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*Moral & Economic Governance*

The Role of China’s Social Credit System in Relation to the Welfare State

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# Abstract

The Social Credit System is an expansive program which aims to rank Chinese citizens, companies, organizations, and government entities by their trustworthiness, which is measured through social credit points earned by complying with legal, professional, and moral standards in China. The early implementation of Social Credit has led to international concern over the system’s supposedly Orwellian nature. Counter to a public perception and historiography which is dominated by discussing the system’s function as a method of social control, this thesis asks how the SCS may alternatively be understood as part of China’s welfare state. In doing so, this thesis questions the tendency to cast the SCS as Orwellian by arguing that these critiques uncritically evaluate the SCS according to Western standards. As a result, the thesis calls for recognition of the cultural and political context in which the SCS exists if it is to be properly analyzed. The thesis then explores this cultural and political context in relation to China’s welfare state and demonstrates how the SCS can be shown to logically consistent with China’s Confucian history of welfare provision. It argues that the SCS provides vitally needed moral and economic governance in response to insecurities generated by China’s economic liberalization. By doing so, the SCS secures material and spiritual welfare in China. Both the program’s Confucian influence and response to the economic liberalization are demonstrated through analyzing the planning document for the SCS. The thesis concludes by arguing that understanding the SCS as part of China’s welfare state has significant explanatory power and should not be overlooked. Overall, it argues that analyzing the SCS through the lens of the welfare state is extremely relevant to understand how the social and economic spheres are linked in the view of Chinese governance. However, the thesis concludes by acknowledging that the program is too large to be adequately understood from any single frame of analysis and thus research should continue to be conducted from multiple frames of analysis.

# Introduction

In 2011 the People’s Republic of China held the 6th plenary session of the 17th Party Congress, a session which was defined by its focus on deepening cultural structural reform in China. One notable aspect of these reforms came in the calls for the construction of a “Socialist core value system” which consolidates the common ideological and moral bases of the country.[[1]](#footnote-1) The value system which came about as a result of the 6th plenum is the Social Credit System (SCS). The SCS is program which aims to rank Chinese citizens, companies, organizations and government entities by their trustworthiness, which is measured through social credit points earned by complying with legal, professional, and moral standards in China. The SCS pursues this aim by integrating credit and behavioral data from a variety of sources to judge entities for the lawfulness and morality of their conduct, while also creating online platforms where rewards and punishments are meted out to actors based on this data.

The SCS was outlined in the “Planning Outline for the Construction of a Social Credit System”, a notice issued by the State Council in 2014. This document designated the period of 2014-2020 as the planning phase for the construction of the SCS and stated that creating the SCS was vitally important for “perfecting the socialist market economy system” and “building a harmonious Socialist society”.[[2]](#footnote-2) The document goes on to say that these aims are forwarded by “establishing the idea of an sincerity culture, and carrying forward sincerity and traditional virtues” and “raising the honest mentality and credit levels of the entire society.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Since the release of this planning document the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has made significant progress towards constructing the SCS; however, China’s efforts to build the SCS and its early implementation have been the subject of widespread public discussion and international scrutiny. Foreign officials and international news organizations have decried the system for its perceived Orwellian nature and high potential for abuse at the hands of the CCP. These actors describe the SCS as dangerous new technology which employs futuristic algorithms, facial recognition scanners, and artificial intelligence for the purpose of consolidating power, cracking down on political dissidence, and controlling ‘virtually every facet of human life’ in China.[[4]](#footnote-4) Vice President Mike Pence embodied this attitude towards the SCS, announcing that

“By 2020, China’s rulers aim to implement an Orwellian system premised on controlling virtually every facet of human life—the so-called ‘social credit score… “In the words of that program’s official blueprint, it will ‘allow the trustworthy to roam everywhere under heaven while making it hard for the discredited to take a single step.’” – Mike Pence, 2018.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Statements such as these from foreign officials and media have given significant cause for alarm when considering the motivations behind and effects of the SCS upon China, however, the debate within academic literature has been somewhat more nuanced. Although scholarly research has been guided by a focus on interpreting the SCS as a method of social control, academics have refrained from condemning it as the media has done. Rather, the scholarly research has offered significant reason to question the dominant interpretation of the SCS. This is due largely to the variety of interpretations which academics have forwarded. Creemers situates the SCS within the context of China’s legal and governance reform and argues that understanding the SCS as primarily a surreptitious tool for social control demonstrates a lack of understanding of Chinese governance. This is because China does not need to employ veiled techniques at social control like in Western liberal democracies.[[6]](#footnote-6) Hoffman has linked the SCS with a larger effort by Chinese leadership to perfect ‘social management’, a concept which dates back to the founding of the PRC in 1949 and seeks to manage the Party and social order in the pursuit of ensuring China’s “holistic” or “comprehensive” state security.[[7]](#footnote-7) Similarly, Liang et al. have interpreted the SCS as an addition to China’s surveillance state infrastructure, yet they argue the SCS is primarily concerned with financial and economic regulation.[[8]](#footnote-8) Other scholars have argued that the SCS is a social classification tool which is more humanized than its historical antecedents in past Chinese systems, and still others have questioned how uniquely Chinese the SCS is at all.[[9]](#footnote-9)

## Research Question

The variety of interpretations the SCS has garnered thus far demonstrates its expansive nature and shows how it touches numerous areas of Chinese society. And while many aspects of the SCS have gathered scholarly interest in the short time since its planning and early implementation phases, there is one notable line of research which has yet to be explored, that of analyzing the SCS through the lens of the welfare state. This line of research would appear justified based on the SCS’s stated goal of being used to perfect the socialist market economy and create a harmonious society, two goals which can be argued to enhance welfare in China through the typical welfare state approach of social and economic regulation. Based upon this argument, this thesis contributes to the nascent yet rapidly bourgeoning literature on the SCS by asking “*To what extent can the social credit system be understood as a program of China’s welfare state?”* In doing so, it argues the predominant interpretation of the SCS as a method of Orwellian social control is resultant of a lack of cultural understanding of China. Placed in the correct context, the SCS can be seen to be not a futuristic method of Orwellian social control, but a technology of the welfare state which is logically consistent with the history of Chinese welfare provision.

## Sources

This thesis combines both primary source material and secondary literature, altogether including policy documents, book chapters, lectures, assorted news media, and journal articles. These sources are drawn from several disciplines which have useful explanatory power when applied to history, comprising of political science, philosophy, law, and the social sciences. The variety of sources and disciplines were selected in order to adequately explain the topic matter at hand, given that the welfare state and social policy are both conceptually and in practice interdisciplinary areas of study, and are frequently examined and explained in relation to concepts from sociology, economics, and philosophy.[[10]](#footnote-10) The main primary source is the 2014 Planning Outline for the Construction of a Social Credit System. This source is a policy document from the Chinese State Council which was translated by Rogier Creemers, a researcher at Leiden University.[[11]](#footnote-11) While the source is accessed through an informal website not direct associated with the Chinese government, the source and its translation are taken to be accurate due to Creemers position as a leading researcher on the SCS and his status as a China expert.

## Methodology and Structure

In asking the research question, this thesis has two aims: First, to question the predominant interpretation of the SCS as a method of Orwellian social control. Second, to show that the SCS promotes and secures welfare in the Chinese context. These aims subdivide the thesis into two respective parts, each two chapters in length.

