

# The Chinese Social Credit System

## *Surveillance and Social Manipulation: A Solution to “Moral Decay”?*

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Master's Thesis in Chinese Society and Politics  
KIN 4593 (30 Credits)

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Autumn 2017



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2017

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Trykk: Reprosentralen, Universitetet i Oslo

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# Abstract

Simultaneously to a worldwide trend of increased surveillance accompanied by an authoritarian turn, China is implementing a Social Credit System (SCS), which according to western media is an Orwellian surveillance system that will rate every single citizen. As partly a financial credit system, and partly a compliance mechanism with moralistic educational aims, the SCS has been painted as China's new egregious social control tool.

This thesis investigates what the SCS is, how it may influence people's behavior, in addition to exploring, through qualitative in-depth interviews, how university students perceive the system. A framework to elucidate how the SCS, as a compliance mechanism, might function is employed here, which boils the SCS down to three elements: *Surveillance*, *analytical intervention* and *social manipulation*. This thesis argues the main instrument of control in the SCS is that of providing access or denial of access to goods and services that define life in modern China. This manifests itself through punishment and reward mechanisms in addition to blacklists that are intertwined with the SCS. The SCS builds on the fundamental principle of surveillance, which is why Foucault's Panopticism theory is used as a theoretical framework in this thesis. To Foucault, the fear of surveillance in itself influences human behavior.

On the one hand, the system is painted as Orwell's nightmare, on the other hand, academics and media asserts that Chinese people find the idea of the SCS appealing, and that critical voices are rare. This puzzle is therefore at the core of the eleven qualitative interviews conducted with university students in Beijing. The appeal of the system becomes clearer when exploring the balancing test of benefits and disadvantages the informants express in the interviews. For the vast majority, the increased access to goods, services and opportunities through the SCS, may be an irresistible deal offered. Instead of claiming they accept a Faustian deal of intrusive surveillance for the sake of tangible benefits. This thesis argues, backed up by interview data, that the balancing test is more complex than a "surveillance vs privacy" bargain.

# Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I wish to thank my supervisor, Anna L. Ahlers. Your guidance and feedback has been extremely valuable throughout this process. I have learnt a lot the last two years with you as my teacher in many of the classes, and especially the last year, with you as my advisor for this thesis. Big thanks to you, Anna!

I would also like to thank my friends at the study hall, who truly has played crucial parts throughout writing this thesis. A special thanks goes out to Henrik and Rebekka whom both have read my initial drafts, and provided fantastic feedback. I have learnt a lot from the both of you, and I am also very grateful for the moral support!

Oliver, thank you so much for proofreading, and correcting my English! I appreciate that you took the time to read this. Roxy, thank you for looking over my Chinese translations!

I would also like to thank all of my informants. Thank you for your patience, and thank you for sharing your personal thoughts with me about this topic.

Finally, I take full responsibility for any remaining errors in this thesis.

# **Abbreviations**

**SCS – Social Credit System**

**CCP – Chinese Communist Party**

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# 1 Introduction and thesis statement

## 1.1 Introduction.

*There are two kinds of people in this world: good people and bad people. Now imagine a world where the good ones are rewarded and the bad ones are punished (Zhang Zheng: Professor at Peking University and advisor for the Social Credit System).<sup>1</sup>*

This qualitative study explores how the Chinese *Social Credit System* (SCS) may function and how it is intended to influence people's behavior, in addition to investigating, through qualitative interviews, how Chinese University students perceive the development and implementation of the system.<sup>2</sup> The SCS is a financial credit and social integrity system that in the year 2020 is supposed to be obligatory and cover the whole of society in China.<sup>3</sup> An all-encompassing digitally calculated and assigned Social Credit Score is supposed to reflect not only financial credibility but also *morality, integrity* and *trustworthiness*.<sup>4</sup> According to the Chinese State Council, the credit or "integrity" score - which will be based on a myriad of collected and analyzed data - will lead to rewards for the *trustworthy* and punishments for the *untrustworthy*.<sup>5</sup> Hitherto (2017), the SCS is in a development phase with pilot projects run by local governments and private sector corporations, with the Chinese State Council's official blessings. As a financial credibility indicator, it resembles credit systems such as the US' FICO or the German Schufa, but it transcends these when it becomes a metric for objective standards of integrity coined with normative assessments of how people *should* behave.<sup>6</sup> China wants to morally educate by steering actions through the SCS, for the sake of the explicit salient goal of *social integrity, social harmony, long-term stability and peace*, in

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<sup>1</sup> Strittmatter, "Creating the honest man".

<sup>2</sup> "The Social Credit System" is a translation of *Shèhuì xìnnyòng tǐxì* 社会信用体系. *Xìnnyòng* 信用, can however be translated as "credit", "trustworthiness" and "to trust". "China" in this thesis refers to mainland China, excluding Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan.

<sup>3</sup> Zhonghua Renming Gongheguo Zhongyang Renmin Zhengfu (The Government of The People's Republic Of China), "Guowuyuan Guanyu Yinfu Shehui Xinyong Tixi Jianshe Guihua Gangyao (2014-2020 Nian) De Tongzhi (Notification From The State Council About The Social Credit System (2014-2020) Implementation Outline)".

<sup>4</sup> The concept *Chéngxìn* 诚信 means "sincerity", "integrity", and "honesty". For the SCS, see Meissner and Wübbecke, "IT-backed authoritarianism".

<sup>5</sup> See appendix 1, quote 1; Strittmatter, "Creating the honest man"; Botsman, *Who can you trust? How Technology Brought Us Together*, 160-180.

<sup>6</sup> FICO stands for Fair Isaac Corporation, and is a credit system in the U.S.

addition to perfecting the *socialist market economy*.<sup>7</sup> According to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China is in a state of moral decay and deteriorating levels of trust engendered by that society has shifted from a society of acquaintances to a society of strangers.<sup>8</sup> Employing this disciplinary technology of the SCS to punish dishonesty, swindling, rumor-mongering and corruption, and reward the trustworthy virtuous people, is supposed to correct moral decay and make China reach a far-distant historical utopia of social harmony. Børge Bakken described the Chinese sense of utopia almost twenty years ago, “(...) as a society where human quality is based on exemplary norm and its exemplary behavior is regarded as a force for realizing a modern society of perfect order”.<sup>9</sup>

The SCS has been vividly depicted as an all-seeing mass surveillance structure and China’s new egregious tool for social control, with dramatic titles such as *China invents the digital totalitarian state, Turning Big Data Into Mass Surveillance* and *China: When Big Data meets Big Brother*, by U.S’ and U.K’ media.<sup>10</sup> By this narrative, the SCS is a mass surveillance technology concealed behind promises of a virtuous harmonious society with increasing credit opportunities for the citizens. A more nuanced picture is painted by the very few academics who have thoroughly investigated the SCS. A leading scholar on the SCS, Mirjam Meissner, brought it in under the larger concept of *IT-backed authoritarianism* in an article with Jost Wübbecke, in which they argued:

*The SCS builds on and reinforces the basic principle of surveillance: its pure existence already influences behaviour. If people assume they are being observed, they behave differently – conforming to existing rules or whatever they deem “right”. China’s SCS creates a system of incentives for good behavior (“nudging”) and disadvantages for non-compliance.*<sup>11</sup>

What galvanized my initial interest was, however, the reported support for the SCS by Chinese citizens. Meissner and Wübbecke claimed, “Many Chinese find the idea of the Social Credit System appealing”, and “(...) critical voices on the SCS are rare”.<sup>12</sup> A Foreign Policy article with the title *Chinese Citizens Want the Government to Rank Them* asserted that the SCS has proven popular.<sup>13</sup> Simultaneously with public unease about surveillance and lack of private information protection in the US, they are suggesting that Chinese citizens do not

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<sup>7</sup> See appendix 1, quote 2; Strittmatter, “Creating the honest man”; Li, “Wanshan Xinyong Tixi, Goujian Xinyong Shehui (Perfecting The Credit System, Building A Trust Society)”

<sup>8</sup> Wang, “Chengxin wenhua yu shehui xinyong tixi xiang yi hu ji (Integrity culture and the Social Credit System mutually rely upon and mutually help each other)”.

<sup>9</sup> Bakken, *The Exemplary Society: Human Improvement, Social Control, and the Dangers of Modernity in China*, 1.

<sup>10</sup> The Economist, “China invents the digital totalitarian state”; Lubman (The Wall Street Journal), “China’s Social Credit System”; Clover (Financial Times), “China: When Big Data meets Big Brother”.

<sup>11</sup> Meissner and Wübbecke, “IT-backed authoritarianism”, 53.

<sup>12</sup> Meissner and Wübbecke, “IT-backed authoritarianism”, 54.

<sup>13</sup> Hawkins, “Chinese Citizens Want the Government to Rank Them”.

worry about a scoring-system that reinforces the fundamental principle of surveillance.<sup>14</sup> This is a puzzle that needed investigation, especially since the claimed support for the SCS is still not substantiated with representative empirical data. Since the empirical part of this thesis is based on qualitative interviews with a few university students, it will not be able to refute the claimed appeal through representative data for the entire Chinese population. Instead, *how* they perceive the implementation and development of the system, may give rise to a better understanding of *why* they might find the idea of the SCS appealing. On the basis of my introduction above, the main research questions informing this thesis are:

- 1. What is the Chinese SCS, and how is it intended to influence society?**
- 2. How do students perceive the development and implementation of the SCS?**

The first research question will be addressed by an analytical review of literature on the SCS. A collection of literature from a wide variety of sources, such as government documents, academic articles and newspaper articles, has been utilized for this purpose. The second research question concerns the puzzle about the appeal of the SCS just highlighted, and this thesis attempts to answer this question based on interviews conducted with university students in Beijing. The empirical results and the analytical review will carry equal importance in this thesis.

Based on the review of literature on the SCS, one concept seems to be employed in most academic work, and in close to all foreign newspaper articles that cover the SCS. This concept is *surveillance*. Therefore, to understand what the SCS is, and how it may influence society, it seems key to understand the concept of *surveillance*, and thus the next section endeavors to clearly define this concept, beyond merely mentioning it as a keyword as it happens in most media reports about the SCS.

## 1.2 What is surveillance?

A leitmotif concept throughout this thesis that needs elucidation is *surveillance*. The nuances of surveillance are many, and this section sheds light on the concept for making it analytically comprehensible. The noun *surveillance* stems from the French verb *Surveiller*, which means

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<sup>14</sup> Lupton and Michael, "Depends on Who's Got the Data", 256; Madden, "Public Perceptions of Privacy and Security"; Madden and Rainie, "Americans' attitudes about Privacy"; Stalder, "Opinion. Privacy is not the antidote to surveillance", 122; A collection of surveys on privacy is to be found on [www.privacyexchange.org/iss/surveys/surveys.html](http://www.privacyexchange.org/iss/surveys/surveys.html).

to watch over, and is related to the Latin *vigilare*, (*to keep watch*).<sup>15</sup> Comprehending *surveillance* as a police officer keeping close watch over a criminal is understandable considering popular depiction in movies and dictionary definitions such as that of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*: “Close observation, especially of a suspected person”.<sup>16</sup> Such definitions has, however, been scrutinized by prominent surveillance studies scholars such as Gary T. Marx, who criticizes “The failure of dictionary definitions to capture current understandings of surveillance”.<sup>17</sup> Current surveillance technologies do not (just) especially target suspected persons.<sup>18</sup> A diversification of surveillance has taken place against the backdrop of a widening range of informatic architectures in the latter parts of the 20th century.<sup>19</sup> Technology has increasingly been employed for obtaining personal information, and this permits surveillance, that is commonly applied categorically, to surveil large groups of people or even entire nation-states. Technology’s marriage to surveillance can be exemplified by: Satellite images of a nation’s army, the use of facial recognition in closed circuit surveillance cameras (CCTV), voice recognition, drones the size and shape of hummingbirds or smartphone-cameras that can be used to capture both innocent and critical moments. In surveillance studies, there are in general two different views on how surveillance can be understood and defined.<sup>20</sup> The first one defines surveillance broadly and in neutral terms. Marx, for instance, understands surveillance as primarily a technical process and defines it as “the use of technical means to extract or create personal data”.<sup>21</sup> An example of surveillance provided by Marx is a baby monitor used by parents to observe their child.<sup>22</sup> Roger Clarke and David Lyon also gives broad and neutral definitions of surveillance. Clarke defines it as “the systematic investigation or monitoring of the actions or communications of one or more persons”, and Lyon defines it as “(...) a shorthand term to cover the many, and expanding, range of contexts within which personal data is collected by employment, commercial and administrative agencies, as well as policing and security”.<sup>23</sup> To Clarke, surveillance is neither positive nor negative, since it depends on the situation.<sup>24</sup> To Lyon, surveillance can be both

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<sup>15</sup> Marx, “Surveillance Studies”, 734.

<sup>16</sup> Marx, “What’s New About the “New Surveillance”?”, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Mathiesen, *Towards a Surveillant Society*.

<sup>20</sup> Allmer, “Critical Surveillance Studies in the Information Society”, 576.

<sup>21</sup> Marx, “What’s New About the “New Surveillance”?”, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Marx, “What’s New About the “New Surveillance”?”, 12. Another example provided by Marx is that of self-tests for levels of alcohol in the blood.

<sup>23</sup> Clarke, “Information Technology and Dataveillance”, 498-499; Lyon, *The Electronic Eye*, viii-x.

<sup>24</sup> Allmer, “Critical Surveillance Studies in the Information Society”, 577.

coercive and undemocratic on the one hand, and innocuous and good on the other.<sup>25</sup> These definitions stresses the neutral and generic activity of surveilling, and excludes aspects of control or power.<sup>26</sup>

The second way of understanding and defining surveillance is narrower. It stresses that surveillance is always negative and is connected to power, discipline, manipulation, repression and domination, and it emphasizes that societies often are controlled and repressed by a centralized power.<sup>27</sup> Power and control as manifested by the use of surveillance, has been portrayed in literary works such as the dystopian novel *1984* by Eric Arthur Blair, known by the pen name George Orwell. The people in the dystopian “Orwellian” world in *1984* is under constant surveillance twenty-four hours of the day by authorities, and enforcing complete obedience and uniformity of opinion on all subjects is in full control of the totalitarian state. Surveillance of the people by a big brother state, as in *1984*, is often referred to as vertical or top-down surveillance.<sup>28</sup> The adjective *Orwellian* is often used by media on surveillance in authoritarian or totalitarian states, and has frequently been used in the context of the SCS.<sup>29</sup> The narrow definition emphasizes that there is an asymmetry between the subject of surveillance, and the agent conducting surveillance.<sup>30</sup> Whilst the agent can *see* the subject, the subject is (often) not able to *see* the agent, which creates an unbalance and asymmetry. Because of asymmetry, the agent may not be held accountable, and it can engender what Scott Robbins and Adam Henschke calls *informational deficit*, which is a situation where the state’s knowledge about its citizens far exceeds what the citizens know about the state.<sup>31</sup> The greater equality there is between the subject and agent, the more likely it is that surveillance will be bilateral, according to Marx.<sup>32</sup> Bilateral surveillance refers to the act of *mirroring* surveillance back at the agent and “keeping them under watch”, and thereby also keeping them accountable, which is a fundamental requirement of a democracy. This thesis understands surveillance narrowly, based on Oscar Gandy’s work, and thus surveillance involves:

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<sup>25</sup> Allmer, “Critical Surveillance Studies in the Information Society”, 577.

<sup>26</sup> Marx, “Surveillance Studies”, 735.

<sup>27</sup> The neutral and broad definition of surveillance is referred to as “non-panoptic Theories of Surveillance”, and the negative and narrow definition of surveillance is referred to as “Panoptic Theories of Surveillance, by Thomas Allmer in Allmer, “Critical Surveillance Studies in the Information Society”, 577.

<sup>28</sup> Albrechtslund, “Online social networking as participatory surveillance”, 7.

<sup>29</sup> The Economist, “China invents the digital totalitarian state”.

<sup>30</sup> Monahan, Phillips and Wood, “Surveillance and Empowerment”, 106-107.

<sup>31</sup> Robbins and Henschke, “Designing For Democracy: Bulk Data and Authoritarianism”, 583.

<sup>32</sup> Marx, “Surveillance Studies”, 735.

