

**Harmony or Hegemony: A Study of the Overwhelming Approval of the Social Credit
System by Chinese Citizens**

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Looking after You: A Study of the Overwhelming Approval of the Social Credit System by Chinese Citizens

Abstract

Despite the diabolical portrayal the Chinese Social Credit System (SCS) received in Western democratic media, recent surveys have shown that less than one percent of Chinese citizens disapprove of the SCS. To find the grassroots of this astounding statistic, this paper delves into Chinese culture, exploring its notion of privacy and civil ideals, as well as analyzing Chinese history, the Chinese crisis of trust, and the radical steps the Chinese Communist Party has taken to bring the situation under control. This paper will argue that Chinese citizens overwhelmingly approve of the SCS because of the Chinese Communist Party's media control, social deterrence, and authority.

Keywords: chinese citizens, support, control, social credit system (SCS)

Introduction

Ever since the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, “when friends and family members were pitted against one another,” Chinese society has suffered from an epidemic of distrust (Simina, 2019). The issue contrives itself in the form of Chinese citizens “expecting to be cheated or to get in trouble without having done anything” (Brussee, 2023). To counter that, the Chinese Communist Party (from hereafter, the CPP) in its 2002’s 16th National Congress announced the plan of constructing a state-centered Social Credit System (from hereafter, the SCS), which would incentivize Chinese citizens to build trust in society (Brussee, 2023). It would achieve that by assigning a score in a database to every citizen, wherefrom a countrywide digital surveillance system would evaluate their behavior and increase their score for exemplary behavior and lower it for undesirable actions. Citizens would then be put into redlists (i.e. whitelists) or blacklists depending on their score, enjoying the benefits or facing the consequences of their behavior. This, in the eyes of Western democratic media, paints an uncanny resemblance to Orwell’s grim and dystopian *1984*, for though the CCP may claim to have noble goals such as revitalizing its citizens’ trust, the possibility of such a system being used for state-control is too palpable.

Yet in spite of all that, recent surveys of the domestic opinion regarding the SCS show that as little as one percent of surveyed citizens disapprove of the mass-surveillance system, and more than 66% advocate for it (Kostka, 2019; Liu, 2023; Rieger, 2020). It is apparent that there exists a strong discrepancy in sentiment between the Chinese and Western populations regarding the SCS. This paper will address the following question: Why do Chinese citizens overwhelmingly approve of the SCS? This paper will argue that Chinese citizens

overwhelmingly approve of the SCS because of the CCP's robust propaganda and censorship machines, its active social deterrence through public shaming, and its authority among Chinese people.

Literature Review

When it comes to explaining the Chinese citizens' overwhelming approval of the SCS, in literature there exist two literary camps. Though both camps agree that the CPP plays a key role in influencing the domestic support for the SCS, they diverge on whether that is due to the CCP's *passive* influence or the CCP's *active* efforts. The first camp, consisting of Chungching Liu, Genia Kostka, Haili Li, and Marc Oliver Rieger, explains high domestic regard for the SCS through the prism of Chinese culture—that is, their beliefs, customs, and values. It argues that the high approval rate stems from the CPP supplanting socialistic “society comes first” beliefs, encouraging hatred towards the West, and upholding Confucian values among its citizens to *passively* ensure the CCP's popularity and continuous reign. The second camp, however, attributes high domestic regard for the SCS to the *proactively* deceitful, nuance-omitting state-censored Chinese media. Xu Xu, Xu Ping, and Mo Chen belong to this camp, claiming that Chinese citizens cannot and do not want to critically evaluate the SCS—having to instead rely on the misleading narrative painted by the government-controlled Chinese media. It is through considering these modalities—the active and passive influence the CCP exerts over public opinion—that scholars explain the paradoxically high approval of the SCS by Chinese citizens.