To achieve the first aim, primary sources in the form of news media from Anglo-American news organizations are analyzed, and a discourse analysis is conducted. This section employs Pan and Kosicki’s framing analysis method to determine how the content and structure of news reports on the SCS have created the perception that the SCS is a method of Orwellian social control. [[12]](#footnote-12) This narrative has led to a narrow conception of the SCS in the minds of their Western readers and has caused other aspects of the SCS, like it welfare capabilities, to be under researched. These findings are contextualized using Vukovich’s theory of Sinological-Orientalism. [[13]](#footnote-13) In doing so, this section hopes to demonstrate that the media narrative about the SCS can be understood as resulting from and reinforcing cultural and political misunderstandings between China and the West. By demonstrating that knowledge production about China is not the result of unbiased reporting, this thesis seeks to contest the overly negative interpretations of the SCS while simultaneously justifying its choice of analyzing the SCS through the lens of the welfare state.

To achieve the second aim, part two begins by conceptually defining the welfare state in order to understand on what grounds the SCS may be considered part of it. Following this, the major philosophical influences on China’s welfare state are discussed in order to understand the formative influences on China’s welfare state. After this, the foundational document of the SCS is analyzed. In analyzing the 2014 Planning Outline for the Construction of a Social Credit System, this thesis traces the motivations, requirements, and goals of the SCS to find evidence that the SCS fits the criteria of a welfare state program and was intended to promote welfare in China. This evidence is found in the document’s stated aims of perfecting the socialist market economy and building a harmonious society. Following the identification of these aspects within the 2014 Document, the thesis then shows how these aims fit within the definition of the welfare state, as well as the history of China’s welfare provision. The aims provide economic regulation on the one hand and promote the moral and spiritual health of the nation on the other. In doing so, the analysis places the SCS within a broader historical context of Imperial Confucian Chinese welfare governance, which paternalistically seeks to enhance welfare for its citizens on a communitarian basis in which common rights and duties prevail when balanced with individual rights. After this, the SCS is examined in detail to demonstrate how its practical effects achieve the aims set out in the document. In the conclusion, it is ultimately argued that the SCS can be shown to be logically consistent within the history of Chinese governance and welfare provision by providing economic, social, and moral welfare in China.

## 

## Theoretical Framework

Part one and part two of this thesis are each guided by their own theoretical framework which is best suited to answer the questions posed their respective sections. Part one, which mainly deals with the media characterization of the SCS, relies on Daniel Vukovich’s theory of Sinological-Orientalism to contextualize and make sense of the narrative found in the primary news sources. Part two uses Foucault concept of governmentality to understand the actions, practices, and institutions or China’s welfare state.

Sinological-Orientalism critically investigates the foreign production of knowledge about China. Similar to how Said deconstructs the Orientalist’s representation of the Orient to expose the hidden meanings and falsehoods behind it, Vukovich takes a similar approach to Western constructions of China, revealing how China is consistently cast in a particular light by foreign texts, including media, films, scholarly work, and literature. Understanding the characteristics of sinological orientalism is indispensable for properly contextualizing the narrative around the SCS.

Part two is guided by Foucault’s concept of governmentality. Governmentality is used to identify the mentality underlying Chinese welfare state governance and thus understand how the SCS serves to promote welfare in the Chinese context. A major component of this use of governmentality is to trace China’s fundamental beliefs about welfare and welfare provision back through Chinese history, linking them to prominent philosophical schools of thought including Confucianism and Legalism. By demonstrating China’s welfare state governmentality is influenced by Confucian thought, the SCS’s function of promoting moral welfare through the building of a harmonious society can be interpreted as a function of the welfare state. Thus, the SCS can be seen as a product of Chinese welfare state governmentality, and therefore represents a tool used to promote welfare in China.

# 

# Chapter 1: The Media Narrative

In order to justify examining the SCS as a potential tool of China’s welfare state, the predominant interpretation which argues the SCS is a method of Orwellian social control must first be evaluated. To evaluate this argument, a comparative analysis of ten online news articles is conducted. Sources include daily papers, monthly magazines, and online publications from organizations covering a range of topics including how technology affects society, financial and economic news, cultural commentary, and the preservation of civil liberties.

Examining news articles can reveal far more than simply which events were reported at which time, but also how information is presented, organized, and which narratives are reinforced through media.[[14]](#footnote-14) To reveal this, Pan and Kosicki’s method of framing analysis is employed. Pan and Kosicki argue that news discourse is understood through frames. A frame is the central idea or concept which organizes and provides meaning to a story, and individual’s use frames to better understand the meaning in news discourse.[[15]](#footnote-15) Each story has a frame which is constructed using four discourse devices; syntactical, script, rhetorical, and thematic structure. Framing may thus be studied as a strategy of constructing and processing news discourse which operates in a sphere of shared beliefs about a society.[[16]](#footnote-16) This analysis does not focus on a single news story, but on multiple. Thus, the aim of the analysis is to characterize the framing of a single issue, the SCS, across the Anglo-American news discourse. After identifying the frame, it may be critically investigated and demonstrated to have affected understandings of the SCS thus far.

## Framing Analysis

The most clearly visible indication that multiple news reports on the SCS are bound by a single frame is found by examining their syntactical structure. Syntactical structure refers to the structure of the story as seen through its component parts, headlines, leads, background, and closure.[[17]](#footnote-17) Headlines are the most powerful framing device, followed by leads or introductions, both of which suggest a particular perspective to view the reported event. Of the ten news stories analyzed, seven of them present the SCS as method of social control described as “Orwellian”, “dystopian”, or make an explicit reference to these ideas in their headlines and leads.**[[18]](#footnote-18)** Three of the articles refrain from this terminology, instead discussing the SCS with a certain degree of nuance.**[[19]](#footnote-19)** The Washington Times’ story reads “'Social credit score': China set to roll out 'Orwellian' mass surveillance tool” and leads by describing the SCS as “high-tech system of mass surveillance and coercion aimed suppressing political dissent among its 1.4 billion people”.[[20]](#footnote-20) The Economist reports “China invents the digital totalitarian state” while the New York Times reads: “Inside China’s Dystopian Dreams: A.I., Shame and Lots of Cameras.[[21]](#footnote-21) Other headlines and leads share this focus, using words like ‘dystopian’, ‘Orwellian’, and ‘nightmarish’, while comparing the SCS to Big Brother.**[[22]](#footnote-22)** It is easy to see that the syntactic structure of the stories suggests a frame in which the SCS is an Orwellian method of social control used by the Chinese government.

The rhetorical structure of the stories is consistent with the frame suggested by the syntactical structure. Analyzing it deepens understanding of how the Orwellian frame constructed. Rhetorical structure describes the stylistic choices used in a story to increase the salience of a certain point or evoke certain responses.[[23]](#footnote-23) In the case of the news stories analyzed here, a frequently used rhetorical structure is the repeated comparison between Chinese governmental action and futuristic dystopias such as those created by Orwell or by the popular show Black Mirror. This is done either by explicitly using the terms Orwellian or dystopian as seen in the leads of many of the articles but is also found in the content of the stories which suggest the SCS will lead to political repression, for example through statements like the one offered by the Economist, which compares the SCS to a recent work of dystopian fiction in which “the Chinese yuan is a global currency and people all wear an “apparat” around their neck with RateMe Plus technology” and “China’s Communist Party may be on its way to inventing the real thing.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

Another rhetorical strategy is seen when news reports link the current Chinese government with Mao’s government of decades prior. The New York Times writes that “China’s new surveillance is based on an old idea: Only strong authority can bring order to a turbulent country. Mao Zedong took that philosophy to devastating ends, as his top-down rule brought [famine](https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/06/world/asia/06iht-letter06.html) and then the Cultural Revolution.”**[[25]](#footnote-25)** While the statements about Mao and the cultural revolution are correct, it is a tenuous link between the SCS, a program which provides credit scores to legal entities, to the Cultural Revolution and the resulting famine. By linking the SCS to the deaths caused by the great famine, the stated goals of the SCS are thrown by the wayside and it is evaluated as a surreptitious method of controlling the population. This is heightened by the implication that the SCS may lead to millions of deaths as past Chinese governmental action has.