*(...) the collecting, processing, and sharing of information about individuals and groups that is generated through their daily lives as citizens, employees, and consumers and is used to coordinate and control their access to the goods and services that define life in a modern capitalist economy".<sup>33</sup>*

Although the Chinese economy may or may not be considered modern capitalist, this thesis argues the main instrument of control in the SCS is that of providing access or denial of access to goods and services that define life in modern China. As will be shown later, this access or denial of access manifests itself through punishment and reward mechanisms in addition to blacklists that are intertwined with the SCS.<sup>34</sup> Although the SCS is mainly a state-run project, the cooperation with the private sector and the punishment and reward mechanisms diffuses the areas where the state may exercise its control. This will become clearer throughout the thesis, but to simplify, an example can be provided. Punishment for “bad” behavior based on a low(er) credit score may not imprison you, but instead result in sanctions such as that your child cannot attend a top private school, or that you are not allowed to stay at luxury hotels or fly with an airplane.<sup>35</sup> This transcending of control may hit you where it hurts – everywhere. The implications it might have on individuals and society will be expanded on, together with the French intellectual Michel Foucault and his Panopticism theory, in chapter three. Panopticism is both a model for how surveillance works, and as a means of situating surveillance within the socio-political history of European states.<sup>36</sup> This thesis will solely apply the first perspective in the context of the SCS, while at the same time trying not to become a slave to the theoretical model.

### 1.3 Why does this topic matter?

The SCS is situated against a Chinese, but also worldwide, trend of increasing surveillance, and a so-called authoritarian turn where it is feared that liberal democracies are slowly descending into populism and then potentially authoritarianism, and that authoritarianism is descending into totalitarianism.<sup>37</sup> Anthony Giddens theorized in the 1980’s that all surveillance tends toward totalitarianism, and that surveillance in and of itself is a marker of a shift towards totalitarianism.<sup>38</sup> Although David Wood suggests we should think of

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<sup>33</sup> Gandy, *The Panoptic Sort*., 1-3.

<sup>34</sup> Botsman, *Who can you trust? How Technology Brought Us Together*, 160-180.

<sup>35</sup> Strittmatter, “Creating the honest man”.

<sup>36</sup> Bauman and Lyon, *Liquid Surveillance: A Conversation*, 49.

<sup>37</sup> See for instance Robbins and Henschke, “Designing For Democracy”; Wood, “The Global Turn to Authoritarianism and After”; Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2017”.

<sup>38</sup> Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence: Volume Two of a Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, 294-342.



totalitarianism as authoritarianism *plus* surveillance, he does not neglect that surveillance might produce a more democratic society if accompanied by measures that restrict the storage and use of information and/or opened up data or its analytical products”.<sup>39</sup> The most dystopic scenario to Wood is totalitarianism or “Panoptic (lit. all seeing) Autocracy”; a scenario where there are no limits to what the state can know about its citizens.<sup>40</sup> By definition, to be a citizen of a totalitarian state is to be known entirely.<sup>41</sup> To be *all-seeing* or to *know everyone entirely* is practically very difficult and presupposes an extremely sophisticated surveillance infrastructure. According to Wood, even the German Stasi only had detailed files on one third of the population, but one major concern today with the authoritarian turn is the way technology may play the part of much more encompassing and efficient surveillance.<sup>42</sup> Not only does it permit more efficient surveillance, but some of the technologies are also increasingly complex to the point of being opaque to peoples’ understanding. Rogier Creemers, a leading author on the SCS, indeed believes the SCS will exceed that of the East German system. According to him, the German system was aimed at preventing a revolt against its regime, but that the Chinese target is much more ambitious; it is an attempt at creating a “new citizen”.<sup>43</sup>

Unless a state is in full control of both public and private sector surveillance, it is normally constrained by the unwillingness of the private sector to share its data with the state.<sup>44</sup> It is imperative for an authoritarian or totalitarian state in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to marry state and private sector surveillance, unless the state wants to own, or be a shareholder in the entire private sector. Rui Huo’s study of online opinion surveillance in China suggests an expanding market providing surveillance solutions by for-profit institutions to all levels of government, with the conclusion that the converging attack by both authoritarian repression and this new emerging sector might further shrink the public sphere.<sup>45</sup> Tech companies in China also often seem willing to trade its data with the state for the sake of minimal regulatory inferences.<sup>46</sup> Government regulators in China have discussed taking one percent stakes, and having a direct hand in China’s largest tech firms.<sup>47</sup> The world’s most powerful facial recognition technology is also being built by a public-private partnership, between the

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<sup>39</sup> Wood, “The Global Turn to Authoritarianism and After”, 364.

<sup>40</sup> Wood, “The Global Turn to Authoritarianism and After”, 361.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Wood, “The Global Turn to Authoritarianism and After”, 362.

<sup>43</sup> Volkskrant, “China rates its own citizens”.

<sup>44</sup> In the US for instance, Apple has earlier refused to share its encryption keys with law enforcement.

<sup>45</sup> Huo, “Neoliberal governance or Digital autocracy?”, 423.

<sup>46</sup> China Digital Times, “How tech firms partner with Beijing to Shame Citizens”.

<sup>47</sup> Yuan, “Beijing Pushes for Direct Hand in China’s Big Tech Firms”.

Ministry of Public Security and a security company in Shanghai. When finalized it will have the power to recognize anyone in China within three seconds.<sup>48</sup> Coining cameras equipped with artificial intelligence with the SCS has already been the case in Shanghai's pilot project (more on that in chapter three).<sup>49</sup> The SCS will create a potential power that *may* be (mis) used, however the leadership sees fit because, as Felix Stalder argues, "access to large data-sets of personal information is a prerequisite for social control."<sup>50</sup>

If authoritarianism plus surveillance equals totalitarianism, and the limitations to becoming all-seeing is technological sophistication and scope of surveillance, then what would be the consequences of a SCS that *cover the whole of society*? Meissner and Wübbecke argues the SCS will "impede political and social progress", and that it may be highly attractive for other authoritarian regimes since it enables strengthening of authority in a subtle but very efficient way.<sup>51</sup>

## 1.4 Thesis objective and structure.

This project aims at producing its own empirical data based on in-depth interviews about awareness and perception concerning the development of the SCS and its relatedness to surveillance. The empirical basis for suggesting that Chinese people find the SCS appealing is lacking, but instead of conducting a statistical analysis of its appeal, this thesis wants to explore *how* it is perceived, which may help us understand *why* it may be appealing or not. Therefore qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews with a limited sample of eleven university student, has been employed in this research. Needless to say, this is *not* representative for the Chinese population; instead, it sheds light on, and explores different views on the academically understudied topic of the SCS. Besides this empirical part, this thesis also analyzes what we know so far about the function of the SCS and its implementation by an analytical review of the literature. This analytical review attempts to answer what the SCS is intended to be and how it may influence society in China. The thesis is structured as follows; after this **introductory chapter**, **chapter two** will further expand on how this study was designed, which in other words concerns methodology. In order to understand what the SCS actually is and how it may influence people's behavior, **chapter three** will develop a context and background for this topic, and also introduce an analytical

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<sup>48</sup> Chen, "China to build giant facial recognition database".

<sup>49</sup> Npr, "What's Your Public Credit Score?".

<sup>50</sup> Stalder, "Opinion. Privacy is not the antidote to surveillance", 122.

<sup>51</sup> Meissner and Wübbecke, "IT-backed authoritarianism", 56.

framework for the study of the SCS. Furthermore, the SCS will be explored in chapter three through the lens of the interdisciplinary field of surveillance studies, where Michel Foucault's Panopticism theory plays an important part. It is, however, *not* claimed here that the social credit system is *a* surveillance system per se, but instead that surveillance is *one* aspect of the system. **Chapter four** will lay out the empirical findings from the qualitative interviews in Beijing with the students, which will be analyzed in **chapter five**. The analysis of the empirical results in chapter five is placed under three topics; the SCS as a personal file, the SCS and its effect on the economy, and finally, the SCS and the balancing test of positive and negative outcomes. **Chapter six** will conclude this thesis, and I will summarize my findings.

## 2 Methodology

This chapter explains how the empirical research was designed and carried out. The main source of empirical data in this thesis comes from qualitative interviews conducted at Peking and Tsinghua University in Beijing on the topic of the SCS. It was carried out in the form of individual qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews with five female and six male University students in March and April of 2017 (five weeks). Ten students were ethnic *Han* Chinese, and one student was an ethnic minority. Firstly, this chapter will provide information about why a qualitative research method was chosen. Secondly, it will explain the sampling of informants. Thirdly, the interview process will be examined.

### 2.1 Qualitative research.

To answer the question *how do students perceive the development of a Social Credit System*, I chose a qualitative approach, mainly for one reason; I did not find it valuable, nor interesting knowing merely *if students find the idea of the SCS appealing*, without understanding *how* they view it, which may explain *why* they find it appealing or not. The exploratory nature of this *how*-question is better investigated through qualitative interviews than for instance quantitative surveys, since a statistical analysis is not the goal here. Qualitative research involves a naturalistic interpretive approach to the world, which means that “(...) qualitative researchers study things in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them” according to Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln.<sup>52</sup> The informant’s point of view is emphasized, and the researcher’s role becomes a topic of special consideration since he never is the objective observing man in a standardized laboratory.<sup>53</sup> As Denzin and Lincoln puts is “Behind all research stands the biography of the gendered researcher, who speaks from a particular class, racial, cultural or ethnic community perspective”.<sup>54</sup>

Although quantitative surveys would have been a better choice if the purpose of the study was to find representative and generalizable results concerning support for the SCS, it would perhaps not answer how the respondents view it more specifically, which is important in order to understand underlying factors. Understanding *how* they perceive the SCS may help

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<sup>52</sup> Denzin and Lincoln, “Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research”, 3.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Denzin and Lincoln, “Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research”, 21.

us understand *why* they are positive or negative to it. Perhaps are students positive about certain elements of the SCS, and negative about others, or perhaps they do find it appealing because they view it in a completely different way than we would expect? The objective was to go thoroughly “in-depth”, through extensive interviews with a few informants, and explore how they viewed the development of the SCS. Realizing the complexity of the SCS and the fact that it is not fully implemented yet and since no academic research has so far explored students view on SCS, it would also be difficult to know which specific questions to ask in a quantitative survey.

## 2.2 Sampling.

Any qualitative researcher needs to reflect upon questions relating to the sampling of participants. In early times of qualitative research, sampling often followed quantitative sampling methods; which often tried to establish numerical requirements for selecting participants.<sup>55</sup> Establishing numerical requirements was challenged by that, as Ben K. Beitin argues, “(...) Qualitative theorist could not agree on an optimal sample size”.<sup>56</sup> Beitin argues that today, sampling is more fluid and focused on the research process, than it is focused on the sample size.<sup>57</sup> Locating informants and conducting interviews was nonetheless constrained by the short time of five weeks spent in Beijing, and the very limited funding. The sample group of informants in this study was localized on Peking University and Tsinghua University’s campuses. A reason for choosing these two universities in Beijing was my familiarity with them - as an exchange student a few years back. With this familiarity also comes a social network that in the end proved very valuable. It has been argued by academics such as Steve Guo and Guangchao Feng that China’s university campuses are reputed to bear the closest resemblance to the so-called “marketplace of ideas” in the West, relative to any other social institution.<sup>58</sup> There were essentially two reasons for choosing university students as a sample group for this study. Firstly, activism against surveillance on US’ campuses is according to *Electronic Frontier Foundation* growing fast.<sup>59</sup> If activism presupposes awareness or knowledge about it, then perhaps awareness would also be higher on Chinese

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<sup>55</sup> Beitin, “Interview and Sampling: How Many and Whom”, 2.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Guo and Feng, “Understanding Support for Internet Censorship in China”, 43.

<sup>59</sup> Glaser, “Campus Activism”.

university campuses than in other social institutions.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, I thought the possibility of finding people that know much about surveillance and the SCS, and the possibility of finding people who opposes it on university campuses in China would be larger. Secondly, if universities in China resemble the “marketplace of ideas”, then I thought I would find more diverse perceptions about the SCS there. An additional reason is because I am a university student myself, and thought it would be easier to relate to my interviewees, and therefore easier to get them to talk freely. It is crucial to highlight that by sampling university students I actually assumed I would find people who opposed the SCS and would express themselves in negative terms about its development.

Locating informants was, however, a surprisingly difficult task. Initially I was “randomly” stopping students on the campus, asking a few introductory questions before suggesting an interview. Prior to the fieldtrip, this seemed like a good approach, but after some reflection, I abandoned it because it proved ineffective in getting students to agree to an interview. I realized that initiating a conversation is never truly random and the SCS and its relatedness to surveillance carry strong biasing issues. This prevented explaining in detail what I wanted to find out and it made orally introducing the topic, in Mandarin, all the more difficult. The first three days, with zero results, seem to be perfectly described by Elin Sæther’s account of her own experience doing fieldwork in China “(...) I found the initial steps to be especially difficult, and imagined that my stay would end up as a complete failure”.<sup>61</sup> However, I did not want to give up easily, and so I asked two acquaintances on WeChat if they could help locate informants.<sup>62</sup> I sent an introductory text that included a presentation of me, a brief introduction to the SCS, a few sentences about not needing experts on the SCS but rather students that wanted to express what they knew and felt about it, a request for recording the interviews, and a promise of full anonymity.<sup>63</sup> My contacts sent this to their networks at the two universities, which resulted in some students agreeing to participate in the interviews.<sup>64</sup> After the interviews, the interviewees helped me find more informants. The sampling method where an existing study subject recruits future study subjects is often referred to as “snowball sampling” or “chain referral sampling”.<sup>65</sup> In this

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<sup>60</sup> Glaser, “Campus Activism”.

<sup>61</sup> Sæther, “Fieldwork as Coping and Learning, 43.

<sup>62</sup> WeChat is an instant messenger app by the IT Company Tencent. WeChat has, however, developed into a multi-function social media app, or an “App for everything”.

<sup>63</sup> A screenshot of the introduction on Wechat is found in appendix 3.

<sup>64</sup> A template for participating informants, with fictional names, can be found in the appendix (1.1).

<sup>65</sup> In Snowball sampling the sample group of informants may be said to increase like a rolling and growing snowball.

sampling method there is a bond between the initial study subject and the other informants and this may invoke a community bias. A community bias is one where the initial subject will have strong impact on the sample.<sup>66</sup> I am therefore aware that my sampling may be biased and unrepresentative since the informants were not collected randomly and instead were dependent on the referral of the initial informant, and his bond with the others.<sup>67</sup> There is a bond between the students (The first with the others) at Peking University and Tsinghua University in my sample.<sup>68</sup>

## 2.3 Individual in-depth interviews.

Interviewing is not just the neutral exchange of asking questions and getting answers, “(...) Asking questions and getting answers is a much harder task than it may seem at first” according to Andrea Fontana and James Frey.<sup>69</sup> Asking *the right* questions, and not contaminating the information, is a technical challenge that faces any researcher who decides to conduct interviews, in which Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein write that:

*The challenge lies in excavating information as efficiently as possible, without contaminating it. Highly refined interview techniques streamline, systematize, and sanitize the process”, and a good interview “is nondirective and unbiased, (and the) respondents will validly and reliably speak the unadulterated facts of experience.”<sup>70</sup>*

Not only are there technical challenges to the interview craft, such as asking the right question, but also epistemological complexities, such as complexities and challenges relating the nature of interview-communication and interview information.<sup>71</sup> Epistemological issues have been referred to as the second watershed of challenges facing the interview craft, besides the first watershed of technical challenges.<sup>72</sup> More specifically, this second watershed concerns the interview as a form of knowledge production, in which information is collaboratively constructed between the interviewer and the interviewee.<sup>73</sup> Thus, not only do I, as the researcher on a fieldtrip in China, need to be aware of asking the right question and aim not to contaminate the information, but also be aware of the active role I play in the collaborative construction of knowledge and information in the interviews. Questions

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<sup>66</sup> Berg, “snowball sampling”, 528-532.

<sup>67</sup> Cohen and Arieli, “Field research in conflict environments: Methodological challenges and snowball sampling”, 429.

<sup>68</sup> There is a bond between the first subject and the others, but not a bond as a network between all of the subjects in my sample.

<sup>69</sup> Fontana and Frey, “The Interview: From neutral stance to political involvement”, 696-697.

<sup>70</sup> Gubrium and Holstein, “Narrative Practice and the Transformation of Interview Subjectivity”, 10.

<sup>71</sup> Gubrium et al., “Introduction: The Complexity of the Craft”, 2.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

spurring are thus; did my Norwegian/foreign background influence the informants, or did it influence the way *I* interpreted and analyzed the interviews?

