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“Individualism in Modern China: The Social Credit Issue”

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1. Introduction

The aim of this dissertation is to analyse the current and future implementation of a new and unique system of social and market control: the Social Credit Score system (heretofore referred to as SCS). Especially in the last decade, China represented the most interesting actor on the global scenario for many reasons. Some of these are of course the huge potential it has in terms of economic and social developments, taking into consideration its populace, which accounts for the 18.54%¹ of the entire world population, and the fact that it has been always extremely difficult to study the country from outside. As a matter of fact, mainly because of the tight control and censorship operated by the Chinese government, every study or research about China has been obstructed by the lack of free access to the country, of reliable and uncensored sources. However, the main factor that influenced and biased a great part of literature about this society is the incomplete understanding and comprehension of Chinese realm in the absence of a deep and continuous study of Chinese culture.

I developed an increasing interest towards China's political and social everchanging realm during the last years, that brought me to choose to spend a semester studying in this country, more precisely in Macau². Thus, I discovered a completely different picture compared to the one painted by western media; in addition to that I found, for instance, Chinese people to have a different perspective on several fundamental concepts of society. Inevitably all these confrontations with divergent views shaped my approach to values such as freedom, individualism, authority and power among the others: notions that I took universally for granted, were in truth not the same all over the world. It is also for this reason that I have decided to analyse this particular topic, because when I began to gather information about the SCS, I was sceptic of the western narration. Every single article about it depicted a negative and dark picture of this system, comparing it to Orwell's writings or to an episode of the popular TV show *Black Mirror*. Looking into each one of this news anyway, I noticed that they were all based upon scarce official information and that there was no mention of the public opinion reaction in China, neither a wider analysis of the scope and motivations that brought the government to design such a policy. It was in fact taken for granted that the country was ruled by an extremely authoritarian regime and that every citizen was just submitted to this great power.

¹ China Population (2018) - Worldometers. Retrieved May 30, 2018, from <http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/china-population/>.

² University of Macau, Faculty of Social Sciences, a.y. 2017-18.

Thus, this thesis is structured in order to contextualize the entire and wide policy, which also includes the SCS, in a broader cultural, philosophical and economic framework. A review of many Chinese school of thought, that had an unquestionable influence over the formation and development of this society, shows us an interesting and not well known conception of individualism. Thus in the first chapter there will be an analysis and overview of these philosophies and studies about the concept of individualism, linking Western and Chinese common and diverging aspects. While in the following section the focus is on social management, reviewing past policies and implemented projects that shaped CCP approach to the topic, contextualizing this in the current government of Xi Jinping, that brought a huge change in the Party leadership and future plans. Finally, in the last chapter I deeply analysed the Social Credit System in its structure, implementation process and already existing examples, trying to draw a clear picture of it from many official and unofficial sources.

As stated before, western thought tends to look at Chinese people as a static, unitary and de-politicized whole, ignoring many socio-political and cultural factors. This particular policy is difficult to understand at first sight, but it is its uniqueness and potential to increase my desire to do research about this topic. If successful, the SCS could be the leading and most-effective socio-political tool available: in few words, it could enable a government (or any other institution) to respond as quick as possible to a huge amount of issues and also to fix and change policies depending on the needs.

Being the SCS officially implemented by 2020³ this dissertation is subject to unpredictable outcomes of the future, but it tries to understand if this system has the condition to be successful. Clearly, Chinese leadership would never elaborate or enforce such a pivotal policy without prior studies. This has been done even before the 21th Century, starting with the working group of Lin Junyue's at the Institute of World Economics and Politics of the Chinese Academy of Sciences in the late 1990s. Thus, rather than a practical contextualization, through a sociological approach, backed up both by quantitative and qualitative measures of study, I found that this project is absolutely understandable and logical from a Chinese perspective. Though there is a critique, both national and foreign, that strongly disagree with this approach and with the possible (and still unpredictable) results of the SCS, in this thesis I deny that part of the critics that tends to perceive the project as unacceptable or as a demonstration of absolute authority of the Chinese Communist Party.

³ "Planning Outline for the Construction of a Social Credit System (2014–2020)", China State Council, 14 June 2014

2. The concept of Individualism and its Importance for Social Management and SCS System

2.1 Western Individualistic Theories: Modernist, Interactionist and Discourse Approach

Before discussing the many theories about this topic produced in China, from Confucius to Yangzi, it is important to analyse first the leading Western school of thought, mainly represented by Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, and consisting of the Modernist, interactionist and Discourse approaches to individualism.

As a starting point, we shall consider these three authors not as solely individualization theorists, but they have all contributed substantially to the development of this concept. To have a clear overview, we can observe that Beck produced a neutral judgement on the topic, also highlighting its negative aspects, such as the lessening of class identification, where class and gender are reduced into zombie categories. While Baumann is more critical, considering individualization as a political act deviated from the transition of producer capitalism into a consumer capitalism and linking the degree of freedom of an individual human being to its (material, economic) capacity to pay for its liberty. “[...] individualization refers to the way in which identity is transformed from a ‘given’ into a ‘task’ and that individuals are encouraged to take responsibility for this task”⁴. Conversely, Giddens is more optimistic about this process, stressing the importance of the new condition of the individual, that is now engaged in a day-to-day decision-making process on how to live.

From these three different approaches Dawson M. draws up two distinct versions of individualization: disembedded and embedded. The first one, which lacks a proper set evidences, consists in the fact that individual values overlook any other social constraint, empowering the individual to take any choice and decision by following only its own moral understanding of society. This is of course an extremist interpretation of individualism, that disconnects the self from society but not from an increased and constant uncertainty, given by the fact that every other individual will act according to the same path. While the embedded definition is more focused on the increased responsibility placed on the shoulders of the modern individuals and described by Baumann as an “ideology of privatization” that however is not exercisable by everyone, because of capital or social status constraints.

⁴ Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid modernity* (pp. 49-58). Cambridge, UK: Blackwell Publishing.

2.1.1 Modernist theorists.

The main characteristics of Modernists is their aversion to globalization, meaning that individualization is not seen as a unique and new process that is taking place. In fact, in their view there is the continuation of a long-term process that is continuing in the modern era. Because of this continuousness, traditional social categories are still considered by Modernists as truly useful to address issues such as political participation, religiosity, voting behaviour and labour market participation. Their assumption is based on the analysis of previous human condition, where in reality the human being was always linked with his individualistic aspect, being always encouraged to create and craft his own identity, being responsible for this growth mechanism. As we will analyse later on, there are similarities between this statement and the Confucian thought. The personal and ancient (Confucian school of thought dates back to 551–479 BCE) input to grow and cultivate the self can be linked to the concept of the *junzi* (gentleman). According to Confucianism, the *junzi* is the highest individual ideal that can be achieved only through a rigorous and complex regime of moral education and training.

Being critical of the exclusiveness of individualization, Modernists stress the impact of de-traditionalization (similarly to Giddens, who however devalued traditional social classes) and the importance of socio-economic status. In doing so they underline the reflexive aspect of individualism, describing the “[...] shift towards ‘pure’ or ‘disposable’ relationships”⁵ as a merely reflection of the prevailing liberal and middle-class social values. This approach finally addresses a methodological issue, criticising one of the foundations of individualization: quantitative research. Mills and other colleagues in fact linked the use of these kind of data sets with a high rate of patent falsification related to quantitative research. This clarification was intended to move the attention towards the correct research approach, one which places individualization as a subjective phenomenon at the centre of the discussion, driven by personal perceptions.

Despite their refusal of many individualization theory assumptions, Modernists are still taken as basis for other approaches to the subject. Ulrich Beck starts his institutionalized individualism theory from the premise that this process, as outlined before, is not entirely new. “It is rather the specific form it takes in late modernity - that of reflexive individuals who have increased responsibility for their identity, actions and life-world - which is new”⁶.

⁵ Dawson, M. (2012). Reviewing the critique of individualization, 55(4), 305-319.

⁶ See above citation from Dawson, M. (2012)

2.1.2 Interactionist theorists.

The Interactionist approach is well described by Savage M. : “The individuals of Beck and Giddens’ social theories are lonely. They see the reflexive individual as the product of global and system-wide social conditions, rather than linked to more proximate social relations around the firm, family, neighbourhood, social network and social class... To be sure, these people search out others, for instance as they seek the kinds of ‘pure relationships’ that Giddens emphasises as a key feature of late modern identity, but such relationships remain contingent”⁷. These theorists thus reduce individualization as a socially situated phenomenon, therefore minimizing its cultural derivation and its temporal dependence.

Reflexivity and interactions of course are at the centre of this approach, which tries to look at individualism from an interesting perspective. In fact the analysis starts from a clear factor, that characterizes modernity: the increased pressure over individuals. Nowadays a person is surrounded by external inputs of behaviour and thus people shape their lives by interacting with the social realm with the aim of conquering an individual higher status. These are the reasons why individuals have a tension to feel an increased obligation of social relationships with others, underlining the necessity of emotional attachment and the need for identification in social groups. Therefore, we face again the issue of classic social categories that are less useful (but still necessary) to analyse society; but following the Interactionist thought we can notice that this kind of social awareness and relationship-seeking process could lead to new form of activism (for example the increasing number of civil social movements).

In fact, after the relational aspect of individualism, Interactionists try to prove that this concept is stratified, using mainly qualitative methods of research and including topics such as class and gender. A clear example of this is given by the feminist school of thought, which highlights the process whereby women are required to adopt different relational approaches depending on the context. For example, having a “male approach” in the work environment, where women are usually treated unequally and thus they redirect their habitus towards a male one in order to achieve this “false” equality, while at home, women are asked to be mothers and wives, placing more pressure on the emotional aspect of relationships. Analysing the social classes aspect however, we still have an important relevance of ‘zombie categories’: Interactionists underline that “dominant classes may have more options available as result of their reflexivity”⁸ compared to lower classes. Individualistic methods of individual beings are still based on collective values and all the individual aspect of a person need social relationships and interactions to be practiced. Sweetman and Adams introduce

⁷ Savage, M. (2000). *Class Analysis and Social Transformation*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

⁸ Plumridge, L. and Thomson, R. (2003). Longitudinal qualitative studies and the reflexive self. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 6(3) pp. 213–222.

respectively the concepts of “habitual reflexivity” and “hybridising habitus and reflexivity” meaning that “reflexivity is situated within the individual’s habitus and, as a result of individualization, there is a greater emphasis on this reflexivity being continually exercised within these circumscribed boundaries”⁹. In the latter sections we will find a similar conception of individualism as socially exercised in Chinese philosophies (primarily Mohism), where many school of thought described the individual nature of human beings as something that is exercised within boundaries, represented by social, familiar relationships and authority (i.e. the State, the Party etc.).

