



The People's Algorithms: Social Credits and the Rise of China's Big (Br)other

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In 2013, just a few months after Chairman Xi Jinping came into power in China, the government declared that the country was entering a new era and launched a project called “the Chinese Dream” (*Zhongguo meng*). In order to realize this dream of “national rejuvenation”, the Central Committee of the Communist Party issued a set of guidelines aiming at the cultivation of what it referred to as “core socialist values” that it divided into three respective categories: national goals (prosperity, democracy, civility and harmony), social goals (freedom, equality, justice and the rule of law), and individual values (patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendship) (Gow, 2017). The making of state-defined “civilized” (*wenming*) and “high quality” (*gao sushu*) political subjects for the newly enounced social and economic order, in short, is an integral part of the so-called Chinese Dream.

Almost immediately, propaganda slogans began popping up everywhere, from giant LED billboards on main avenues to the pages of

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school textbooks. Predictably, Western observers immediately contrasted the Chinese Dream with the American Dream, pointing out that while the Chinese version might have borrowed a concept from the United States, it focuses on collectivism rather than individualism (Kai, 2014). Implicit in their argument is not only just a criticism of authoritarianism's and nationalism's suppression of individual aspirations but also an embrace of a certain belief in the ability of the autonomous individual to exercise reason that is thought to be fundamental to the operations of the market and democracy. China, in their estimate, needs to unleash that potential if it is to fully align itself with the Western economic and political order and become a true global leader.

This narrative deploys a certain moral filter to make sense of the world and human behaviour and has a long genealogy traceable to the Enlightenment. And in spite of the recent financial crisis and repeated electoral catastrophes in liberal democracies on both sides of the Atlantic, the foundation of that moral conviction has remained largely unshaken. The recent critique of fake news, alternative facts and misinformation (all of which have been made possible by the deployment of politically motivated computer algorithms and analytics) is heavily grounded in the insistence on the importance of real facts and the human capacity to reason.¹ Yet in the face of populist political division and even violence fed by data-driven technology and the feedback loop in our post-truth world, it has become clear that the notion of self-determination and self-governance of the autonomous individual is being called into question (Rahwan, 2018).

This essay equally questions the adequacy of this view of human capacity, especially in the contemporary digital landscape, by examining the recent introduction of the social credit (*shehui xinyong*) rating system in China. As a new technology of governance, the social credit system is intended to track and calculate the social credit scores of every Chinese citizen and organization based on their activities and performance. Significantly, this government-mandated big data and surveillance project involves more than just the mining and processing of data by the state and corporations; it also seeks to compel individuals and groups to regulate themselves tirelessly based on the social and ethical order sanctioned by the state. Under such practices of state-led neoliberalism, the government uses social engineering interventions—the idea of the social credit in this case—to promote the ideas of marketization, social harmony, innovation, entrepreneurship, the rule of law, and other state-defined “core socialist values”. By subjugating the everyday to neoliberal logics

and normalizing its citizens through self-regulation, postsocialist China is moving away from the older socialist system of surveillance. In doing so, it has also given up on the dream of creating enlightened and critical citizens once cherished by Chinese intellectuals and revolutionary vanguards a century ago. Instead, it edges towards a posthuman world where citizens are fast becoming calculable and mouldable data subjects.²

Of course, Chinese citizens are not alone in their subjugation to sophisticated digital surveillance, as it has been demonstrated by Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) study of surveillance capitalism in market democracies. Yet the ubiquitous and conspicuous way in which the everyday activities of the individual are being tracked and regulated by a single party-state with an explicit agenda of behaviour modification is unprecedented. Moreover, whereas surveillance capitalism focuses primarily on capital accumulation, the Chinese social credit system also includes a political and ideological dimension that cannot be subsumed completely under the logic of capital. As such, Big Other—the “instrumentarian power” enabled by the vast surveillance infrastructure for herding and moulding society as suggested by Zuboff (2019)—is even bigger in China. Given the resilience and strengthening of the authoritarian party-state, one can even refer it to as Big (Br)other.³

THE EARLIER CHINESE DREAM

The desire to reform the thought of the individual is at least partially rooted in China's looming existential crisis at the beginning of the twentieth century. When the multi-ethnic Qing empire led by the Manchu ethnic group (1644–1912) repeatedly suffered major military defeats and setbacks in political and institutional reforms in its final decades, many Han Chinese intellectuals came to believe that the failure of the empire was due to its inability to create a unified body politic to counter the encroachment of foreign powers. The prominent intellectual Liang Qichao (1873–1929), for example, argued that the Chinese nation emerging out of the crumbling empire was in dire need of an organic society. According to him, the prerequisite to forming such a society was to create national citizens who were motivated and enlightened. Those who led the top-down revolution that ultimately toppled the dynasty also shared this view. Sun Yatsen, the revolutionary leader and “father of the republic”, also famously castigated the disorganized and disunited state of the Chinese nation (Lam, 2011, p. 9). Underlying this line of reasoning

was a fundamental shift in the political logics of the state from that of the Manchu-led dynastic empire to the Chinese nation. Political legitimacy, similarly, was now derived from the people rather than from the imperial lineage and divine sources.