By placing the SCS in the context of past Chinese governmental failures, the analyzed news stories also utilize script structure, which seeks to organize news reports according to the structure of a popular story.[[26]](#footnote-26) In this case, the story suggested is one in which the Chinese government masks the true purpose of its public policy in acceptable rhetoric to achieve a secret aim. The Washington Times writes that the SCS seeks to control behavior, “ostensibly as part of a financial credit monitoring system similar to those used in the West.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Here a comparison between the West and China is explicitly offered, in which the credit systems of the West are taken to serve their stated function, whereas China’s systems are understood to be cloaking their true purpose of social control. The Economist adds to this story, uncritically stating that “Big-data systems in democracies are not designed for social control. China’s explicitly would be.”[[28]](#footnote-28) This further adds to a frame which asserts an essential difference between China and the West, in which China is inherently untrustworthy and dishonest about their policies and Western governments are honest. The structure of these story supports the a priori assumption is that the SCS as a tool which cannot be examined for its stated purpose; it must be intended for the purposes of social control.

Analyzing the thematic structure of the news reports demonstrates the same trend as the previous discourse devices. The basic units of thematic structure are difficult to pinpoint but Pan and Kosicki identify them as the main message of a summary or in the main body of a story.[[29]](#footnote-29) In the news reports analyzed here, there are several main themes and subthemes which may be derived from the logical relations of the quotations, sources, and depictions.

First, the SCS is consistently discussed as a measure of political compliance which is designed for the purpose of upholding the CCP. This is clearly exemplified in the quote from the Washington Times, which describes the SCS as “high-tech system of mass surveillance and coercion aimed suppressing political dissent among its 1.4 billion people”.[[30]](#footnote-30) This is done despite many of the stories acknowledging that the SCS is designed as a program which is largely dealing with financial and economic regulation. This leads into the second theme, which suggests that the CCP are enforcing the SCS to the detriment of the Chinese population.

The theme which suggests the SCS carries only negative effects is forwarded by the consistent discreditation of its stated functions to regulate the economy or society, or these functions are omitted entirely, despite being a stated aim of the SCS. Consistently, the articles analyzed suggest that the functions relating to promoting welfare, social and economic regulation, are merely superficial justification for implementing a strict method of social control.[[31]](#footnote-31)

## The Orwellian Frame

Taken altogether, the discourse devices used by the media create a frame which holds the *a priori* assumption that the SCS functions only as a sweeping new form of social control which already does or inevitably will trample on both individual rights and further pave the way for Chinese authoritarianism. The stated aims of the SCS receive scant attention and are written off as empty, superficial justifications for implementing an otherwise contentious system. By and large the sources implicitly and explicitly depict social credit as a Chinese aberration, one which almost certainly is intended for nefarious use in oppressing the population by the despotic CCP and ushering in a new technologically driven dystopia.

This frame is problematic because it influences popular, governmental, and academic understandings of the SCS. As the analyzed news reports have demonstrated, media reports on the SCS further an incomplete understanding of the SCS, which does not give any consideration to the possibility that the SCS may have a purpose outside of social control. This type of reporting is reinforced by governmental officials such as American President Mike Pence, who has also cast the SCS as an Orwellian tool. This interpretation of the SCS can be seen to affect academic studies of the SCS and guide their focus, as numerous researchers respond to the popular perceptions of the SCS in their research, leading to a disproportionate focus on social control and a lack of other frames of analysis, for example through the lens of the welfare state.

The potential function of the SCS to deliver a form of social control is not what is contested here, but rather its depiction as Orwellian. Virtually all governmental action in the realm of social or public policy exhibits some form of social control, but in this case, it is Chinese policy which is assumed to be automatically Orwellian.

# Chapter 2: Constructions of China

The previous chapter established that media reporting on the SCS served to construct a frame in which the SCS is interpreted as a method of Orwellian social control. In this chapter that frame will be investigated using Said’s concept of orientalism as a starting point. This is done to demonstrate that the tendency to view China and its governmental actions from within a frame suggesting they are inherently despotic or Orwellian fits within a larger context of Western knowledge construction about China.

## Orientalism

Said’s concept of Orientalism refers to three interdependent areas. First, the academic study of the Orient. Second, the style of thought which accompanies the discipline, which Said sums up as “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident'”. And third, Orientalism as historically and materially defined, "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient . . . in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient".[[32]](#footnote-32) Ultimately, Orientalism is a method of upholding Western superiority by producing popular and academic knowledge about the Orient which asserts its fundamental difference from and inferiority to the West.

While Said’s observations in this realm are in reference to the Arab world and not China, Vukovich asserts that “China and Islam share a certain discursive history in Western intellectual-political culture”, as does virtually every national culture subjected to colonialism and imperialism.[[33]](#footnote-33) Thus, to understand how the West constructs knowledge about China, Vukovich’s concept of Sinological-Orientalism is employed.

## Sinological-Orientalism

Vukovich argues that writings on China appear Orientalizing not only in the sense of literary descriptions, but also in a social scientific manner which is less overtly orientalist but more scientifically and journalistically detail oriented.[[34]](#footnote-34) Consequently, Vukovich takes broad aim at knowledge about China produced outside of China and examines a range of exterior sources including the social sciences, politics, journalism, film, literature, and current theory.[[35]](#footnote-35) He justifies his wide focus by explaining that

“discourses are produced across a range of sites; knowledges are always multiply constituted, not hermetically sealed, and it is paradoxically this dispersion that gives them their strength and unity and that constitutes a discursive formation like orientalism in Said’s sense.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

Thus, Sinological-Orientalism is visible in its ‘system of dispersion’, which is to say the regularities apparent across seemingly unconnected statements, objects, and texts about China.[[37]](#footnote-37) In the case of the previous chapter, the frame was identified across various news reports, making up their own system of dispersion. The regularities across a system of dispersion combine to form authoritative ‘statements of power’ which can be explicit (as in speech or text) but are also implied and signified indirectly, both by specialists as well as laypersons.[[38]](#footnote-38) Thus, a statement of power can be interpreted as similar to a frame as identified by Pan and Kosicki.

The common statement across the texts analyzed in *China and Orientalism* is that China is in the process of becoming the same as the liberal modern West.[[39]](#footnote-39) So, In contrast to Said’s Orientalism, contemporary Sinological-Orientalism moves away from asserting China’s ‘essential difference’ and instead portrays China as in the process of becoming the same as the West and becoming liberal, open, and free.[[40]](#footnote-40) However, this sameness is nonetheless structured by a hierarchical difference. This is exemplified in the citation of numerous temporary obstacles to explain China’s lack of (Western defined) freedom, the most prominent obstacle being the CCP.[[41]](#footnote-41) Vukovich summarizes, saying “Were it not for this anachronistic, evil institution, the logic goes, China would and will be becoming-the-same and joining the normal world”.[[42]](#footnote-42)

## Sinological Orientalism, the CCP, and the SCS

This logic and its concomitant statement of power is evident in the frame constructed by the discourse devices in the analyzed journalism, literature, and political statements about China and the SCS. Gao argues this construction of knowledge delegitimizes China domestically and internationally, ultimately serving Western national and transnational interests regarding economic, military, and technological dominance.[[43]](#footnote-43) China is painted as perpetually breaking the status quo: as an aggressor on trade, a threat to democracy, and a threat to the American led international order.[[44]](#footnote-44)