The first scholarly camp argues that the CCP puppeteers Chinese citizens into supporting its authoritarian initiatives—like the SCS—by forging domestic societal customs, beliefs, and

values to be a passive insurance of the party's continual reign. The CCP accomplishes that by inspiring party-benefiting ethos: modulating societal values and creating aspirations among its citizenry. One example is provided by Rieger: in his analysis of the high approval rates of the SCS among Chinese citizens, he attributes the high support to Chinese culture traditionally putting more emphasis on society than on the individual (2020). He traces the belief's origin back to the times of early communist China, when the Party, still in its early days, would embed its ideals within its citizens' culture (2020). The citizens' stances in such cases did not matter, as Li notes in his investigation on the topic: unpopular as some decisions made by the CCP were—whatever the backlash—the CCP would not back away, and so Chinese citizens were forced to adapt (2022); this is exactly what happened with the SCS. From this, Li concludes that among Chinese citizens there exists a fear (and therefore respect) of the Party (2022). This fear lives on *passively*, without need for intervention from the Party. Another instance of the CCP inspiring party-benefiting ethos among its citizens is through asserting that “affiliating with the party” is “prestigious.” So much so that, as Kostka and Liu argue, a Chinese citizen’s position in relation to the Chinese Communist Party—career-wise and attitude-wise—is their defining characteristic (2019; 2022). Kostka observes a strong correlation between a person’s status in society and their support for the SCS (2019). Adding to her findings, Liu presents two correlations wherein (a) the better-off tend to be closer to the party and (b) trust to the CCP is tied to approval of the SCS (2022). Liu argues that support for *invasive* governmental policies historically has been in proportion to the trust the people hold in that government (2022). Once again, respect to the part lives on *passively*. In sum, the first camp finds that the trust and proximity to the CCP and the CCP’s adamance are what *passively* influences Chinese citizens’ perception of the SCS.

The opposing camp insists that the CCP overtly and *actively* controls public sentiment through propaganda and, more importantly, censorship. The state-driven propaganda machine operates on exaggerating and understating, ensuring that it is the propaganda machine's position that is taken through media censorship. According to Xu Ping, Chinese citizens are *reliant* on Chinese media in assessing the SCS—therefore, the opinion circulating in the media is the one that will be circulating among civilians as well (2023). As such, Chinese citizens effectively lack the knowledge of the repressive potential behind a system like the SCS, only being aware of its social benefits (Xu P., 2023). This would be impossible without *proactive* tight state media control. Furthermore, Xu Xu suggests that “invisible targeted repression”—*id est*, censorship—operates in tandem with the propaganda machine to further conceal the repressive potential of the system (2022). Censorship need not be carried out by Secret Service officers making the person disappear—the SCS makes this kind of imperceptible muffling as easy as lowering the offender’s score, restricting their access to various services. Chen expands on this point, adding that censorship is not just silencing voices, but using public shaming to discourage “discourteous” acts (2022). Both Xu Xu and Chen mention the “Laolai” list—a published and publicly displayed list of individuals who refuse to fulfill legal obligations despite being able to (2022; 2022)—as an example of public deterrence. Once more, the party *actively* puts effort into this. Yet the CCP doesn’t stop there: according to Xu Ping, to further disincentivize negative attitudes towards the SCS, the CCP ridicules and misrepresents the Western views on the matter, making them appear unjustly hostile and biased, and as such conditioning its citizens to disregard them (2023). It is through propaganda and censorship, all of which the CCP proactively performs, that the second camp explains the abnormally high support for the SCS.

In summary, in answering why Chinese citizens overwhelmingly approve of the SCS, scholars diverged into two camps—though both camps point to the CCP as being the underlying reason for this puzzle. The first literary camp argues that the overwhelming support for the SCS can be explained by Chinese culture, values, and beliefs, which have been forged by the CCP to uphold its influence. The opposing literary camp argues that the paradoxical support for the SCS is due to the CCP's active efforts to censor and control Chinese media, using it instead as an outlet for government propaganda. This paper will take the side of the second literary camp, arguing that the Chinese citizens overwhelmingly support the SCS because of active efforts on the CCP's behalf to prove that Chinese citizens overwhelmingly approve of the SCS because of the CCP's robust propaganda and censorship machines, its active social deterrence through public shaming, and its authority among Chinese people.

