

Trust is good, control is better.
—Vladimir Lenin¹

Adam Greenfield

Sincerity Systems

For an outsider, particularly one without any Mandarin to lean on, thinking clearly about the relationship between Chinese state policy and culture in the era of Xi Jinping is remarkably difficult. Whatever factlets and bits of half-knowledge one manages to acquire sit there like a hot stone in the belly, as indigestible as they are impossible to ignore. On the one hand, there's unquestionably a very great deal of noise in the channel, of the sort that responsible people are honor-bound to reject out of hand: the superpower jockeying, scarcely camouflaging naked commercial interest; the zombie reproduction of dusty cold-war fearmongering; and above all, the demonization of the Other that, at its neocon edges, more-or-less openly traffics in the vilest Yellow Peril tropes. Strip these factors away, and the maneuverings of Xi's China can seem little different, and not noticeably worse, than those of its competitors. If you fear and distrust China on such grounds, you'll hopefully feel more or less the same way about the United States, or India as it has evolved under Narendra Modi. Great powers gonna great power, and that is never not ugly in its particulars.

But it is also clear that in flexing its muscles, growing at last into its longed-for status as the twenty-first century's marquee superpower, the Chinese state is incontrovertibly, habitually, and profoundly dedicated to choices and practices that curtail freedom of belief, expression, assembly, and action across multiple dimensions of being. There is, of course, the large-scale physical detention, and cultural-linguistic annihilation, of restive Tibetan and Uighur minorities in the west, with perhaps a million currently being held in desert "re-education" camps.² There is the One Belt One Road policy of power projection: the attempt to acquire legitimacy, not to mention forward operating bases via free-spending infrastructure development and its concomitant creation of an emergent comprador class in mostly African client states. There is the intensifying suppression of democracy and dissent in Hong Kong, the ruthless marginalization of Taiwan, and the perennial land-grabbing in the South China Sea, including the engineering of artificial fortress islands. Increasingly, there is the state's implicit claim to speak for (and right to perform extrajudicial rendition of) anyone of Han ancestry, wherever throughout the sprawling Chinese diaspora they happen to reside. These policies are not, to put it mildly, those of a power whose influence on the world feels entirely benign.

And then there is "social credit," the network-mediated form of ubiquitous surveillance and control that has become the object of much horrified fascination in mainstream Western media. With descriptions in the



A financial app showing a user's Zhima, or Sesame Credit score: 773 out of 800. Source: ABC/Foreign Correspondent/Brant Cumming.

Western press marked more by hyperbole than by solid technical reporting, and notably deficient in the perspectives of Mandarin speakers—let alone first-hand accounts of the system and its workings from those actually implicated by it—the discourse around social credit has more than occasionally taken on a Sinophobic tenor.

As a novel fusion of technical capability with a particular kind of political desire, social credit is undoubtedly worth understanding in detail. But accounts of it that reach the West are generally marred by a subtle, invidious, possibly even unconscious “us/them” binary, as though the systems of control “they” live under are somehow different, and scarier, than the conditions “we” contend with. My task here will be to peel away that layer of othering with regards to China’s social credit system, figure out what it is really doing, and delineate some of the many ways in which it has more in common with everyday practice in the West than the emerging media narrative generally lets on. Once equipped with a clearer understanding of where and how social credit evolved, a few preliminary conclusions can be drawn about what its emergence implies for those of us who happen to live outside of the Middle Kingdom.

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In a 2012 Party Congress, Xi Jinping consolidated power

by succeeding Hu Jintao as general secretary of the Communist Party and president of the People’s Republic of China. Some eighteen months thereafter, in June 2014, China’s maximum ruling body, the State Council, issued a memorandum outlining its ambition to achieve a “sincerity culture” by engineering a broadly pervasive system of behavioral control.