The SCS in particular is interpreted as enabling Chinese deviancy in these areas.[[45]](#footnote-45) It is hyperbolically written about as Orwellian, dystopian, and the tool of an illegitimate party state which will use it to consolidate political power and enable a more direct foreign policy.[[46]](#footnote-46) The New York Times’ invokes Mao and the Chinese famine while discussing the SCS to allude to the disastrous consequences of Chinese governmental aspirations while Vice President Pence speaks of “China’s rulers” implementing the SCS over its population, adding to the implication that the agency and free will of the Chinese populace has been utterly suppressed by the CCP.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Critiques of the SCS as Orwellian and of the CCP as evil or dystopian are levelled by the media, academics, and politicians, and align “in complete harmony” with US foreign policy directed at China.[[48]](#footnote-48) Consequently, interpretations which assert the SCS’s Orwellian nature should not be taken as neutral or unbiased products, but understood in their Sino-Orientalist context and revealed for constructing biased yet authoritative knowledge about the CCP and the SCS. This can be understood as part of a larger US strategy of politically motivated confrontation and de-legitimation.[[49]](#footnote-49) This is evident when one considers the framing of facts about the SCS. For example, speaking of ‘China’s rulers’ or remarking that there are “encouraging signs of popular resistance” to the SCS encourages the belief that the CCP and its SCS are being implemented in an Orwellian manner.[[50]](#footnote-50) This belies the fact that both the CCP and SCS are popular institutions. For example, the CCP has been shown to maintain high levels of support which cannot be explained by political fear or lack of education.[[51]](#footnote-51) Instead, higher educational attainment results in greater levels of popular support.[[52]](#footnote-52) Another reason for high approval of the CCP is found in the level of performance-based satisfaction in areas of policy performance and governance.[[53]](#footnote-53) Similarly, the SCS enjoys approval rates of up to 80%, with better educated respondents displaying more support for SCS than lower educated respondents.[[54]](#footnote-54) The results of this research into the domestic approval rates of SCS should offer a significant reason to question the popular narrative of the SCS being an Orwellian tool of the CCP. However, as Gao notes, it is far less important what actually happens in China as opposed to whether it fits a media narrative.[[55]](#footnote-55)

Evidently, the framing of the SCS in the context of Sino-Orientalist constructions of China gives rise to questions about on what grounds the SCS is opposed. While there are legitimate causes for concern in the SCS, and the CCP is by no means exempt from criticism, the basis for these critiques should not be centred around different cultural and political values in China versus the West. The level of inattention or implicit discreditation which is commonly displayed to facts such as the high popular approval of the CCP and SCS are evidence of an ongoing Western paternal mindset towards China. There are legitimate ways to govern a country which do not fall within the normative Western paradigm of political thought. Disqualifying the CCP or its SCS based on its incongruence to the Western style of governance is misrepresentative and judging either in relation to Western norms obscures more about their true functions than it reveals.

From the Western standpoint, if one takes a positivist approach to searching for ‘Orwellian’ methods of social control in the SCS, inevitably they will be located. Furthermore, with the proper tone and media framing, many governmental programs could be described as Orwellian. However, these observations also hold true in the West. For example, an article posted to a Chinese governmental website describes the “American social credit system” of FICO scores and social security numbers; it identifies individuals, gathers their personal and behavioral information, and provides a numerical credit rating to individuals.[[56]](#footnote-56) It notes,

“in the United States, almost every link in the daily life of individuals is closely related to credit, and it is difficult for an individual or enterprise with a credit taint to gain a foothold in society… even Americans will check each other's credit history when they are in love.”[[57]](#footnote-57)

This fact should not necessitate falling entirely into cultural relativism when evaluating governmental actions. However, it does call for greater awareness of what these differences may be and calls for the discourse surrounding the SCS to be done with awareness of the proper cultural and political context.

# Chapter 3: The Welfare State

Part two of this thesis will move on from tempering the predominant interpretation of the SCS as a dystopian tool of the CCP and begin arguing for a reconceptualization of the SCS as a tool of China’s welfare state. This is done on the basis of its function to promote material and spiritual welfare in China by providing social, moral, and economic regulation. To demonstrate how these functions fit within China’s welfare state, the welfare state must first be defined.

The welfare state has historically been defined in various ways; the traditional minimalist approach is to define a welfare state as any state which tasks itself with the responsibility for securing a basic modicum of welfare for its citizens. Therborn expands this definition to argue that welfare states are states which devote the majority of their daily routine activities to the welfare needs of their people.[[58]](#footnote-58) Notably, Esping-Anderson classifies welfare states into ideal regime types based on the level of decommodification achieved by their policies.[[59]](#footnote-59) However, these definitions are not the best suited for analyzing China.

Walker and Wong argue these definitions are ultimately each part of the Western ethnocentric construction of the welfare state. [[60]](#footnote-60) This construction sees the welfare state as a democratic capitalist project and thus leaves out welfare states which do not possess one of these institutions. As a result, China is automatically precluded from welfare state analysis and the concept of welfare as a whole is open to the criticism that it relies on a narrow cultural understanding of welfare.[[61]](#footnote-61) In order to accommodate this nonwestern conception of welfare and the welfare state, Garlands definition of the welfare state as a form of governmentality is employed.

## Governmentality

Governmentality refers to the distinctive mentalities of government. Mentality in this sense refers to the combination of how a government conceptualizes of the problems to be addressed, thinks and acts upon these problems, and which specific technologies are employed to address these problems.[[62]](#footnote-62) Technologies here are taken in the early Foucauldian sense of the word to mean the methods and procedures for governing human beings.[[63]](#footnote-63) Mentalities of government contain rational and a-rational elements which each influence governmental response to a problem.[[64]](#footnote-64) The rational elements consist of scientific, systematic knowledge such as that provided by academic disciplines like economics or statistics. The a-rational elements consider political, rhetorical, and cultural influences when identifying or responding to a problem.[[65]](#footnote-65) For example, in the case of the welfare state, a rational influence on the state’s conceptualization or approach to a problem would be motivated by specialist knowledge from the discipline of economics drawing on models of the national economy, statistics, and so on. An a-rational influence would be motivated by political or cultural factors, for example if a certain demographic is considered politically important. This was the case with the United States welfare program of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). AFDC was implemented after the first World War and was designed to provide aid to families with fathers who were deceased, absent, or unable to work.[[66]](#footnote-66) In this case, families headed by a female widower were politically cast as deserving of welfare benefits, demonstrating how political and cultural factors may influence a mentality of governance.[[67]](#footnote-67)

The influence of rational and a-rational approaches in governmentality are recognized, however, historians and political sociologists have nevertheless remained minimally attentive to the role of cultural factors in influencing policies and institutions.[[68]](#footnote-68) This is reflected in Garland’s work, as he focuses heavily on the rational influences to the welfare state. This is not a problem however, as a discussion of which a-rational elements influence China’s welfare state will take place after the welfare state is ideally and conceptually defined. But for the purpose of this analysis, governmentality should be understood as how a government’s rational and a-rational influences mutually affect government preferences, resulting in a mentality of governance with a specific conceptualization of and method for targeting problems.