2.1.3 Discourse theorists.

The Discourse thought is the one that focuses its analysis on neoliberalism, targeted as source of the current and modern individualization. In this perspective the political context is seen as shaping market structure and social structure, by creating individuals coherent with neoliberal values and norms. Thus, we can see an individualization of life choices, where every consumer behaviour for instance is individually centred and this is valid also for the job market according to Brennan and Lazzarato, where occupation, such as teaching, healthcare sector etc., lose their social connotation becoming marketized. While Doogan faces the same issue by theorizing that the neoliberal political leadership created (directly or not) an increased awareness in the job market, where every person feel insecurity in employment, in order to “create a pliant workforce more ready to accept the neo-liberal medicine”¹⁰.

An interesting Discourse perspective on neoliberal policies is the analysis of public policy and social welfare, two pillars of this political approach. Theorists of this school of thought believe in the individualization of failure promoted by the welfare state, which seeks to implement meritocracy and thus the individual seems to become responsible for his/her life to a point where one also has to engage in a successful strategy that includes failure countermeasures. According to Foucault, Brady and other authors, anyway, this neoliberal strategy could even create opposite results in the individuals, turning them against those policies that have forged their new (individualistic) attitude.

2.2 Alexis de Tocqueville’s conception of Individualism

Alexis de Tocqueville, a French diplomat, during the first half of the 19th Century wrote two important works that consecrated him as the forerunner of sociology and political sciences: *Democracy in America* and *The Old Regime and the Revolution*. More precisely, in the former, following a trip in the United States, he analyses the condition of individuals in the American society (and Western democracies in general) in relation to the economy of market

⁹ Dawson, M. (2012). Reviewing the critique of individualization, 55(4), 305-319.

¹⁰ See above citation from Dawson, M. (2012).

and the State. Alexis de Tocqueville used an interesting approach to describe and study individualism by comparing democratic Countries with aristocratic ones. In his opinion the fundamental difference lied in the structure of the two models: aristocracies are essentially based on a chain-structure, where everyone is bound by obligations to other people (above or below them) and they are always involved in something greater and outside themselves. Thus, de Tocqueville defines individualism as “a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself”¹¹. This definition gives us the author’s negative perception of individualism, evaluating as a positive feature of aristocracies the fact that in this kind of society a person is obliged to be part of a wider society. Therefore, democratic equality (and equality in general) tends to dissolve these bonds, while at the same time increasing the possibility of social mobility. In fact, in western democracies, “Equality puts men side by side without a common link to firmly hold them . Despotism raises barriers to keep them apart. It disposes them not to think of their fellows and turns indifference into a sort of public virtue”¹².

According to de Tocqueville, this distance between society and individuals in America had generated from being a trading Nation and thus it was virtually of utmost necessity to hold an ideal embracing the risk, the instability and the isolation. In fact, one of the founding principles of USA has been “The American Dream”, meaning that everyone, despite one’s place of origin, one’s religion or beliefs, can achieve personal (economic) success without any barrier. Thus, people who prosper in defiance of the community they emanate from, are often given higher awards than those who do so on, by and for it. Individualism is likewise hazardous and dangerous to society because when a large segment of the population is isolated and indifferent to the welfare of others, it becomes unwilling and then finally unable to unite together to prevent tyranny, by attending only its own personal affairs. This is then reflected into local politics, where in the past there was a high participation, with everyone knowing each other. With a shift from towns towards cities and then megalopolis and the increasing movement of people transformed the role of those in office: now local (and national-level) politicians and administrators tend to do that job mostly for their career and they do not know at all the people they are serving. To sum up, according to de Tocqueville, the outcomes of individualism are egoism, suppression of all virtues and concession of political deliberation to the tyranny of the majority.

Even though this analysis is based on American society, we can see similarities with China and the development of its individualism. Chinese society had to face the radical change

¹¹ de Tocqueville, A. (2006). *Democracy in America*. (, Trans.). New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics.

¹² See above citation from de Tocqueville, A. (2006)

occurred with the Economic Reform that brought capitalism and market economy into a strictly aristocratic realm. CCP therefore had to challenge the risks of disinterest and disengagement towards the State and the authority of the Party: as we will see in the following chapters, the leadership changed his approach to social management and social control, trying to create a new sense of participation placing the individual at the centre of the debate. In fact, the national goal of becoming the leaders of the World (challenging the USA) has been presented to the people as something that only a better society can achieve: in order to do so, every individual has the assignment and duty to be a good individual, following determined rules and being evaluated (by the Social Credit System).

2.3 Chinese Individualism

Having analysed individualism definitions and conceptions in western thought, essential is to look at the meaning of this topic from a Chinese perspective. In fact, even if it is about the same general concept, we can see that in this case it is conceived in a substantially different manner. It is also interesting to look at these differences, because many western commentators often produced misled analysis on this subject. A clear example of this is the perception of Chinese society as one based on obligations and duties rather than on individual freedoms. As Erica Brindley points out: “This characterization of Chinese culture as group-oriented rather than individual-oriented helps promote the notion that individualism, especially as it is perceived – as a doctrine that protects individual autonomy against obligations stemming from external, familial or social institutions – is inappropriate for the Chinese context”¹³. For this reason, it is crucial to understand the first and most important difference in individualist understanding of Chinese philosophy. Rather than focusing on the individual separation from society and its total independence from authorities, it “emphasizes one’s power from within the context of one’s connection and unity (or harmony) with external authorities of power. [...] the Chinese tradition focuses on the individual as a vitally integrated element within a larger familial, social, political, and cosmic whole”¹⁴.

Starting from this fundamental premise, that enables us to have a different approach, we can first of all underline the fact that the “self” needs to be understood as an organism. Thus, this entity is the result of processes happening both inside and outside of it, giving again relevance to the relationship among the individual and the environment that surrounds him. Integration is therefore the key: the integrated individual is functional to the whole system in which is inserted, but the focus is not on the importance and absolute authority of the external realm, while it is on the capacity of the person to exert his (relative and relational) autonomy. Even if characterized by duties and obligations, there is a degree of self-determination that

¹³ Brindley, E. Individualism In Classical Chinese Thought | . Retrieved May 22, 2018, from <https://www.iep.utm.edu/ind-chin/>

¹⁴ See above citation from Brindley, E.

empowers the self with the freedom to shape his/her own life and to take decisions for oneself, at the same time being valuable and responsible for its surrounding.

The main author and philosopher of Chinese thought is undoubtedly Confucius, father of Confucianism, the main philosophical, religious, moral and political tradition in the Country. The *Ru* (Confucian lineage) places at the centre of its theory the concept of self-cultivation, meaning that every individual needs to morally elevate himself using a variety of tools: the aim is to reach the status of *Junzi* (nobleman). In addition to this individual aspect, the philosopher also considers every human being equal, saying that everyone is born with the same capacities, that need to be used in the morally right way. According to Brindley this process consists in “[...] a complicated moral regimen of intense involvement with the rites of the Zhou (dynastic house) and its music; moral education through a morally achieved ruler, master or moral exemplar; and training—involving texts and histories as well as personal resources such as will-power, moral desire, inward reflection and thought, and the active appraisal of how one’s own thoughts and actions compare to those of others”¹⁵. Confucian theory does not promote individualism or something similar, but it is the first example in Chinese culture of the important role of the individual: in fact it is the site of moral transformation and it forms the basis of society.

Confucius’ follower Meng-Tzu (or Mencius) developed a slightly different theory, of course based upon his mentor’s work. Mencius, through the concept of human nature (or *Xing*) defines moral agencies as innate into the human being. In doing so, it places the individual body as the “universal source of cosmic authority and natural patterns”¹⁶. He believes that tradition and culture, that are external sources of morality, are not fundamental; instead, he highlights the importance of a natural flow which guides the person to have a proper behaviour and thinking, all trending towards goodness. Thus, immoral and wrong conduct arises only when the *Xing* is obstructed and inhibited by external coercion: many people discard themselves, opting not to adopt the path to rectitude, beneficence and sapience. Compared to Confucian lineage, we notice that Mencius placed greater and greater importance on the individual being, giving him an intrinsic valuable nature by virtue of living properly and healthfully that just needs to be preserved from external influence. In addition to that, not only is the body (or the self) source of moral agency, but also an individualized source of authority.

This concept of moral autonomy developed by Meng-Tzu, can also be found in the Mohist Writings (School of Mo or Mohism), which were inspired by the ancient Chinese philosopher Mozi. This school of thought is mainly known for its social conformity and obedience to political authorities. However, beyond this apparently “submissive behaviour”, the basis of

¹⁵ Brindley, E. Individualism In Classical Chinese Thought | . Retrieved May 22, 2018, from <https://www.iep.utm.edu/ind-chin/>

¹⁶ See above citation from Brindley, E.

this philosophy are once again (whether directly or not) grounded in the power of the individual. In fact, Mohists believe in the rational capacity of the human being, that should thereupon use this innate rationality in order to discover morality, consequently following the morally correct path, individually. Human moral authority is considered by Mohists even more relevant because the self has the ability and possibility to confirm with what is right in its conception. Thus, it is possible to understand why this concept of individuality is not the same of the Western one: I would argue that the common view about this concept is focused more on an anarchic aspect of human freedom in society, even affecting the social order. Chinese conception however gives more weight and importance to the capacity of the person to coexist with a larger and most of all unavoidable environment. It is incorrect to consider this process only as a form of submission by this particular society to every imposition coming from a strong government and leadership.

2.4 Holistic Theorists

The concept that better explains this particular interpretation is holism, because it is another basic philosophy in Chinese thought. It argues that every single cog of a system (social, economic, biological...) is intimately interconnected and explicable only referring to the whole realm.

To reinforce this, it is interesting also to look at the *Inner Chapters* of the Zhuangzi (or Chuang Tzu): a philosopher which in reality strongly denied values of individualism, claiming a complete losing of self identity and sense of self in order to reach the agency of Dao (Heaven). But then, on the other hand he conceives a freedom of the individual not against an higher authority but as freedom through it. Once again, the centre of all the philosophical research is understood in terms of an entire system, which in the end share a common Dao, ultimate aspiration for the self. In the *Outer Chapters* of the Zhuangzi this vision is partially rejected, in favour of an extremist individualistic view of society, that one of the so-called “Primitivists”. They consider unnecessary all social institutions, knowledge, technologies and culture, by arguing that the individual should access to a cosmic and natural law (hence, the definition of primitivists): the ultimate value is innate in the human being.