When the new republic disintegrated soon after its establishment, most intellectuals blamed the top-down approach to political change. They further emphasized that if China wanted to institute a modern political order, creating a functional society with politically awakened citizens was critical. Thus, during the 1910s and 1920s, many Chinese intellectuals spoke of the need to create a “new culture” based on science and democracy. They vernacularized language for the masses and carried an education campaign to the countryside with the hope of turning the nation’s mass population into new citizens, making this period a sort of Chinese enlightenment (Lam, 2011, pp. 38–45; Schwarcz, 1986). Yet, owing to the political imperative of the time, the idea of turning individuals into enlightened citizens quickly gave way to the idea of producing a people who would adhere to the newly declared social and political order that was seen as vital to the survival of the nation. Being politically aware, in this new context, was to acknowledge the priority of the collective over the individual.⁴

Immediately after the Second World War, unsurprisingly, officials and academics of the Nationalist government also began to contemplate how to put the population under surveillance as part of the national reconstruction project. Nevertheless, it was only after the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949 that the dream of engineering the new citizen on a large scale became possible. Among other things, a system of household registration was put in place, subjugating individuals, workplaces, schools, neighbourhoods and so forth, to a new administrative order legible to the surveillance state. While such a system was no doubt partially drawn from practices used in the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, scholars have also noted that the Chinese population was put under surveillance in the imperial era (Lu & Perry, 1997). The social surveillance system in twentieth-century China can thus be seen as a case of the modern bureaucratic state appropriating both native and foreign ideas for its state-building needs. This essay takes up one aspect of this vast surveillance network, the personal file or dossier system (*renshi dangan* or *geren dangan*), as it offers a meaningful departure point for understanding the significance of the new social credit system in the era of big data.

PERSONAL DOSSIERS

In many ways, the specific idea of putting the behaviour and thought of the individual under constant surveillance followed directly from the way in which party cadres were managed within both the Communist Party and the Chinese Nationalist Party (Huang, 2002). After the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, ideology was seen as key to the Communist Party's consolidation of its control of the government and the country. In 1956, the Party issued a set of guidelines regarding the management of the personal files of its cadres (Huang, 2002). Soon, the system was expanded to cover all urban residents. At a time when Communists were struggling to bring the country under their firm control amid heightening Cold War anxiety, one main purpose of the more elaborated surveillance system was to identify and eradicate the so-called class enemies and foreign spies. Thus, seeking more than to just discipline the docile bodies of the people in order to prepare them to mobilize for war and economic production, the state now also strove to monitor and reform their minds in order to secure the revolution. In other words, as China transformed into a "dossier society", it departed further from the aspirations of creating the free-thinking new citizens the intellectuals of the turn of the twentieth century had hoped for.

Generally, the personal dossier for urban residents is created when a child enters the school system and tracks his or her character, attitudes, performance and social relationships. Although Chinese citizens have no direct access to these files themselves, these dossiers literally follow them throughout their lives, leaving no temporal and spatial gaps. During the socialist era when a large segment of the Chinese society was organized into work units (*danwei*), the local unit was responsible for the updating and storage of the dossiers. In schools, for example, student dossiers were kept up-to-date by teachers. Likewise, in workplaces, individuals were evaluated periodically by supervisors and peers. To a certain extent, the Chinese socialist dossier system was similar but not identical to its counterparts in the Eastern Bloc. For instance, in East Germany, unlike in China, information about targeted individuals was collected by recruited informants and secret state agents, and those records were centrally managed by the Ministry of State Security commonly known as the Stasi.⁵

The Chinese dossier system was a central pillar in the social surveillance system of the party-state, as it allowed the state to monitor the moral character, work ethic, ideological leanings and social relationships of its urban citizens, workers, students, not to mention its own cadres.⁶ Furthermore, the content of these dossiers was often an important factor in determining the individual's eligibility for opportunities and benefits such as transferring to a better school, promotion, better housing or admission to the party.⁷

In short, even if the tracking of the individual through the dossier was only part of the larger surveillance infrastructure, it was an important one.⁸ And the idea of having a dossier trailing the life of a citizen like a shadow, deciding his or her individual fate based on past behaviours and attitudes, certainly invokes the menacing imagery of Big Brother. Still, this sort of imagery may have overlooked the nuances, failures and contradictions of the system in practice. Not only were most rural citizens or the so-called peasants not subjected to the dossier system, but calling in personal favours, exacting revenge and seeking leniency were conceivably always part of the game for those who were. In the film *The Lives of Others* (*Das Leben der Anderen*) that depicts the surveillance programme in former East Germany, for instance, the Stasi agent assigned to monitor a subversive writer ends up empathizing with his subject and eventually refuses to properly report his illegal activities. In postsocialist China, ideological control is more relaxed and so the ability of the system to keep track of individual citizens' thoughts and behaviours has probably become even less effective.⁹