## The Welfare State

Garland defines the welfare state as a distinctive form of governmentality, a mentality concerned with providing welfare via “a specific mode of constituting the economy, assuring social security, and guaranteeing social provision.”[[69]](#footnote-69) The specific mode of constituting the economy emerged in the 20th century postwar era and understands the economy from a macroeconomic perspective. Consequently, problems of employment and security are seen by the welfare state as affecting the entire population and economy rather than only affecting the poor.[[70]](#footnote-70)

However, engaging with problems of employment and security has led to a common misconception about the welfare state, namely, that the welfare state is only concerned or primarily concerned with providing benefits and safety nets for the poorest members of society. This misconception severely limits a proper understanding of the welfare state, for while it undoubtedly does provide poor relief, the primary aim of welfare state governmentality is to govern the nation’s economy and population in the interest of economic growth and social security as a whole.[[71]](#footnote-71) This means that a whole host of programs which serve these functions are welfare state programs. But this does not mean that policies or programs cannot serve other functions; Garland notes that “Properly used, the concept of the welfare state only ever refers to a specific dimension of governmental activity—one part of a much larger complex that carries out many other functions and forms of expenditure.”[[72]](#footnote-72)

The goals of the welfare state are sought to be obtained by applying governmental regulation through five main institutions, each of which employ various technologies: social insurance, social assistance, public services and social rights, personal social services, and government of the economy. Social insurance protects workers from a loss of earnings due to sickness, injury, disability, old age, or unemployment.[[73]](#footnote-73) Social assistance uses programs like income support, tax allowances, food stamps, or housing benefits to make up the ‘safety net’, together with social insurance.[[74]](#footnote-74) Public services and social rights refer to public goods like education, healthcare, and transport on the one hand and social rights like minimum wages, paid holidays, maternity and paternity leave, or employment protections on the other.[[75]](#footnote-75) Personal social services consist of programs like social work, children’s services, care for the elderly and disabled or community care for the mentally ill.[[76]](#footnote-76) The final area of welfare state governance is the government of the economy, consisting of fiscal policies to curb inflation, labour policies, farming and food subsidies, and others.[[77]](#footnote-77)

Welfare state governmentality is predicated on the collectivization and socialization of activities.[[78]](#footnote-78) This is evident in the five institutions listed above; each of them adopts this approach towards guaranteeing the provision of welfare. This means they intimately link the economic and the social spheres in their actions, resulting in economic action being constrained by a-rational influences, or the norms of social, political, and moral life.[[79]](#footnote-79) This is viewed by some as the imposition of a “moral economy” on the market economy, and has resulted in debates concerning the appropriate level of governmental control or interference in the private sphere.[[80]](#footnote-80) However, linking the social and economic serves more than simple altruism; moral social provision serves economic interest by stabilizing the negative effects of the market and making the market socially and politically sustainable.[[81]](#footnote-81) Consequently, the ‘moral economy’ is a common element of welfare state governance. This blurring of social, economic, public and private inherently results in some degree of governmental or political control over the population in pursuit of its aims. This is especially true in China’s case, where governance has historically been characterized by high levels of state control and intervention in the private sphere. This is exemplified in the Chinese institution of Hukou, which linked family and state by tying an individual’s access to employment and welfare benefits to their or their families place of birth.[[82]](#footnote-82) However, a certain degree of social control does not diminish a programs capacity to promote welfare. [[83]](#footnote-83)

The reality that all state’s conceptions of welfare are related to the norms of social, political, and moral life necessitates a critical look at the Western definition of welfare and the welfare state. As previously mentioned, the welfare state is typically understood as part of a Western ethnocentric construction; Garland’s definition of the welfare state is comprehensive on the rational elements in welfare state governmentality but ultimately falls into this Western centric category as well due to his exclusively Western understanding of welfare. This narrow cultural understanding of welfare limits welfare to being understood almost exclusively in economic terms, for example in Esping-Anderson’s ‘decommodification’ analysis. However, welfare has historically encompassed more than simple economic provision in China. It has also been understood that it is the state’s duty to promote moral or spiritual virtue for the welfare of citizens and the state as a whole.[[84]](#footnote-84) Garland’s definition should not be abandoned however, as by understanding the welfare state as a form of governmentality, it inherently allows for the consideration of how a-rational elements like culture, ideology, and politics influence the welfare state.

Thus, the next section will demonstrate how China’s welfare state has been formatively shaped by the a-rational influence of Confucian thoughts on welfare provision which include the prescription of moral or spiritual health in the definition of welfare. It can also be shown that this Confucian influence is still a major determinative influence on Chinese welfare provision up to the current day. Consequently, understanding welfare to include the prescription of moral and spiritual wellbeing is not only justified by historical precedent but is a key factor in conceptualizing the SCS as a program of China’s welfare state.

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## Chinese Welfare and Imperial Confucianism

China’s welfare state has been definitively shaped by a-rational influences, most notably its intellectual and philosophical traditions. These traditions have created a distinct relationship between morality, politics, and welfare provision in China. The most influential school of thought which has influenced China’s approach to welfare governance is Imperial Confucianism, which is still a major influence in contemporary China.[[85]](#footnote-85) Imperial Confucianism is a political philosophy derived from a fusion of classical Confucianism and Legalism which set the moral code for welfare provision in China which persists to this day. [[86]](#footnote-86) In addition to this, Imperial Confucianism solidified a distinctive conception of welfare in Chinese history while also providing a model of how this conception of welfare was to be achieved by using specific technologies. Confucianism is an ethical philosophy with its origins in 500 BC which stresses the principles of benevolence or humaneness (ren), reason, rites or rules of propriety (li) and filial piety (xiao).[[87]](#footnote-87) When applied to governance, these Confucian principles make up a political philosophy for those in power as well as those who are governed. [[88]](#footnote-88) This political philosophy is primarily concerned with achieving social order and harmony by stressing the values of obedience, respect, and care towards elders, while also positioning morality at the center of all governmental action.[[89]](#footnote-89) Legalism shares Confucianism’s goal of social order and harmony, but contrary to Confucianism, is an amoral philosophy of governance. Legalism priorities the efficient implementation of policy to achieve the aims of the state and utilizes rewards and punishments to guide the people.[[90]](#footnote-90) Taken together, these two philosophies were adopted as Imperial Confucianism by the Han in 136 BCE, and as a result the Chinese conception of welfare and the state’s approach to securing this welfare was altered to incorporate the values of Imperial Confucianism.[[91]](#footnote-91)

By combining classical Confucianism’s focus on benevolence, respect, and morality with Legalism’s focus on effective punishment and policy implementation, Imperial Confucianism set two prevailing trends in Chinese welfare provision. The first deals with how Chinese regimes conceived of the welfare of the people and the state, and the other deals with the approach the state took in securing this conception of welfare. Regarding the conception of welfare as influenced by Imperial Confucianism, the preeminence of morality which was dictated by Confucian values made it so governing in accordance with Confucian morality became equivalent to practicing good governance in China.[[92]](#footnote-92) As to how the state would seek to promote this morality, the dual influence of the Confucian values of benevolence and obedience to social hierarchy, and the Legalist influence which positioned the state’s desires as supreme resulted in the institution of paternalism becoming enshrined as a component of good governance in the Chinese context.[[93]](#footnote-93)

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## The Political-Cultural Rules of Paternalism and Moral Education

Taken together, these two trends make up what Fairbrother refers to as the “political-cultural rules” of good governance in China, that a good government is paternalistic and rules according to Confucian morality.[[94]](#footnote-94) In conjunction with a paternalistic outlook, ruling according to Confucian morality places multiple duties on the state. On the one hand it means government officials must follow the norms of Confucian morality and be morally exemplary. On the other hand, it means the state is also tasked with the duty to model this behavior for its citizens and educate the populace on moral or spiritual behavior to ensure the welfare of individuals as well as the state at large. In the context of the welfare state, the political cultural rules of Chinese paternalism and moral governance can be viewed as an institution similar to the five institutions identified by Garland. Just as with the other institutions of the welfare state, paternalistic moral governance employs a variety of technologies to achieve its aims which will be discussed below.

State sponsored moral education has held such a high priority for Chinese leaders historically because moral knowledge in China is not only seen as vital to the health of individual citizens, but society and the state as a whole. Social order, harmony, moral or spiritual welfare, and material welfare are inherently linked in the view of Chinese regimes from Imperial times up to the present day. Fairbrother states that “The paternalistic state was also openly concerned and caring for the people’s spiritual and material well-being, both of which were in mutually reinforcing relationships with overall social stability.” [[95]](#footnote-95) By educating the population on Confucian morality the people are considered to be spiritually nourished and taught the values of contributing to a productive society. This prevents major social dislocations which would in turn inhibit the state’s ability to provide for the material welfare of its citizens, and by continually providing for the material welfare of their citizens, the state preempts criminal and immoral behavior which disrupt society. Unlike Western welfare states, China is a paternalistic state which has historically been tasked with ensuring the wellbeing of its citizens both materially and spiritually, in a mutually reinforcing manner. Thus, a vital component of welfare as conceptualized by Chinese governments is ensuring the moral and spiritual health of members in society.