It also clear from this research into Chinese individualism, that the topic has always been a complex and debated issue, such as in the case of Yang Zhu (or Yangzi), strongly contested and criticised by Mencius that accused him of promoting egoism and anarchism. Even though, Yangzi starts his theory by indicating the human body and the self both as crucial resource for universal forms of authority (or *Xing*). But he adds that the human being has to preserve some aspects of himself, preserving his “genuineness” from outer influences. Then, the philosopher is once again closer to Mencius’ vision, operating the similar inner/outer distinction we previously saw .

3. Social Management and Forms of Social Control

3.1 Social Management: the key concept to improve people's livelihood

Modern nation states rely upon the pillar conception of State, meant as the authority that is sovereign upon a territory and a population: this is not true for China.

Since the end of the Chinese Communist Revolution and the consequent proclamation of the People's Republic of China on October 1st 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) became the founding institution on which the whole society hinges. Following Article 1 of the State Constitution, the People's Republic of China is defined as "a socialist State under the people's democratic dictatorship", implying that the entire system lies on the alliance among the working classes led by the CCP, the maintenance of the leadership of the latter is in fact the engine driving the whole state machine. Thus, National Security too is shaped by this idea underpinning Chinese society, meaning that the pivotal issue is creating a political system not only able to manage and oversee contestations for power by foreign actors, but also within the Country and the Party itself.

In order to fulfil this central objective of the (Party-) State, from Mao's era onward it has been developed an ideal type of governance derived from Marxist-Leninist theories: social management (or social governance). It is basically an evolution and expansion of the Maoist Mass Line ideological mobilization approach, aimed at guaranteeing CCP power and consisting of a "continuous process of shaping, managing and responding"¹⁷. Through this methodology, the leadership is constantly trying (and succeeding in) to be always in control of every situation: economic development and improvement of life conditions do not suffice to definitely stabilize the status quo. Chinese model of authoritarianism now has to deal with an ever more complex, rapid and unpredictable change both in a global and in a national scenario. Hence, technology needs to be understood as the key tool to automate this model of power: already in 1995 Jiang Zemin stressed the relevance of this development, calling for "...accelerat[ing] realizing the informatization, automation and intelligent-ization of economic and social management"¹⁸. In this perspective the Social Credit System project appears to be the properly designed tool to handle the social setting previously outlined.

After Zemin's proposals in 1995, the term 'social management' entered the Chinese political framework in the Proposal to Restructure the State Council in 1998; where there were

¹⁷Samantha Hoffman, "Programming China: The Communist Party's autonomic approach to managing state security, Mercator Institute for China Studies", 12/12/2017

¹⁸ Comrade Jiang Zemin's Speech at the National Science and Technology Conference (26 May 1995)," The People's Daily, 5 June 1995

proposals of basic functions of the government including “macro-economic control, public services and social management”¹⁹. It is rather complicated to provide an exact definition of the term however, giving the fact that deals with a very wide and abstract concept. Professor Yu Keping, from Peking University, described it as it follows: “social management means the government manages and regulates social affairs (社会事务), social organisations (社会组织) and social life (社会生活), with the guidance of law - The connotation of social management is so broad that it includes areas such as social justice, public security, social stability, social trust, the coordination of various social interests, food safety, emergency management, city management and community governance”²⁰.

Increasing importance to SM was thereby given both by the CCP and the Government, with further elaboration of this concept in the 16th and 17th party congresses. During the Fifth Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee in 2010, the resolution of this meeting focused on “Strengthening and innovating social management”, clearly stating what was the leading principle guiding this process: “the general principle of social management is party leadership, government responsibility, social coordination and public participation”²¹.

Thus, the Party decided to reshape China’s policies and future developments with a pivotal document: the 12th Five Year Plan (2011). “The document laid out a three-level understanding of social management, including building a more “service-oriented” government in order to “prevent and reduce” the number of social problems, from strengthening “dynamic management” to “resolve the masses’ legitimate and rational appeals,” and strengthening the party-state’s ability to manage the sudden outbreak of public incidents. It also called for establishing a “social stability risk and evaluation mechanism” that would assess the social impact of construction projects, including land acquisition, before they were undertaken”²².

Section nine “Look into Both Root Cause and Symptoms; Enhance and Innovate on Social Management” is relevant to grasp the entire vision of SM and consequently the development of SCS project. Thus, this part of the outline document states as follow:

“By adapting to the new situation of profound changes and transformation in economic system and in social structure, the deep-seated readjustment of the interest setup, and the deep changes in ideological concept, we will innovate on social management system and mechanism, enhance social management capability building, establish and perfect a socialist

¹⁹ Proposal to Restructure the State Council, 1998

²⁰ Yu Keping, East Asia Forum - Governing China, 2011

²¹ Fifth Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee, 2010

²² Joseph Fewsmith, “Social Management” as a Way of Coping With Heightened Social Tensions”, China Leadership Monitor, 2012

management system with Chinese characteristics, and ensure the society that is not only full of vitality but also harmonious and stable”²³.

This section of the Plan then analyses the following topics in five “key” chapters:

- “Innovate on Social Management”
- “Strengthen Communities' Autonomy and Service Functions in Urban and Rural Areas”
- “Enhance Social Organization Building”
- “Perfect Mechanism for Maintaining the Masses' Rights and Interests”
- “Strengthen Public Security System Building”

We can therefore notice that the CCP is deeply aware of the radical change that is taking place within the Chinese society, especially following the economic reform (“Socialism with Chinese Characteristics”) launched in 1978. Theretofore, almost every aspect of the social realm dramatically evolved following a unique path in contrast to every other historical case, and most of all happening in an incredibly short period of time. For this reason, social control and management turned out to be, as precedently observed, the urgent compelling controversy meant to be handled as soon as possible. “From a hermetically sealed socialist State, the Country has evolved to become an increasingly cosmopolitan one. [...] China’s society has become much more complex and fluid”²⁴. Following this evolution, CCP omnipresence is now different, being less direct and invasive, given the greater and more effective resources employed by the leadership. One of the most influential contributions of president Hu Jintao, with his socioeconomic vision of China of creating an “Harmonious Society”, was the incorporation of a broader range of sciences other than economics, engineering and natural sciences. This approach also applied to the development of social management and to the issue of institutions parallel to the CCP: “Non-state social forces and institutions are thus presented as no longer a threat to the CCP’s power monopoly, but as the object and tool of a concerted effort at social engineering that will ultimately strengthened Party rule”²⁵.

3.2 Xi Jinping reform process as a key tool to consolidate the operational capacity of the CCP

This situation implies a reform process of party mechanisms and approach to society, starting with the issue of public opinion and the authority and credit the people give to the institution of the Communist Party in the Country. It was indeed worth notice what was the impact of

²³ The Outline of the 12th Five-Year Program for National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China, Beijing, 16 Mar (Xinhua), 2011

²⁴ Pieke, F. N. (2012). The Communist Party and social management in China, China Information vol. 26(2), 149-165.

²⁵ See above citation from Pieke, F. N. (2012)

one of the main policies implemented by current President of the People's Republic of China (as well as General Secretary of the CCP and Chairman of the Central Commission of Military): the "Anti-corruption campaign after the 18th Party Congress". It was probably the largest and most effective anti-bribery organized action in the history of the CCP. This effort had two useful and important consequences and aims: the first one consisted in giving the possibility to the President to centralize power, to "eliminate" any kind of internal opposition and finally, to essentially gain the absolute control over the entire Party. This was then reinforced by the constitutional reform and the consequent amendment voted by the National People's Congress, that eliminated the two-mandate term limit, thus potentially enabling Xi to rule for life. Such a huge amount of power enjoyed by the President (he was elected the most powerful man on the planet in 2018 by the well-known magazine Forbes, climbing on the podium Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump) was then presented as beneficial for the Republic, as a solid guarantee of continuity of the policies implemented to date and under development. Even though his strong and direct censorship and control over the internet for example, Xi has a positive and wide support from Chinese citizens. In fact the above mentioned anti-corruption campaign was firstly (and officially) intended to restore the CCP public image and stature, after many years of discontent and protests. One of the strategies to avoid a direct challenge to the leadership of the central government however, was to download the criticism to local administrations, which in fact do not enjoy good reputation and consideration in China. To easily understand the impact of the campaign one can just look at the numbers: a total of 1899 persons has been investigated, expelled, arrested or sentenced since Xi came into power in 2012. 185 of them are party and government officials of deputy provincial / vice-ministerial level and above, or military officer ranking major General and above, called 'Tigers'; while the other 1714 are defined as 'Flies': lower level officials and individuals. With an action of enormous socio-political and media impact, the General Secretary succeeded in giving a new image to the Party, that consequently gained greater trust and confidence in people's eyes.

In addition to this campaign and a different redistribution of powers within the Party, a fundamental change concerns the capacity of the CCP to "...reinvent itself, while retaining core Leninist principles that guarantee its authoritarian leading role over state and society. The Party summarizes this orientation by saying that it is a 'Marxist learning party'"²⁶.

3.3 Neo-socialist approach to social management

The neo-socialist approach to SM has to deal first of all with a fundamental paradox, in which SM combines two contrasting and incompatible elements: public sector autonomy (neoliberal) and leading role of the CCP (Leninist). Maintaining its unique path of socio-

²⁶ Pieke, F. N. (2012). The Communist Party and social management in China, China Information vol. 26(2), 149-165.

economic development, China of course has always looked at societies of the developed world, in order to get inspired by others' ideas and models. This process of borrowing, mixing, experimenting neo-liberal patterns in order to create an original version of them, adapted to the Chinese socialist governmental rationality, has been defined by Pieke as "neo-socialism". "Under neo-socialism, the communist utopia has been replaced by a technocratic objective of a strong, peaceful and modern China. [...] Socialist ideology is no longer the end served by the communist party rule, but the mere means by which party rule is perpetuated"²⁷. Zhou Yongkang, Minister of Public Security from 2002 to 2007 (subsequently arrested and expelled by the CCP in 2014 because of corruption crimes following the campaign wanted by Xi), was the leading figure in the evolution process of SM, and he was able to highlight some of the critical points related to society management. In fact, he published a pivotal article in the *People's Daily* titled "Strengthen and improve social management - promote social stability and harmony". In his vision, improvement of SM has been chosen by the Politburo Standing Committee as an historical duty, becoming a catch-all solution both for long term social instability issues and for current ordinary management tasks. One of the reasons why this process is undoubtedly pressing and important is the transition of Chinese citizens from "work unit people" to "social people": a natural change in societal structure and composition after the past implementation of social engineering policies. This could represent a concrete threat to social stability, forcing the Party to reshape their social policies and approaches to current and future situations. In addition to this, Zhou called for a "combined central and local, territory-based emergency management system with a unified command that can effectively respond to disasters, accidents, and security incidents"²⁸ : the big-data system behind the realization of SCS is also related to the development of this kind of mechanism.