Indeed, the end of the socialist era in 1978 and the subsequent introduction of a mixed economy have produced new challenges for the dossier system. Since the 1980s, a growing portion of the population has not been employed by traditional work units, such as government or state enterprises. The non-government workforce has become even bigger since the 1990s due to intense privatization. In order to address the changing social and economic order, talent exchange centres (*rencai jiaoliu zhongxin*) with field offices in cities all over China were created. Among their many functions, these government-run centres are responsible for keeping files on urban residents who do not work for state-assigned work units. Under this new system, urban residents outside of the state employment system, along with their employers, such as private or foreign corporations, are required to make sure that their files are properly maintained by the relevant local field offices.

When these field offices first opened in the early- to mid-1980s, they only served a relatively small number of workers who were in high demand—normally experts or workers with foreign language skills—who worked for foreign companies or were part of Sino-foreign joint ventures. However, because more and more workers are no longer working for the government or state enterprises, these talent exchange offices have evolved into general employment centres for the public. Meanwhile, the dossiers maintained by these offices have begun to function as a kind of resume for school and employment and even as evidence when it comes to individuals' entitlements to social insurance and social security benefits (Wang, 2011, p. 27).

How does a surveillance programme that was initially designed to enable political and ideological control interact with the country's emerging new social and economic order? This is a central question that Chinese officials and policy thinkers have been grappling with (Edin, 2003). As relocation, job changes, business closures and restructuring have become common occurrences, so too has the misplacement and loss of dossiers, filing errors and other management mishaps. Since such occurrences have direct impacts on the livelihoods of affected individuals, disputes over the accuracy of the information in the dossiers have been on the rise. Policy thinkers are unsure whether they should classify these as labour disputes, administrative mishaps or civic disputes, as each of these categories has different legal ramifications (Wang, 2011, pp. 27–28). The stakes are certainly high, since any mishandling of these cases could contribute to social discontent and political instability.

SOCIAL CREDIT

Although the rise of the social credit system is not directly linked to the erosion of the original function of the personal dossier system, it does represent the latest attempt to create new citizens by the state. In fact, the idea of placing the moral character of each citizen under surveillance jibes with neoliberalism. The new focus, however, is no longer on ideological purity for political purposes but on trustworthiness as a basic condition for economic efficiency, because trustworthiness is thought to be vital to minimizing economic risks and facilitating transactions. Chinese policy thinkers share the belief of advocates of rational choice and game theory that economic development proceeds apace with the level of social trust (Liu, 2016, pp. 30–39; Zak & Knack, 2001). In this context, trust is

more than an emotional or psychological issue; it is also an important economic variable. The key question then is how to turn trust into social capital, and how to turn social capital into quantifiable and calculable social credit. And it is in the light of this imperative of converting trustworthiness into creditworthiness that the constant surveillance of the moral character of the individual is thought to be highly relevant and even critical in establishing and maintaining the neoliberal social and economic order (Zhongguo Guowuyuan, 2014, 2015).

The social credit idea first began to circulate around 2000. Prior to that time, this concept was only mentioned rarely, even though the experiment with marketization had accelerated in the 1990s. Since 2000, however, thousands of articles mentioning this concept have appeared in magazines and academic journals, mostly in finance-related fields but also in governance.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it was not until 2014 that a detailed outline of the new system, called the “Planning Outline for the Construction of a Social Credit System”, first came to light (Zhongguo Guowuyuan, 2014). Jointly released by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (the highest administrative body of the Party) and the Chinese State Council (*Zhongguo Guowuyuan*) (the highest administrative body of the central government), the document reveals a central initiative of the government’s ongoing effort to “strengthen and innovate social management” (Zhongguo Guowuyuan, 2014). As part of the proposed thirteenth five-year plan (2016–2020), the planning outline stipulates in no ambiguous terms that credit is the foundation of all market operations and that a market economy is essentially a credit economy. Moreover, it further argues that the social credit system is vital to the functioning of the socialist market economy and to social governance. In so doing, it lays out the rationale for radically economizing and financializing the social world in an unprecedented way.

Needless to say, the idea of using quantifiable data to rate the creditworthiness of an individual or an organization is neither new nor unique in China or elsewhere. Yet unlike in countries with well-established credit infrastructures, Chinese credit rating agencies often have difficulty tracking rural residents, migrant workers and students. Moreover, while the cash economy is increasingly replaced by app-based direct transfer and payment platforms such as WeChat and Alipay (Liu, 2016, p. 169), these methods of payment do not contribute to establishing credit in the conventional sense. Therefore, as the planning outline points out, the existing credit rating system in China is sporadic and fragmented

at best. From the perspective of the government, the system misses the opportunity to piece together different databases and the different platforms consumers use to construct a fuller picture of individual citizens, organizations and society at large.