Continuous Evolution

To understand the backbone behind the overwhelming domestic support of the SCS, one needs to recognize that all Asian cultures—including China—view privacy from an angle that differs from the West. As a matter of fact, the SCS is merely a continuation of cultural developments within Chinese society—all of which stem from privacy. The notion of privacy in Chinese society is heavily influenced by Confucianism and Taoism. Within these frameworks, privacy [yín, 隱] is portrayed exclusively as a right to conceal sensitive information to “save face” (Whitman, 1985). That is because these frameworks put emphasis on upkeeping harmony within their respective communities, as a reveal of sensitive information might disrupt said

harmony. This definition contrasts heavily with the Western idea of privacy, where the goal is the “uniqueness” rather than the Chinese “union” (Whitman, 1985)—and its implications are vast.

The extent to which Confucianism and Taoism influence the workings of Chinese society becomes quickly apparent after examining key aspects of Chinese life. Chinese law, for instance, with some individual exceptions, treats privacy as protection of one’s reputation against libel (Wang, 2011). Judiciary systems generally reflect historic public sentiment and that is exactly the case with Chinese law and Chinese culture. A more recent development, however, begins in the post-Mao era. Chinese courts often announce criminal sentences in a public forum. This serves a two-fold purpose: to educate the public of the CCP’s might and to deter citizens from breaking the law (Trevaskes 2003). The SCS is, therefore, merely a natural extension of previous policies, as it simply transfers public shaming to an online format. All of this hints towards the reason why the SCS enjoys the popularity it was: (a) people are deterred from rebutting by the sheer power of the CCP and (b) such systems had already existed prior to the launch of the SCS. The latter point [b] is further emphasized by Chinese citizens being accustomed to arbitrary and thorough surveillance. Since the birth of the CCP, it has kept a *dang’an* [档案]—a secret dossier on millions of its urban citizens (Cho, 2020). The *dang’an* kept self-reported records on citizens—their work, family life, mental health conditions—all of which were inaccessible to regular citizens (Cho, 2020). It is not surprising, then, that a system like the SCS had not encountered much resistance from Chinese citizens upon launch, as it was merely yet another iteration in the Chinese machine.

While in retrospect the SCS might seem like a natural successor to pre-existing systems, for the first fifteen years it was not the alarming dystopian model the West came to know it to be. In 1999, when then–Prime Minister Zhu Rongji sought to create tools to evaluate the

trustworthiness of enterprises and citizens, the system wasn't much different to the Western capital banks' Credit Score (Raphael and Xi, 2019). Even after the 16th People's Party Congress in 2002, the system was thought of *exclusively* in the context of market reforms (Raphael and Xi, 2019). It was not until 2014 that the "Plan for the Construction of the Social Credit System" was established. It was at that point that the CCP transferred the *dang'an* to an online, publicly displayed and accessible format. More importantly, it introduced rewards for "trust-keeping" behavior and punishments for "trust-breaking" deeds (Cho, 2020). The rewards and punishments include: access to government services and subsidies, professional licenses, the right to sell assets, operate businesses, use public transport, and so on (Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2016). Further enclosing upon a dystopian system, citizens with both high and low scores alike will be put in public on billboards—though, of course, citizens with a high score will be labeled "model citizens," and those with a low score will be subject to vituperation. Although not every citizen will be put up for public scrutiny, the CCP guarantees that under the SCS, every citizen will get what they deserve, be it benefits or consequences.

In summary, the Chinese notion of privacy explains why the SCS did not face outright backlash from Chinese citizens. To understand why the SCS enjoys the popularity it does, however, one needs to delve deeper into the CCP's robust propaganda and censorship machines, its active social deterrence through public shaming, and its authority among Chinese people.