Thus, Technology is at the heart of CCP strategy of modernizing, centralizing and enhancing its leading role in society. It is absolutely wrong to underestimate the political realm in China, assuming it is a backward Country from this point of view since no political opposition is found. From the Chinese perspective, this could be seen as a positive aspect and even as an advantage in respect to modern democracies: Chinese political institutions (CCP and all the other bodies) are more developed and advanced than many other democratic counterparts'. Through absolutism, the CCP was always able to focus on its evolution and policies on one side, while managing oppositions and discontents on the other, not being the term *limit* imposed by free elections. The Party in fact programs new projects and faces present challenges with an impressive government apparatus, still rigidly organized above all and at the same time incredibly fluid, liquid, and able to express in the realization of its own politics.

²⁷ See above citation from Pieke, F. N. (2012)

²⁸ Pieke, F. N. (2012). The Communist Party and social management in China, *China Information* vol. 26(2), 149-165.

As we will further analyse in this dissertation, Social Credit System is the best example that describes Chinese capacity to innovate and create (depending on its success) a socio-economic tool that could potentially change the vision according to which governments worldwide deal with this contemporary and fast-moving society.

3.4 Previous Social Engineering Programs

In order to understand in depth, the nature and the evolution of the Social Credit System, it is useful to look back at the social engineering culture in China. Since Mao Zedong, CCP leaders have implemented policies of strong impact and unique for the impossibility in being implemented in Countries with democratic regimes.

3.4.1 People's Commune

During the time-span from 1958 to 1983, rural areas in the People's Republic of China were organized and divided into communes. The main principle and aim behind this project, as well as behind SCS, was economy: Mao Zedong wanted to surpass both the United States and the United Kingdom in the production of steel, and generally he wanted to exponentially boost the overall production of the Country in a short period of time by collectivizing agricultural and industrial economy. In order to deploy its vision in practice, Mao gained mass support from peasants also in the framework of the Great Leap Forward. The Three Red Banners were the ideological slogans on which the whole plan to ultimately build a Chinese socialist state was founded: they consisted of the General Line for socialist construction, the Great Leap Forward and the People's Communes.

Each commune usually consisted of nearly 4-5,000 households, reaching 20,000 households in the biggest ones: at the end of the implementation phase, 98.2 percent of all family units in the countryside were part of one of the total 26,425 People's Communes. The main feature of these organizations was their all-inclusive nature: agricultural, industrial, cultural, political and military activities were performed²⁹. In doing so, being each commune guided by Party cadres, the CCP was practically able to check, to direct and to organize the social, economic and political development of all of its rural population, readopting in a certain way the concept of "divide et impera." We therefore have an intrusive system, that affected every single aspect of individuals' life, even the most intimate feelings and relationships. In fact, propaganda at that time repeatedly tried to influence peasants' opinion, telling them to subordinate their love to the needs of the State³⁰ and above all to the final aim of production. Here an example of moral directives directed to communes' members:

“Love should be subservient to work and study ... In choosing the object of their affections, many young people ignore the political stand of the other party but are guided purely by

²⁹ Gluckstein, Y. 1960. 'The Chinese People's Communes'. International Socialism, No. 1, pp. 20-28

³⁰ See above citation from Gluckstein, Y.

outward appearances ... Such an attitude does not represent the proletarian concept of love. Some people take the extremely erroneous view that the problem concerns the private life of individuals and not society as a whole, so that the choice of a spouse is purely a matter of personal taste...”³¹.

Further suggestions and directives concerned even how to deal with divorce, sleeping habits or how to have love relationships while working, in order to still be productive without distractions. At the end, the economic result of the People’s Commune were complex to analyse, especially because of statistics altered by CCP officials; undoubtedly, it is clear that this system exponentially increased the agricultural production of China (not the same can be told for industrial production). Anyway, this social engineering project demonstrated the Chinese leadership capacity to steer and to effectively reshape and influence society in an enormous range of aspects.

3.4.2 Dang’an: the predecessor of Social Credit System?

Another important and intrusive system introduced by the CCP to control Chinese society is the Dang’an, defined by Jie Yang as:

“...the compiling of the minutia of one’s work and personal information in an envelope that follows one around, was introduced in Mao’s era. As a defining feature of Maoist socialism, the dang’an reveals the inner, hidden bureaucratic workings of the state on the individual. It documents information about each employee’s education (including reports from teachers), job history (including reports from employers), family background, political activities, achievements, mistakes, self-criticism, and so on. Scrutinizing and entextualizing the attitudes, performances and everyday existence of urban Chinese citizens, the dang’an was the basic socialist database authorized by the communist party, the only legitimate hermeneutic authority and a central domain for the production and reproduction of state power. It was the site at which life and society were fused in politics”³².

This individual file seems to be the predecessor of SCS, consisting of a detailed source of information about citizens, which included also subjective reports (mainly written by teachers and professors). During the Mao era, and the Cultural Revolution, it was an extremely powerful tool to eliminate oppositors and potential traitors. Of course it has been overused by the government as an instrument of purge even against innocent or harmless people, similar to the abovementioned use of the Anti-Corruption Campaign by Xi Jinping. Indeed, before a reform process, it had heavily affected people’s lives: being addressed as anti-communist, revolutionary or mentally-ill could have altered any aspect such as receiving proper education and one’s access to universities or work careers. Besides political

³¹ Shansi Jih Pao, Taiyuan, Nov. 8, 1958. SCMP, 1789

³² The Politics of the Dang'an: Spectralization, Spatialization, and Neoliberal Governmentality in China, Anthropological Quarterly, March 2011

motivations, it is common to hear stories about some lives ruined by Dang'an: for example Tang Guoji's: a famous Chinese writer who discovered after 20 years that he was labelled as "mentally ill". Thus, he connected his past adversities to that dossier: he had no chance to find a job as a teacher after graduation (even if, back in 1983, demand of that professional figure was shown to be high) because of his mental problems. But the scariest and most problematic feature of this system is that no one can access one's own personal Dang'an, not being aware of what the State knows and thinks about you.

As briefly mentioned before, there are strong similarities with the Social Credit Score project that is at the core of this thesis. Speaking of which, the two systems have the aim of producing a complete description of individuals and they both are based on objective and subjective measures. The concept hidden behind them is almost the same and the two systems are described by officials as instruments to boost personal development and improvement as good (socialist) citizens. In addition, they have had an analogous development. In fact, as we will see further, the SCS will be implemented and developed first as a market-regulation tool, enabling the Government to oversee and to regulate the economy in the fastest possible way; then it would certainly be extended to evaluation and rating of individuals. The Dang'an instead, also went through a reform process that transformed the original approach and aim, from a socio-political tool of control and manipulation to a market-development one. As Jie Yang points out: "since the late 1970s, China's market reform has gradually negated Maoist socialism. But rather than completely negating socialism, the post-Mao state often ontologizes and repoliticizes some socialist legacies for market development: it constantly conjures up socialist spectres and keeps them close at hand"³³. This paradox between socialism and market economy produced a new evaluation of communist and socialist values, that became something to obtain personal achievements and opportunities, rather than ideals to pursue and to follow. Like in the SCS, to be a good Chinese citizen is useful to gain benefits in everyday life, such as tax deductions or better interest rates on loans.

It's been many years since the Dang'an had lost his "power" also given the fact that people did not care about it anymore because they started working for private companies. So, following new market dictates and objectives, the CCP is reshaping and reinventing its direct approach to social control, preferring an indirect and more complex way to accomplish the same result:

"The transformation of the Dang'an appears to be built on grounds of the consensus between the State and the individual through a discourse of freedom and desire. Its recent revision from a mode of socialist control to a mechanism for enacting a market economy is related to, or a result of, a series of changes in other elements of the bureaucratic system and other

³³ Jie Yang, "The Politics of the Dang'an: Spectralization, Spatialization, and Neoliberal Governmentality in China", *Anthropological Quarterly*, March 2011

modes of governing—for example, the gradual breakdown of the socialist work-unit system because of privatization and marketization, the transformation of the socialist job assignment to a market-oriented employment system, the establishment of talents centers, and the discourse of freedom (of job choice)³⁴.

3.4.3 Hukou: Housing Registration System and discrimination

Given its population and its growing economy, China had to deal since the 1950s with the pros and cons of urbanization and internal migration. Even before the economic reform and market opening in 1978, there were important urban cities with an intense economic activity and higher standards of living. However, rural inhabitants at that time constituted the majority of the population and in 1958, in order to control and maintain social stability Mao Zedong established the Hukou: the Housing Registration System still in place today. With this scheme, the CCP intended to address two crucial issues: on the one hand the farming population was just trying to seek higher wages and better living conditions (urban/rural income gap are clearly highlighted in the graph below); on the other hand there was the issue of public protests and discontent in urban areas. Following this situation, the system was structured to keep record of all Chinese citizens, dividing them in two categories, urban or rural, subsequently linking all their social benefits to a person’s local institution (from healthcare, to education and working rights).



Source: China Labour Bulletin; <http://gb.clb.org.hk/en/content/wages-china>

³⁴ Hoffman, Lisa. 2006. “Autonomous Choices and Patriotic Professionalism: On Governmentality in Late-Socialist China.” *Economy and Society* 35:550-570 and “Patriotic Professionalism in Urban China: Fostering Talent”, Temple University Press, 2010

The Hukou was very successful at first, consistently imposing limits to the urban migration phenomenon, but at the same time creating new issues and problems to face. In fact, urban citizens suffered the bad sides of this policy, being forced to find opportunities in areas with little economic infrastructure and with difficult access to higher levels of education or to quality healthcare. Fei-Ling Wang analysed this discrimination, splitting the concept into four types of exclusion: “...based on (1) who you are, (for example, the South Asian caste system); (2) what you have (skills, property); (3) where you are (for example, hukou)', and (4) what you do/did (for example, criminals)”³⁵. The urban population received almost every benefit, since there has been an increase in labour force (coming from rural areas) without weighing on their local government budgets. As stated by Hein Mallee: “...the countryside is exploited to foster rapid industrialization at low cost, through concentration of resources, and how ultimately the economic point of gravity and capital formation shifts to the industrial and urban sector”³⁶.