With this in mind, the newly introduced social credit system is designed to deliver an aggregated, albeit not necessarily total, information system that emphasizes uniformity, consistency, comprehensiveness, accuracy, efficiency and up-to-dateness. It tracks the creditworthiness of citizens, enterprises, institutions and even government agencies using a uniform framework. In order to facilitate the implementation of the new system, the government has also started to introduce new laws, regulations and standards for the social credit system that were intended to be fully implemented by 2020 (Zhongguo Guowuyuan, 2014, 2015). Just months after the outline was published, the development of a system of national unified social credit codes was named a top government priority. These codes, not to be confused with credit ratings themselves, are standardized identification numbers assigned to all citizens and organizations. Such a nationwide system of standardized credit codes is to facilitate the sharing and exchanging of credit information among governmental agencies, enterprises and social organizations.

Significantly, even if the installation of a social credit system for tracking individuals meticulously and constantly may sound like an Orwellian nightmare, the rationale of the system is generally not articulated in negative and repressive terms. More often than not, it highlights the importance of generating incentives to reward good behaviour. The language of the planning outline echoes that of the media's and Chinese social scientists in their frequent comments about the lack of morality in Chinese society, revealing anxiety about how a lack of morality and trust will harm the market economy and social stability (W. Zhang & Ke, 2003). The goal of the social credit system is, according to the planning outline, to "build mechanisms to incentivize the keeping of trust and to punish the breaking of trust" (Zhongguo Guowuyuan, 2014). An ideal social credit environment, in other words, will "encourage people to be sincere, keep trust, promote morality and uphold courtesy". Therefore, in line with previous attempts to cultivate moral and "civilized" citizens for the nation, social credit is meant to promote civic virtue and patriotism in order to foster a "harmonic society" (*hexie shehui*), which has been a state slogan for the past decade.

A central concept underlying the emerging incentive structure is the so-called natural person (*ziran ren*) that appears multiple times in the document (Zhongguo Guowuyuan, 2014). While the concept is certainly linked to the rights discourse of the Enlightenment, its immediate context is actually game theory in economics, which is paradoxically predicated on a dark vision of humankind, namely, that the individual is nothing but calculating, distrustful, suspicious and so forth (Brown, 2015). Still, despite this negative view, in modern economics, the natural person is nonetheless adorned as a “rational” being who makes “self-interested” decisions based on incentives. This conception of the human being informs public choice theory, which uses economic theories to address social and political problems. Under this logic, the purpose of governing is to provide incentives to reward individuals who behave in ways consistent with the objectives of the state and punish those who don’t.

Economists have long argued that a sound credit system promotes the smooth functioning of the market (Bartels, 1964). In a way, the Chinese social credit system takes the idea of credit rating to a new level. By evaluating and establishing the creditworthiness of all citizens, businesses and organizations, the system is trying to make individuals and groups accountable for their actions by subjugating their behaviours to calculable economic and financial logic. In so doing, the government hopes to rein in the perceived growing culture of fraud, selfishness and callousness that are regarded as the most prominent problems of the postsocialist era. The social credit system is regarded as a way to help safeguard social order and build “social sincerity” and a “sincerity culture” (Zhongguo Guowuyuan, 2014). Once the social credit system and the national social credit codes are in place, the official newspaper *China Daily* predicts, it will “let credit weigh in for malfeasances and lawbreaking” (Shehui xinyong daima [Social Credit Codes], 2015).

In addition to emphasizing the construction of credit for the “natural person”, the planning outline also discusses the importance of including businesses, institutions and government agencies in the same social credit system. Just like individual citizens and consumers, businesses, social organizations and government agencies must also be evaluated by people and other organizations in order gain respect and credibility. As if the invisible hand of the market will magically solve all problems, the planning outline specifies that the construction of the credit infrastructure will help to strengthen healthcare services, lead to better hygiene and birth control,

deliver safer food, reinforce scientific and technological development, generate stronger environmental protection and bring improvements in many other sectors. Above all, it will help to construct and maintain social and political stability. This is like a form of credit fundamentalism, similar to free market fundamentalism, that believes an omniscient credit system will save China from social discontent, instability and other perils.