Follow Me

Chinese citizens overwhelmingly approve of the SCS because of the CCP's robust propaganda and censorship machines. China simply *must* have the views of its citizens aligned

with the views of the Party. So much so that, in 2013, Xi Jinping told the CCP Central Committee that “winning or losing public support is an issue that concerns the CCP’s survival” (Xinhua, 2013). Indeed, the CCP must—one way or another—upkeep public sentiment towards not only themselves, but all of their authored initiatives. Otherwise, the CCP risks being decimated. Because China is an authoritarian regime, to mold the public’s views it *must* employ control methods typical to all authoritarian regimes. Namely: propaganda and censorship.

When it comes to public control, the arsenal the CCP has at its hands is dazzling. Brought together, the propaganda and censorship machines incorporate a combination of antique and modern tactics to most effectively curb the vox populi. The propaganda element of the equation is antique and prosaic. It simply utilizes: (a) fake news, to exaggerate and downplay narratives to form a context that is favorable to the Party, and (b) social coercion to force Chinese citizens to *parrot* propaganda (Neo, 2022; Zeng, 2023). The latter is achieved by manipulating the intrinsic desire to belong to a group—anyone going against the party will ostracize themselves from their peers and society overall. When it comes to censorship, however, China is at the forefront of controlling their citizens’ sentiments towards various governmental reforms.

China, put simply, has a censorship arsenal unmatched by any other country. Rapid domestic digitalization has given rise to unprecedented intrusive monitoring and surveillance practices. The cornerstones of Chinese digital censorship are its two million employees that are tasked with moderating all forms of media and selectively punishing *unfavorable* discourse (Neo, 2022; Tsai et al., 2022; Zeng, 2023). Being well aware that they are under constant scrutiny of online surveillance, Chinese citizens encounter considerable friction in expressing their opinion publicly. In addition to that, there are other censorship mechanisms in place, such as: China’s Great Firewall, which makes sites outside of China practically inaccessible to

Chinese citizens; apps having backdoors, that means that there can be no *privacy*, as any personal data can be extracted upon unsolicited request (Li, 2023; Zeng, 2023). Combined, the robust propaganda and censorship machines create an environment wherein going against the Party-welded public opinion would prove to be a significant challenge.

Yet not only is this arsenal vast—it is also effective. Both of these systems successfully accomplish what they were designed for. Neo's study on the effectiveness of media intervention confirms these results: “state propaganda has been successful in steering public opinion towards positions favorable to the state” (2022). That means that the party succeeds in aligning its citizens with its own views; hence, the Chinese citizens' positive outlook towards various governmental initiatives—the SCS, for instance. Moreover, not only are Chinese citizens' opinions aligned with the Party's vision—they actually *emotionally follow* the Party's voice. Neo points out that in most cases, Chinese citizens advocate for retaliatory measures that are *even more* forceful than that of the Party (2022). Therefore, it is safe to say that the CCP's propaganda and censorship machines significantly alter the views of their citizens on governmental initiatives, biasing them with factitious news and punishing them for “crimethink.” As such, a significant part of the reason why the SCS enjoys such high approval domestically is due to the CCP's robust propaganda and censorship machines.

On Display

Chinese citizens overwhelmingly approve of the SCS because of the CCP's active social deterrence through public shaming. Public shaming manifests itself in a single, yet multifaceted, factor: the *lǎolài* [老賴, frequent trust-breaker] billboards. *Lǎolài* is a concept that, to many

Chinese Citizens, is synonymous with the SCS. Those are individuals, whose private information is put on-display on public billboards because of their blacklisted status—a violent innuendo from the CCP to Chinese citizens (Liu, 2022). This is the simplemost act of deterrence: perform trust-breaking acts – face the consequences. The *lǎolài* list is one of the few converging points that are omnipresent across all implementations of the SCS (Tsai et al., 2021). That entails that the attitudes towards the *lǎolài* list (and, by proxy, the SCS) are independent of a citizen’s geographical positioning. What is more, *deterrence* plays a major role within the SCS’s 2014 official guidelines, construction plan, and implementation (von Blomberg, 2023). The sole objective of introducing *lǎolài* billboards was to deter citizens from performing “trust-breaking acts” (von Blomberg, 2023). The result of this deterrence—and the SCS as a whole domestically—then comes down to two juxtapositions among citizens: angst induced by the CCP and contempt towards “trust-breaking” individuals.