Blandly entitled “Planning Outline for the Construction of a Social Credit System,” the State Council initiative described in this document intended to redress the government’s longstanding inability to deal with a lengthy list of entirely real and vexing abuses: “grave production safety accidents, food and drug security incidents, ... commercial swindles, production and sales of counterfeit products, tax evasion, fraudulent financial claims, academic impropriety and other such phenomena [which] cannot be stopped in spite of repeated bans.”³

The solution proposed was to create “sincerity systems” that would leverage the extension of credit as an incentive toward good behavior on the part of individuals and institutions both. (As it exists now, social credit makes virtually no distinction between “legal persons,” i.e. government agencies, private enterprises and other organizations, and the “natural” ones we recognize as fellow human beings. Both classes of person bear scores, and both are in principle subject to the same sorts of sanction for misbehavior, though it is far easier to see how

this conditions the lifechances of flesh-and-blood individuals and families.) An individual numeric rating of one's judgment and conduct—a *social credit score*—would be established, via the tracking and registration of online as well as offline activities. And that rating would *matter*, would be made to matter, henceforth acting as a gating mechanism for access to financing and public services, as well as those commercial products and services whose vendors complied with the scheme. Faced with the looming threat of sanctions applied to those who failed to maintain respectable scores, deception and fraud would cease to be ordinary business practices. *Pianzi* (swindlers, cheats) at every scale would regulate their own behavior, bringing it into line with the state's expectations for them. And "ordinary" Chinese citizens would be able to relax in the knowledge that they could broadly trust one another to act in prudent, neighborly fashion, perhaps for the first time in their long history.

There is clearly some concern in all of this for Brand China as it is perceived both domestically and overseas, with the appeal of Chinese products sharply limited by widely-shared coverage of vaccines that aren't what they claim to be, infant formula adulterated with the industrial plastic melamine, and a long list of other contaminations, substitutions and outright scams.

There is also, perhaps, some desire to place limits on the historically pervasive role Chinese society accords to *guanxi*, an informal practice in which ordinary people seek influence with bosses, administrators, and others in a position to help them via the strategic distribution of gifts and favors. Guanxi is the juice that seals a business deal, guarantees housing with an auspicious address, ensures that a relative is admitted to a highly-rated hospital, or secures a favored child's acceptance into a good school. While it undoubtedly offers the multitude access to power they have little if any formal ability to make claims upon, by the same token it is broadly understood to have hampered the development of public institutions in China, and a rule-of-law-based civil society more broadly. Reformers have long dreamed of doing away with unaccountable, inherently unequal guanxi-based influence networks, and social credit offers a superficially objective, publicly verifiable means of establishing good conduct and formal equality before the law.

The desire to limit shoddiness, irresponsibility, and fraud is, of course, laudable enough, and wanting to place bounds on the scope of informal, unaccountable means of influence is at least defensible. Continue to tease out the logic of social credit as expressed in the State Council document, though, and things start to get uncomfortably draconian. If the carrot offered to upstanding citizens is the extension of consumer credit, the corresponding stick is its withdrawal. "[I]ndividuals breaking trust and violating regulations" are to be placed on a credit blacklist linked to their real name and national identity number, and ultimately their unique biometric signatures. There is to be

no outside, no shadow grey market sheltering those denied access to the formal economy—at least not one in which participation is not itself punishable by law. What the document envisions, authorizes, and sets out to secure for China is a continuous, real-time assessment of one's reliability as a dutiful citizen, persistently available to all, coupled to a pervasive fabric of incentives and disincentives rewarding compliance and punishing deviance, all in the context of compulsory, state-mandated use.

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At first blush, much of this may sound relatively familiar, even uncontroversial to those who have internalized neoliberal values. From such a perspective, this is little more than the stuff of good networked government in the twenty-first century. But underneath is the centuries-old dream of authoritarians, articulated and given flesh by the State Council almost at the very moment it first becomes technically possible.

At entry into the register, one's score starts at a nominal 1,000 social credit points, and is subsequently incremented or decremented in response to one's actions in the world, whether public or private, online or off. Remember to take the recycling out in time for pickup Wednesday morning and enjoy a modest bump in your score. Keep it above 750, and you may even be whisked through airport security without having to suffer the indignity of a bodyscan. Run a red light, though, or get into a shouting match with your neighbor, or spend too much time playing games online, and you'll see your score suffer. Allow it to fall too far beneath the critical threshold—the score of 600 that defines the upper bound of the officially-suspect "Class D"—and you may be barred from the national high-speed rail network, or find it difficult to purchase airline tickets.⁴ Your children may have trouble being accepted to good schools. Your home internet service may be restricted to dial-up speeds. You may be denied access to public housing entirely.