It is also important to point out that as much as the government is trying to use the social credit system to instil the so-called socialist core values, such as a “harmonic society”, “Chinese virtue” and “socialism with Chinese characteristics”, it is not promoting a brand of Chinese exceptionalism. Among the keywords, such as “sincerity”, “trustworthy”, “amity” and “patriotism”, that can be found throughout the planning document, there are also explicit references to the desire to integrate the so-called Chinese “socialist market economy” with the global market economy. For instance, it maintains that a positive credit infrastructure will promote corporate responsibility, a productive and efficient workforce, and a transparent and accountable government, all of which, it maintains, are crucial for China’s global competitiveness (Zhongguo Guowuyuan, 2014). After all, at the most fundamental level, the logic of economizing society through quantification is to break down and replace the old order with a self-proclaimed universal order that can be rendered in numerical and deeply statistical terms (Asad, 1994).

THE TOTAL INFORMATION SYSTEM

The dream of establishing a total information system, of amassing data and acting on this data, is not without precedent. In 1965, for example, a group of US social scientists and statisticians proposed establishing a national data centre in order to facilitate the storage, sharing and processing of large datasets owned by the government for use in carrying out research, designing social programmes and making policy decisions. However, the proposal was not adopted as it was vigorously opposed by the public and the US Congress precisely on account of the fear that this would lead to the infringement of privacy and the creation of an Orwellian dossier society (Kraus, 2013). Similarly, in the mid-1950s, some anthropologists and psychologists came up with the idea of a “database of dreams”, where everyday human dreams, life stories and wandering thoughts could be stored and then made available for analysis (Lemov, 2015). In the end, the idea of totality in all these proposed and

imaginary projects is more like a fantasy, and that fantasy has long been replaced by the more effective idea of networked information, which is explicitly manifested in the design of the internet that emerged during the Cold War. Driven by the fear of a nuclear apocalypse, architects of the system emphasized not just the importance of constant and real-time communications that the information network made possible, but also the necessity of its decentralization so that the entire system could not be incapacitated by a single strike (Naughton, 2016).

In his analysis of the decentralizing nature of networked surveillance, Roger Clarke (1988) has characterized such practice as “dataveillance”. Writing long before the rise of the social media, he argues that the kind of surveillance based on the mining of data linked by networked information technologies is far more powerful than the Orwellian totalitarian state, since the monitoring and analysis of the data trails take place constantly in linked and automated local processes. By now, obviously, the phenomena observed by Clarke has already saturated our everyday life. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that tech giants today, such as Amazon, Google and Facebook, know many of us better than we ourselves and that they are in some respect more powerful than the government.

The traditional sense of surveillance or the ubiquitous Big Brother trope is therefore no longer adequate to describe the digital landscape of the twenty-first century. In his discussion of the rise of the “expository society”, Bernard Harcourt (2015) argues that it is not just that our physical and online activities are being tracked constantly. It is also that we have become very eager to share our information in exchange for convenience, security and social belonging. To put this in lay terms, we are constantly posting and liking on social media in order to be liked and stay relevant. Similarly, we give out our most private information from secret login questions to biometric data in exchange for security. In this brave new world, we need to check in with the surveillance machine incessantly, and we have to constantly turn ourselves into spectacles for others to consume. In our desire to exhibit ourselves, we are like the incarcerated subject in Jeremy Bentham’s classic panopticon who wants to be seen rather than just watched (Harcourt, 2015; Horne & Maly, 2014, pp. 110–142). In essence, we are both watching Big Brother and wanting to be watched.

If big data in the neoliberal age has altered our sociality in fundamental ways, it has equally transformed our practice of knowledge. In particular, the implication of the total information system is far more consequential

than that of the total archive. Whereas “archive fever”, as Jacques Derrida (1998) puts it, is driven by the desire to collect and hoard in anticipation of the future in a vague sense, the modus operandi of surveillance capitalism is not simply to collect but also to calculate, analyse and act on those data in or near real time for capital accumulation, which, among other things, has the effect of creating infinite behavioural feedback loops. We may know nothing about computer algorithms and learning machines that we are helping to train, but they know us. Moreover, they guide and shape us in the process.

The Chinese dream of creating a standardized and aggregated, if not total, information system of its population is no different in this regard. Arguably, this dream is readily shared by both the government and tech conglomerates even if their interests are different. For tech giants, this is surveillance capitalism par excellence as mining data of the everyday will allow them to reach a much larger segment of the population that is not covered by traditional credit rating organizations (Chai, 2015). For the one-party security state, the potential access to these otherwise dispersed and unconnected databases provides a new capacity to govern that has been unthinkable until now.

Indeed, even at this moment, the degree of Chinese internet companies’ penetration into the everyday is already more pronounced than that of their non-Chinese counterparts. The messaging and payment app WeChat is the ultimate example that offers a glimpse into the future that is now. Introduced in 2011 by Tencent, China’s largest internet company, WeChat developed the first cross-platform instant messaging service. It has since evolved into an app that functions as a clearinghouse for a wide range of online activities, including shopping, travel, banking, messaging and much more. In a way, it is like the combination of WhatsApp, Facebook, Google, Amazon, eBay, Expedia, Uber and a dozen of other commonly used platforms in a single app. In 2016, WeChat alone had at least 700 million subscribers, over 90% of which were in China (*The New York Times*, 2016). These days, as China becomes increasingly cashless, urban and even rural citizens cannot conduct most of their daily activities smoothly without using the app. In theory at least, the information collected by Tencent along with Alibaba, Baidu and other major online platforms together can provide a detailed picture of their users, including their movement, finances, reading habits, health conditions, social networks and so forth.

