliant. Here, there were instances of banks having to provide credit facilities at a discounted interest rate . . . The report on the progress of the Social Credit System construction highlighted a 72% drop in complaints rate concerning taxi drivers as well as a 26% drop in non-performing loans, showing the impact of increased state capacity. (finance.youth.cn 2018) Those who score favourably are to be assigned to the “Red-lists” where they are thereafter to be given less regulatory scrutiny and favourable rates of commercial credit, which are both in theory supposed to be made possible by the “double check” system – the dual mobilisation of state and societal forces against agents according to their levels of trustworthiness. This discursive demonstration of enforcement actions, functions, aims and normalising design show the Social Credit System.

In summary, the Social Credit System imposes a normative agenda. This is enforced via a reward-and-punishment system through the Red and Black list systems. The Social Credit Scores are used to allocate agents to such lists and such data are shared throughout state and societal agents. They are then obligated to mobilise to allocate or deny resources and conveniences to normalise behaviour towards a new normative standard where legal obligations are framed as moral imperatives. The data itself is gathered and reported from these state and societal agents which are “mutually constraining” and thus introduces a panoptic system of checks and discipline enforcement.

Legitimation

In introducing forces of state and societal agents to watch over one another, the Social Credit System also introduces a force of normative legitimation to the centre. There are three ways in which the dynamics of power which the System introduces which does this. Firstly, there is routine demonstration of state-capacity. This is not only evident in the publicity concerning the breath of state and societal penetration which the Social Credit System policy project has achieved but also the policy areas which it has achieved improvements. Wider success bragged by the Rongcheng city government and NDRC of decreased proportion of non-performing loans and better-quality taxi drivers there, show the various avenues via which the state can claim credit. (finance.youth.cn 2018)

Secondly, there is an active marginalisation of normatively deviant agents both from the state, party and society at large. This normative enforcement by in large marginalises the groups in question thereby showing the efforts to disassociate morally deviant elements of state and society away from itself and its local extensions. This is done by both the implementation and enforcement processes of the Social Credit System, as the competitive selection of model cities as well as those with good credit scores are routinely publicised at the national level, where as those who are deemed normatively deviant are also seen to be marginalised by the state.

Lastly, there is the projection of the centre as the moral agent of state and society. This imposition of a new norm where the law is equated to morality and the pursuit of those who go beyond such norms put those not marginalised by this process above and the party-state above all as the very moral agent of state and society. At the same time institution building, bureaucratisation and societal penetration is achieved. This strengthening of state-capacity concurrent to normative projection, thereby, pushes a multifaceted form of legitimation that not only demonstrates a renewed state-capacity but also its

moral credentials. This not only individualises blame for any normative defects societal and state while shifting the blame away from the state.

Conclusion, Limitations and Scope for Further Study

This paper has, thus, far analysed the new avenues of automated legitimation via which the Social Credit System has provide the Chinese party-state. The design and the government publicity indicate that the party state is indeed creating a panoptic system via which it seeks to enforce normative discipline to achieve a wide range of policy objectives. With the largely Orwellian manner of normative conditioning this system relies on and enforces to achieve a wholesome range of policy objectives, the avenues of state encroachment on society as well as the number of mediums via which the party state can legitimate itself is thereby augmented.

However, it is not clear whether these actually are successful in its aims of legitimating the state in the imaginations of its citizens. The way in which the results of the Social Credit System at work are publicised by the state conveys the idea that it sees such avenues of systematic repression and self-promotion as one of new sources of legitimacy. It is important to emphasise, that legitimation is a two-way process in politics and it would be absurd to claim that the citizenry of the party state do not have a mind of their own. On this note, it is hard to measure how successfully such modes of self-legitimation is being carried out through the Social Credit System. A more in-depth fieldwork beyond looking at the designs of the Social Credit System can contribute to this side of question of legitimation. In addition, it must also be noted that the Social Credit System is still undergoing its pilot stage. The only “complete” and functional state variant of the Social Credit System in operation is currently in Rongcheng, at the municipal level. Thus, it is difficult to claim with certainty that the materials assessed here represent what the entirety of a nationally implemented Social Credit System may look like.

Nevertheless, the skeleton and the designs of the Social Credit System seen thus so far can still contribute to the conversation concerning the relationship between politics and communication. In fact, it can be argued with more conviction that, despite the uncertainties of how effective the Social Credit System might be, it as a case study on the conversation provides a new direction in the conversation beyond the ones noting disruption, chaos and gloom. Indeed, it is the ways in which technologies are deployed and the individual practices of politics that defines the success of failures of specific political systems or regimes. Then, the questions as to whether our contemporary world is heading against democracies and democratisation because of advances in information communication technology appears to be the wrong ones to ask.

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