One of the most interesting features of social credit is how very much of its mechanism of action is formally deniable by the state, and reliant instead on the policies of commercial partners like Alibaba's Alipay, the massively popular Uber analogue Didi Chuxing, or the equally inescapable dating site Baihe. It's hard to imagine a more concise illustration of the Foucauldian logic of the panopticon than that offered by Alibaba executive vice chairman Joe Tsai when he says, reflecting on the company's utilization of social credit scores, "We want people to be aware of" the causal link between their behavioral choices and the real-world products and services that are made available to them, "so they know to behave themselves better." It's more startling still to realize that these blandly sinister words are being spoken not by some faceless government apparatchik, but by someone celebrated as a captain of notionally libertarian

free enterprise.⁵

That behavioral standards mandated by the government are upheld and enforced by private commercial parties in each of the thousands of networked touchpoints increasingly strewn through everyday life is one of social credit's subtler points. It may, indeed, be its greatest single innovation as a technique of governmentality. Transgress the established norms, and the nominally private electronic funds transfer platform won't let you pay for the groceries, or the babysitter, or the water bill. The nominally private car service won't show up at your door. The nominally private dating site won't show you any prospective matches. All of these measures, and more, will remain in effect until you've learned to behave appropriately, and have managed to ease your score past a minimally respectable threshold. And woe unto the private enterprise that fails to enact state policy with sufficient fidelity: as a corporate person, it could find itself subject to many of the same sanctions applied to recalcitrant flesh-and-blood individuals.

As compared with authoritarianisms past, China's social credit system ought to be understood as an inscription of soft power, if only just. In some formal sense, under social credit, the choice of how to act, and therefore to what degree citizens wish to avail themselves of the freedoms and perquisites attendant on good behavior, remains with the individual. At least to a first approximation, punishment for deviance is largely applied by private actors, and it is largely negative in character—a fabric of deprioritizations, exclusions, and absences.

Comparing such measures with the Chekists at the door, the Gestapo in the foggy night, the killing fields of the Khmer Rouge, or the machetes of the Hutu, then, clearly courts a degree of moral hazard. But it pays to remember that the full power of the carceral state ultimately looms behind the determination to offer or deny credit and other commercial services to any given individual, a sovereign power that retains its historical prerogatives to compel or deny, to kill or let live.

And that power is brought to bear on individual bodies according to criteria that are, at their root, profoundly arbitrary, even absurd. As an executive responsible for overseeing the design of social credit explains: "Someone who plays video games for ten hours a day, for example, would be considered an idle person, and someone who frequently buys diapers would be considered as probably a parent, who on balance is more likely to have a sense of responsibility." This is the level of inferential sophistication behind the decisions that stand to affect the lifechoices of hundreds of millions of Chinese citizens. In this light, some punishable acts like "living in a flat exceeding one's personal needs," or the ever-popular "evasion of queuing at supermarket checkouts," are clearly rife with potential for definitional vagueness and abuse.⁶

Perhaps inevitably, then, there are already incidents on record in which the social credit system was used to enact revenge and harassment. Human Rights Watch cites the case of lawyer Li Xiaolin, who was added to a national no-fly list and barred from boarding a flight on at least one occasion, not because of anything other than that he'd run afoul of a petty bureaucrat.⁷

One feature of social credit as imagined by the State Council goes quite a bit further, in a way bound to stir memories of one of the darkest chapters in Chinese history. In its explicit ambition to "give rein to the role of the masses in appraisal, discussion, criticism and reports," "shape social deterrence through social moral condemnation," and "censure trust-breaking acts of members of society," the State Council risks reviving the worst excesses of the Mao period. This inclination to harness the punitive power of freelance ostracism blends the frenzied "struggle sessions" of the Cultural Revolution with the online swarms of our own time, with all the sociopathic harassment, doxxing and swatting they give rise to.

Perhaps most pernicious of all, social or sustained physical proximity with low-scoring individuals is in itself enough to negatively affect one's rating. Of all the ways in which social credit abrades progressive sensibilities, among the most chilling is the deliberate creation of a class of digital lepers, cut off from normal human contact and rendered untouchable by dint, perhaps, of little more than an accumulation of trivial or arbitrarily-defined transgressions. One can easily imagine the more or less ad hoc formation of ghettos for those ill-favored in this way—entire sink districts or even cities where those barred from the society of their peers are compelled to gather, and are henceforth denied access to any but the most rudimentary services.