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## Technologies for Moral Cultivation

That prescribing Confucian morality is an activity of China’s welfare state becomes eminently clear when viewing Chinese welfare provision through a historical lens. Fairbrother has shown that Confucian morality was a central component of Chinese governance throughout the Imperial period, beginning with the Han in 136 BCE, going through the Tang and Song dynasties from 618-1279, and ending with the Manchu Qing dynasty in 1911.[[96]](#footnote-96) He says “the government gradually took on the responsibility of actively providing Confucian based moral education to people” through a variety of technologies.[[97]](#footnote-97) This can be seen in the implementation of civil servant tests based on Confucian texts, state sponsored schools which promoted Confucian morality, or the public lecture system in rural areas, which covered filial piety, harmony, peace, cooperation, education, honesty, and crime prevention, among others.[[98]](#footnote-98) He notes “the entirety of the Sacred Edicts 16 maxims is essentially a list of the peoples most basic duties to the common good, about which local administrators and their representatives were expected to lecture and expound at regular meetings with rural inhabitants”.[[99]](#footnote-99) The focus on moral provision continues into the present day in China, despite a lack of overt references to Confucianism after 1911. Chinese governments in the reform and contemporary period continue to espouse Confucian ideals under adapted ideological terms, which are plainly visible in numerous state declarations. The communist party’s 1982 constitution confirms its responsibility to cultivate citizens spiritual livelihood by promoting culture, education, and morality.[[100]](#footnote-100) Similarly, the CCP in 2001 stated its goal to “strengthen the development of socialist morality and ruling the nation through morality”, and even more recently, one of the major goals of the SCS is to assist in the building of a harmonious society, demonstrating that moral education is very much on the agenda of China’s welfare state.[[101]](#footnote-101) The tactics listed above, including state sponsored moral education, public lecturing, and the 16 edicts, should be understood as technologies employed by the Chinese welfare state to enhance moral or spiritual health in China.

## Imperial Confucian Welfare State Governmentality

By combining Garland’s approach to welfare and the Imperial Confucian approach to welfare, China’s mentality towards welfare provision has been elucidated. On the one hand, as identified by Garland, the welfare state seeks to secure social and economic security by applying governmental regulation in five main areas. On the other, the Chinese state has historically engaged in paternalistic moral governance to secure certain welfare goals. Combining Garland’s approach with China’s a-rational influence of Imperial Confucianism leads to an understanding of China’s mentality towards welfare provision.

This mentality could be termed Imperial Confucian welfare state governmentality, which uses the modern methods of the welfare state to achieve an Imperial Confucian conception of welfare. This conception sees welfare as having mutually reinforcing social, economic, and moral components. In the following section, the foundational document of the SCS will be examined to find specific terms which are linked to Imperial Confucian welfare provision. Additionally, the document will be searched to find phrases which indicate the SCS is designed to deliver moral governance in the aim of promoting economic efficiency. This demonstrates the linkage between spiritual and material which is characteristic of Imperial Confucian welfare provision and shows that the SCS in an exercise of Imperial Confucian welfare state governmentality.

# Chapter 4: The Social Credit System

This analysis begins with an external criticism of the source, discussing its authorship, accuracy, and intended readership. After that point the analysis will move to internal criticism and identify the main aims of the SCS. These aims will be contextualized by analyzing specific terms to understand how they are linked to Imperial Confucian welfare state governmentality. After analyzing the content of the stated aims, they are historicized, meaning the historical factors leading to their inclusion in the document are discussed. From there, the particular methods of the SCS as outlined in the document will be discussed to demonstrate how they serve to achieve the main goals of the SCS.

## The 2014 Planning Outline for the Construction of a Social Credit System

The 2014 Planning Outline for the Construction of a Social Credit System is the authoritative document to consult when researching the SCS. The document was created by the State Council and distributed to all provincial, autonomous region, and municipal People’s Governments, as well as all State Council ministries, commissions, and directly subordinate departments.[[102]](#footnote-102) The fact that the document bears no individual’s name is characteristic of the estrangement of the author in government memoranda identified by Kittler over the past two centuries.[[103]](#footnote-103) As such, the individual history of the author cannot be explored, only the State Council. In creating the planning outline, the State Council reacts to the call for a social credit system which was issued in the 6th plenum of the 17th Party Congress in 2011.[[104]](#footnote-104) This plenum was focused on cultural and ideological reform in China, and gave special note to carrying forward traditional Chinese culture and virtues through the construction of a “Socialist core value system”.[[105]](#footnote-105) The focus of the 6th plenum guides the analysis of the 2014 document to focus on the cultural and ideological aspects of the SCS. As such, this analysis searches for the presence of an Imperial Confucian mindset towards welfare provision. This is done by identifying specific terms which have a Confucian history, or by identifying phrases and stated motivations which indicate that the realms of spiritual and material welfare are viewed as inextricably linked in a characteristically Imperial Confucian manner. By employing this method, this analysis recognizes the use of governmental memoranda to explain the motives and rationale behind certain policies while also attempting to remain aware of the role public state documents may have in forwarding official state narratives.[[106]](#footnote-106)

The format of the document as well as its directly intended readership give some clues into how it was meant to be utilized. To begin with, the document is almost 12,000 words of dense policy language which primarily focuses on the intended goals and methods of the SCS. However, it does not offer a determinative blueprint for how the SCS is to be constructed. This can be seen as characteristic of China’s distinctive policy modeling process of decentralized experimentation. In this model, the central government encourages local governments to create their own interpretations of policies based off state directives, and these local policies are then adapted and consolidated into a finished national policy.[[107]](#footnote-107) The size of the document, as well as awareness of this policy modeling process directs attention not to the minutiae of specific sections, but rather to the overarching aims, goals, and ideological underpinnings of the document.

## Target Aims and Guiding Ideology

In the opening section of the 2014 outline, two large aims can be discerned which appear to be driving the SCS. The document states that constructing a social credit system is “an important method to perfect the Socialist market economy system” and an important basis for “building a harmonious Socialist society”.[[108]](#footnote-108) These aims are pursued by using rewards and punishments to establish the idea of a “sincerity culture” which carries forward “sincerity and traditional virtues”.[[109]](#footnote-109)

The outline states that these goals are pursued while taking Deng Xiaoping’s theory of modernization with Chinese characteristics and the “Three Represents” as the guiding ideology of the SCS.[[110]](#footnote-110) According to China’s official state-run information center, the “Three Represents” refers to economic production, advanced cultural development, and political consensus.[[111]](#footnote-111) This guiding ideology indicates that the SCS is designed to govern the social, moral, and economic spheres conterminously, a conclusion which is further supported by the linkage between the two main goals of the SCS, perfecting the economy and building a harmonious society. However, “the harmonious society” is not a self-evident term and warrants further analysis as a goal of the SCS.