Through interviews, we can gain access to the observation of others, and learn about people's interior experiences, and what they perceive and how they interpret their perceptions, according to Robert S. Weiss.<sup>74</sup> The interviews conducted in this research took the form of individual in-depth interviews. Individual interview is a method where the researcher interviews a single individual who has "knowledge" about the topic. "In-depth" refers to a style of interview that seeks "deep" information and knowledge, which often is "deeper" than one could find by conducting surveys, focus groups, or informal conversations.<sup>75</sup> This method is suited for answering exploratory questions relating to *how* and *what*, thus in-depth interviewing is associated with an inductive mode of research.<sup>76</sup> Individual interview is the most common form of data collection strategy in qualitative research, but it does not come without its limitations.<sup>77</sup> One limitation is that individual interviews are more susceptible to informants withholding certain descriptions if the truth is inconsistent with their preferred self-image or if they wish to impress the interviewer.<sup>78</sup> One of the benefits with individual interviews as opposed to group interviews is that the informant will not be influenced by the presence of other informants. In group interviews, the informant may alter his answer because of the fear that the answer might affect the relationship with others.

In my study, eleven Chinese university students were individually interviewed in Mandarin Chinese, which is not my native language.<sup>79</sup> Language is a returning challenge for non-native researchers conducting interviews, but the preference for Mandarin Chinese was aimed at making the experience as easy as possible for the informants. Being a non-native can at times, however, be an advantage. In some ways, I have a "reason" for not understanding what the informant is talking about, and can therefore ask them to elaborate. A Lenovo phone with the App Easy Voice Recorder was used as a recorder, and the interviews lasted between 13 and 58 minutes.<sup>80</sup> An interview guide was produced before going to Beijing, but changed slightly during the course of the research. Some interviews took the form of unstructured interviews, with spontaneous follow-up questions. In in-depth interviews, highly standardized

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<sup>74</sup> Weiss, *How to learn from strangers*, 1.

<sup>75</sup> Johnson and Rowlands, "The interpersonal dynamics of in-depth interviewing", 2.

<sup>76</sup> Johnson and Rowlands, "The interpersonal dynamics of in-depth interviewing", 4.

<sup>77</sup> Beitin, "Interview and Sampling: How Many and Whom", 2.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> 5 female and 6 male university students, a total of 11. Five ethnic Chinese students and one ethnic minority student were from Peking University, and five ethnic Chinese students were from Tsinghua University.

<sup>80</sup> Which phone brand one uses does not seem irrelevant, maybe depending on the topic under discussion. Two of the informants brought up the topic of phone brands (Chinese VS American) and surveillance.



interview schedules are often avoided, in favor of open-ended interviews.<sup>81</sup> When open-ended, one can afford to let the informants guide some of the direction of the interview. I did, to the best of my ability, try not to contaminate the interviews and interview questions, with my own opinions.

The interviews took place in cafés on the campus area under informal circumstances. Using a public space might not be ideal and can have influenced the interviews by the social desirability bias, which is the tendency by informants to answer questions in a way that will be viewed as favorably by others. Guo and Feng warns that this is a “(...) known source of systematic error (and that it) affects the quality of data from surveys on practically all socio-political issues in China”.<sup>82</sup> The questions should be as little political sensitive as possible, without sacrificing the quality of the questions, according to Guo and Feng. The informants were, however, asked to choose a location of their preference, and all of them suggested a café. I started the interview with some small talk to build trust, good rapport and an informal setting, which are important elements of in-depth interviews.<sup>83</sup> Thenceforth, I explained what my research is about, and I stressed that I wanted to hear their personal opinion about the topic, and that there were no correct or incorrect answers to my questions. I asked them to be as honest and open as possible, and to remember that their identities would be strictly protected by anonymity, which I had already stated in the introductory text in WeChat, which is an important ethical aspect of doing this kind of research. I asked the informants once again if I could record the interviews and made it clear the interviews would be used as data for my thesis. All the informants were university students, which might explain why they did not question my need for interview data. Additional conversations after the recorder was stopped occurred, and I took notes about that. The interviews were transcribed and translated by me.

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<sup>81</sup> Foley, “Constructing the Respondent”, 3.

<sup>82</sup> Guo and Feng, “Understanding Support for Internet Censorship in China”, 43.

<sup>83</sup> Johnson and Rowlands, “The interpersonal dynamics of in-depth interviewing”, 2.

## 3 Context and theory

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate what the SCS is and develop an analytical and theoretical framework. An analytical framework made up of three elements – *surveillance* (3.2), *analytical intervention* (3.3) and *social manipulation* (3.4) – will be utilized for the purpose of answering the research question: *What is the social credit system, and how is it intended to influence society?* This framework is inspired by Sara Espoti’s analysis of mass data surveillance.<sup>84</sup> Espoti utilized a framework for analyzing data surveillance in a general context, based on Roger Clarke’s portmanteau concept *dataveillance*.<sup>85</sup> The complexity of the SCS prevents a thorough investigation of every aspect of the SCS, and therefore it will be examined through an analytical framework.

### 3.1 The Social Credit System: Surveillance, analytical intervention and social manipulation.

*Allow the trustworthy to roam everywhere under heaven while making it hard for the discredited to take a single step* (The State Council of the People’s Republic of China: “The Social Credit System’s Construction Plan Outline 2014-2020”).<sup>86</sup>

The SCS is coordinated by the Central Leading Small Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reform, which is led by Xi Jinping.<sup>87</sup> The implementation process is led by the National Development and Reform Commission in synergy with People’s Bank of China.<sup>88</sup> Since 2014, the SCS has been in an implementation phase with pilot projects run by the private sector and in about 30 cities by the public sector (in 2017).<sup>89</sup> In 2020, the system is intended be in full function and cover the whole of society, which means according to Wang Lei, Vice Secretary of the China Society Administration for Industry and Commerce, that every social organization, legal entity and citizen will have an exclusive social credit score when the system is finalized.<sup>90</sup> When finalized, credit references, disclosures and punishment and

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<sup>84</sup> Espoti, “When big data meets dataveillance: The hidden side of analytics”.

<sup>85</sup> Clarke, “Information Technology and Dataveillance”.

<sup>86</sup> See appendix 1, quote 3.

<sup>87</sup> Meissner, “China’s Social Credit System”, 6.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Wade, “China’s Social Credit System: Black Mirror or Red Herring?”.

<sup>90</sup> Pumin, “Credit Will Speak”.

reward systems will be linked, according to Wang Lei.<sup>91</sup> Individuals are to be rated in four main areas, and the score is intended to be connected with the individuals' identity card number.<sup>92</sup> The four main areas in which they are to be rated is, commercial activities, social behavior, administrative affairs, and the law enforcement system.<sup>93</sup> The rating is supposed to reflect integrity and trustworthiness, in addition to financial credibility. According to Creemers, the idea started growing in China that it should be equally possible to assess other modes of trustworthiness, in addition to financial trustworthiness.<sup>94</sup> In this context, the trustworthy are often referred to as trust-keepers whilst the untrustworthy are often referred to as trust-breakers. A 2014 government document proclaims, "trust-keeping should be glorious and trust-breaking should be disgraceful" and that the SCS should make "(...) honesty and trustworthiness become the conscious norms of behavior among the entire population".<sup>95</sup>

This thesis suggests a framework to elucidate how the SCS, as a compliance mechanism, might function and how it may influence behavior. It is made up of three elements:

*Surveillance, analytical intervention and social manipulation.*

1. **Surveillance**, relates to collection, identification, storage and sharing of (big) data and information on subjects, which in this case will be used for the sole purpose of creating credit scores. Limitations in this area are politico-legal and technical; how much data is *allowed* to be legally collected and how much data *can* technically be collected and stored. The technical process of collecting data and information for the SCS is elaborated on in section 3.2.
2. **Analytical intervention**, relates to how *raw*-data is transformed into information and knowledge, which in this case is a credit score that is a representation of the subjects trustworthiness, integrity and financial credibility. Without applying analytics to raw-data – which means applying mathematical models to interpret the data – the data would be useless, since it would be indecipherable. At this point, analytical intervention for the SCS is very obscure, and therefore looking at pilot projects, which will be done in section 3.3, is perhaps the closest we can get to information about this aspect. The obscurity concerning analytical intervention raises ethical questions about

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Pumin, "Credit Will Speak".

<sup>93</sup> Zhonghua Renming Gongheguo Zhongyang Renmin Zhengfu (The Government Of The People's Republic Of China), "Guowuyuan Guanyu Yinfu Shehui Xinyong Tixi Jianshe Guihua Gangyao (2014-2020 Nian) De Tongzhi (Notification From The State Council About The Social Credit System (2014-2020) Implementation Outline)".

<sup>94</sup> Schiller, "China is Building The Mother of all Reputation Systems to Monitor Citizen Behavior".

<sup>95</sup> See appendix 1, quote 4.

how raw-data may be transformed into a score that objectively says something about a subject's level of integrity or morality.

3. **Social manipulation**, relates to how the objective of *social harmony* and *long-term stability and peace* is going to be achieved, on the basis of the collected and analyzed information. *Social manipulation* in this thesis relates to behavioral manipulation on a nationwide scale. *Behavior manipulation* refers to the capability of intentionally leading or steering actions of others in a certain way. This is manifested in the SCS by (at least) two effects. Firstly, reward and punishment mechanisms are intended to bring concrete rewards and punishments based on the credit score. Secondly, a surveillance effect will in and of itself have an effect on human conduct, according to Foucault. In other words, there is actual concrete punishment and reward, and there is a more abstract awareness of punishments and rewards. Manipulation in this respect does not say anything on the outcome or predictably, since it may influence someone or something in unforeseen ways. This theoretical underpinning is elaborated on section 3.4 of this chapter.

## 3.2 The Social Credit System and surveillance.

*We may reach the point where no one would even dare to think of breaching trust, a point where no one would even considering hurting the community. It we reached this point, our work would be done (Zhao Ruying, department head in charge of implementing the SCS in Shanghai).<sup>96</sup>*

The whole fundament of the SCS circles around the need for access to massive amounts of (big)data and information on those who are to be included in the system. The SCS is according to Yongxi Chen and Anne Cheung “(...) essentially an all-encompassing, penetrative system of personal data processing, manifested by the comprehensive collection and expansive use of personal data with the explicit intention on the Chinese government's part of harnessing the ambition and power of big data technology”.<sup>97</sup> Big data may be viewed as “high-volume, high-velocity and high-variety information assets that demand cost-effective, innovative forms of information processing for enhanced insight and decision

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<sup>96</sup> Strittmatter, “Creating the honest man”

<sup>97</sup> Chen and Cheung, “The transparent self under Big Data Profiling: Privacy and Chinese Legislation on the Social Credit System”, 1-2.

making”.<sup>98</sup> In the SCS, it can be used for a variety of purposes related to encouraging trustworthiness and punishing untrustworthiness by for instance excluding people from the marketplace based on their credit score.<sup>99</sup> Surveillance by collecting personal information in the form of big data, is not uniquely Chinese, as this is done by both private and public sectors in other places. What separates big data usage in the SCS from other places seems to be the scale of the data collected and the scope of its use, in addition to the apparent lack of a comprehensive legal system to protect personal data”.<sup>100</sup> According to Creemers, the Chinese government sees no reason to protect personal data if it thinks the data can benefit them, which leads to possibilities for companies and the government in China to exploit big data in ways unimaginable in the west.<sup>101</sup> Chen and Cheung thinks the country must be an ideal social laboratory for mass surveillance, data intelligence, and big data experimentation.<sup>102</sup>

A lacking legal framework to protect citizens’ privacy is also, according to Willy Wo-Lap Lam, a reason why China has perhaps the most advanced Artificial Intelligence-enabled surveillance technology in the world.<sup>103</sup> In a government published document about the development of the AI field, it seems clear that AI is an element of the SCS, which in synchrony will be used to increase integrity and trust in society.<sup>104</sup> The society is co-opted to participate in the SCS because some of the same technology used in the SCS to collect data is also linked to conveniences in every-day life, such as electronic payment, according to Samantha Hoffman.<sup>105</sup> As we use these conveniences linked to every-day life such as electronic payment, internet, social media, cellphones and other devices, we leave behind growing digital footprints, which enables gathering information about our behavior to an extent that earlier was impossible. This is, however, not uniquely Chinese, or uniquely related to the SCS, as this is the case all around the world. Society is also co-opted into real-name registration in the fields of telecommunication, internet, postal services and financial accounts, which is an important step of implementing the SCS, in addition to being a

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<sup>98</sup> Gartner, “IT Glossary”.

<sup>99</sup> Chen and Cheung, “The transparent self under Big Data Profiling: Privacy and Chinese Legislation on the Social Credit System”, 1-2.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Volkskrant, “China rates its own citizens”.

<sup>102</sup> Chen and Cheung, “The transparent self under Big Data Profiling: Privacy and Chinese Legislation on the Social Credit System”, 3.

<sup>103</sup> Lam, “Beijing Harnesses Big Data & AI to Perfect the Police State”.

<sup>104</sup> Guowuyuan, “Guowuyuan guanyu yinfa xinyidai rengongzhineng fazhan guihua de tongzhi (state council notice issuing the development plan of new generation Artificial Intelligence)”.

<sup>105</sup> Hoffman, “Managing the State: Social Credit, Surveillance and the CCP’s Plan for China”.

cornerstone of surveillance.<sup>106</sup> Without registering with your real name, you will not be able to use services connected to the real-name registration policy, if implemented fully. In essence, it makes you accountable to what you say, do or write, by de-anonymizing you. It removes anonymity, and people will for instance not be able to hide from the state behind pseudonyms online.<sup>107</sup> Anonymous users online launched for instance the Chinese Jasmine mobilization in 2011, and it was thus unclear, because of anonymity, who called for the demonstrations that took place in a dozen cities.<sup>108</sup> Since enforcing real-name registration on the internet is an important step of the SCS, it may indicate that undesired behavior online will influence your score.<sup>109</sup> Real-name registration links your digital self, sometimes referred to as *data-double*, to your physical body and identity.<sup>110</sup> For the SCS to work, you obviously need to be identified, which is to say that if you do something dishonest, such as not paying your taxes or running a red light with your car, you have to be recognized and identified in order for a decrease in your credit score. This may seem obvious, but a harmful rumor-spreading comment on a forum left by an anonymous user would just be an IP-address, and *could* be untraceable if the user fakes his IP-address *and* hides behind a pseudonym. A surveillance camera with facial recognition software would work the other way around; it would see your physical body, and through algorithms connect it to your data-double.<sup>111</sup> Another element explicitly mentioned by the government is connecting fingerprints to an individual's identity card.<sup>112</sup>

According to Creemers, the Chinese leadership has for years sought to “keep tabs” on its citizens through for instance the *personal file* (*dàng'àn*) system.<sup>113</sup> The SCS is not new even within the context of technology-enabled surveillance and policing, and the ideas behind the SCS can be traced to articles, of which Zhou Yongkang, the disgraced former security chief, is credited as the author “(...) describing a “social management system” to monitor happiness, encourage compliance, and shape decisions that could affect social stability”,

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<sup>106</sup> Xinhua, “China speeds up creation of social credit system”; Jia and Fanxu, “Microblogging and Grassroots Surveillance in China”, 57; Daum, “Giving Credit”.

<sup>107</sup> You can in fact still use a pseudonym on for instance forums, but you have to register with your real name. You may therefore be anonymous to other users on that forum, but you will not be anonymous to the state.

<sup>108</sup> Franceschini and Negro, “The Jasmin Revolution in China: the limits of the cyber-utopia”, 31; Tsai, “How Networked Authoritarianism was Operationalized in China: methods and procedures of public opinion control”.

<sup>109</sup> Creemers, “Cyber China”, 97.

<sup>110</sup> Lyon, *Theorizing Surveillance*, 79.

<sup>111</sup> Introna and Wood, “Picturing Algorithmic Surveillance: The Politics of Facial Recognition Systems”, 177-180.

<sup>112</sup> Guowuyuan (The State Council), Guowuyuan bangongting guanyu jiaqiang geren chengxin tixi jianshe de zhidao yijian (Guiding opinion by the general office of the State Council on strengthening the establishment of the personal credit system).