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As much as all of this may sound like a season's accumulation of unaired *Black Mirror* plots, it is but a literal and uninflected description of what is currently happening in China, as the ongoing rollout of social credit gathers force and scope. Is any of this uniquely Chinese, though? Hardly.

It has to be said that an end-to-end system of social control is particularly easy to implement in present-day China due to the country's massive turn toward ubiquitous digital mediation, in an embrace more aggressive than any visible in the West. Whether cashless peer-to-peer transactions on the WeChat platform or uses of facial recognition that range from the disturbing (police equipped with augmented-reality goggles, scanning railway crowds for fugitives) to the ludicrous (the apportionment of toilet paper in public facilities), everyday Chinese life is already suffused by networked digital technology to an extent that is difficult for most

non-Chinese to comprehend.⁸

Lest anyone in the West fool themselves into thinking that all this is somehow safely other, though, the bits and pieces of social credit have been present in Western society all along, waiting for someone to pick them up and assemble them into a coherent apparatus.

The central inspiration—the notion of hegemonic reliability scores, used to police personal comportment—is a straight lift from longstanding practice in the West, as is the folding of private, commercial actors into affairs of public consequence. The adjudications of the private credit-rating bureaus Equifax, TransUnion, and Experian certainly have a force in contemporary American society that no public document ever stipulated, no democratic process ever authorized, and no representative body ever formally assented to, yet the models of prudent behavior encoded in their algorithms have been internalized by millions.

Neither is the use of financial incentives to motivate socially acceptable behavior particularly or exclusively Chinese. In the UK, local government bodies working toward the now quaintly obsolete, Cameron-era vision of a voluntarist “Big Society” proposed a set of incentives strikingly similar to some of those enacted in social credit: reward points “redeemable in supermarkets, high street shops and restaurants in return for good deeds. Residents would get a loyalty card similar to those available in shops. Points would be added ... when cardholders had completed good works such as litter-picking or holding tea parties for isolated pensioners.”⁹

More deeply, the contingent award of privilege is ultimately where the breezily cheery rhetoric of “gamification” was headed all along. As originally described by the game designer and TED speaker Jane McGonigal, gamification is the application of an incentive vocabulary drawn from competitive games to the kind of mundane or onerous, but necessary, tasks for which people might ordinarily struggle to find the motivation. What ought to have been self-evident from the outset is that this is a compliance mechanism ideally suited to implementing the turn from Foucauldian discipline to Deleuzian control. In other words, it is behavior modification in a population of nominally free subjects, accomplished not through any clumsy strategy of spatial or bodily containment, but through the operation of their, our, own choice.

Beyond the simple reward mechanisms prescribed by gamification discourse is an array of prompts, hectorings, and subtle guilt-trips devised by behavioral psychologists and deployed by government agencies in the West to secure higher rates of compliance. (Such work was pursued in the UK by the government’s Behavioural Insights Team, better known as the “Nudge Unit,” and in the United States by the no-longer-extant Social and

Behavioral Sciences Team of the National Science and Technology Council.)

And finally, the internalization of these logics by ordinary people is something that has already taken place in the West. Algorithmic penalties for breaches of the social contract are still relatively trivial, but they do occur. Think of habitually-tardy diners who subsequently have trouble making restaurant reservations using the OpenTable service, or the inability of passengers rated poorly by their drivers to secure timely rides on the Uber platform. Many of us have already folded the way these systems represent “a good customer” into our own perceptions of the world, and tailor our actions accordingly: as *Jezebel’s* Kara Brown once explained, in justifying the inordinate energy she dedicated to explaining her lateness to a restaurant hostess, “A perceived no-show would count against my OpenTable score, and I’m not trying to ruin my life.”¹⁰

What is plain to see is that virtually every element of social credit, including the greater part of its most troubling aspects, was pioneered in the West, and made available as a conceptual (and occasionally literal) kit of parts. The Chinese implementation may be more pervasive. It may sport much sharper teeth. But the inescapable truth is that the techniques it relies upon were first devised by North American and Western European companies and tested on their populations at large. Their reappearance in the form of media hype about the scary thing happening in China is merely a gift back across the chasm that divides our cultures.