## The Harmonious Society

While there is not a single mention of the word “Confucian” in the 2014 outline, the harmonious society is a Confucian concept which has been identified as being at the core of social ideologies in China in the Peoples Republic of China.[[112]](#footnote-112) Part of these social ideologies is welfare state policy, in which the harmonious society has been written about as a goal of the Chinese welfare state since the 1990’s.[[113]](#footnote-113) Harmony is a concept originally discussed by Confucius in the *Analects* and has been subsequently debated and interpreted by his followers Mencius and Xunzi. The modern application of the harmonious society by the CCP stresses the values of “peace and order, sincerity, friendship, love and also upon a coherent development,” ultimately striving for balance and equilibrium achieved through obeisance to social hierarchy and self-transcending societal goals.[[114]](#footnote-114) However, this modern understanding of the harmonious society is not derived from a pure Confucian reading of harmony. Whereas Confucius and his humanistic follower Mencius use the term in a way which places weight on the freedom and diversity of individuals, the term’s modern usage links harmony to hierarchy and unification rather than diversity. This reading of the concept of harmony is derived from Xunzi, Confucius’s follower who’s views on the innate nature of humans led to a more legalist interpretation.[[115]](#footnote-115) In following the legalist view, Xunzi links harmony to the hierarchical order of the state and the deliverance of punishments, stating that the governing of society will be harmonious when punishments are established.[[116]](#footnote-116) The goals of the state are reflected in the modern terminology through references to coherent or sustainable development.

Thus, the modern usage of the harmonious society uses Xunzi’s connotation of harmony. This demonstrates that the term’s usage by the CCP represents a bridge between Confucian and Legalist approaches to governance. In this sense, the harmonious society as found in the 2014 planning outline is used in an Imperial Confucian manner. The SCS can be thus be understood as seeking to attain a harmonious society in which Confucian values like sincerity, trust and moral behavior are promoted through Legalist paternal governmental action to mutually benefit the state and the people. By promoting moral Confucian values, the harmonious society prevents major social dislocations which would impact sustainable growth and the material welfare of the nation, for example through the market economy. This is characteristic of Imperial Confucianism’s link between material and spiritual welfare discussed in the previous chapter. What remains to be answered is how the 2014 outline intends for the SCS to promote the harmonious society, and which social dislocations it prevents.

## The Moral Crisis: Need for a Harmonious Society

To build a harmonious society, the 2014 outline directs the SCS to focus on building sincerity and on educating members of society in moral behavior. Sincerity is the most often repeated word in the document, appearing just over 110 times. While sincerity is understood as the root of moral behavior, the outline notes that in China’s market and society, levels of trust and sincere action have been sorely lacking. The document identifies a plethora of causes, citing food and drug security incidents, tax evasion, academic fraud, the sale of counterfeit products, unsafe working conditions, government corruption, and many others.[[117]](#footnote-117) Overall, the planning outline describes a crisis of morality which has negatively affected the social and economic spheres.

This crisis of morality can be traced back to the implementation of Deng’s economic reforms in 1978, which transitioned China from a centrally planned economy to a socialist market economy, termed ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’.[[118]](#footnote-118) These reforms resulted in almost two decades of economic growth, however, along with introducing a market logic to China came problems of corruption and fraud which have persisted for years.[[119]](#footnote-119) Corruption grew to be such a large problem that it was recognized as “one of the most lethal threats to China’s future economic development and political stability”, costing China at least three percent of its GDP.[[120]](#footnote-120) In the finance sector firms defaulted on debt payments, exposing the fact that there existed no way to establish creditworthiness in China’s nascent market economy.[[121]](#footnote-121) In food safety, a highly publicized incident in which industrial chemicals were found in baby formula, resulting in 300,000 hospitalizations, further contributed to a perceived crisis of morality.[[122]](#footnote-122)

The moral crisis was exacerbated by the loss of normative ideological governing power suffered by the CCP after Mao. Maoism was thoroughly discredited due to the events caused by the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward. This caused an ideological void which was only fueled by Deng’s economic reforms.[[123]](#footnote-123) As Carillo notes, “China’s economic reform policies were as much a response to the need for economic efficiency and growth as they were a rejection by many in the leadership to some of the ideological precepts of the Maoist era”.[[124]](#footnote-124) And while the policies stimulated economic growth, they came with socio-economic inequality and social dislocations.[[125]](#footnote-125) After two decades of reform, these inequalities led to social movements which demanded an expansion of China’s welfare system, which coincided with the revival of Confucianism by intellectuals and government actors.[[126]](#footnote-126) Beginning as early as 1989, government officials publicly urged for the revival of Confucian thought and traditional Chinese culture.[[127]](#footnote-127) This manifested itself in changes to official party language and a revival in Confucian teachings, particularly as they relate to the harmonious society.[[128]](#footnote-128) Taken together, this resulted in the Confucian concept of a harmonious society becoming a stated aim of China’s welfare state.[[129]](#footnote-129)

## Methods: Sincerity Building and Moral Cultivation

This provides some evidence that the SCS contains Confucian goals and methods, however this is further proved by the methods the SCS takes to assist in resolving the crisis. To remedy the moral crisis, the document calls for the construction of sincerity education and promoting the norm of a sincerity culture.[[130]](#footnote-130) It states that sincerity education seeks to “enhance the moral cultivation of the members of society” within the context of a Socialist core value system which is part of the process of “civil virtue construction and spiritual civilization construction”.[[131]](#footnote-131) This immediately places the goals of the document in the context of Confucian governance, which is concerned with the spiritual wellbeing of governed citizens.[[132]](#footnote-132) Spiritual civilization construction is done by strengthening education “about social morals, professional ethics, household virtue and individual morality” as means to “inherit the fine traditional virtues of China”.[[133]](#footnote-133) If these terms are investigated, they can be revealed to be almost explicitly Confucian in nature, which comes as no surprise given the explicit reference to China’s “traditional virtues”. Social morals, professional ethics, and household virtue directly correspond with the three main Confucian values of ren (benevolence), li (rules of propriety), and xiao (filial piety or obeisance to hierarchy). Additionally, education concerning individual morality is characteristic of Confucian values as well, which sees the personal development of the moral self and the inward harmoniousness of the individual as inextricably linked with the achievement of the harmonious society.[[134]](#footnote-134)

## Four Policy Areas

The 2014 outline focuses sincerity building in in four focus areas, in government affairs, commercial affairs, the social services, and in judicial credibility.[[135]](#footnote-135) Practically, this entails the creation of systems to judge conduct in these policy areas and deliver rewards and punishments to actors based on their level of sincerity. As explained above, sincerity is measured using Confucian values of ren, li, and xiao. Alternatively put, it is measured using the legal, professional, and moral standards in China.

In government affairs, the SCS is supposed to establish the government as a model for honest conduct and moral behavior.[[136]](#footnote-136) The focus on governmental modeling is apparent throughout the section on government sincerity and appears to show how fully the paternalistic nature of the SCS has been embraced. The document even states that “Sincerity in government affairs is the crux of social credit system construction”, and “Governments must first and foremost strengthen their own sincerity construction” in order to raise the sincerity consciousness of members of society. [[137]](#footnote-137)

In commercial affairs, the SCS is designed to increase trust and transparency in areas ranging from production and construction to finance and taxation.[[138]](#footnote-138) These are all viewed as conditions which must be achieved to increase efficiency and levels of satisfaction in the market, two goals which are “a basic guarantee for the effective conduct of all kinds of economic activities .[[139]](#footnote-139)

The section on social sincerity begins by stating:

“Social sincerity is the basis for building the social credit system, only if there is mutual sincere treatment between members of society, and only if sincerity is fundamental, will it be possible to create harmonious and amicable interpersonal relationships, will it be possible to stimulate the progress of society and civilization, and realize social harmony, stability and a long period of peace and order.”[[140]](#footnote-140)

Social sincerity is pursued by focusing on credit systems to judge conduct in a variety of welfare state areas, including social security, social services, labour and employment, healthcare, and public goods such as education.[[141]](#footnote-141) This has the dual effect of enforcing professional standards in these areas while also increasing societal trust in these institutions. Here the outline appears to almost explicitly embrace an Imperial Confucian mindset towards welfare provision. State delivered moral guidance is provided through the construction of credit systems. These systems are designed to facilitate harmonious interactions between members of society by enforcing Confucian values in the pursuit of enhancing the quality of, as well as the level of trust in welfare state services. The enforcement of these Confucian values like ren, li, and xiao leads to harmonious interpersonal relationships, which in turn prevent impediments to the efficacy of welfare provision. Taken together, this is an inherent linkage between moral or spiritual and material welfare, and the SCS secures both simultaneously.