<sup>113</sup> ChinaFile, “Is Big Data Increasing Beijing’s Capacity For Control?”.

according to Hoffman and Peter Mattis,<sup>114</sup> What is new now with the SCS may be the use of cloud computing, big data and the internet combined in systems where surveillance is being integrated with technology-driven systems that provide consistent nudges toward compliance, and where the SCS creates a range of rewards and punishments for online and offline behavior”.<sup>115</sup> There thus seems to be one element of continuation with the SCS, in the form of “keeping tabs” on people, and one element of innovation, in the form of applying technology to this.<sup>116</sup> Besides the *personal file*, parallels could also be drawn to other systems for keeping tabs on people in China, such as the *grid-management system* and historically perhaps the *Bǎojiǎ* system.<sup>117</sup> The *Bǎojiǎ* system was invented by the chancellor Wáng'ānshí in 1070, during the *Song dynasty*, and was a household surveillance system where households were categorized into sizes and people were selected to oversee and uphold order.<sup>118</sup> The system was used as a police and mutual surveillance system, or to say neighborhood surveillance system, during both the *Ming* (1368-1644) and *Qing* (1644-1912) *dynasty*.<sup>119</sup> The grid-management system resembles the *Bǎojiǎ* to some extent, but was structurally based on the Chinese work units (*Dānwèi*), with the purpose of social control.<sup>120</sup> The first grid-management experiment was however, carried out in Beijing a thousand years later, in 2004/2005.<sup>121</sup>

Assembling information about people and keeping track of them by using information for this purpose can, however, be traced far back in history of many nation states. From censuses in the Han dynasty (206 BC- 220 AD), old Babylon or the Egyptian state, to the Roman Empire, and perhaps could it be argued the first surveillance system for steering morality was that of God's all-seeing eye.<sup>122</sup> Keeping files has been practiced in regimes from the PRC to East Germany, and the Soviet State to Greece Post-civil war (1946-1949), and *the file* is to Maria Los the most recognizable symbol of totalitarian domination.<sup>123</sup> The power of the file is thus connected to its elusive quality as “assumed but almost never encountered”,

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<sup>114</sup> ChinaFile, “Is Big Data Increasing Beijing's Capacity For Control?”.

<sup>115</sup> Creemers, “Cyber China”, 97.

<sup>116</sup> The *Dang'an* will be further expanded on in chapter five, since it takes a central stage in the interviews. At this point of the thesis and my analysis, the *Dang'an* does not play a key part.

<sup>117</sup> *Bao Jia* (保甲), according to CC-CEDICT Chinese-English dictionary means “Headman of village security system”.

<sup>118</sup> Fairbank and Goldman, *China: A New History*, 97.

<sup>119</sup> Fu, *Autocratic tradition and Chinese politics*, 91.

<sup>120</sup> Qiang, “Urban Grid-Management and Police State in China”.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Mathiesen, *Towards a Surveillant Society: The Rise of Surveillance Systems in Europe*.

<sup>123</sup> Pendakis, “Living in the File: kinship and political Surveillance in Post-Civil War Greece”; Los, “Looking into the Future: Surveillance, Globalization and the totalitarian potential”, 74.

and evokes fear and obedience.<sup>124</sup> Through the modern computer, the paper files can now be digitized which may increase both storage capacity and simplify sharing of information, which is to say that technology has changed both the format of keeping files, and that of technology-driven surveillance. To Bakken, the file serves the purpose of “freezing” human quality and morality into written documents in which the documents are used as proofs of such qualities.<sup>125</sup> The effect the file had, by invoking fear and obedience through freezing human quality and morality into documents, may be continued through the SCS and modern surveillance. Surveillance in this respect is thus not just a technical process of collecting information (which has been the focus of this section), but is also an instrument for influencing behavior, if that is the goal. This surveillance effect depends on that surveillance and punishments are assumed but never truly invisible. If the aim is *social manipulation* through influencing the behavior of the masses, the SCS should be as “visible” as God’s eye would be to a religious man. This will be further looked upon in the last section of this chapter, after *analytical intervention* is explored.

### 3.3 Pilot projects, a case of analytical intervention.

*The leading authority of the world has been transferred from religious leaders to politicians, and now to data owners (Zhu Shaoming, research assistant, Pen State Law School).<sup>126</sup>*

Although the fundament of the SCS circles around the need for access to data and information, this access would be useless unless the information is analyzed and transformed into knowledge that can be acted upon. Without computing power and analytics, the system would be nothing but billions of files that would require an immense supply of labor to analyze. Here, analytical intervention refers to the process of transforming raw data, by the use of analytics, into a credit score that is a representation of a subject’s financial credibility, moral and behavioral qualities, in which the credit score and can be utilized for punishment and rewards. Analytics is in general terms what connects data, in practical and logical terms, with value creation”.<sup>127</sup> Analytical intervention is the most obscure element of the SCS so far, and thus answering how the SCS will technically work in terms of transforming data into a

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<sup>124</sup> Los, “Looking into the Future: Surveillance, Globalization and the totalitarian potential”, 74.

<sup>125</sup> Bakken, *The Exemplary Society: Human Improvement, Social Control, and the Dangers of Modernity in China*, 287.

<sup>126</sup> Borak, “China’s Social Credit System: AI-driven panopticon or fragmented foundation for a sincerity culture?”.

<sup>127</sup> Espoti, “When big data meets dataveillance”, 212.



credit score is a challenge. Some information about analytical intervention in the SCS may be obtained by investigating pilot projects. There are, however, little evidence about to which extent these pilot projects will be part of the state-run SCS, but it seems these are informing the state by providing real world testing.<sup>128</sup>

Pilot projects are being conducted by both the private and public sector, and perhaps more interestingly, pilot projects where the private and public cooperates, such as with *Honest Shanghai* (*chéngxìn Shànghǎi*).<sup>129</sup> The Honest Shanghai App, which when voluntarily downloaded and registered for, uses facial recognition software to recognize you and draws from 5198 pieces of information from 97 public authorities.<sup>130</sup> It then makes use of this information to evaluate whether you are a good, neutral, or bad citizen.<sup>131</sup> It will know if you travelled on the subway without paying for the ticket, if you have paid your electricity bill on time, and if you have donated blood, to mention a few examples. A third party conducts the analytical intervention, which in this case is the private software company Zhangxin Fangsheng.<sup>132</sup> Thus, the local government outsources analytical intervention to a third party by providing them with the data sets. Only using government records to develop a rating have been viewed as a weakness, and as Shao Zhiqing, deputy director of Shanghai's Commission of Economy and Informatization, has stated; "In order to give a well-rounded rating for each resident, we'll need to tap the market for data. We'll look to industry associations, private companies, and social media". According to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the more and broader the data, the better and more scientific the social credit score will be.<sup>133</sup> Another project is Alibaba's *Sesame Credit*.<sup>134</sup> Alibaba is one out of eight companies that got official permission to conduct pilot project credit systems.<sup>135</sup> Sesame Credit ranks individuals choosing to participate with a score between 350 and 950, based on factors such as; Personal characteristics, Credit history, ability to pay off debt, social networks and behavioral habits.<sup>136</sup> Sesame Credit claims it conducts scientific mathematical analysis to predict and evaluate

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<sup>128</sup> Diab, "Becoming-Infrastructure: Datafication, Deactivation, and the Social Credit System", 13.

<sup>129</sup> Zha, "Tuidong xinyong tixi jianshe gongtong goujian "Chenxin Zhongguo" (Push forward the construction of the credit system, and jointly construct "honest China")".

<sup>130</sup> Strittmatter, "Creating the honest man".

<sup>131</sup> Strittmatter, "Creating the honest man".

<sup>132</sup> Npr, "What's Your Public Credit Score?".

<sup>133</sup> Zhongguo Shehui kexue yuan (The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences), "Faxuesuo Jin Sa: Zhengxin Lifa (Law faculty's Jin Sa: Credit Legislation)".

<sup>134</sup> Alibaba is a successful Chinese e-commerce company, and can perhaps be described as "China's Amazon". Sesame Credit is run by Ant Financial, which is a subsidiary of Alibaba.

<sup>135</sup> Wade, "China's Social Credit System: Black Mirror or Red Herring?".

<sup>136</sup> Zhima Xinyong (Sesame Credit), "Zhima Xinyong Pingfen (Sesame Credit Score)".

trust-breaking and trust-keeping – the algorithms are however, a trade secret.<sup>137</sup> It will apparently judge you based on the products you buy with Alipay, which is Alibaba's digital payment system.<sup>138</sup> Buying diapers would indicate that you are a parent, and they are more likely to have sense of responsibility, and a person who plays video games for ten hours a day would be considered an idle person, according to Li Yingyun, Sesame's technology director.<sup>139</sup> Your social network will also have an impact: if you have close friends with a low sesame score, they will drag down your own score.<sup>140</sup> With a high Sesame score, you can rent a car without deposit, check in and out of hotels faster, use VIP check-in at Beijing airport, and get a credit loan for shopping on Alibaba's website.<sup>141</sup> You can also get a visa to Singapore without excessive supporting documents, get fast tracked application to a pan-European Schengen visa, in addition to leaving a hospital without standing in line to pay cash and instead pay later with Alipay.<sup>142</sup> Researchers at the Citizen lab proclaims that the sesame credit system is a component of a broader Chinese Government push to harness big data as a resource for social control<sup>143</sup>. With a good rating in the *Honest Shanghai* system, you can get discounted airline tickets, and can borrow books in Shanghai library without a deposit. Shanghai is, together with Jiangsu, Anhui and Zhejiang, the first demonstration zone for the SCS, according to Xinhua.<sup>144</sup> A searchable government website with cases of infringement and counterfeit in the region is already in place.<sup>145</sup> A somewhat similar website was also created by Alibaba in early 2017, called *Chengxin*, which accordingly is aimed at lowering fraud risk and fundraising costs, and lists hundred million enterprises, based on Alibaba's credit system for enterprises started in 2016.<sup>146</sup> Banks, such as *Huaxia bank* have included Ali's credit data for risk evaluation of companies<sup>147</sup>. Rongcheng city of Shandong Province is one of the thirty public pilot projects currently running in China. There, each participant starts with a thousand points, and can either increase this score by being the honest man, or decrease it by being a dishonest one. If you drop below 599, you will be considered a dishonest person, and have your name added to a blacklist, the general public will be informed and you will be

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<sup>137</sup> Zhima Xinyong (Sesame Credit), "Zhima Xinyong Pingfen (Sesame Credit Score)".

<sup>138</sup> Botsman, *Who can you trust? How Technology Brought Us Together*, 163.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Xinhua, "Across China: Good credit helps Chinese patients skip hospital lines".

<sup>143</sup> Ahmed, "Cashless Society, Cached Data".

<sup>144</sup> Xinhua, "China Focus: China plans social credit pilot".

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Lianshangwang (Linkshop), "Ali tuichu qiye chengxin chaxun pintai (Ali launches enterprise integrity inquiry platform)"; ChengXin (integrity), "Chengxin (Integrity)".

<sup>147</sup> Lee, "Data from Alibaba's enterprise credit-rating system is now open to the public".

an “object of significant surveillance”.<sup>148</sup> Analytical intervention in Rongcheng is according to one report, conducted in a single information center where big data technologies are analyzing 160 thousand parameters.<sup>149</sup>

A Xinhua report asserts that the first offenses that will affect your score in the nationwide SCS is traffic violation and taxes, while doctors and civil servant are among the first groups of professionals to be fully included in the system.<sup>150</sup> The trustworthy will be granted conveniences in education, employment and opening start-ups, while severe wrongdoing will be made public through blacklists, according to the same article.<sup>151</sup> According to the State Council, these *blacklists* should be made known to everyone in order to create public opinion pressure, through the media.<sup>152</sup> For instance, when you make a phone call to a “dishonest person” in Dafeng city of Henan province you will be greeted by a robot voice, instead of a ringing tone, that informs you the receiver of the call is on a blacklist.<sup>153</sup> According to Zhang Liyong, head of Henan High People’s Court, this plays into the Chinese concept of losing face.<sup>154</sup> Zhang asserts that they have to make dishonest people lose face among their friends, and leave them with nowhere to hide.<sup>155</sup> Other punishments include restriction from traveling with airplanes and trains and restrictions from certain job positions, and restrictions from certain sectors and affairs.<sup>156</sup> Breaking trust in one place, will also lead to restrictions everywhere, according to the State Council.<sup>157</sup> Smoking on trains and reselling train tickets in Beijing, not visiting your parents enough in Jiangsu and running a red light, not paying for car parking or leaving a job without giving proper notice in Shenzhen, will all be considered as breaking trust.

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<sup>148</sup> Strittmatter, “Creating the honest man”.

<sup>149</sup> The International Massmedia Agency, “big brother 2.0”.

<sup>150</sup> Xinhua, “China speeds up creation of social credit system”.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Xinhua Wang (Xinhua Net), “Zhongong Zhongyang Bangongting Guowuyuan Bangongting Yinfa “Guanyu Jiakuai Tuijin Shixin Bei Zhixingren Xinyong Jiandu Jingshi He Chengjie Jizhi Jianshe De Yijian” (State Council Publication “About Accelerating Implementation Of Monitoring And Punishment Of Trust Breakers, Building Of Warning And Reprimand Mechanism Opinion”)”.

<sup>153</sup> Wang, “Court Orders Phone Shaming for Dishonest Debtors”.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Xinhua Wang (Xinhua Net), “Henan Chengjie Lao Lai Chuxin Zhao Dingzhi Shouji Cailing Cu Lvxing (Henan Punishes discredited debtors, custom-made ringtones to promote fulfilling their obligations)”.

<sup>156</sup> Xinhua Wang (Xinhua Net), “Zhongong Zhongyang Bangongting Guowuyuan Bangongting Yinfa “Guanyu Jiakuai Tuijin Shixin Bei Zhixingren Xinyong Jiandu Jingshi He Chengjie Jizhi Jianshe De Yijian” (State Council Publication “About Accelerating Implementation Of Monitoring And Punishment Of Trust Breakers, Building Of Warning And Reprimand Mechanism Opinion”)”.

<sup>157</sup> See appendix 1, quote 5.

### 3.4 Social manipulation – surveillance theory.

Only when data and information has been collected and transformed into the credit score, is it possible to undertake social manipulation by deciding how the subject will receive rewards or punishments. Actual consequences will influence people's behavior, but so will also *awareness* of the consequences, according to Foucault.<sup>158</sup> If the SCS reinforces the fundamental principle of surveillance, then understanding surveillance theory is key.<sup>159</sup>

Foucault developed a theoretical model for surveillance, based on Bentham's Panopticon.<sup>160</sup> The Panopticon is an annular building with a central tower in the inner ring and with separated (prison) cells at the periphery.<sup>161</sup> From the tower, a few supervisors can have full oversight of every cell. From the cell on the other hand, the prisoner cannot see if a supervisor is constantly watching him, and thus the prisoner have to assume that he is being watched. This makes visibility a trap and the prisoner start watching himself by internalizing the gaze.<sup>162</sup> To Foucault; "(...) the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power".<sup>163</sup> The *few* supervisors in the tower has the ability to watch the *many* prisoners without their knowledge and can do so without the risk that the other will watch back, creating docile bodies, whose role is to reinforce the efficiency of the social system.<sup>164</sup> At the core lies an unbalanced power relationship, which Christian Fuchs translates into a contemporary example of "The NSA monitors your use of google and Facebook, but you do not monitor the NSA agent monitoring you, which shows a fundamental power asymmetry".<sup>165</sup> To Foucault, power is a confrontation between different forces, thus every social relationship is based on a relationship of power, and the Panopticon is merely an architectural figure of a dualistic hierarchical power relationship between the supervisor and the subject/prisoner.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Translate. Sheridan.

<sup>159</sup> Meissner and Wübbecke, "IT-backed authoritarianism", 53.

<sup>160</sup> Marx, "Surveillance Studies", 735.

<sup>161</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Translate. Sheridan, 200

<sup>162</sup> Simon, "The Return of Panopticism:", 3.

<sup>163</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Translate. Sheridan, 200

<sup>164</sup> Newell, Gomez, and Guajardo, "Sensors, Cameras, and the New Normal in Clandestine Migration", 24.

<sup>165</sup> Fuchs, "Surveillance and Critical Theory", 7.

<sup>166</sup> Foucault, "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of freedom", 11-13; Navarria, "China: the Party, the Internet, and Power as shared weakness", 14; Marwick, "The Public Domain: Social Surveillance in Everyday Life", 382.