Critics of surveillance capitalism are deeply concerned about the erosion of freedom, democracy and privacy that has resulted from big corporations' amassing of data of their users with little transparency and government supervision. In China, however, criticism of this sort is generally muted because heavy-handed state surveillance has always been the norm, and that the boundaries between the private and public domains have always been blurry. In short, even though there is no evidence yet that the government is planning to incorporate commercial databases for its social credit calculation, there is no doubt the potential is tremendous and tempting. Furthermore, despite their occasional reluctance, most Chinese citizens, especially Han Chinese who are educated, urban based and affluent, are supportive of the initiative because they believe that social credits will bring them security, convenience and prosperity (Kostka, 2019; Lee, 2019). All in all, while the social credit system is not a total information system, it is a system that seeks to deepen the reconceptualization the human and the everyday in the hegemonic economic and financial order.

THE FUTURE NOW

In late 2016, more than two years after the Chinese State Council published its planning outline on the implementation of the social credit system, the British science fiction anthology series *Black Mirror* premiered an episode called "Nosedive", which tells the story of a woman who was not allowed to board a plane due to her recently reduced social credit score. Somewhat predictably, the spiralling narrative ends with tragedy.¹¹ Although there is no indication that the dystopic science fiction was inspired by China's emerging new reality, and that the two cases have some crucial differences, the parallels are still uncanny.

Many media reports have noted the resemblance between China's social credit system and *Black Mirror's* dystopia. Unsurprisingly, the undertone of some of these observations is built on a long history of viewing China as an exotic and fearsome Other. In response to this renewed Cold War rhetoric, some critics (including some of those who had initially contributed to the sensational reporting mentioned above) have started to offer new "corrective" views, emphasizing that the official intention of the system is to guide morality, promote trust and facilitate law enforcement. In short, they contend that this is just a Chinese version of data-governance, and therefore the hysteria about the coming

dystopia is unwarranted (Develle, 2019; Matsakis, 2019). Some have further pointed to the fact that the implemented system so far is only local, fragmentary and partially digital (Horsley, 2018). Lost in the back and forth between the persistent Sinophobia and the insistence on evaluating China's situation in its own terms, however, is a recognition of the growing convergence between postsocialist China and market democracies in spite of their many differences. All nuances and differences aside, the logic of financialization, capital and the security state are actually the shared underpinning of today's expanding surveillance infrastructures in various nations.

That the future as fantasized by a British science fiction should so closely resemble the emerging everyday reality in contemporary China is therefore astonishing and yet unsurprising. After all, the "unimaginable" is able to appear in the science fiction precisely because it is imaginable and even desired in certain contexts. Already in early 2015, just months after the State Council had issued its comprehensive guidelines for constructing the social credit system by 2020, the financial wing of the tech giant Alibaba introduced the beta version of its own personal credit rating system, Sesame Credit (*Zhima Credit*). In 2020, Tencent has also launched its own credit scoring system based on WeChat transactions, even though the system so far is more like a loyalty reward programme (Hu & Guo, 2020). Meanwhile, with at least four hundred million users across the various platforms maintained by its subsidiaries, the Sesame Credit programme has been quick to collect participants' information such as personal identity, credit history, contractual reliability, behaviours and social relationships. Based on this information, participating users are assigned with social credit scores that are visible to others (Shu, 2014). Some users even see the advantages of displaying high social credit scores in their dating profiles. Users with high credit scores are also offered perks, such as faster loan approvals and faster check-in at some airports (Hatton, 2015; Kostka, 2019).¹² In short, the social credit platforms introduced by tech giants have been gamified with rewards that are designed to modify behaviour.

These commercial social credit platforms are not related to the system implemented by the government, however (Daum, 2017). And it remains unclear whether or how commercial social credit platforms are linked to the larger surveillance state (Ahmed, 2019). But even if commercial platforms such as Sesame Credit and Tencent Credit remain unconnected to

the government's system and even if user participation remains voluntary, the story for the government-run social credit system is entirely different. Soon after the planning outline had been announced, authorities at every level started to develop and implement their corresponding social credit infrastructure. For instance, in Chongqing municipality, local districts drew up blacklists of individuals and organizations whose conduct they regarded as “seriously untrustworthy”, lists that they intended to share with all other government agencies at least within the municipality (Cqnews.net, 2017). Similarly, major transportation services, such as China Rail and many Chinese airlines, have reportedly created their own blacklists, leaving millions of individuals no longer eligible to use some of their services (Chin & Wong, 2016; He, 2019). Social credit scores have crept into many other aspects of life—for instance, people who switch jobs too often as well as people who do not visit their elderly parents often enough have lower scores (P. Wood, 2018; Zhang, 2019). Although local implementation of the social credit programme has been rather uneven, one wonders when and how far the central government will further standardize and centralize the social credit system at the national level.¹³