The success of the SCS among Chinese citizens relies on their fear of the CCP because of the ambiguity in the definition of “trust-breaking acts” and the innate apprehension towards being publicly shamed. As the SCS lacks clear-cut implementation details, the definition of what exactly “trust-breaking” is is left up for party officials to interpret (Tsai et al., 2021). For instance, a number of Chinese cities where the SCS is implemented consider activities such as jaywalking or posting pictures of Winnie Pooh on social media to be “trust-breaking” (Tsai et al., 2021). The latter example emphasizes that, realistically, there need not be a reason to convict an inconvenient persona, as the reason can be made up post-factum. With this, the messaging couldn’t be clearer: going against the party will decimate anyone who is willing to try (Xinhua, 2013); the CCP is simply all-too-powerful domestically to be contested with. Furthermore, no Chinese citizen would enjoy the role of being the black swan of the pack. The aversion to that

role is further exacerbated by Chinese culture and its notion of privacy (Cho, 2020). Combining these factors, in turn, suggest the partial answer to why Chinese citizens overwhelmingly approve of the SCS: many of them are frightened into embracing the system.

On the other side of the coin, the success of the SCS is greatly affected by human gloat. Lǎolài are publicly detestable in Chinese society for a myriad of reasons. It is not only financial dishonesty that gets one blacklisted—“uncivil” behavior such as “invading personal space, harming public health, or disrupting social order” yields the same result (Trauth-Goik, 2022). As such, lǎolài and the SCS as a whole are seen through this prism of “curbing dishonesty.” Which explains why the SCS enjoys the popularity it does: Lǎolài are “selfish, incapable of self-restraint, and thus in need of external control” (Trauth-Goik, 2022), which the SCS provides through blacklists. Another reason for the SCS’ domestic popularity is that, through the lǎolài list, it inflicts punishments upon *uncultured* people, giving Chinese society a delightful reprieve from the inconvenience such people cause. In the end, of course, it is a mixture of both fear and spite evoked by public shaming that helps explain the overwhelming approval of the SCS by Chinese citizens.

Bow And Kneel

Chinese citizens overwhelmingly approve of the SCS because of the CCP’s authority among Chinese people. That authority is a by-product of the popularity the CCP enjoys domestically. While it may initially seem that the upholding of the CCP’s popularity is a task for media control (which was discussed earlier), media control is just a decorative layer on top of the CCP’s actual body of work. Specifically, what yields the Party respect and popularity is the

realization of its ambitions—the “Chinese grand strategy.” In other words, propaganda and censorship merely exacerbate and undercut steps of the Chinese government to paint it a more favorable picture—not to be a substitute for real action. The Belt and Road Initiative is what is typically gratified with the status of a Chinese grand strategy—more important, however, is Xi Jingping’s “Chinese Dream” [中国梦], which builds on top of the “Chinese grand strategy,” for it provides a wide array of goals that will lead to the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (Xinhua, 2015). These ensure the CCP’s domestic popularity, and, by extension, the indisputability of all of its efforts towards fulfilling the “Chinese dream”—whatever those steps and actions are. The CCP *is* enjoying enormous popularity domestically, as “over 70 per cent of [surveyed citizens] support the central government and the party” (Kennedy, 2009). In other words, almost three quarters of Chinese citizens support the legitimacy of the central government—by far a majority—which, in turn, means that three quarters of Chinese citizens support *the strategies, policies, systems, and efforts* of the Party. It is not a surprising claim, then, that the support for Xi’s “Chinese Dream” is strongly rooted in nationalism.