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Some four decades downstream from the publication of *A Thousand Plateaus*, with some sectors of elite opinion still marinating in the Californian-ideological optimism of the Web’s breakout moments, networks still tend to be thought of as necessarily diversifying, decentralizing, distributing, and ramifying in their effects. But there’s something else that networks are very good at, and that is coordination and the maintenance of homeostasis. In a word: harmonization, whether that of fireflies, electrical impulses in the heart muscle, or the behavior of other formally independent entities.

Consider the mycorrhizal network: an uncanny, interspecies mesh of tree roots and fungal hyphae operating quietly beneath the forest floor, redistributing nutrients and other vital chemicals between individual trees. As our understanding of biological structure and function improves, the forest emerges as one giant symbiont superorganism; its seemingly discrete parts interwoven in ways we have difficulty perceiving.

The figure of the mycorrhizal network comes to mind when contemplating the intellectual genesis and evolution of social credit, with nation-states playing the trees and the global culture of late-capitalist information-technical

“innovation” standing in for the fungal mesh that binds them. China’s concerted efforts at industrial espionage and its perennial status as an “advanced persistent threat” highly adept at cyberwarfare account for many of the more granular details of West-East information transfer, no doubt, but the broad conceptual strokes travel freely. Ideas, techniques, and fashions in thought flash back and forth between these superficially dissimilar worlds, across circuits developed by late capitalism to nourish the global innovation ecosystem that serves it. In time, notions like algorithmically-derived credit scoring and reputation indices are inevitably taken up by parties other than those originally envisioned, modified and turned toward their own particular ends. What else is social credit but gamification “with,” as the Deng-era cliché suggests, “Chinese characteristics”? And perhaps the adoption of this particular set of ideas says less about China or its culture than it does about the West.

As the corporate ethnographer Tricia Wang describes, China has always supported a feisty, robust online culture fully able to critique those in power and hold them up for mockery, with such mockery often involving visual puns that effectively circumvent the state’s clumsy, keyword-driven attempts to limit expression. (During the Hu years, for example, netizens would share a picture of a river crab to denote heavy-handed government attempts at censorship, because the Mandarin word for crab rhymed with that for “harmonization,” the state’s policy of social control; more recently, the rice-bunny emoji combination has emerged as a way to circumvent government attempts to limit #MeToo-inspired discussions of sexual abuse and harassment.) The testimony of Wang’s respondents suggests that there remains a space for tactics in even the most heavily policed medium, and therefore a space for hope. It is not entirely ridiculous to assume that everyday people exposed to the rigors of social credit will eventually be able to develop the array of workarounds, dodges, and empty pro-forma performances their ongoing freedom of expression will require.

But the experience of the West tempers the emergence of any particular optimism on this question. The Western flavor of late capitalism is astonishingly tenacious, and the techniques of maintaining an indebted, scared, ignorant and precarious population that have been developed over the past four decades—many of them based precisely on the notion of credit score—seem to work “just fine.” Those of us who live under the sway of this culture have allowed an ever-greater proportion of our creative expression to be drawn into the voracious maw of an industry predicated on digitizing, connecting, and therefore commodifying virtually every act we undertake. We have been slow to appreciate what is implied by the aberrant afterlife of our deeds and choices as data. We’ve been unable to slow the steady rightward drift of the governments charged with overseeing the collection of that data, where it is not in fact a sharp rightward turn. We’ve collectively shrugged at

the effacement of meaningful distinctions between state power and that exercised in its name by self-interested commercial partners.

These are now the facts of ordinary everyday life in the West, and together they spell an enclosure and a system of constraints almost as stifling as the more overtly hegemonic efforts of the Chinese state. For those of us who live outside of China, it might be best to spend the time and energy we currently spend worrying about social credit developing ways in which the components of this system of constraints might be disassembled, the assumptions on which it rests banished and its power to condition our lifechoices dispelled. And if, indeed, it turns out that our acts are linked to other places and cultures through some analogue of the mycorrhizal transport pulsing all but imperceptibly beneath the forest floor, it might turn out that this in itself would be the most productive thing we could possibly do to resist the thing that China is building, and seems hell-bent on becoming.

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