For now at least, unlike the *Black Mirror* story, national social credit scores do not exist, and there is also no indication that social credit scores will become viewable by the general public like those gamified social credits run by tech conglomerates. Yet, ultimately, a “loyalty programme” run by the state, especially an authoritarian state, will certainly lead to rewards (and punishments) that are far more consequential. Moreover, as decentralized practices of dataveillance, social credit programmes managed by local governments and tech giants have together substantially economized and financialized Chinese society by making citizens and consumers credit conscious, as well as turning them into mouldable data subjects.

BIGGER THAN BIG OTHER

The social credit system is a technology of subjectivity and citizenship that seeks to calibrate and modify the behaviour of individuals and groups, compelling them to align themselves with the state-sanctioned social, economic and political order. At one level, by using reward and punishment to instil responsibility and self-regulation, the government is exercising its power through what Foucault refers to as “the conduct of

conduct” (Gordon, 1991, p. 48). As Foucault argues, “to ‘conduct’ is at the same time to ‘lead’ others (according to mechanisms of coercion which are, to varying degrees, strict) and a way of behaving within a more or less open field of possibilities. The exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome” (Foucault, 1982, p. 789). No wonder so many Chinese citizens, especially middle-class Han Chinese who have benefited tremendously from China’s uneven but rapid economic growth, are willing to accept or even embrace the idea of social credit as a way to ensure their economic prosperity. For them, high social credit scores are their tokens to become “civilized” and “high quality” citizens as defined by the state (Tomba, 2009).

Moreover, the Chinese social credit system is part and parcel of a state-led neoliberal model of development and governance. After all, neoliberalism is never just a set of laissez-faire practices. Behind the facade of the free market is always a political and legal structure created and guaranteed by state power.¹⁴ In China, that very market ecology is maintained by a strong party-state that prioritizes economic growth and political stability. The emerging social credit system that seeks to economize and financialize the social world is therefore a political instrument as much as an economic one. In particular, using governing algorithms, predictive analytics, big data profiling and so on, the system meticulously tracks, archives, calculates and moulds the activities of all citizens and organizations. If the dossier society of the socialist era saw China moving away from its earlier dream of cultivating critical and enlightened citizens, the mandatory social credit infrastructure in the postsocialist era takes it even further away from that dream by producing calculating individuals who are nothing but normalized and optimized for the state-defined order.

Politics and security are therefore equally central to China’s social credit system. By design or not, the social credit infrastructure has been unfolding together with an array of mass surveillance technologies with profound political and security ramifications. Driven by the imperatives of one-party rule, domestic stability, geopolitical ambitions, nationalism and capital accumulation, the party-state has introduced unprecedented technological measures to manage its population (BBC, 2019). Such technologies include an all-encompassing CCTV network with growing facial and gesture recognition capabilities, the collection of genetic and biometric information especially in the ethnic minorities areas, and the monitoring of online activities, as well as other forms of mass surveillance

and censorship (Churchill & Delaney, 2019; Leibold, 2020). Granted that many of these practices can also be found in liberal democracies, as in the controversial cases of dataveillance linked to the National Security Agency (NSA), Cambridge Analytica and Palantir that have come to light in recent years, the totality of them and the aggressive way through which they have been weaponized in China is still far more menacing (Burke, 2020; Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018; Steinberger, 2020).

With social credit systems of various kinds operating at all levels, China's Big (Br)other is indisputably more overt, ubiquitous and powerful. Even at this initial stage, what makes these social credit systems particularly ominous is that the practice has already amplified the existing systematic state violence against vulnerable individuals such as the poor, non-Han minorities and political dissidents by subjecting them to additional scrutiny and discrimination. As such, "dispossession by surveillance" as described by Zuboff (2019) has taken on yet another layer of meaning.