This gave birth to a new category of citizen: “the floating population”. This new born group is defined as “...[people] living in an urban area without household registration status through the Hukou system. They trade the opportunity to work in an urban area for their government-provided benefits of healthcare, education and retirement. In many cases, not having urban registration also excludes migrant workers from many urban jobs”³⁷

Since the Hukou system has been established, the majority of Chinese population lived in rural areas, but the watershed happened in 2012, when the trend significantly changed direction, and in addition “...the rate of Chinese rural-urban migration in recent years has been suspected to be the largest in the history of the world. More than 250 million Chinese are estimated to migrate to the cities each year (that’s 2/3 of the population of the United States)”³⁸.

4. Social Credit System

4.1 Origins of Credit Score System

After the publication on June 14, 2004 by the Chinese State Council of the overall "Planning Outline for the Construction of a Social Credit System (2014–2020)" many commentators started arguing on the meaning of this massive and, at first sight, *Orwellian* project. This

³⁵ Mallee, H. (2006). Organizing through Division and Exclusion: China’s Hukou System. Fei-ling Wang, 55, 173-176 and Wang, F.-L. (2005). Organizing Through Division and Exclusion: China’s Hukou System. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

³⁶ See above citation from Mallee, H. (2006).

³⁷The Untold Story Of China’s Rural-Urban Migration. (2015, March 12). Retrieved May 16, 2018, from <https://projectpartner.org/poverty/untold-story-chinas-rural-urban-migration/>

³⁸ Hukou System Explained: China’s Internal Passport. (2015, March 17). Retrieved May 16, 2018, from <https://projectpartner.org/poverty/hukou-system-explained-chinas-internal-passport/>

adjective is used to define the Social Credit issue because one of the main aspects which the program focuses on is the evaluation of individuals adopting a big data approach. Anyway, before looking more in depth at the characteristics, methodologies of implementation and at every social, political and economic implication, it is indeed paramount to understand where the Social Credit System project originates from.

The very first step of the aforementioned systems is the financial sector, in which credit scoring systems are used to evaluate the creditworthiness of a prospective debtor, using qualitative and quantitative information, both public and private. From the 19th Century onwards, many companies started to collect, use and sell to other clients, fiscal records of customers in order to evaluate their financial reliability and behaviour. This system is of course essential for lenders to assess the risks associated with future potential debtors. The common factors taken into consideration to generate a credit score usually are:

- Payment history
- Outstanding debts
- Time on file
- Credit inquiries
- Types of credit

Every company weights these factors in different ways in order to produce a final numeric score, mostly ranging from 300 to 850 points: the higher the score, the lesser the risks the creditor has to face. However, this type of data and customer profiles became increasingly more and more relevant given their value for companies in order to target people and to deeply understand and with more precision what financial products they are willing to purchase. Beginning with this initial analysis we can already forecast and grasp how this kind of information can be useful and precious at the same time. Whilst on the one hand they do allow to have a quantitative measure of the creditworthiness of an individual, on the other they have the capacity to lead and design their policies in a more effective, specific and even individually-targeted manner.

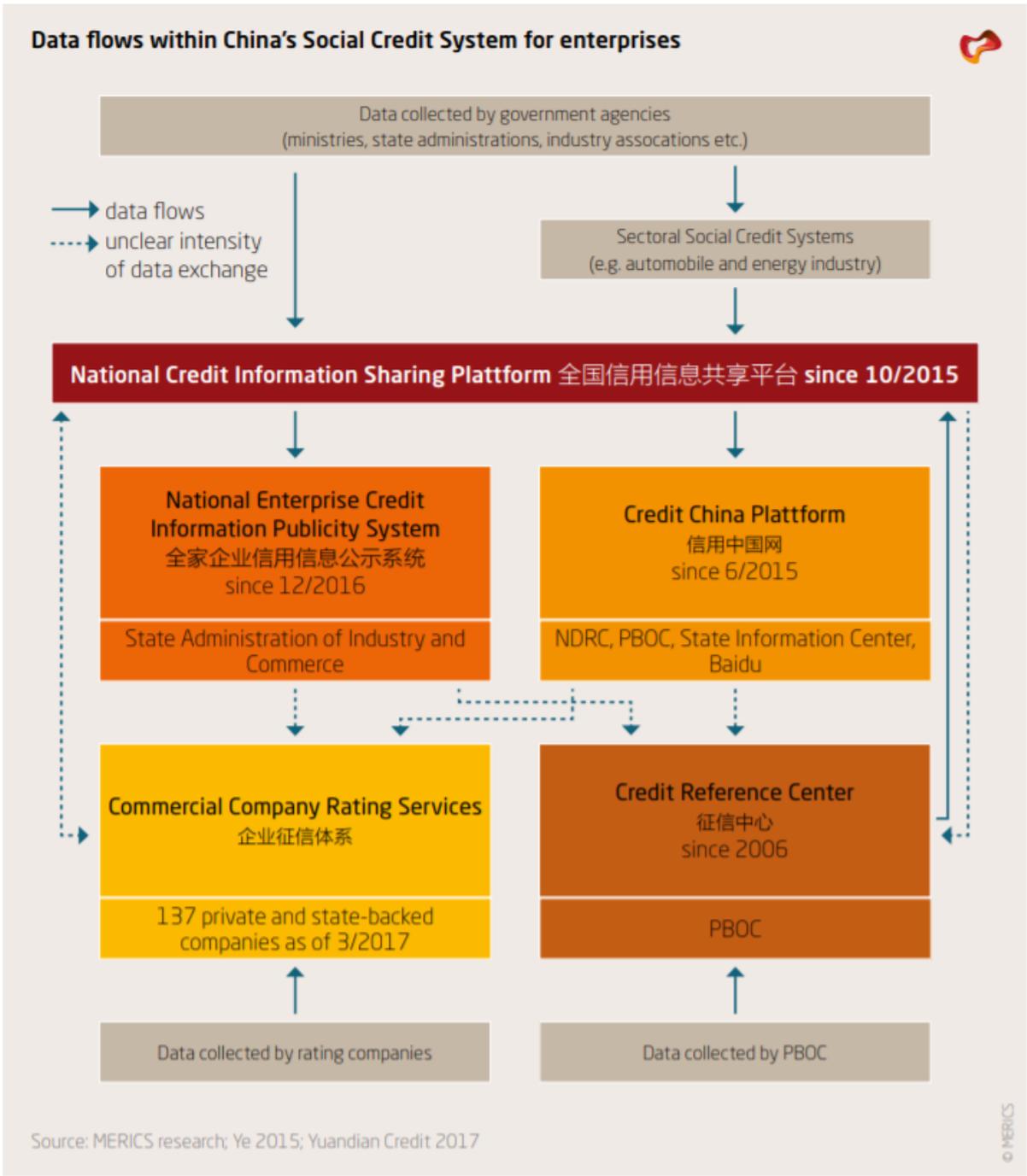
4.2 Private and Governmental Data Sources

Credit score systems and data sharing platforms are the two crucial tools that will help the Chinese government to address some serious socio-economic lacunae and, if the SCS will turn out to be successful, they will also contribute to a more complex but efficient, management of almost every aspect of economic and social life in the Country. The main gap in the Chinese financial framework which needs to be closed concerns the instability generated by a way too small amount of registered people at the central CRC (Credit Registry Centre, operated by the Bank of China), specifically less than a third of the 800 mln potential bank customers.

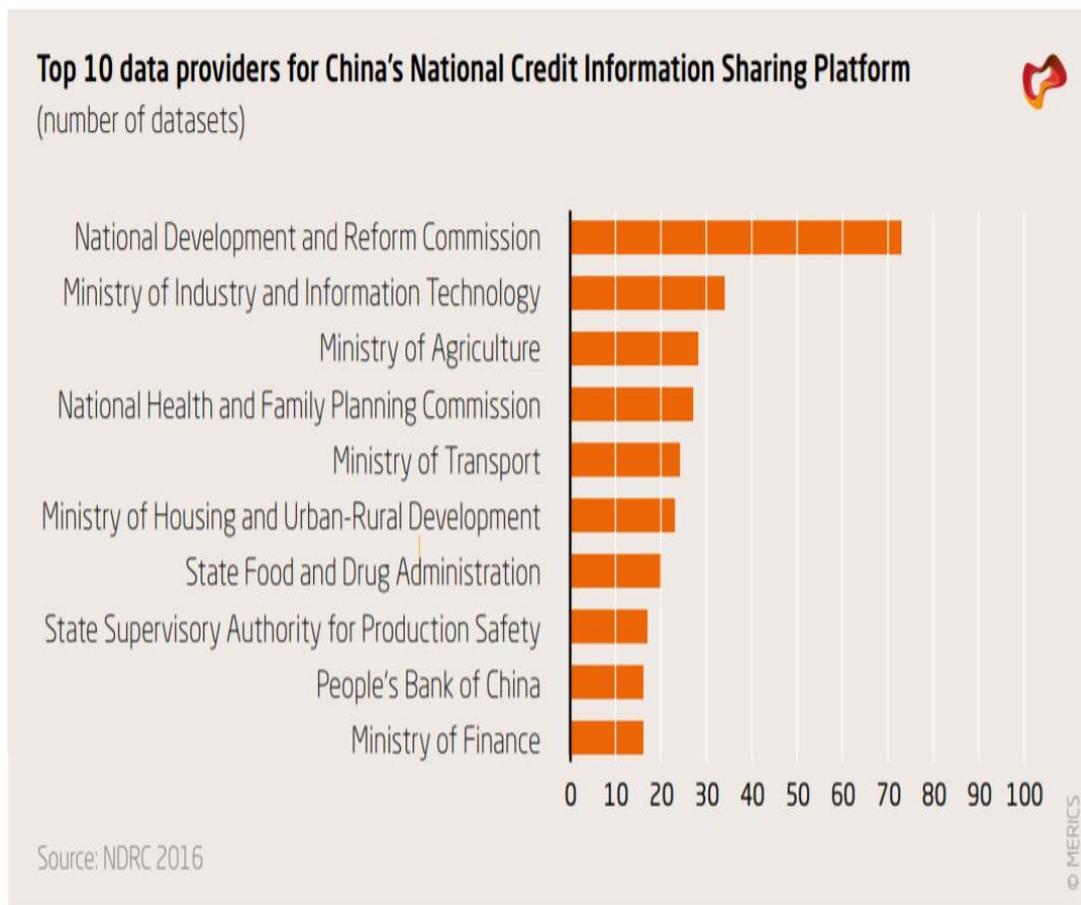
This is the reason why in 2015 private companies have been authorized to set up private credit rating systems, being forerunners of the future governmental system and becoming a market which has been exponentially growing during the last three years. 137 commercial credit reporting companies were operating as of March 2017, including Alibaba (leading e-commerce company), Baidu (Chinese Google), Wanda, Fosun (Investment Company) and China Telecom (state-owned telecommunication company). The revolutionary goal of the SCS project is to combine data collected by government agencies with those of private companies having the pivotal capability of tracking and collecting individuals' data about almost every aspect of their daily life.