A myriad of scholarly criticism has faced Panopticism against the backdrop of a widening range of informatic architectures and fragmentation of surveillance.<sup>167</sup> New media, social media, commercialization of computers, smartphones and cameras, in addition to a plethora of surveillance practices by companies, have diversified today's surveillance. Scholars such as Roy Boyne and Kevin Haggerty suggest we should tear down the walls of the Panopticon.<sup>168</sup> Sousveillance (watching from below) as manifested by the use of smartphone cameras to "watch the watchers", in addition to sharing this on social media may have empowered the prisoner and reversed the polarity of the Panopticon by bottom-up surveillance.<sup>169</sup> Contrary to in the Panopticon it is now possible for the *many to watch the few* (Synopticon) through mass media such as the television.<sup>170</sup> Fragmentation of surveillance has also been the framework for Manuel Delanda's Panspectron. Delanda lay it out by comparing it to the Panopticon: "Instead of positioning some human bodies around a central sensor, a multiplicity of sensors is deployed around all bodies", and "(...) compiles information about all at the same time, using computers to select the segments of data relevant to its surveillance task".<sup>171</sup> At times, Bentham's prison seems to be more of a limitation to understanding Foucault's Panopticism than of any help. Where the enclosed Panopticon was a concrete spatial arrangement, the enclosure of Foucault might have been more of an abstraction of the human mind. Thomas Allmer argue the scholars who rejects the panoptic notion have overlooked that corporations and state institutions have much more resources to undertake surveillance than the average citizen has.<sup>172</sup> Facebook, for instance, has more resources analyzing our behavior, than we have the resources to analyze how Facebook analyzes us.<sup>173</sup> Arguably, the Panopticon is still a Panopticon if the central tower is exchanged for surveillance cameras, and the supervisor exchanged for a computer, as long as there is one element of surveillance and one element of punishment. The most convincing argument for that Panopticism is passé would be if all surveillance or surveillance subjects becomes invisible; which is not the case with the SCS.

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<sup>167</sup> Haggerty and Ericson, "The New Politics of Surveillance and Visibility", 23.

<sup>168</sup> Boyne, "Post-Panopticism", 299; Haggerty and Ericson, "The New Politics of Surveillance and Visibility", 23.

<sup>169</sup> Mann, Nolan, and Wellman, "Sousveillance", 336.

<sup>170</sup> Mathiesen, "The Viewer Society.", 219., and Boyne, "Post-Panopticism", 301.

<sup>171</sup> Delanda, *War in the age of intelligent machines*, 266; Dahan, "The Gaza Strip as Panopticon and Panspectron", 26.

<sup>172</sup> Allmer, "Critical Surveillance Studies in the Information Society", 575.

<sup>173</sup> Fuchs and Trottier, "Towards a theoretical model of social media surveillance in contemporary society"; Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The dark side of Internet freedom*.

The function of Panopticism in this thesis is rather as a model for how surveillance might influence behavior through the SCS, and not for analyzing structural changes of surveillance in western societies. The fundamental principle of surveillance works by what Foucault calls *internalizing the gaze*, and is more colloquially referred to as *the chilling effect* of surveillance. Jonathon Penney's research on internet traffic patterns before and after the revelations in 2013 by Edward Snowden regarding surveillance conducted by the NSA, found a statistically significant drop in Wikipedia searches for terms such as *Al Qaeda*, *Car bomb* and *Taliban*, after the leaks.<sup>174</sup> Other studies, with similar findings, by Massachusetts Institute of Technology and PEN America, lend support to the claim that the fear of surveillance influences behavior.<sup>175</sup> The central finding is that when surveillance turned visible, *only then* did it influence behavior. Thus, when Snowden in one interview claimed the NSA's program was Panoptic in nature, he was partly wrong, since it only turned Panoptic *after* he leaked the story of the program.<sup>176</sup> Before the leaks, surveillance would be more effective in preventing terrorism if those planning terrorism were unaware its existence. When aware, they might alter their behavior, which prevents NSA from capitalizing on the data they collect, and therefore, the leaks decreased the efficiency of the surveillance *because* of the chilling effect. In the SCS, it is the complete opposite; the efficacy of the system as a compliance mechanism and a conditioning force depends on the visibility of the surveillance (seeing that one is seen). In 2014, Lu Jia and Zeng Fenxu suggested abandoning the Panopticon because Chinese surveillance had failed to create docile bodies, since there was not enough of a threatening effect.<sup>177</sup> This was, however, before the SCS combined surveillance with automatic punishment and reward, and before the Chinese state had increased its sophistication of surveillance.<sup>178</sup> The self-regulating effect of the SCS brings Panopticism back to relevance.<sup>179</sup>

In conclusion, the SCS seems to be aimed at saving moral decay and manipulate actions, by making sure that people are closely associated with their actions and morality, and thus turn it into a self-regulating system of internalized gaze. The intended effect, and *how it may influence society*, is thus to induce on the SCS subjects a state of conscious and

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<sup>174</sup> Penney, "Chilling Effects: Online Surveillance and Wikipedia use".

<sup>175</sup> Pen America, "Chilling effects"; Marthews and Tucker, "Government Surveillance And Internet Search Behavior".

<sup>176</sup> Escobar, "The Roving Eye: Digital Blackwater Rules".

<sup>177</sup> Lu and Fanxu. "Microblogging and Grassroots Surveillance in China", 70.

<sup>178</sup> Lu and Fanxu. "Microblogging and Grassroots Surveillance in China", 70; Wang and Minzner, "The Rise Of The Chinese Security State", 356.

<sup>179</sup> Zhang, "Cong Shichang Tixi Dao Xinyong Tixi De Lichengbei (The Milestone From A Market System To Credit System)".

permanent visibility that assures the automatic function of power. Power in this sense is derived from knowledge and information about the subjects, and may be exercised by restricting subjects from the access to goods and services that define life in modern China. Both automatically occurring punishments and rewards and the chilling effects of surveillance will influence behavior, according to Foucault. A reminder that people are being watched will be achieved by publishing *blacklists* of serious trust-breakers. This serves the purpose of making an example out someone in order to scare others, also known by the Chinese idiom *killing the chicken to scare the monkeys*.<sup>180</sup> After I have now articulated how the system is intended to work and how to conceptually grasp its function, I will turn to the question of how students perceive the implementation of the SCS. In the next chapter, I will lay out the empirical findings from my research, before I analyze this in chapter five.

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<sup>180</sup> Tsui, “The Panopticon as the Antithesis of a Space of Freedom: Control and Regulation of the Internet in China”, 70. “Killing the Chicken to scare the monkey” is known as *Shā jī xià hóu* 杀鸡吓猴.

## 4 Empirical results

This chapter presents the results from the interviews, which will reveal the student's perception about what the SCS is, how they believe it will function, and their opinion about which effects on the individual and society it might have.<sup>181</sup> After an initial presentation and some small talk, to build rapport, the informants were asked to express in their own terms what the SCS is. Because of biasing issues, I initially made sure not to ask them for specific elements of the SCS, or of surveillance. I wanted an uncontaminated first description of the system, but admittedly I was expecting descriptions of the SCS that resembled how it is portrayed in UK' and US' media: as a mass-surveillance system, as an egregious *Orwellian* system, as a “scary” system of control.<sup>182</sup> I was also looking for awareness relating to how it would work technically (technical specifics), and how the *collected data and information* (surveillance) would be *transformed* (analytical intervention) into a credit score, in addition to how it would *affect society* (social manipulation).<sup>183</sup> I also looked for signs related to the *appeal* of the SCS. Towards the latter part of the interviews, I was less concerned about contaminating the interviews, and asked how they thought the SCS would affect society, and the good and bad sides to it. Therefore, this chapter is separated into three topics that reflect the main findings, based on the objectives mentioned above. Firstly, the results relating the technical specifics will be put forward. Secondly, the informants take on the broad functions of the SCS will be shed light on. Thirdly, and finally, the results relating how they think it will influence society and individuals will be highlighted.

### 4.1 The social credit system and its technical obscurity.

Only one, out of eleven students, started the interview expressing that he was interested in the topic:

*I'm rather interested in this topic, because I work at a start-up in Zhongguancun. We are doing innovation, and take an interest in data and big data*<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> The interviews were conducted in March and April 2017, in Beijing. Eleven interviews with eleven informants.

<sup>182</sup> Orwellian is an English adjective, and I did not look for that specific concept, but rather other Chinese terms related to *scary*, such as *pà* 怕, *képà* 可怕, *hàipà* 害怕, *jīngpà* 惊怕, *kǒngbù* 恐怖 and *kǒngjù* 恐惧.

<sup>183</sup> Transforming the raw-data into a credit score is something I called *analytical intervention* in chapter three.

<sup>184</sup> 我对这个挺感兴趣的，因为我在中关村那儿的一个 startup 工作。就是做 innovation。我们很关心这个数据还有大数据。



As a student of economics and an entrepreneur in a start-up, he said he took an interest in how data collection and data analytics, may promote economic development. Clearly, he saw a connection between big data and the SCS by bringing it up in the first sentence. The other ten informants, to my surprise, were less interested and claimed a limited understanding, with one informant articulating that:

*To be honest, when I heard you say this word yesterday I was ignorant, because I haven't had anyone bring this up to me before, and I have not learned about it before. So, everything that I am saying now is just my own understanding.*<sup>185</sup>

Another informant voiced that:

*Actually, I do not have a deep understanding of this, but in my opinion, the social credit system is linked with a person's credit.*<sup>186</sup>

The SCS had not been brought up in any of the informants' school classes. One student said they might take a larger interest in it if they knew it would directly benefit them:

*We are not the kind (of students) that would research such a topic, therefore I do not understand much about it. If we really had use for it, we might go and learn about it. We might just want to understand how we can use it, and what kind of regulations there are, that is about it.*<sup>187</sup>

Most informants advised me to interview students of other majors that *would know and care more about the SCS*, with the most frequent advice being *economics students*. Only one student did not blame her academic background, by saying that taking an interest in the SCS depends on individual interests and not academic background. Even though pointing me in different directions and claiming limited knowledge, all informants were able to elaborate on different aspects of the SCS and how it might influence society. They also managed to draw parallels to the *dàng'àn* (personal file) and to financial credit systems elsewhere. I conclude that there are *technical* obscurities with the SCS that the informants claim little knowledge of. This may simply reflect pragmatic thinking. Instead of caring about how data is *technically* going to become a credit score, they instead seemed to care about how it will *practically* influence or benefit them or society.

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<sup>185</sup>坦白说，我昨天听到你说这个词的时候我其实是一无所知的。因为之前没有人跟我普及过。然后我自己也没有主动去了解过。所以我现在说的一切是我自己的理解或者说我自己的想象。

<sup>186</sup>在我眼里吧，其实我没有深入了解过。首先社会信用体系肯定是跟个人的信用是挂钩的。

<sup>187</sup>因为我们不是真的专门会研究这个 所以不太了解这个体系。如果真的有需求的话，我们可能会去了解。但这个，我们可能只想知道怎么用，规则是什么，大概这样。

## 4.2 The Social Credit System; One part financial credit and one part digital dossier?

Although unsure about the technicalities of the SCS, a few similar elements surfaced when the informants drew parallels to other systems in society. One element was the SCS as a system for improving the market economy by providing credit opportunities, and another element was the SCS as some form of a personal file (*dàng'àn*). One student, for instance, communicated that:

*I think the core of the social credit system lies in credit, and our daily use of credit cards. If your credit is good then you can apply for a loan. I think that credit card is one element to the social credit system. In addition to credit cards, this credit system could also include some other things, for instance, every student and every person has his/her own dossier.*<sup>188</sup>

He explained that the *dàng'àn* records everything about a person's life. He also brought together the concept of *integrity* (*chéngxìn*) with the *dàng'àn*, expressing:

*If you have made any mistakes, such as a crime, or have for instance cheated on your gāokǎo, then the issue with your integrity level will be recorded in the dàng'àn.*<sup>189</sup>

Later the informant said he thought the *dàng'àn* would be a part of the SCS, but also that this was only *one* aspect the SCS. He also emphasized that he thought *everything in society is related to credit* (*xìnyòng*). It was unclear what he meant, especially since another informant believed that *chéngxìn* (integrity) is included in the word *xìnyòng* (credit/trustworthiness).<sup>190</sup> The concepts of *xìnyòng* and *chéngxìn* seems to be mixed up in a complicated relationship with *credit, to trust, trustworthiness* and *integrity*.<sup>191</sup> Since the SCS is both a financial credit system and an integrity system, this relationship becomes even more complicated.

Most informants brought up the SCS as both a financial credit system, and some form of personal file. One informant, however, believed the *dàng'àn* would stay separate from the

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<sup>188</sup>我觉得这个社会信用体系它的核心在于信用吧，还有我们经常用的信用卡。信用卡它就是 如果信用好的话你可以透支。我觉得信用卡应该是社会信用体系一部分。除了信用卡这个信用体系还可能有其他的东西比如说 一个学生，还有任何人，有他自己的个人档案。

<sup>189</sup> The informant expresses that the issue with *integrity level* will be recorded; 相当于是你整个人的一个从小到大的身份生活的一个履历。如果你犯了什么错事。比如说你犯罪了那你这个经历会被记到这个档案上。如果你高考的时候作弊，就是中国高考很重要，如果你在高考上作弊的话那你的诚信问题也会被记上。当你带这些有问题的档案，你要去应聘的时候，面试官看到你档案里的作弊行为，他很可能不会要你。比如说你想要去贷款 买房买车，然后银行发现你有这些历史，可能也不会要你。就是这个东西会跟着你一辈子的。Gāokǎo is an entrance exam for Chinese Universities.

<sup>190</sup> 我觉得信用可能包含诚信吧，I mean, that trust is an aspect of credit, but not the only one.

<sup>191</sup> According to CC-CEDICT Chinese-English dictionary, *xìnyòng* (信用) can mean *credit, to trust* and *trustworthiness*. *chéngxìn* (诚信) can mean *integrity* and *honesty*.

SCS, since the *dàng'àn* has been difficult for people to see themselves, and it would therefore probably not be disclosed to everyone. She explained that if the SCS would be a transparent system where others could view your credit score, she believed the *dàng'àn* would not be included in that.

Many informants highlighted the difficulty of getting private bank loans in China, because of a lacking credit history. One informant complained that many in the China - especially on the country side - lack a credit history, and it is therefore difficult for them to ask the bank for a loan. Another student said China did not have a fully developed credit system such as in the US, and that the US' system was probably better:

*Many of these things in China are studied and picked up from other countries. The current system in China is probably the same or even better in the US. The model for the system is probably the same. Like the credit card system, or bank system. In Western Europe and in the US, it is probably more perfected.*<sup>192</sup>

This informant saw similarities with *the US' system*, which I found interesting, especially since he at one point called the credit system in the U.S the “U.S's Social Credit System”. Another student asked me (after the interview) what “Norway’s Social Credit System” was like, and if it was much different from China’s SCS. Both argued the SCS would be beneficial to the market economy in China.<sup>193</sup>

### 4.3 The Social Credit Systems and its perceived effect on individuals and society.

When reflecting on outcomes the SCS could have on society and which challenges lies ahead, the informants expressed themselves in different manners. One of the students articulated that:

*There are some issues with the social credit system. For instance, how would you specifically evaluate, or define, whether your credit score is good or bad. Good and bad are ambiguous and obscure concepts. They (“good and bad”) are adjectives.*<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>192</sup>目前中国很多都是从国外学过来的。所以说中国现在是什么样，可能美国它差不多或者说比中国的体系更好。但是这个模式应该差不多。就像信用卡体系和银行贷款体系，西欧还有美国应该会比中国更完善更发达一些。

<sup>193</sup>这个体系可能会对市场经济有帮助。

<sup>194</sup>这个信用体系它有它的一些问题。比如说怎么具体去衡量，就是 *define*，怎么具体去定义你的信用是好或者坏。因为好和坏它是一个很 *ambiguous* 就是很模糊的概念，它是一个形容词。

He further elaborated that it would be difficult to compare different situations and different people in terms of assigning credit scores, and that the government should continuously make this clear, and create a complete and scientific system.<sup>195</sup> Nonetheless, he was not very concerned, and expressed that:

*I think that the positive sides with the system far exceed the negative sides of it. For instance, people at times need to apply for loans, and the government should fulfill this need.*<sup>196</sup>

Another informant expressed concerns related to the implementation of the system, and how people with their own interests can make it beneficial to themselves:

*Because people are creating things, and people have their own interest, so they might spoil it.*<sup>197</sup>

He stressed *people* (*rén*) in his answer, but it was unclear who these *people* were, in his mind. Although considered a possible issue in the future, he primarily expressed benefits with the SCS, and how it might positively affect society. *Integrity* (*chéngxìn*) *should be a guiding principle of society*, he said.<sup>198</sup> The informant considered it a problem when people are chasing economic profits without considering how it might affect other people, and that the SCS might be an attempt to correct this.<sup>199</sup> It seemed he thought the positive outcomes from the SCS would exceed the negative, and he even seemed more concerned about whether or not cheating on exams at school would be noted in the SCS.<sup>200</sup>

Another student also highlighted *integrity*, and said integrity is an important element of Chinese society with long historical roots. He further voiced that trust (he said “trust” in English) is a very important part of the market economy, since without trust between different actors then transactions cannot occur. The informants seemed to connect the SCS to the concept of integrity/trust, and that integrity/trust was an important moral ingredient of a better society as a whole.