Nonetheless, to highlight the differences in scale and intensity between China and market democracies is not to demonize China as the Other by returning to Cold War rhetoric. In fact, if the idea of everyday surveillance by the government and tech giants as implicated by China's rising social credit ecology feels dystopian and yet strangely familiar, it is only because we have already seen and experienced fragmentary versions of it. From Brexit to Trumpism, mass surveillance and behaviour modification through digital infrastructures operated by corporations and states has been a vital force in disrupting the old liberal order, unleashing a new wave of populist and extremist politics that is heavily driven by algorithm-generated disinformation and misinformation. The old sense of the autonomous political subject has thus become increasingly limited if not altogether antiquated. Similarly, instead of creating politically aware citizens, the Chinese one-party security state has now resorted to the production of data subjects susceptible to digital control and manipulation based on pre-inputted parameters and algorithms. Thus, in spite of the many differences between China and market democracies, the two sides converge significantly in how their corresponding surveillance infrastructures have produced a new mode of governing paradigm that, as Zuboff argues, replaces "the engineering of souls with the engineering of behavior" (Zuboff, 2019, p. 376). In short, as human behaviours are increasingly shaped by computer algorithms and feedback loops, we drift toward becoming essentially posthuman (Hayles, 1999; Käll, 2017). If

this trend continues, then we may indeed finally (and tragically) reach the end of history.

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NOTES

1. In critiquing of the “real” fact as an unqualified concept, I do not mean to promote nihilism or to suggest that reality does not exist but rather to emphasize that facts are always mediated. For a discussion why facts remain important in this context, see Bruno Latour (2004).
2. According to the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), a data subject is a person whose personal data is subjected to be collected, stored and processed by digital technologies. See Käll's (2017) discussion, especially in the posthuman context.
3. Zuboff also argues that instrumentalism and totalitarianism are like “two species of power” (2019, chap. 12). While pointing out the cultural, political and institutional differences between China and the West, she nonetheless concludes that the technological trajectories of both are strikingly similar. While I agree that these are two sides of the same coin, my contention is that the Chinese state, which represents a brand of authoritarian neoliberalism with growing global geopolitical ambitions, seems to occupy a space in between these two modes of power. China's Big Other (see Zuboff, 2019, chap. 13), therefore, could be characterized as Big (Br)other.
4. In a sense, it was as if the impulse of liberal governmentality had taken an authoritarian turn. According to Mitchell Dean, “authoritarian governmentality differs from liberalism in that it regards its subjects' capacity for action as subordinate to the expectation of obedience” (Dean, 1999, p. 209).

5. The scope of Stasi's surveillance was nonetheless vast. At the time of the collapse of East Germany in 1989, the agency employed approximately 91,000 full-time staff and 300,000 informants, and it had over six million personal files. See https://wikileaks.org/wiki/Stasi_still_in_charge_of_Stasi_files, accessed 1 October 2016.
6. However, it is worth noting that given the way these dossiers were managed in socialist China, the vast rural population who did not work in factories or collectivized farms were generally neglected by the system.
7. Despite the prevalence of these dossiers, very little is known about the operations behind them in the socialist era, and there has not been any in-depth scholarly analysis of them. Nonetheless, some individual dossiers, including high profile ones, have been leaked. Those of high profile individuals provide a glimpse of what was recorded when an individual in question was under intense scrutiny. For example, see Duo (2007).
8. For example, these dossiers were also used by the Public Security Bureau (PSB) for its household registration programme, known as the hukou system, which restricted the mobility of citizens. Household registration determined where individuals were allowed to live or work or attend school, and the dossiers on Chinese citizens contained information that could be used to support or deny any request for transfer and relocation.
9. For example, whereas personal files in the earlier period tried to document the individual's "thought" meticulously, reform-era personal files often contain only simple and generic statements, making differences between individuals indiscernible and hence the files unusable (see Sun, 1994, p. 88).
10. A quick search of the term "social credit" in China Academic Journals, the most prominent and comprehensive database of Chinese publications, is revealing. Throughout the 1990s, there were only about two dozen essays, mostly on the subject of finance, that mentioned the concept of social credit in passing. In 2000 alone, however, there were more than forty articles that did. Moreover, for the first time, social credit appeared in the titles of six articles, suggesting that more in-depth discussions of social credit had begun to emerge. Since then, social credit has become a frequent topic, with several hundred articles either focusing or mentioning the concept each year. Moreover, starting in 2014, there are over a thousand such articles published each year. Many of them were direct responses to the publication of the central government's planning outline.
11. "Nosedive", which is based on a story by Charlie Brooker, was directed by Joe Wright. It was first screened at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2016 and premiered on Netflix on 21 October 2016, as the first episode of the third season of Black Mirror. See Black Mirror <https://www.netflix.com/ca/title/70264888>, accessed 5 June 2020.

12. Much has been written about our willingness to feed details of our lives to big data projects. For example, see the discussion of the idea of the quantified self in Swan (2013) and Simanowski (2016).
13. Needless to say, there is no doubt that the system will continue to evolve beyond 2020 based on new requirements and technology. See www.chinalawtranslate.com/en, www.chinalawtranslate.com/social-credit-mou-breakdown-beta, and www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/credit-regulation. Accessed 10 June 2020.
14. As David Harvey (2005) has observed, the so-called market reform started in 1978 under the late paramount leader Deng Xiaoping has to be understood in the context of the global advance of neoliberalism.

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