In fact, evidence of the crucial relevance of private companies can be seen in of Tencent Holdings Ltd. This company, founded in 1998 in Shenzhen, became the third largest internet company in the world in 2010, just behind Google and Amazon. Through its numerous products and services, Tencent is able to reach an enormous number of users while collecting their personal data. *WeChat* is their most popular service: an instant messaging app that is currently used by more than 980 million of users, mostly in China; it offers the chance of exploit the service in every possible way the users wish to. Moreover, referring back to the importance of credit records and scores, *WeChat Pay* is the in-app integrated e-payment platform, that allows users to send and receive money with and by everyone, it undoubtedly became the most used payment method in the country, together with AliPay offered by Alibaba. Disposing of a platform capable of combining all these data from all the sources available, would be the most powerful tool to trace an exact profile of individuals, including *qualitative* information such as purchasing behaviour, geolocation, personal and political preferences (Social Media) and so on.

This project, as mentioned from the beginning, is going on very fast: in fact, albeit bearing in mind 2020 as the official deadline the Chinese government already has acquired a wide range of data flows system:



As regards to the governmental bodies or entities in possession of and collecting citizens' data, as shown in the above map, the first to be taken into consideration are the National Enterprise Credit Information Publicity System and the Credit China Platform. What these two agencies do is to keep track of companies' positive and negative credit records, reflecting information about blacklisted firms that may translate into a prohibition to issue bonds and to invest on financial markets.



To date, not only is the Chinese government already employing data from PBOC in administrative decisions and bidding processes, but also will there be data flows from the Credit Reference Centre of the PBOC and from the centre's Financial Credit Information Database.

4.3 The Core of China's Social Credit System: Companies Regulations

As aforesaid, a blurred and worth concern aspect of the SCS will turn out to be the evaluation and scoring of individuals, and above all the inclusion of behavioural factors into the score-production process. Yet a fundamental source to understand China's objectives is the "13th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China", which outlines all the aims and challenges related to the socio-economic development of the Country from 2016 to 2020. A compelling section of this plan makes clear what is the core concept behind the SCS: *self-restriction of companies*.

For the need to regulate, control and stimulate the wide and constantly growing market has exponentially increased, this project has come out China truly understood how crucial is having a government able of promptly responding to each aspect of the socio-economic environment. In this fast digitizing world, the real challenge for politics and institutions is in fact to adapt to a consistently wider field of action (not governable in a direct way) and

boundlessly rapid in its changes. From this perspective, the concept of exaggerated control by the government of almost every aspect of the socio-economic life of the Country would then take on a slightly different meaning. From now to the next decade China wants to definitely stand up on the political and economic world stage, trying to overtake the United States as global leaders, and there is the necessity to radically transform their market first. In fact, an outstanding growth rate (slightly slowing down) is not enough to gain leadership and being the first country to implement a policy-making instrument with this enormous capability of responsiveness could be the pivotal factor to have a unique socio-economic structure.

However, the SCS would be a self-enforcing restriction on companies because it will generate a higher or lower score depending also on internal factors. Repaying late debts, being unable to fulfil security standard or even not delivering packages (ecommerce companies etc) on time will result in a bad score. As we previously saw, depending on the score, there will be a system of punishments and benefits including:

- Higher taxes or low tax burdens
- Restrictions in the participation of publicly-funded projects
- Mandatory government approval for investments
- Restriction in the participation in the financial market (bonds issuing, investments)
- Good or bad credit conditions on loans etc.

All these measures will try to tackle some fundamental issue that China is trying to overcome since many years, like polluting industries that are already being sanctioned multiple times also to be in respect of the Paris Agreement signed by Chinese Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli in April 2016.

4.4 SCS Implementation: Media Communication and Criticisms

An important phase of the entire SCS project is the communication through official declarations, public and private media, social media and so on. It is useful to analyse in which way the program is presented to the society and what is the perception of Chinese citizens. Of course, in respect to other countries, censorship (and self-censorship) is a crucial bias factor, however we can still look at favourable comments and support as well as many criticisms. From a governmental point of view, SCS is presented as a unique tool to fix all the socio-economic problems in the country, starting from the protection against corruption. This is in continuity with Xi Jinping policies aimed at fighting bribery both in the government and in the market. The official aim of SCS is in fact to “create confidence in the law” and “improve the integrity awareness and creditworthiness”³⁹. There are also four key areas that will be addressed to build transparency, integrity and trust:

³⁹ State Council's *Plan for Establishing a Social Credit System (2014-2020)*

- Government
- Commerce
- Society
- Legal institutions

Whether the government will be held accountable for and subject to the Social Credit Scores can be considered as one of the most concerning questions about the future implementation of the system. Official sources and favourable news are infer this concept to be the fundamental principle behind the ongoing construction of a more trustworthy society, notwithstanding the fact that the actual and practical implementation still is unclear. In order to give more gravity and to underline the necessity of the SCS, which is not questioned in any way, the current socio-economic plight in China is displayed as “flawed and plagued by untrustworthy elements”⁴⁰.

With respect to criticisms we can identify some key issues, including the lack of cooperation between governmental agencies in the data sharing process. In fact, it seems that these bureaucracies are not establishing efficient and continuous data flows between them, with the possibility of creating so-called *data islands*: data stores with limited (or absent) connectivity with other systems. In addition to that there is also a controversy about the lack of a uniform data formatting standard to elaborate all the data collected; but as we can observe these kinds of flaws can be fixed from a technological point of view, in which China is really confident considering its tech knowledge and capability.

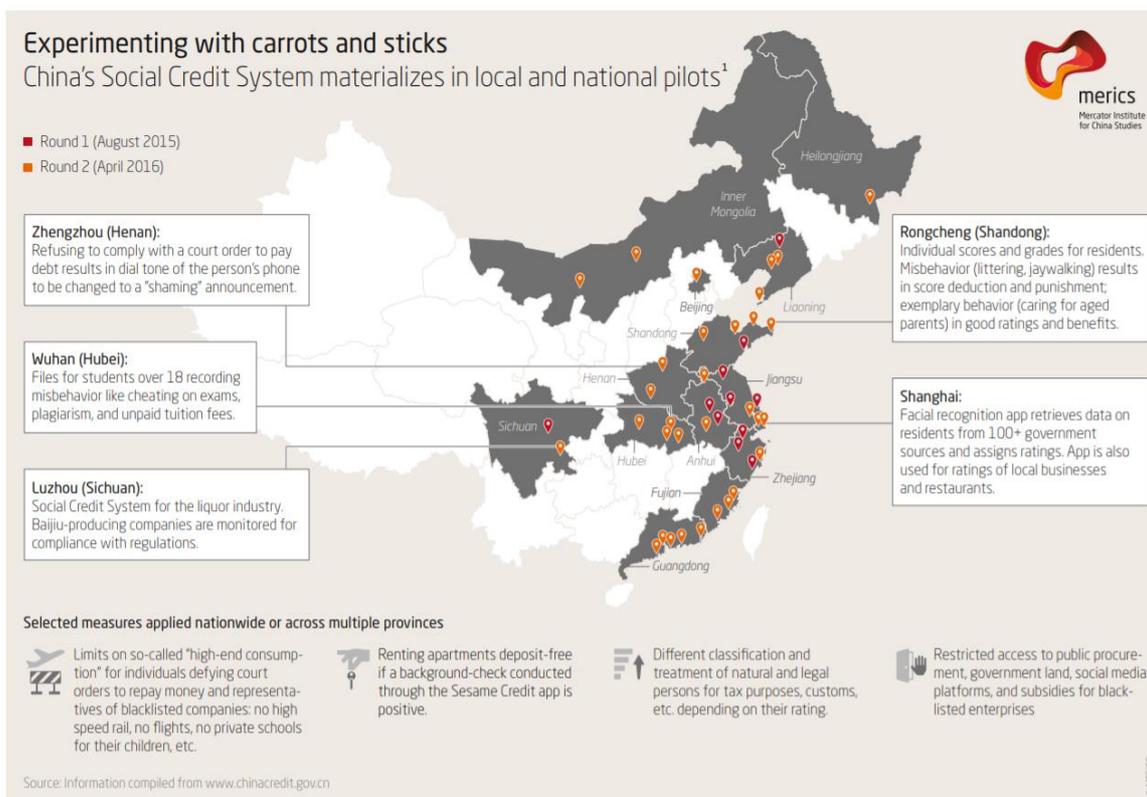
Undoubtedly the main matter of contention for citizens cannot but be the protection of their privacy, considering the fact that SCS would collect a significant amount of information as we saw earlier. Citizens consider the types of data being currently collected as inappropriate for determining a creditworthiness score. The role of private companies in accessing too much of individuals’ personal info can be considered a non-transparent factor, since the users are denied the access to the companies’ stored data. Generally, more trust is found towards government agencies and less towards private entities, thus the administrative authorities will be required to openly clarify the role of these actors inside the functioning of the SCS project.

2.5 SCS Implementation: The Rongcheng Case

Considering the very close deadline (2020) set by the government to activate the SCS, the implementation process has already taken place, though at an early stage, and it is possible to find many experiments still running since 2015. Two rounds were made to start various projects, in August 2015 and in April 2016. One of the operational examples, deployed in

⁴⁰ *Central Planning, Local Experiments*, Mercator Institutes for China Studies (2017)

Rongcheng, can show us the application and possible outcomes of the most discussed facet of the entire system: evaluation of individuals' misbehaviour and related aspects.



The city in the Shandong province is considered both by government officials and researchers as the best example to show how the SCS will be like in the future. The main reason why this experiment is currently being so successful is because the urban community widely accepted and embraced this system in its daily life. This is confirmed by the fact that hospitals, neighbourhoods and schools are voluntarily running their own private version of the credit system.

First Morning Light is a neighbourhood consisting of 5,100 families which decided to divide the community into grids of 300 family units, each one headed by a grid-manager. Using the official Rongcheng system they added some interesting penalties for illegal spread of religion, abuse or abandon of any family member and online people defame. Thanks to these implementations the overall quality of life and property price of the neighbourhood increased exponentially.