One student reflected on how the SCS could make life more convenient for her. She said she was using Alibaba’s Sesame Credit for fun, and that the dating site *Bǎihé* which she

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<sup>195</sup> 所以说这个需要政府去不断的去弄清楚不断的去制定出一套完整的科学的一个体系。

<sup>196</sup> 我觉得首先它肯定是好处大于坏处的。就是比如说人们需要贷款。那作为政府那应该去满足。

<sup>197</sup> 因为就是人去做一个事儿吧。因为人有自己的利益的它可能会把这个体系搞坏。

<sup>198</sup> 我觉得诚信这种东西 是一个社会导向。

<sup>199</sup> The informant expressed in English: “I think the first thing that comes to my mind is it’s kind of a balance to the market economy. When people are chasing profits and their own interests, they often neglect their honesty and sincerity. I think they may neglect some of those ethics and this a way to put a check on this”.

<sup>200</sup> 比如说不知道我们考试作弊，可能会在社会信用体系里，也可能这件事会影响我们一些其他的一些事情。具体这个我不太了解，我可也只是听人说过这些东西。

also uses, now cooperates with Alibaba and the Sesame credit.<sup>201</sup> She correctly claimed that it is possible to see another person's Sesame credit score on the profile on ones *Bǎihé* account.<sup>202</sup> From a surveillance perspective, this is an example of a gamification of horizontal social surveillance, where people gather social information about other *Bǎihé* users, a form of peer-to-peer surveillance, for the fun of it.<sup>203</sup> The student also expressed that it is possible to get visas to other countries with less paperwork if one's Sesame Credit score is high, and that this was something she was very interested in because she was going to Europe next summer. She expressed further that she used Sesame Credit for shopping and that this enabled her in some instances to buy first and pay later.<sup>204</sup> I asked if she worried about data collection by both the private and public sector, in relation to personal data, which the student replied to with an almost excited voice: *I think it's okay!*<sup>205</sup> She elaborated by saying that data collection, or more precisely Big Data, had become *a big hit* and that many actors in China wanted to collect and use Big Data.<sup>206</sup> She followed up in English; *it's like you have tailored advertisement – you only get the one's you want!* I asked how she felt about tailored advertisement, and if she did not worry that tailored advertisement might be so effective that she would waste her money. She replied enthusiastically; *I think it's good!*<sup>207</sup> When asked if they could use people's data however they see fit, she expressed that the government can use all the data, but that she was not sure of the limitations private companies had. The informant did not seem to worry about neither private nor public sector-collection of data about her; on the contrary she seemed to support it.<sup>208</sup>

Only one informant was expressing very negative views, about the SCS. The student had a minority background and had been abroad on student exchange. The remarks and worries expressed stood in stark contrast to all the others. She expressed worry about the SCS in relation to *privacy* (*yǐnsī*);

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<sup>201</sup> Baihe.com is a Chinese online dating service that uses Sesame Credit as part of its service.

<sup>202</sup> See, Botsman, *Who can you trust? How Technology Brought Us Together*, 163.

<sup>203</sup> Whitson, "Gaming the Quantified Self", 172; Marwich, "The public Domain: Social Surveillance in Everyday Life", 390.

<sup>204</sup> 当你买东西的时候如果你的 rating 很高，你在买东西的时候可以先买之后再付。

<sup>205</sup> 我觉得可以啊

<sup>206</sup> 这是一个 really hit 因为很多人，很多公司，他们会想要用一些你的数据 Big Data 然后他们要用你的这些东西。

<sup>207</sup> 我觉得挺好啊。

<sup>208</sup> Jack Linchuan Qiu writes that private companies might be even more effective than governments in collecting big data, because of its believed profit maximizing properties, and that governments can easily access this data if a legal framework protecting the data is not fully implemented, in Qiu, "Reflections on Big Data: Just because it is accessible does not make it ethical", 1091.

*This might just be my opinion, and it has to do with privacy. When you think about it, it is rather scary. Especially, since you cannot guarantee in whose hand this data or analysis is, or who is controlling the results. It is really scary. And some companies might be very effective doing this kind of analysis, and have even more power. Especially companies such as Google or China's Alibaba and Tencent, they really have a lot of information about you. If, for instance, they establish a complete and independent social credit system, if it is fair and scientific, then it can be helpful to you, and be helpful to the market economy. On the other hand, it would be really scary if everyone's Facebook, for example, included your education and your job, and then create a credit score based on this. That would be a really scary situation. I don't know how the social credit system will look like.<sup>209</sup>*

Use of the term *scary* without explicit explanation of what the consequences behind surveillance is, has been found in studies in Australia (2017),<sup>210</sup> UK, Spain and Sweden (2015),<sup>211</sup> and in another study in UK (2015).<sup>212</sup> The informant used an example of *if Facebook would be used to create a credit score*, but did not elaborate on why she said *Facebook* instead of Chinese social media's. Perhaps she thought I did not know much about Chinese social media, and therefore used an example that I would understand, or perhaps she found surveillance and big data collection *scary* in general, and not just in the Chinese context? When asked if she worried about surveillance she expressed:

*I am rather worried. We cannot know in whose hand this private information will be, and how this information will be used. It is rather scary. But it might just be me thinking in this direction.<sup>213</sup>*

When asked why she emphasized *it might just be me thinking in this direction* she connected this to her minority background, without explaining why that would matter. *Worrying about surveillance is only a small concern here*, she said. When I asked if she thought that China had any NGO's fighting for data privacy she answered in English: *No, I don't think so, NGO's situation is kinda of tricky here*. She frequently used VPN's to access foreign newspapers, and Twitter, and further highlighted a range of VPN services that were used on

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<sup>209</sup>可能只是我的观点吧，就是隐私上。你想这个就蛮害怕的，特别可能是你不能保证这样的数据 随后的分析 或者结果，是掌握在谁的手里 如果在。就是很可怕。还有有些公司他们可能更会做 就是这样的分析 就是更有实力，特别是想谷歌或者是在中国像 Ali 或腾讯，他们对 就是掌握的 你的信息 我的妈呀。然后，如果，比如说建立了一套比较完整的独立的 社会信用体系，如果它公平，如果是狗科学的话，当然对那些，这个 就是对你的利益可能会有帮助的。可能会对市场经济有帮助。但这样想的，就蛮恐怖 就是如果每个人 比如你的 Facebook 上突然有个，就是会看这个人毕业于哪个大学，然后在哪儿工作，然后有个社会评分，哈哈，就是其实蛮可怕的一个事情。我不知道以后这个体系会怎么样。

<sup>210</sup> Lupton and Michael, "Depends on Who's Got the Data".

<sup>211</sup> Kennedy et al, "On Fairness".

<sup>212</sup> Pybus, Cote, and Blanke, "Hacking the social life of Big Data".

<sup>213</sup>我蛮担心的，就是我们不知道这样的个人信息或者说 private information 会落在谁的手里，也不知道他们会怎么用这些 information。蛮可怕的。但可能只是我这么觉得吧。

her university.<sup>214</sup> As VPN's are normally used for accessing websites that are blocked, but it can also be utilized to avoid surveillance by creating an encrypted tunnel between your IP-address and the service's server, and thus conceal your IP-address (if the VPN works properly). In such terms, it can be a resistance or avoidance tactic, by eliminating and making data inaccessible to the surveyor.<sup>215</sup> She showed awareness of surveillance by taping over the camera on her laptop and the front-facing camera on her phone, which could be considered as an avoidance tactic.<sup>216</sup> Of eleven students, she was the only one calling the SCS *scary*, and the only one highlighting the concept *privacy* (*yīnsī*). The concept may have divergent meanings in different countries and contexts, and may have, as argued by Elaine Yuan, Miao Feng and James Danowski evolved within the sociological values of western democracies, and therefore interpreting the informants use of the term *yīnsī* (Privacy) as “our” understanding of *privacy* might be problematic.<sup>217</sup> In the US, Warren and Brandeis formulated privacy as “the right to be let alone” in 1890, but scholars such as Colin J. Bennett argue the legal interpretation of the term is vague, and in this context with the informant specifically, it is difficult to know what she meant.<sup>218</sup> Another student summed up the SCS in one eloquent sentence, by expressing;

*I think that even though you cannot see or feel this social credit system, and most of the time you will probably not notice it, but once you get into trouble, the system might strike you fiercely, or become a big problem in your life.*<sup>219</sup>

It did seem like the student expressing this talked about *other people* committing mistakes. He did not seem to find this problematic. Perhaps was this his way of saying: I don't have anything to hide, therefore I don't have anything to fear.

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<sup>214</sup> A VPN is a Virtual Private Network, which makes it possible, at times, to circumvent Chinese censorship (The Great Firewall).

<sup>215</sup> Marx, “A tack in the Shoe and Taking off the Shoe”.

<sup>216</sup> Greenville, “Shunning Surveillance or Welcoming the Watcher?”.

<sup>217</sup> Yuan, Feng and Danowski, “”Privacy” in Semantic Networks on Chinese Social Media: The Case of Sina Weibo”, 1011.

<sup>218</sup> Warren and Brandeis, “The Right to Privacy”. Bennet, “In Defense of Privacy: The concept and the regime”, 486.

<sup>219</sup>我觉得这个社会信用体系虽然看不见摸不着，可能平时你也不会接触到它，但是一旦你出现什么问题它可能会对你这个致命的打击或者说会成为你的一个很大的一个困难。

## 5 Discussion and analysis of the findings

This chapter will analyze and discuss the findings from the interviews, and thus aim to answer the research question of *how do students perceive the development and implementation of the SCS?* The results are placed under three interrelated topics, which are supposed to reflect the main findings in addition to commonalities and discrepancies from the interviews. Although the informants brought up different elements with the SCS they perhaps found most interesting, a few commonalities reoccurred throughout the interviews. Firstly, all but one started by explaining their limited understanding of the *technical specifics* of the SCS, and some emphasized they did not find the topic very interesting. Secondly, concerning *functional aspects* of the SCS, the informants raised two different elements, namely; the SCS as a financial credit system, and the SCS as some form of a personal file. Thirdly, all showed awareness of how the SCS might *affect society*, but only one expressed this very negatively, by calling it “scary”, and only one (the same student) mentioned the concept of *privacy* (*yīnsī*). Although some raised some reservation about its implementation, the general finding was that most of them were either indifferent or not very negative towards it. The *functional aspects* will thus make up the first two topics of this chapter. The first topic therefore discusses the SCS as some form of personal file, and the second topic of this chapter discusses the SCS as some form of a financial system. The third section takes more of a macro-perspective look and attempts to tie my findings together, with the main purpose of discussing it in relation to the puzzle of this thesis; that it is suggested that Chinese people find the idea of the SCS appealing. I call the last section *the SCS’s balancing test*.

### 5.1 The Social Credit System as a digitized *Dang’an*, what’s the big deal?

In the interviews, the SCS was placed, for one, in the context of *a*, or *the dàng’àn* (personal file). One way of interpreting this is that my interviewees believed the SCS would be *a dàng’àn*, and another way of interpreting it is that they believed a *dàng’àn* would be *one aspect* of the SCS. Keeping tabs on people is neither new nor unique in China, but the application of technology to this may be new, as chapter three showed through references to Creemers, Hoffman and Mattis. Whilst Creemers draws parallels to the *dàng’àn*, Hoffman situates the SCS besides the grid-management in which the SCS and the latter are merely the



two newest attempts at automated social management, which is aimed at ensuring China's "comprehensive" state security.<sup>220</sup> State security in the Chinese context means both "national security" in a western sense, but also includes two internal security dimensions which is "managing the party" and "managing social order", according to Hoffman.<sup>221</sup> None of the informants in this study, however, highlighted the grid-management system. Instead, they raised the *dàng'àn* as a topic, or perhaps as a comparison to the SCS. The *dàng'àn* starts accumulating after middle or high school graduation, and only specialized cadres under authorization can alter or change material to the *dàng'àn*, and most people rarely get to see their own *dàng'àn*.<sup>222</sup> According to Fei Ling Wang, a typical *dàng'àn* collects ten kinds of information, which includes:

*(...) a resume and updates; an autobiography and updates; regular appraisal by superiors and peers; all sorts of test results; political history and investigations into that history; party and other associations; awards and honors; penalties and confessions; professional credentials, diplomas, degrees, and certificates; and promotion and demotion records. Other materials include personal writing and reports and ultimately eulogy and death certificates.*<sup>223</sup>

Whilst the *dàng'àn* were not automated in a digital sense, it is a mechanism of governing, and Jie Yang argues the *dàng'àn* made governing of people transform into the governing of things, in which the personal file *became* the person.<sup>224</sup> According to Yang, this has further made the *dàng'àn* become an objective of fear, where on the one hand it works as a visible bureaucratic system, and on the other, as an obscure power structure that intimately regulate people's existence in China.<sup>225</sup> One of the informants expressed how the SCS may stay invisible for the most part, but might strike you fiercely once you have committed a mistake, which seems to fit into the description of an obscure *dàng'àn* that regulates behavior. On this note, it is interesting that the informants, although raising the topic of the *dàng'àn*, did not seem to express it as "an object of fear" and none directly speculated on the SCS's intrusiveness compared to the *dàng'àn*. Whilst one informant expressed that the *dàng'àn* collects everything about your life, the informant did not normatively assess how this influenced his life, instead, it seemed like a technical process of gathering information about people. If the *dàng'àn* is an objective of fear, and the SCS is a form bureaucratic of digitized *dàng'àn*, then how come only one informant expressed it as a scary development? The intrusiveness of the SCS is obviously up for discussion, since it is not fully implemented at this time, but as a system it

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<sup>220</sup> Hoffman, "Managing the State."

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Wang, *From Family to Market: Labor Allocation in Contemporary China*, 118.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Yang, "The Politics of the Dang'an: Spectralization, Spatialization, and Neoliberal Governmentality in China", 510.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

seems to share the traits of the *dàng'àn* as both a bureaucratic system and as an obscure power structure that may intimately regulate people's existence in China.

When the informants draw parallels between systems they know of, such as the *dàng'àn* and the SCS, then it might indicate they view the SCS as a continuation rather than a unique innovation, as Creemers, Hoffman and Mattis also do to some extent. If the SCS is viewed as a continuation and/or digitization of the *dàng'àn* and that there has been an historical acclimatization of personal files kept by the government in China, it may explain why people don't find the SCS unappealing. This would, however, contradict Yang's argument that the *dàng'àn* is an object of fear. If people find the *dàng'àn* as an object of fear, and they think the SCS is a continuation of the *dàng'àn*, then why do they not fear the SCS? The informants in this study did not seem to view the *dàng'àn* negatively, and perhaps do they not have the same experience of the *dàng'àn* as the older generation have. Suggesting that Chinese people are historically accustomed to personal files or even surveillance could be controversial, but on the other hand, one informant did not even blink when she expressed that the government can use *all* of your personal data. It seemed she thought government access to personal data was the most natural or normal thing in the world. Perhaps is this a form of *normalization* of surveillance in China.

Simultaneously, however, a *normalization* of surveillance may be seen in other countries as well, as argued by David Wood and William Webster in their work on CCTV cameras in Great Britain. The vast increase of CCTV cameras in GB since the 1980's have been met with, outside of academic circles, as they point out, "(...) popular enthusiasm for surveillance cameras", and "(...) demand for their installation in more and more places".<sup>226</sup> The effect CCTV cameras have on both preventing and solving crime is very questionable, and thus makes support for their installations all the more fascinating.<sup>227</sup> Wood and Webster shed lights on several explanations for the enthusiasm of CCTV cameras, such as their intended effect on preventing crime and increasing security, which shows that the "something is being done" by the state, or that the cameras is "(...) as much about care as control", which shows that "(...) someone is looking out for the people".<sup>228</sup> Although a possible normalization of surveillance from CCTV cameras should not be inflated as a normalization of all kinds of surveillance, certain suggestions about participatory surveillance may strengthen the argument. Through online social networking we are increasingly sharing information about

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<sup>226</sup> Wood and Webster, "Living in Surveillance Societies", 263.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

ourselves and setting up a foundation for what Albrechtslund calls participatory surveillance, which is the joyful act of mutual horizontal surveillance.<sup>229</sup> The voluntary disclosing of information and the peer to peer monitoring in this respect is not seen as scary big-brother surveillance, instead it is seen as joyful, and it may even empower us by that we can use our voice on sites such as Facebook. To Zygmunt Bauman, there is a change in people's attitudes concerning what should be considered private and what should be considered public.<sup>230</sup> At the same time, however, normalization of surveillance has been seen in studies focusing on Facebook users' attitudes toward surveillance, where at least one study found that they viewed giving up some of one's privacy as necessary to participate online.<sup>231</sup>

Normalizing and justifying surveillance has also occurred in the media according to one study by Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, Lucy Bennett and Gregory Taylor.<sup>232</sup> They found in their study that surveillance has been normalized and justified on the basis that it protects national security, and thus "for the greater good".<sup>233</sup> In this respect, keeping tabs on people through either the *dàng'àn* or the SCS may be viewed as putting a check on people, and making sure that it steers morality, and prevents people from chasing profits without considering how it affects other people, as one informant highlighted. It may seem like a paradox that while Wood and Webster suggest that there may be something called normalization of surveillance, research polls by PEW Research Center still find that many still worry about surveillance. Both in Australia and in the US, studies has found that people do not voluntarily give in to surveillance but rather feel resigned and a sense of powerlessness, which means that they surrender to it instead of resist it.<sup>234</sup> Arguably, acceptance of surveillance, or a sense of powerlessness, may be misinterpreted as a normalization of surveillance. How would people in China resist the SCS? Resisting it through "voting" or demonstrations in China would be an uphill battle. Thus, when interpreting both qualitative and quantitative data concerning support for the SCS, or even surveillance in general, it would be wise not to inflate "acceptance" as "support" for it, or a "normalization" of it.