The CCP is heavily reliant on public education to foster a chauvinistic opinion-set among its citizens. In particular, by inspiring seething among its citizens at the idea of being nationally humiliated, the CCP can get away with implementing radical authoritarian systems. The Chinese school curricula-defining authors seek to inspire “patriotism, sacrifice, *vigilance against foreign threats*,” affirmation and prioritization of the CCP over oneself among the students; funneling all that to build aversion to “national humiliation” and using it as “a potent tool for Chinese nationalism” (Lee and Wang, 2023). Effectively, the Party is *brainwashing* its citizens to mindlessly follow all of its orders. This, in turn, leads to citizens’ expecting the Party to fulfill president Xi’s goal of “rejuvenating the Chinese nation.” The success of China means disgrace

for other countries. This is especially true when considering Japan, China's sworn enemy as of recent, which is "portrayed as the other," and which Chinese citizens seethe to disgrace (Lee and Wang, 2023). As such, the patriotism pulsating through the Chinese people *reinforces their commitment to the Party* to avoid "national humiliation," as the Party will protect its people from foul-intent outsiders, like Japan or the U.S.

The CCP is happily harvesting what it has sown in public sentiment: the citizens who support the state also support the SCS and other governmental initiatives. If the CCP brings prosperity to the Chinese nation, then, logically, it must know what better be done to most effectively ascent China to the top. As Kostka and Liu found in their studies on the public sentiment surrounding the SCS, "Higher political trust in the regime [...] is consistently correlated with higher support" for the SCS (2019; 2022). Point blanc: party-favoring exposure in education leads to increased political trust and therefore higher support for governmental initiatives. Which is the final explanation for why the SCS enjoys the popularity it does domestically: the CCP has, through education and public campaigns, acquired an indisputable status among its citizens wherefrom that indisputability also applies to all of the CCP's initiatives.

Conclusion

In summary, the reasons behind the overwhelming approval of the SCS are as follows: the CCP mediates strong propaganda and inflicts considerable censorship; the CCP actively deters any public resistance through shaming; and the domestic authority and popularity the Party enjoys. China, as an autocracy, must turn to propaganda and censorship to control the

domestic sentiments towards itself and its initiatives. When it comes to propaganda, the CCP turns to controlled media and peer pressure. Censorship, on the other hand, has a far superior arsenal: scrutinizing surveillance; China's Great Firewall; and backdoors, which introduce significant friction in going against the party's vision. Brought together, propaganda and censorship easily achieve what they were designed to do. When it comes to public shaming, everything comes down to the *lǎolài* phenomenon. It thrives on two juxtapositions: angst and contempt. The angst comes from the fear of being convicted and publicly shamed—the latter exacerbated by the Chinese cultural notion of privacy. Contempt, also rooted in Chinese culture, rears itself in the form of despising the *lǎolài*, as they are “selfish, incapable of self-restraint, and thus in need of external control” (Trauth-Goik, 2022). Lastly, because the CCP enjoys significant popularity domestically, it possesses authority among its citizens to govern the country as it sees fit. To do that, the CCP relies heavily on public education fostering a strongly chauvinistic sentiment among its citizens. To that end, they have been successful, as citizens who support the government also support the SCS.

As the SCS is still in its early days it is hard to gauge the extent to which Chinese citizens would be supportive of the fully-implemented system. Further observational obstructions are added by the fact that most Chinese citizens would not risk speaking out against the SCS (as it is an initiative of the CCP) for fear of punishment. Lastly, the studies mentioned in this paper have predominantly been conducted in the form of surveys, from which it is difficult if not impossible to account for the nuanced opinion-sets of different populations within China. To gain greater insight into the paradoxically high approval of the SCS, future research should conduct one-on-one, private, and consequenceless interviews with those who have had diverging experiences with China's Social Credit System.

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