Each of the 740,000 adult residents received 1,000 points at the beginning, with a grade that goes from A+++ to D: triple-A citizen (*"Role model of Honesty"* - more than 1050 points), double-A citizen (*"Outstanding Honesty"*), C-citizen (*"Warning Level"* - less than 849 points) or D-citizen (*"Dishonest"* - 599 points or less). The latter is considered by the municipality as an *"object of significant surveillance"* and blacklisted; the general public is then informed of the subject in question.⁴¹

⁴¹ Rongcheng municipality's handbook *"Administrative Measures for the Trustworthiness of Natural Persons"*

As we analysed before, there are actions or behaviours that can improve or worsen the personal score of an individual, even if the deputy director of the Rongcheng Social Credit Management Office, He Junning,) points out that “anything that influences your points needs to be backed by official facts with official documents”⁴².

For the organizational and administrative aspects of the several pilots around the Country are left to the provincial and municipal administrations, we can observe various models of implementation and different factors taken into consideration. The list below clearly shows the offenses that lower a personal score in seven different cities currently testing social credits:

LOCATION	NEGATIVE FACTORS
Rongcheng	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Get a traffic ticket (5 points deduction) - Drunk driving (Score goes straight to a C) - Not stopping at crosswalks
Beijing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fare cheating on public transportation - Smoking on trains - Reselling train tickets
Jiangsu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not visiting your parents “often” - Cheating on school exams - Illegally petitioning higher authorities for help
Ningxia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Violation of the government family plan (i.e. having two children despite not being exempt)
Shanghai	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Illegal parking - Falsifying personal history when registering for marriage
Shenzhen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Running a red light - Not paying for car parking - Leaving a job without giving proper notice - Jaywalking (crossing a roadway illegally)
Yunnan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not paying electricity bills

Source: CreditChina.gov.cn (Official Credit System Website)

⁴² “Life Inside China’s Social Credit Laboratory”, ForeignPolicy 03/04/2018, Simina Mistrenau

Moreover, two key features of the implemented systems so far are facial recognition technologies and public shaming. In fact, especially Shanghai, Beijing and Shenzhen have an enormous amount of CCTV cameras around almost every public building, roads, subway stations and so forth. Thanks to infrared and facial recognition technologies, municipalities are capable of instantly tracking and getting information about vehicles and people, noticing and officially sanctioning offenders. For instance in Shanghai, via *Honest Shanghai*, a smartphone app, users can access to a certain amount of personal data through facial recognition: according to the Shanghai Municipal Commission of Economy and Informatization, the app can currently access exactly 5,198 pieces of information from a total of 97 public authorities. Then, an algorithm processes those data, communicating to the user according to how he/she is considered as a “good”, “bad” or “neutral” citizen by the administration.

Furthermore, keeping in mind that the aim of the SCS is to improve society, usually offenders are publicly shamed in several ways, conversely high-scoring residents receive benefits and awards. As an example, in Rongcheng “local heroes” pictures are shown outside public libraries and residential communities and villages; in Shanghai people who commit driving offenses (the most common is illegal honking, banned since 2007) can find their plate numbers displayed on the sides of the roads, with a series of information about the vehicle and the violation.

To show the results of the SCS and to boost and stimulate the improvement of citizens and companies behaviour, the Chinese Government has set up a website (www.creditchina.gov.cn) that contains individual social credit scores, information and legal developments of the project and finally a ranking of the most well-performing cities having the highest average scores:

	CITY	PROVINCE	COMPOSITE INDEX
1	Beijing	Beijing	88.27
2	Chongqing	Chongqing	87.66
3	Shanghai	Shanghai	87.21
4	Xiamen	Fujian	87.13
5	Hangzhou	Zhejiang	86.95
6	Shenyang	Liaoning	86.40
7	Nanjing	Jiangsu	86.14
8	Fuzhou	Fujian	85.59
9	Chengdu	Sichuan	84.49
10	Qingdao	Shandong	83.66

Source: CreditChina.gov.cn (Official Credit System Website)

5. Conclusions

Having used a sociological approach to the study of the topic, this research tried to go beyond the practical and quantitative analysis of the Social Credit System. Personally, I found that the main misunderstanding related to this issue is the different conception and perception of authority. It could be seen as a too generic and theoretical concept, while I noticed that the study of this cultural and social aspect of society led me to a completely different interpretation and comprehension of this policy. For these reasons the main purpose of this dissertation is to contextualize the SCS policy within a cultural, sociological and economic framework. This operation is made to make the reader more conscious of what and why the Chinese Communist Party wants to implement in the country. Furthermore, the Western

literature about this topic is almost non-existent, both in the academic community and in the mainstream media coverage. Thus, considering the fact the entire project is still in an (advanced) beta stage, it is clearly necessary to study and analyse the topic from the beginning.

The aim of the first part of the thesis is indeed to understand the cultural roots of this policy, understanding on what values Chinese society is founded on. The main concept I focused on is individualism, because much criticism addressed the issue of individual freedom, declaring that the SCS could be the ultimate form of individuals' control and monitoring, linking this aspect mainly to the huge technological infrastructure used by the government. However, the cultural comparative analysis I carried out clearly shows strong linkages between Western and Chinese conceptions of individualism: underlining the uniqueness of China's perspective. This can completely change the approach to this matter, inducing the reader to adopt a super-partes judgment both on the SCS and on the wider question of authority. Thus, the Chinese individual has to be considered as an empowered self, in a certain range of autonomy as everyone else. The political and social situation of this specific country should not lead to a complete elimination and denial of people's self-identity. In this context it is also worth noting that the Western analysis of this topic always faced the same, even if apparently opposite, problem concerning the degree of freedom that everyone possesses. Various schools of thought underlined a crucial point: freedom is dependent on means, that can be money, availability of opportunities or geographic position for example. This substantially reduce the imaginary gap between Western and Chinese individuals in relation to their self-power. Is wrong to consider the Social Credit System or some of the other social control methods used by CCP or other authorities of that particular society as unacceptable a priori.

In this perspective the second part of this thesis contains a review and analysis of previous methods of social control implemented throughout the years. It is evident that social management and control, always among the top priorities for China's governments and considered as matters of national security, went through a long and radical process of development and change. Mao Zedong represented the moment in which the approach was direct and strong, that produced both great benefits and inevitably catastrophic consequences. However, rapid changes and a change both of the internal and global scenery, have certainly modified methods, strategies and objectives of the ruling power. Following leaders demonstrated a new and softer approach to the governance of society, going together with the unbelievable economic (and consequently socio-political) development of the nation since its opening to the market economy and globalization. While Hu Jintao brought back on the stage the importance of society rather than the economy, trying to promote an ideal of peace and more inclusiveness, Xi Jinping is going even beyond that. The greater amount of

discretionary power he recently acquired is giving him the chance to implement a revolutionary form of social control. The Social Credit System represents a more indirect form of supervision, that in order to be so has the necessity to have access to a greater range of information and variables, otherwise it would require authoritative and dangerous methods.

A complete and exhaustive picture of the actual form and possible developments of the SCS is then presented in the third chapter. A superficial description of the System is often reported on many media sources, depicting it as a high-tech project capable of tracking everyone and everything in order to give a single score that influences everyone's life. However, going through many official and unofficial documents and real experiments it is possible to realize that the SCS will work in a different manner. The first point is that it will be implemented step-by-step, starting with a function of market regulating tool, that will be almost automatic and able to oversee an enormous number of variables as stated before. Moreover, the highly criticized score would not be only one, but the process will consist in a series of scores and evaluations, both quantitative and qualitative, aimed mainly at enforcing and regulating more quickly present and future policies. It is clear that what China is trying to do and to create, is possibly a revolutionary innovation in every field such as politics, economy and society. This research is aimed at stimulating more and deeper analysis of this topic, taking into consideration the fact that other countries could follow this model if it would be successful enough. Thus, it has to be considered as a more interesting situation rather than only a dangerous and risky one, taking benefit from this experiment. Without any doubt however the whole system introduces some leaks and contradictions, in addition to some aspects that inevitably are still vague. The main questions that arise looking at the official implementation are of course related to its future developments, considering that the system would be updated, fixed and changed. It is also concerning the fact that both the market and society application of the SCS will address an incredible amount of legal entities and citizens, meaning that every problem or leak will have an inevitably and hardly controllable impact. Further research is kindly invited to search for more of these issues while the SCS will be progressively developed and implemented, avoiding throwing the opportunity in first place to assist to one of the most remarkable phenomena in the history of social management and besides to be able to develop alternative models and otherwise applicable.

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“Individualismo nella Cina Moderna: il Tema del Credito Sociale”

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La Cina, specialmente negli ultimi decenni, ha rappresentato una delle realtà più interessanti da studiare ed approfondire in particolar modo per la sua incredibile e rapidissima evoluzione, innanzitutto dal punto di vista economico che inevitabilmente ha poi portato a cambiamenti sociopolitici di grande importanza. Mentre altre società hanno affrontato lunghi periodi di gradualità trasformazioni, che richiedevano quindi un periodo di assestamento, nel caso Cinese la realtà è sostanzialmente diversa dopo soli 30 anni, ponendo a dura prova innanzitutto la stabilità sociale, che è proprio uno dei pilastri di questa ricerca. Infatti, il *Social Credit System* è proprio il caso discusso nella tesi, ovvero un sistema di “valutazione” di cittadini ed aziende che il governo vuole implementare ufficialmente su scala nazionale entro il 2020. Essendo una data molto ravvicinata e che vede già diverse sperimentazioni in atto, ho però ravvisato la mancanza di un’adeguata copertura mediatica ed accademica riguardo la materia, lasciando l’opinione pubblica, soprattutto quella esterna alla Cina, incapace di comprendere appieno cosa stia avvenendo. Non a caso, i quotidiani e siti web che hanno lanciato già dal 2014, anno in cui il governo guidato da Xi Jinping ha annunciato la messa in atto del progetto, notizie piuttosto superficiali e soprattutto piene di inesattezze. Ciò ha portato l’Occidente a guardare con sospetto e diffidenza e proprio il *Social Credit System* è stato subito descritto come un metodo di controllo sociale dittatoriale e pericoloso, in quanto capace di tracciare potenzialmente ogni attività degli individui. Proprio per questo ho deciso quindi analizzare, ma soprattutto contestualizzare al meglio l’intero scenario, suddividendo la ricerca in tre parti interconnesse fra loro.