On a final note, it would be interesting to see more studies focusing on a correlation between exposure to surveillance, and normalization of it. If exposure to it is correlated with

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<sup>229</sup> Albrechtslund, "Online social networking as participatory surveillance".

<sup>230</sup> Bauman and Lyon, *Liquid Surveillance: A Conversation*, 25.

<sup>231</sup> Fulton and Kibby, "Millennials and the normalization of surveillance on Facebook".

<sup>232</sup> Jorgensen, Bennet and Taylor, "The Normalization of Surveillance and the Invisibility of Digital Citizenship: Media Debates After the Snowden Revelations".

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Andrejevic, "The big data divide"; Turow, Hennessy and Draper, "The Tradeoff Fallacy: How Marketers Are Misrepresenting American Consumers And Opening Them Up To Exploitation".

normalization, then the second question would be; how is it normalized? Do people not care about it *and* change their behavior, or would they not care about it and *not* change their behavior and thus be the final nail in the coffin for the Panopticon? The studies thus far, seem far too few to concluded that exposure to surveillance normalizes it, and especially when different studies point in different directions. Concerning the SCS's relation to the *dàng'àn*, however, it is still plausible that the young students I talked to do not have an experience with the latter, and therefore do not fear that the SCS will be an object of fear.

## 5.2 The Social Credit System and the collective market enhancing effects.

The second major element highlighted in the interviews was the SCS as a financial credit system, or its relation to financial credit. Some of the informants expressed that it is difficult for some segments of the Chinese population, such as those living on the countryside, to get a bank loan because of lacking credit history, which brings limitations to their economic well-being. Other students complained it is also difficult for students to get credit cards from the banks, and that the SCS, by creating credit histories might solve this issue. In China, only 320 million out of 1.4 billion people have a traditional credit history, and only about 15 percent of loans offered by banks go to private consumers.<sup>235</sup> The average Chinese household saves 40 percent of its annual income, eight times more than its American counterparts, and although this may seem fiscally responsible, it is detrimental to the economic growth.<sup>236</sup> The lack of credit for hundreds of millions of people makes it much harder to purchase or invest in housing, real estate or in businesses, which would fuel the economy. By freeing up disposable income through a credit system such as the SCS, it would fuel the economy by increasing private spending, without having the state to stimulate the economy through increased public spending. In this respect, it would seem the SCS could help China keep reaching its economic growth targets by spurring private spending. Even the most critical voice in this study, the minority student who found the idea of the SCS scary, saw the advantageous benefits the SCS might bring to society, but *only* if it could be fair and scientific. She stated:

*If for instance they establish a complete and independent social credit system, if it is fair and scientific, then it can be helpful to you, and be helpful to the market economy.*

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<sup>235</sup> Botsman, *Who can you trust? How Technology Brought Us Together*, 181.

<sup>236</sup> Markey, "The Socialist Network: Why China's proposed credit rating system is anything but credible".

The Sesame credit undertakes obscure analytical intervention to evaluate its users, and according to Botsman, Alibaba admits that they judge people by the products they buy.<sup>237</sup> For the Sesame credit, playing videogames ten hours a day would indicate you are idle, while buying diapers would indicate you are more likely to have sense of responsibility, in addition, your interpersonal relationship also influence your score.<sup>238</sup> For the national SCS certain trust-breaking activities could include, as seen in chapter three, not visiting your parents “often”, in Jiangsu for example. These unscientific measures may create discriminatory technologies that sort and categorize people into categories based on their presumed economic, moral, and later perhaps, political value.<sup>239</sup> To Lyon, this form of *social sorting* often extends to the social realm, where categories of human groups are derived from stereotypical and prejudicial sources, which results in discriminatory practices which in turn lead to social injustice.<sup>240</sup> The minority informant highlighted her minority background when explaining why she was skeptical to the SCS and surveillance, and one possible explanation could be that she unconsciously fear social sorting for an already marginalized minority. Marginalized people may be more vulnerable to surveillance because of cumulative disadvantages that increase over time, which means that if a minority is statistically poorer and less educated than the majority, and then is *socially sorted* into this group it may reinforce the disadvantages they may have, and cumulate over time.<sup>241</sup>

The quest for economic profits has led to scandals in the marketplace, and the decreasing levels of trust in society may have been affected by this. In 2008, six babies died and 300 000 fell ill after drinking baby formula, knowingly filled with melamine, which may be an example of chasing profits without considering how it affects society, as one informant claimed was the case in China. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 63% percent of all fake goods in the world originates from China.<sup>242</sup> The estimated financial loss in China from fake goods is about 100 billion US dollar a year, according to the Ministry of Commerce in China.<sup>243</sup> “Food security, counterfeiting and lack of regulatory compliance are real issues for Chinese citizens”, according to Creemers.<sup>244</sup> Not to mention the impact polluting industries have on the China, and one of the goals with the SCS

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<sup>237</sup> Botsman, *Who can you trust? How Technology Brought Us Together*, 163.

<sup>238</sup> Botsman, *Who can you trust? How Technology Brought Us Together*, 163.

<sup>239</sup> See, Lyon, “The search for surveillance studies”; Lyon, “Surveillance as social sorting: Computer Codes and Mobile Bodies”, 13-15.

<sup>240</sup> Lyon, “Surveillance as social sorting: Computer Codes and Mobile Bodies”, 13-15.

<sup>241</sup> Gandy, *Coming to Terms with Chance: Engaging Rational Discrimination and Cumulative Disadvantage*.

<sup>242</sup> OECD, “Global trade in fake goods worth nearly half a trillion dollars a year – OECD & EUIPO”

<sup>243</sup> Lan, “China’s social credit system gains momentum”.

<sup>244</sup> Botsman, *Who can you trust? How Technology Brought Us Together*, 181.

is also to monitor emissions for polluting industries in real-time, and make them comply with the emission targets.<sup>245</sup> If the SCS is able to tackle issues such as pollution, unsafe foods and fake goods by restricting actions, it might increase the appeal of the entire system. As the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences argued about the main effect of the SCS: “When people’s behavior isn’t bound by morality, a system must be used to restrict their actions”.<sup>246</sup> To Meissner, steering the behavior of market participants is the main function of the SCS.<sup>247</sup> Counterfeiting and IP theft leads to less willingness to innovating, since you are at risk that once you have invested your money, someone steals your invention. The SCS may spur economic growth by market regulation, and it may steer investment to certain sectors by providing incentives or punishments. Incentivizing green-tech and punishing emission could be one example. The more obvious economic impact it could have would be achieved by providing credit opportunities to the whole population. Since people’s livelihood depends on economic growth, and the SCS may spur growth, it is understandable if they find the system appealing.

Some of the informants also raised rating aspects with the SCS, with one student specifically expressing it would be scary if ratings would be based on for instance your Facebook.<sup>248</sup> Rating and assessing people and customers, is however also present in the West. Consider Uber, Amazon, Ebay and Airbnb for instance, which services are built around ratings that are supposed to reflect trustworthiness, and in turn make the customer or buyer trust the seller. Johan Lagerkvist has commented that the SCS “is Amazon’s consumer tracking with an Orwellian political twist”.<sup>249</sup> Ratings are arguably also present on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, where people “Like” other people’s posts or pictures, which in turn may lead us to be judged by peers or superiors based on our online identities. Perhaps are we, in the West, closer to the Chinese SCS than we realize, and we are now in the early stages of digitizing reputation and identity as well.<sup>250</sup> The SCS may create a situation where humans are rated or judged by standards they cannot control, and where judgment may not be erased or forgotten because it is stored by computers.<sup>251</sup> According to Freud, the ability to forget is a vital aspect of a human’s psychological makeup, which is founded on the ability to selectively

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<sup>245</sup> Meissner, “China’s Social Credit System, a big-data enabled approach to market regulation with broad implications for doing business in China”, 4.

<sup>246</sup> Volkskrant, “China rates its own citizens – including online behavior”.

<sup>247</sup> Meissner, “China’s Social Credit System, a big-data enabled approach to market regulation with broad implications for doing business in China”, 4.

<sup>248</sup> Facebook is blocked in China, and it was thus a bit strange that this was used as an example.

<sup>249</sup> Volkskrant, “China rates its own citizens – including online behavior”.

<sup>250</sup> Botsman, *Who can you trust? How Technology Brought Us Together*.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

filter personal narratives that are consistent with the reality we want to believe in.<sup>252</sup> If a human's wellbeing and ability to cope with stress and trauma depends on this, then how would an *end of forgetting* affect us?<sup>253</sup> On the other hand, ratings may be inevitable in a rating-economy and a marketplace where transactions move faster than ever, since it is now crucial that we quickly can assess if we trust a person or not. As one informant claimed, without trust in the market, transactions would be impossible.

### 5.3 The Social Credit System – A balancing test?

By interpreting the empirical data there seems to be many different ways of perceiving the SCS, which may directly influences how appealing they find it - and this is perhaps the main findings of this research. Still, I suggest that most of the informants in this study did not heavily oppose the implementation of the SCS, even though some of them had their reservations about certain aspects. While raising positive and negative aspects of the SCS, most of them, except perhaps one, seemed indifferent or optimistic about its implementation. It all boils down to weighing the positive and negative consequences against each other, in which a *balancing test* looks different dependent upon the type of surveillance, the intrusiveness of it, in addition to what kind of benefits are being offered. Surveillance by businesses for the sake of profit is normally not the same as surveillance for the sake of protecting national security. Surveillance by the state is often declared as a necessity or a moral obligation for safeguarding the security of its citizens, in other words, surveillance for the sake of security.<sup>254</sup> Much of the increase in today's surveillance is placed against the backdrop of the 9/11 attacks, which arguably was a watershed for implementing large scale, and increasing, surveillance for security purposes in the west.<sup>255</sup> Thomas Mathiesen argues the exaggerated danger of terrorism is documented many places, and that this leads to both increasing surveillance and increasing support for surveillance based on how the enemy picture is painted, which is something David L. Altheide calls a *politics of fear*.<sup>256</sup> Both Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck have diagnosed the modern society as fixated on risk.<sup>257</sup> For instance, in the US between 2007 and 2011 the chance of dying from a terrorist attack

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<sup>252</sup> Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

<sup>253</sup> See, Bossewith and Sinnreich, "The end of forgetting: Strategic agency beyond the panopticon".

<sup>254</sup> Macnish, "Just Surveillance? Towards a Normative Theory of Surveillance", 148.

<sup>255</sup> Mathiesen, *Towards a Surveillant Society: The Rise of Surveillance Systems in Europe*.

<sup>256</sup> Mathiesen, *Towards a Surveillant Society: The Rise of Surveillance Systems in Europe*, 65; Altheide, *Terrorism and the Politics of Fear*.

<sup>257</sup> See, Beck, *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*; Giddens, *The Consequences of modernity*.

was 1 in 20 million, and the chance of dying in a car accident, or even falls in bathtubs are much higher.<sup>258</sup> In this respect, there is a balancing test between surveillance for the sake of security and privacy, where the latter is often viewed as an antagonist to the first.<sup>259</sup> Privacy in this context can be understood as the right to be let alone, and informational privacy as defined by Westin “the claim for individuals, groups or institutions to determine for themselves when, how and to what extent information about themselves is communicated to others”.<sup>260</sup> This balancing test is based on the idea that you cannot have both at the same time, or as Barack Obama once said, “You cannot have hundred percent security, and also have then have hundred percent privacy and zero inconvenience”.<sup>261</sup> Previously, surveillance in China has been defended as counterterrorism and crime-prevention, which both are defined broadly in China, and now even includes criminalizing the spreading of “harmful rumors” online.<sup>262</sup> The SCS is not, however, aimed at protecting Chinese citizens from terrorism, at least not primarily, which raises the question of what the balancing test is made up of.

The rhetoric around the SCS concerns how trust is decreasing in a society of strangers where moral conduct has suffered, and that China’s market economy needs a credit system.<sup>263</sup> That is to say, in a country where hundreds of millions lack a traditional credit history, where people are scammed by sales of fake products and baby formula filled with melamine. This is not *politics of fear* for terrorist attacks, or *exaggerated danger of terrorism*; instead, it is rhetoric concerning contemporary issues in the Chinese society, with proposed tangible benefits for the law-abiding and honest citizen. Instead of asking how much privacy you are willing to give up for the sake of security, the question becomes how much privacy are you willing to give up for getting tangible rewards in return? Only one of the informants

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<sup>258</sup> Barrett, “Don’t Turn Security into Theater”.

<sup>259</sup> Hong, “Criticising Surveillance and Surveillance Critique”, 192.

<sup>260</sup> Westin, *Privacy and Freedom*, 337; Tunick, *Balancing Privacy and Free Speech: Unwanted Attention in the Age of Social Media*, 24-30; Romele, Emmenegger, Gallino and Gorgone, “Panopticism is not Enough: Social Media as Technologies of Voluntary Servitude”, 213.

<sup>261</sup> Dijck, “Datafication, dataism and surveillance: Big Data between Scientific paradigm and ideology”.

<sup>262</sup> MacKinnon, “China’s “Networked Authoritarianism””, 41; Renmin Wang (People’s Daily Net), “Ba Wangluo Zaoyao, Chuan Yao guanjin fazhi de longzi (Criminalizing spreading of rumors)”.

<sup>263</sup> See: Zhang, “Cong Shichang Tixi Dao Xinyong Tixi De Lichengbei (The Milestone From A Market System To Credit System)”; Zhonghua Renming Gongheguo Zhongyang Renmin Zhengfu (The Government of The People’s Republic Of China), “Guowuyuan Guanyu Yinfa Shehui Xinyong Tixi Jianshe Guihua Gangyao (2014-2020 Nian) De Tongzhi (Notification From The State Council About The Social Credit System (2014-2020) Implementation Outline)”; Xinhua Wang (Xinhua Net), “Zhonggong Zhongyang Bangongting Guowuyuan Bangongting Yinfa “Guanyu Jiakuai Tuijin Shixin Bei Zhixingren Xinyong Jiandu Jingshi He Chengjie Jizhi Jianshe De Yijian” (State Council Publication “About Accelerating Implementation Of Monitoring And Punishment Of Trust Breakers, Building Of Warning And Reprimand Mechanism Opinion)””; Luo, “youguan shehuixinyong lifa wenti (about the legislation of social credit)””; Liu Zhun, “China’s social credit system won’t be Orwellian”; Li, “Wanshan Xinyong Tixi, Goujian Xinyong Shehui (Perfecting The Credit System, Building A Trust Society)”.



specifically mentioned the complicated topic of *privacy* (*yīnsī*), and thus the empirical data in *this* study shows that the concept of privacy was not heavily emphasized by the informants. Another informant in this study said the government can use all of your private data, and she said so without blinking. If surveillance is not a major concern in China, as one of the informants claimed, then why would they not find the idea of the SCS appealing? The benefit from surveillance for the sake of security is that you will be secure, but the SCS proposes benefits in terms of access to the goods and services that define life in a modern economy. If there is no privacy to lose, there cannot be a Faustian bargain between privacy and tangible gains. Pew Research center claimed in one 2014 poll that Americans would be willing to trade their personal information depending on the deal they are being offered.<sup>264</sup> The much mocked and often heard saying *if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear*, may thus be exchanged in this context to, *if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear AND you will be rewarded*. Some of these tangible benefits are linked to everyday conveniences such as quick electronic payment, not paying deposits in hotels, getting visas to other countries with less paperwork. In addition, you may get better credit opportunities, so that you can buy or invest in property and businesses. Other tangible benefits with the SCS as it is sold could be that fake goods are removed from the market, that there are less scams, less pollution, less corruption, and less dangerous additives in foods, in addition to lightning fast transactions in a rating-economy. The vast majority of people could receive benefits, and to the state the benefit could be that they increase surveillance and control while at the same time “keep people happy”. Fan Hao found in his nationwide study on trust in China that 61.4 percent believed that lack of trust is the most serious problem in the Chinese society.<sup>265</sup> Instead of exacerbating the danger of terrorism, the Chinese state may exacerbate the need for a credit system, and the need for increased morality for the common man’s sake, and thus create a politics of fear based on moral decay in China, and let the SCS be the referee that can ensure fairness. Is authoritarian-mass-surveillance-utopia an oxymoron? Is it possible to socially manipulate society for the sake of state control and stability, and at the same time keep the vast majority “happy” because of an efficient economy and a society of integrity? If the positive outcomes are perceived as exceeding the negative, it is understandable if Chinese people find the idea of the SCS appealing. The negative outcomes may be diminished by factors such as normalization of surveillance, or that “surveillance is not a major concern”, or

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<sup>264</sup> Rainie and Duggan, “Privacy and Information Sharing”.