Come uno dei concetti fondamentali alla base di questa politica voluta dal governo Cinese c'è senza alcun dubbio il ruolo, i valori e la concezione generale dell'individuo. In modo da poter approcciarsi al tema in maniera a-critica e non condizionata da pregiudizi è quindi fondamentale capire la differente, ma non opposta, concezione di individualismo e di autorità nella cultura Cinese. Una comparazione tra il pensiero filosofico-politico occidentale e quello della Cina infatti evidenzia chiaramente come la visione dell'individuo non si discosti poi così tanto come si potrebbe credere. Da un punto di vista esterno infatti, soprattutto a causa del contesto politico sicuramente divergente dal modello democratico più diffuso nel resto del mondo, si sottovaluta quasi del tutto il ruolo degli individui nella società asiatica presa in considerazione. Si è infatti portati a pensare che, vista l'assoluta autorità detenuta dal Partito Comunista Cinese e l'assenza di opposizione politica (espressa poi in realtà in maniere differenti), i cittadini non abbiano quasi alcun valore o libertà individuale, costretti ad accettare qualsiasi politica o decisione presa dalla leadership del Partito. Risulta però fondamentale notare come all'origine, il concetto di individualismo occidentale si basi principalmente sulla completa libertà della persona da autorità esterne, in modo che ognuno abbia la possibilità di prendere qualsivoglia decisione per sé. Siamo però consapevoli che anche nei regimi democratici, la libertà di ognuno e l'ordine sociale sono mantenuti proprio da restrizioni, obblighi, leggi e regole che limitano in qualche modo il raggio d'azione delle persone. Oltre a ciò, Anthony Giddens si è focalizzato su un aspetto apparentemente banale, ma al contempo vero: la libertà degli individui dipende sempre dai mezzi a disposizione. Sostanzialmente, anche dove i diritti civili e individuali sono riconosciuti e protetti, spesso le disponibilità economiche, di movimento ecc. risultano quelle che permettono al cittadino di poter veramente prendere scelte senza costrizione alcuna. In Cina invece non è l'individuo ad essere considerato diversamente, bensì è l'approccio alla libertà e all'autorità che differisce. Le scuole di pensiero più importanti, come il Confucianesimo, hanno formato la base per lo sviluppo della società Cinese e da esse si può apprendere come la libertà individuale sia considerata come il raggio d'azione che una persona ha tenuto conto dei legami che ha all'interno del contesto sociale. Questo include non soltanto l'autorità del governo o delle istituzioni che controllano il potere, ma anche i legami familiari, di amicizia e così via. Inserito in questo contesto, la persona può quindi esercitare al meglio la sua libertà, senza dimenticare però di non essere solo. Da questo punto di vista quindi il concetto assume tutto un altro aspetto, evidenziando come l'individuo in Cina non sia "sottomesso" ad un potere più grande, ma bensì di come sia consapevole dell'inevitabile rapporto con altri soggetti. L'individualismo occidentale invece vede ogni legame, compresi quelli familiari, come elementi in contrapposizione con la libertà. Il perfetto individuo "libero" promosso da svariate scuole di pensiero infatti è anche il frutto di un'economia di mercato che ha idealmente consegnato ad ogni persona la possibilità di non dipendere dagli altri ad esempio, riducendo il valore dei legami affettivi e simili.

L'analisi delle origini del pensiero Cinese però serve anche a comprendere non solo come i cittadini vivano la propria società, ma anche come essa sia percepita e gestita dalle leadership, che inevitabilmente poggiano le loro basi sulla propria cultura e sui propri valori morali. Già da questa prima parte si può quindi notare

come la progettazione di una politica come quella del *Social Credit System* sia perfettamente comprensibile ed in linea con questi fondamentali concetti.

La seconda parte della tesi invece analizza invece il *Social Management*, ovvero come il Partito e le leadership in generale hanno amministrato e controllato l'ordine sociale. Proprio per questo motivo vengono esaminati esempi di politiche atte a mantenere o modificare il *social order* che abbiano avuto un impatto notevole. Mao Zedong rappresenta sicuramente il leader che, grazie anche all'assoluto potere di cui disponeva, ha influito di più nella società Cinese. Non a caso sono proprio sue le principali azioni di rilevanza storica, come la Grande Rivoluzione Culturale, ma fu anche uno dei più grandi innovatori proprio nel *social management*. L'epoca di Mao ha infatti rappresentato il punto più alto della cultura di intervento diretto delle leadership Cinesi, che preferivano infatti applicare politiche radicali ma che producessero effetti in breve tempo. Con la storica apertura della Cina ai mercati e le numerose riforme che ne susseguirono si decise però di cambiare approccio anche nell'amministrazione della società, constatando come non fossero più applicabili vecchi modelli spesso dipendenti ad esempio da una forte mobilitazione delle masse. I successivi governi infatti riflettono proprio questi cambiamenti, che hanno portato all'applicazione di misure sempre più indirette e meno percettibili, ma al contempo efficaci e meno rischiose. Si può infatti prendere come esempio il sistema del Dang'an, che ho definito come il possibile predecessore del *Social Credit System*. Il Dang'an consiste infatti in un segretissimo file detenuto dalle autorità riguardante ogni cittadino e compilato sin dalla sua giovane età. Le similitudini con il *Social Credit System* risiedono nel fatto che entrambi si propongono sostanzialmente di raccogliere informazioni, basate su valutazioni sia quantitative che qualitative, per tracciare un profilo più o meno dettagliato dei cittadini. Ambedue vengono poi utilizzati allo stesso modo per imporre eventuali sanzioni o per restringere l'accesso degli individui a determinati lavori ad esempio. La differenza principale però risiede innanzitutto nel fatto che, nonostante la struttura del punteggio generato dal *Social Credit System* sia ancora vaga, quest'ultimo sia innanzitutto accessibile agli utenti (che potranno quindi conoscere il loro status) ma inoltre sarà anche migliorabile (o peggiorabile). L'uno può quindi rappresentare l'evoluzione dell'altro, dimostrando come il Partito Comunista abbia deciso di limare difetti e contraddizioni attraverso soprattutto un grande sviluppo tecnologico, che ha permesso l'ideazione di questo progetto. Inoltre, sempre nella seconda parte della ricerca, viene quindi analizzata la situazione storico-politica dell'attuale presidente Xi Jinping, che sembra ricalcare l'ascesa del suo predecessore Mao. Xi, dopo aver ricevuto il secondo mandato, a seguito di una serie di riforme contro la corruzione all'interno del Partito, ha infatti ottenuto la rimozione dei limiti dei termini del mandato, potendo quindi aspirare a un governo simile se non di maggior durata rispetto a Mao Zedong. Tutto questo per contestualizzare la situazione in cui l'attuale Presidente ha deciso e ha potuto accelerare la messa in atto del *Social Credit System*, che potrebbe determinare anche un suo possibile fallimento o un immenso successo, vista la sua crescente popolarità all'interno del paese e non solo.

A seguito di queste doverose premesse, nella parte finale della tesi viene quindi affrontata la questione vera e propria del *Social Credit System*, che presenta però ovvie difficoltà nella sua analisi. Infatti, i documenti e le informazioni a disposizione sono limitati, sia per motivi di sicurezza che per la mancanza di un progetto

finale definito in tutte le sue parti, con alcuni esperimenti ancora in corso e che potrebbero modificare l' *SCS* nel corso dei prossimi 2 anni. Dagli elementi a disposizione è però stato possibile tracciare un quadro piuttosto dettagliato della possibile struttura del progetto, che innanzitutto verrà utilizzato per regolamentare il mercato. Infatti, al di là di ciò che le agenzie internazionali riportano (come spiegato in precedenza), gli individui verranno inclusi nel *Social Credit System* solo successivamente, dopo che il sistema verrà correttamente applicato e di conseguenza modificato e migliorato sui soggetti economici. Infatti, il primo obiettivo della Cina è quello di sopperire alla grave mancanza di un sistema di valutazione finanziaria, il cosiddetto *Credit Score*. Questo strumento è infatti ampiamente diffuso in tutto l'Occidente e non solo, permettendo agli operatori finanziari di conoscere i profili di credito dei propri attuali o futuri clienti. Tramite l' *SCS* quindi il Paese potrà finalmente contare su una quantità e una qualità delle informazioni finanziarie più elevata, in modo anche da diminuire l'imprevedibilità del mercato Cinese. Oltre a tutto ciò, il suddetto sistema sarà teoricamente in grado di regolamentare l'intero mercato in maniera automatica ed efficiente, esercitando ad esempio maggior pressione sulle aziende che non rispettano le leggi (in primis quelle in tema di rispetto ambientale, altro grave problema da risolvere). Questo ovviamente porterà ad un iniziale stravolgimento dell'economia Cinese, con soprattutto le aziende e investitori stranieri che dovranno adeguarsi a queste nuove procedure, ma questa operazione verrà effettuata proprio per compiere definitivamente un salto di qualità importante che richiamerà in seguito ancora più investimenti. Già guardando la situazione da questa differente prospettiva si cominciano ad intuire i motivi principali e le enormi potenzialità del *Social Credit System*, che specialmente in questa sua applicazione potrebbe venir preso come esempio da molti altri mercati internazionali.

Per quanto riguarda invece le azioni e le misure rivolte ai singoli cittadini, si è per ora compreso come, in base a determinati comportamenti si potrebbero ricevere dei bonus o delle sanzioni espresse sotto forma non solo di punteggio (*score*), ma anche di limitazioni negli spostamenti o nelle operazioni finanziarie. Ci potrebbero essere ad esempio maggiori difficoltà a richiedere un prestito in banca o ad ottenere una determinata occupazione se si è una persona "poco affidabile" secondo lo *score personale*. Proprio questo è l'aspetto più intricato e preoccupante dell'intero progetto, ma che la Cina non ha intenzione di sottovalutare. Xi Jinping ha infatti dimostrato da un lato un atteggiamento molto diretto e forte ad esempio per quanto riguarda la censura, avendo limitato non poco l'accesso a internet dei propri cittadini. Ma al di là di ciò è allo stesso tempo consapevole della delicatezza di un'applicazione del sistema a livello individuale, preferendo quindi di imporre la sua linea innanzitutto sul mercato.

Proprio per questo la mia tesi è innanzitutto volta a stimolare una maggiore attenzione verso il tema del *Social Credit System*, ma partendo innanzitutto da un approccio oggettivo e contestualizzato. Nel corso dei prossimi mesi e dei prossimi due anni si avrà una maggior quantità di informazioni ufficiali disponibili, che potranno quindi essere utilizzate per ampliare ed approfondire questa ed altre ricerche correlate all'argomento.