<sup>265</sup> Hao, *Zhongguo lunli daode baogao* (Chinese Report on Morals and Ethics), 133.

even support for the central government or Party. The positive outcomes seem to be plenty - for the vast majority.

The Panopticon may work in unforeseen ways, and so may the SCS. The chilling effect, or the internalization of the gaze, seems to influence behavior, as shown in chapter three, but it is not clear if artificially creating this chilling effect may lead to social manipulation that is predictable. Although Foucault theorized the Panopticon would create docile bodies that would reinforce the social system, and this thesis has argued how the SCS may influence behavior, it is not certain that the SCS would influence behavior in a foreseen or desired ways. Bakken, for one, criticizes Foucault's approach to control based on the limited space Foucault give to resistance.<sup>266</sup> To Bakken, a society simply resists being reduced to the discipline of its social engineers.<sup>267</sup> Lorna Rhodes did a study on prisoners in Washington State supermax prison in 2004. A supermax prison is a high security prison, with intensive surveillance of the inmates, and although not a Panopticon prison per se, Rhodes examined prisoner's self-mutilation and behavior as means of diagnosing the Panopticon.<sup>268</sup> The Panopticon was intended to produce a calculated manipulation of the human in a predictable way, but as Rhodes argues; "the perfection of the mechanism actually calls forth its opposite".<sup>269</sup> She concluded that self-cutting prisoners react against the negative visibility that originally was intended to produce compliant selves, by making themselves more visible.<sup>270</sup> To Maria Los, surveillance in the private sphere adds unpredictability and destroys the necessary quantum of trust needed to achieve basic levels of solidarity and sociality, which means that the SCS, through plausible intrusive surveillance, may even erode what it tries to build; integrity and trust.<sup>271</sup> Even if China overcomes the technological hurdles of implementing a SCS that will cover the whole of society, it may still not work as intended by that the gaze or the chilling effect may lead to unpredictable consequences. How humans are affected by intrusive surveillance and ratings, and how human conduct is affected when they are reduced to a data-double in a hyperconnected reality, are merely two questions that still are unanswered.

In conclusion, my empirical findings from the interviews primarily suggest there are many ways of perceiving the SCS, and secondarily, through my subjective interpretation of

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<sup>266</sup> Bakken, *The Exemplary Society: Human Improvement, Social Control, and the Dangers of Modernity in China*, 2.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> Rhodes, *Total Confinement: Madness and Reason in the Maximum Security Prison*, 286.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>271</sup> Los, "Looking into the Future: Surveillance, Globalization and the totalitarian potential", 74.

the data I claim that most of the informants either seemed indifferent or not very critical towards the implementation of the SCS. Since only eleven students were interviewed, I cannot generalize and say that I know anything about how appealing Chinese people find the idea of the SCS. There is also obviously a possibility that I have misinterpreted the data, or that they simply did not tell me exactly how they perceive the SCS, for different reasons. On the other hand, concerning confirmation bias, when I set out to study this topic, I thought I would find very critical voices regarding its implementation, which I (mostly) did not find, and thus I did not confirm my personal presumption or hypothesis. Nonetheless, the interviews did shed light on the diversity of the SCS, which is founded on views about the SCS as partly a sort of personal file, or *dàng'àn*, and partly as a financial credit system. It is important to highlight at this point that since the students expressed limited knowledge about the system, this may have influenced their answers. If they knew more about it, or perhaps even read foreign newspaper articles about it, they might change their opinion about its implementation.

## 6 Conclusion

This thesis aimed to lay out what the Chinese Social Credit System is, how it may be intended to influence society, in addition to presenting and analyzing the results from the interviews. The first part of this thesis analyzed the SCS through an analytical framework made up of three elements; *Surveillance*, *analytical intervention*, in addition to *social manipulation*. Through that framework, this thesis argued that *social manipulation*, which means the steering or manipulation of action for the entire society, could be expected to work by the surveillance effect proposed and theorized by Foucault. In this respect, the SCS may reinforce the fundamental principle of surveillance by inducing on the SCS subjects a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic function of power. Power in this sense is derived from knowledge and information about the subjects, and may be exercised by restricting subjects from the access to goods and services that define life in modern China. Arguably, the SCS is not only a compliance mechanism, but also a financial credibility indicator, that reaches further than other financial credit systems. If it is primarily a compliance mechanism or primarily a financial credibility indicator is difficult to say, and it would perhaps merely be speculations trying to know the intentions before its implementation. On a functional level, the answer seems to be: both at the same time. Thus, the purpose of the SCS seems to be both creating a financial credit system for spurring economic growth, and a system for correcting morality, trust and integrity in the Chinese society, with the ultimate goal of, in official terms, *social integrity*, *social harmony*, *long term stability and peace*, in addition to perfecting the *socialist market economy*. Social harmony, stability and peace, may be indications of a control aspect of the SCS, which means that one plausible function is to prolong stability by keeping control of the Chinese citizens. If the SCS is not primarily aimed at controlling the masses it will nonetheless create a potential power that may be used for this purpose, which in the end will be dependent on the authorities and how they will use the SCS, just as a knife can be used to both slice bread, and cut throats.

The second research question has been addressed in chapter four and five. My analysis of the empirical findings suggests that the informants in this study perceived the SCS in a range of different ways, which probably affects how appealing they find the idea of the SCS. Two main elements surfaced in the interviews in terms of the functions of the SCS; the SCS as some sort of a personal file (*dàng'àn*), and the SCS as a financial credit system. The informants claimed they had limited knowledge about the system. With more information

about it, they may have viewed it in a different manner. Only one of the informants in this study seemed to perceive to SCS in a highly negative way, whilst the other ten seemed indifferent or somewhat positive, although they had reservations about certain elements. In this respect, the findings from the interviews surprised me, since I thought more of them would be negative towards it. My initial understanding of the system was however influenced by media reports about a dystopic system of rating and mass-surveillance, which came from sources that my informant don't easily have access to. On the other hand, the appeal of the SCS may stem from both the rhetoric around the SCS and the proposed benefits for the vast majority of the people. Perhaps it is also true that surveillance is not a broad major concern in China, as one informant expressed. I have, however, no means to test this assumption on a broad basis at this point. The benefits that accompany the SCS will most likely determine how appealing people will find the system. For those people that are deemed as dishonest, which perhaps also includes critics of the regime, this system may not create a utopian society of trust, but just the opposite. There are however, some remaining questions to how surveillance, or the SCS in particular, may influence people. Although it may have an impact on people, it is not certain that this will work in a predictable manner. If people eventually find it too intrusive, the effects from the SCS may be detrimental to its purpose.

This thesis was meant as a contribution to the field of scholarly work on the SCS, which at this moment may be in the early stages. Since the SCS is not finished and in full use yet, this thesis has only explored how the system *may* influence behavior, in addition to exploring what the SCS is by looking at pilot projects and analyzing public documents and academic articles about the implementation of the system. Later academic work may be able to access more empirical material about the SCS, as the SCS move closer to 2020, when it is supposed to be fully implemented. For further academic work it may be valuable to study the project in pilot cities where the system is well developed; Rongcheng in Shangdong, as mentioned in chapter three, could be one of those. Since this thesis was built on qualitative interviews, not much can be generalized about the appeal of the SCS in the vast country of China. Further research is imperative for drawing assumptions about how most people from different social groups and backgrounds view the SCS.

Throughout this research, my interest for the SCS and contemporary surveillance in general, has exponentially increased. From initially being very skeptical of the SCS, I can now understand why the SCS might seem appealing. Admittedly, in the beginning, I even thought people *should* find the system “scary”. My thinking of the system has evolved into a

certain fascination of China's pragmatic hands-on approach to steering society. Still, only time will tell if and how the system will emerge, together with China, into a mass-surveillance state. Finally, although the system is supposed to be finalized in the year 2020, we should perhaps predict that there will be continuous improvement and development of the system beyond this deadline. When people express skepticism about if the system will work or not, they ought to give a timeframe and a definition of "to work". If it does not "work" by 2020, it might "work" by 2030. Using data, surveillance and AI to govern society may be an unavoidable development in the whole world, but in "whose" hands all this (big) data ends up and how exactly it is used in each case is maybe the most crucial question informing future empirical work.

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# Appendix

## Appendix 1 – translation of written quotes.

The translations are my own.

中华人民共和国中央人民政府，国务院关于印发社会信用体系建设规划纲要（2014-2020年）的通知。 **Zhonghua Renming Gongheguo Zhongyang Renmin Zhengfu "Guowuyuan Guanyu Yinfa Shehui Xinyong Tixi Jianshe Guihua Gangyao (2014-2020 Nian) De Tongzhi". The Government Of The People's Republic Of China. "Notification From The State Council About The Social Credit System (2014-2020) Implementation Outline".**

**Quote 1:** 它以法律、法规、标准和契约为依据，以健全覆盖社会成员的信用记录和信用基础设施网络为基础，以信用信息合规应用和信用服务体系为支撑，以树立诚信文化理念、弘扬诚信传统美德为内在要求，以守信激励和失信约束为奖惩机制，目的是提高全社会的诚信意识和信用水平: Laws, regulations, norms and agreements are its basis; a robust network covering the credit/credibility records of all members of society and credit/credibility infrastructure is its foundation; the proper application of credit/credibility information and credit/credibility services systems are its supports; establishing the concept of an integrity-culture to promote traditional virtue of integrity is its intrinsic requirement; encouraging trustworthiness and restricting untrustworthiness through mechanisms for reward and punishments, and its goal is to raise the entire society's awareness and level of credibility.

**Quote 2:** 社会诚信是社会信用体系建设的基础，社会成员之间只有以诚相待、以信为本，才会形成和谐友爱的人际关系，才能促进社会文明进步，实现社会和谐稳定和长治久安: Social integrity is the foundation of the building of the Social credit system. Only if there is mutual honest treatment between members of society, and only if integrity is fundamental, will it be possible to create harmonious and benign interpersonal relationships and possible to promote the progress of society and civilization, and realize social harmony, stability and long-term peace and stability.

**Quote 3:** 让守信者一路畅通,让失信者寸步难行: Let the trust-keepers move freely in society without obstruction, and let the trust-breakers be unable to move a single step.

**Quote 4:** 在全社会广泛形成守信光荣、失信可耻的浓厚氛围，使诚实守信成为全民的自觉行为规范”：Everywhere in society, trust-keeping should be glorious and trust-breaking should be disgraceful. Integrity/honesty and trustworthiness/trust-keeping should become the conscious norms of behavior among everyone in society.

**Quote 5:** 一处失信、处处受限的信用监督：Once trust-breaking occurs, it will receive limitations everywhere through credit/credibility supervision.

## Appendix 2 – template of interview participants.

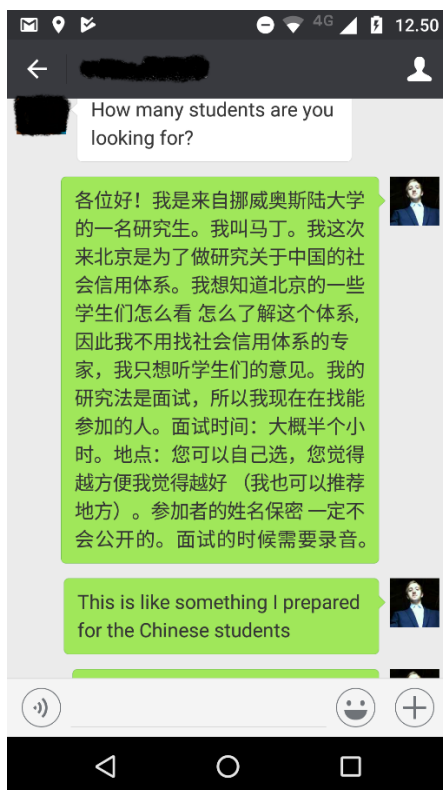
Template of the 11 participants in my interviews. The names are all fictional.

M=Male. F=Female

Name	Age	Major	Degree	Province	University
Wang Xiu Ying (F)	20	Int.Relations	BA	Yunnan	Peking Uni
Zhang Li (M)	22	Economics	BA	Jiangsu	Qinghua Uni
Wang Xi (M)	27	Journalism	MA	Shaanxi	Qinghua Uni
Wang kai (M)	28	Journalism	MA	Beijing	Qinghua Uni
Fan Yi (F)	27	Journalism	MA	Jilin	Qinghua Uni
Luo Shi (F)	27	Law	MA	Henan	Peking Uni
Fei Yu (M)	22	Int.Relations	BA	Beijing	Peking Uni
Xiao Yi (M)	26	Public Management	MA	Zhejiang	Qinghua Uni
Zhang Wei (M)	30	Astrophysics	PHD	Heilongjiang	Peking Uni
Xiao Lin (M)	31	Philosophy	PHD	Hebei	Peking Uni

## Appendix 3 – introduction text on Wechat.

Introduction text sent to the informants in this study.



## Appendix 4 – interview guide.

**The interview guide was produced before the fieldtrip, and does not reflect all (follow-up) questions asked during the interviews.**

How old are you? 你今年多大了？

Where are you from? 你的家乡在哪里？

Are you from a city or are you from the country side? 你来自城市还是农村？

What major do you study? 你学什么专业?

How long have you stayed in Beijing? 你在北京呆了多久?

Do you have a sister or a brother? 你有没有兄弟姐妹?

What is your family background? 你的家庭背景是怎样的?

What does your parents do for a living? 你父母是做什么样工作的?

Can you explain in your own terms what the SCS is? 请用你自己的话告诉我什么是社会信用体系?

Have you studied anything related to the SCS during class? 你上课的时候学习过有关这个社会信用体系的内容吗?

Have you read anything about the SCS in the news? 你是否在新闻中看过有关这个体系的报道?

Have you claimed the firewall, or to say, have you read foreign news articles about this system? 翻墙过吗, 或者说, 你是否曾看过有关这个体系的国外的新闻报道吗?

What kind of news do like to read? 你喜欢看什么样的新闻?

Have you heard about the Sesame Credit? 你听说过芝麻信用吗?

What would you say is the difference between the SCS and the Sesame Credit? 你觉得社会信用体系跟芝麻信用有什么不同?

Do you think everyone in China will be given a credit score? 你觉得在中国, 每个人都会有信用评分或者说被评估一个信用分数吗?

How will this score be calculated? 这个评分是如何被算的?

Do you think that a SCS score will be published so everyone can see it? 你觉得每个人的信用分数会被在网上公开让所有人都可以看到吗?

Is the SCS finalized yet? 现在的社会信用体系已经健全了吗?

What does *keeping trust* and *breaking trust* mean to you? 对你来说, 守信用和不守信用意味着什么?

What does *integrity* mean? 诚信是什么意思?

What does *credit* mean, and what kind of relationship does it have with *trust*? 信用是什么意思, 信用跟 *trust* 有什么关系?

What do you think about this system, and what kind of positive and negative things will it bring? 你觉得这样的一个体系分别会带来什么好处和什么坏处呢?

Do you think the SCS will change people's behavior? 你觉得这样的体系会改变人们的行为吗?

Do you worry about surveillance of the internet? 关于网络监视, 你对这个担心吗?

I have heard that China is implementing a real-name registration law. What do you think about this? 我听说中国正在实行实名认证, 你对这个有什么看法?

Foreign newspapers writes that this system is only about social management, what is your take on this? 国外的一些报纸写说这个体系的唯一目的就是进行社会管控, 你对这个的看法是什么?