Finally, in the judicial system the SCS is designed to increase credibility in China’s legal framework.[[142]](#footnote-142) This is an important goal which serves to enhance the efficiency of the SCS and its ability to deliver social justice, as the legal punishments handed down by the SCS are enforced with China’s existing judiciary system.[[143]](#footnote-143)

## The Social Credit System(s)

While the 2014 document clearly demonstrates that the SCS has the aims of welfare provision in mind, how do the aims and methods described above function practically, and how has the SCS been implemented in China since the release of the 2014 document? Currently, there is no single social credit system in China. Rather, there are multiple social credit systems which exist alongside and interact with one another, making up different aspects of one unified system which is commonly referred to as ‘The Social Credit System’.[[144]](#footnote-144) Two main approaches with four distinct kinds of SCS’s may be discerned. The first approach sees SCS’s as an infrastructure for economic and financial activities, including nationwide governmental financial credit systems as well as commercial credit rating systems for individuals. The second approach sees SCS’s as a tool for moral governance, including national governmental blacklists as well as SCS’s developed by municipal governments.[[145]](#footnote-145)

While these systems often aggregate, not every SCS feeds into a single database, and there is no single numerical score.[[146]](#footnote-146) Given the multiplicity of SCS’s which have arisen, it falls outside the scope of this paper to properly analyze the many variants of social credit which have resulted from China’s distinctive modeling process. However, the largest and most well-known SCS, which is also the SCS most often decried for its Orwellian nature, may be examined here.

## National Governmental Blacklists System

The national governmental blacklist system offers practical evidence that the SCS fits within the historical trend of Imperial Confucian welfare state governmentality. This version of social credit functions by creating blacklists to punish legal entities for immoral behavior across a range of sites, spanning government affairs, commercial affairs, the social services, and in judicial affairs. Blacklists may target all legal entities, including natural persons, institutions such as non-governmental organizations and business corporations, as well as local or municipal governments and government officials.[[147]](#footnote-147) There is no single blacklist, rather, blacklists are created on an *ad hoc* basis to respond to the needs of various different sectors. [[148]](#footnote-148) There are separate blacklists for any number of specified areas which fall into the four main policy areas identified by the 2014 document. This means there are blacklists for air and train travel, the insurance sector logistics and transportation, the oil and gas sector, housing, food security, environmental protection, and others, each with corresponding punishments.[[149]](#footnote-149)

The oldest and most developed blacklist system is the discredited judgement debtor list, which was built to enforce court judgements predominantly in cases where an individual or institution fails to pay repay debts to another party despite having the financial capabilities and being ordered by the court to do so.[[150]](#footnote-150) Consequences for being on this blacklist restrict access to luxury goods, meaning blacklisted individuals cannot spend money on first class train tickets, star rated hotels and restaurants, resorts, nightclubs, cars, or tuition for private schools.[[151]](#footnote-151) The logic here can be found in the 2014 document, which states that the SCS should shape an atmosphere “in which agreements are honoured and trust are honestly kept”.[[152]](#footnote-152)

These punishments do not only apply to individuals, but also to corporations or even governments if they fail to pay their debts. In this case, the organization, its legal representatives, and key personnel in charge may be added to the blacklist and classified as a discredited judgment debtor.[[153]](#footnote-153) In April of 2017 the media found that 480 city, county, and country governments were blacklisted, meaning government leaders faced travel and other restrictions and their governments financial activities were limited.[[154]](#footnote-154)

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## Ideology & Practice

Altogether, the 2014 planning outline and the practical implementation of the blacklist system demonstrates that the aims and methods of the SCS can be adequately understood through the lens of Imperial Confucian welfare provision. The document’s clear Confucian influence is demonstrated through a repeated use of Confucian terminology, most notably in the case of the harmonious society. Even this notwithstanding, the relationships between social sincerity, social hierarchy, and moral and material welfare belie its Confucian mindset. The Legalist approach which prioritizes state aims, effective policy implementation, and a paternal mindset through the deliverance of rewards and punishments is also visible throughout. The document’s stress on governmental modeling, punishing insincerity, and effectively governing the permeable spheres of social, moral, and economic action demonstrate an Imperial Confucian mentality towards the welfare of members of society as well as the state and society as a whole. Ultimately, the 2014 document outlines a system which is overtly framed in moralistic terms and inherently rooted in the Imperial Confucian institutions of paternalism and moral education. By tracing the historical events leading up to the 2014 document, it becomes eminently clear that the SCS is a program designed to secure welfare in response to the insecurities and problems China experienced as a result of its rapid modernization. These include the economic insecurities generated by Deng’s economic reforms as well as the ideological rift which grew at the same time. The SCS responds to these by creating a system which regulates the economic and social spheres according to an Imperial Confucian philosophy of governance, which addresses economic insecurities while also filling the ideological void.

# Conclusion

In asking “*To what extent can the social credit system be understood as a program of China’s welfare state?*”, this thesis began by questioning the predominant Western interpretation of the SCS as a method of Orwellian social control. This was not done to contest that the SCS engages in some form of social control, but rather to question how the SCS was framed and why this occurred. By doing so this thesis demonstrated that news reports used various discourse devices to frame the SCS as well as the CCP as inherently dangerous, dystopian, rights violating, and Orwellian. A consequence of this framing is the implicit and explicit discreditation of the possibility that the SCS may genuinely serve functions other than social control.

This frame is both the result of and contributes to Sino-Orientalist constructions of China. Challenging Western constructions of China which indiscriminately apply Western standards in a Chinese context is paramount to properly understanding the SCS. This does not mean the CCP and SCS are immune to criticism, however, criticism should be delivered with an awareness of the cultural contexts in which they take place. The framing of the CCP and SCS as Orwellian and unpopular must be countered by the findings of peer reviewed research which finds that both the CCP and SCS enjoy high levels of public support. These findings are reached with full awareness of the methodological difficulties associated with measuring public opinion in authoritarian regimes. Thus, the relevance of exploring the framing of the SCS deals not only with understanding why the SCS has yet to be evaluated in relation to the welfare state, but also speaks to question of who should shape the discourse and practice of social policy in the context of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

What is made clear from examining the details of the SCS is that the social credit system is the product of a distinctive mentality towards welfare provision in China. This mentality is based on governing the social and economic spheres conterminously in the pursuit of ensuring mutually reinforcing material and spiritual welfare. While this is not a typical function of Western welfare states, this thesis argued for an evaluation of the welfare capabilities of the SCS from within a specific cultural and political context. The specific context was demonstrated to be the political philosophy of Imperial Confucianism, which is a determinative influence on China’s approach to welfare provision both historically and up to the current day. In light of this context, the functions of the SCS take on a new clarity.

By administering and enforcing governmental regulation in targeted policy areas, the SCS provides government of the economy and ensures the proper functioning of the market. By framing the SCS in covertly Confucian and overtly moral language, the CCP also pursues the goal of instilling moral behaviour in members of society, contributing to a harmonious society. While these are broad aims, the SCS is also precise in that it clearly responds to specific insecurities which arose following China’s economic liberalization. The function of the SCS to serve as a financial and economic policy alone would warrant its classification as a part of China’s welfare state, however, in light of the clear continuities between Chinese Imperial Confucian welfare provision and the aims and methods of the SCS, it can also be adequately understood as falling within the history of paternalistic Chinese moral governance and welfare provision.

While the SCS clearly fits both the practical and historical or ideological definitions of China’s welfare state, it is impossible to adequately explain all aspects of the Social Credit System from any single frame of analysis. The strength of using welfare state analysis is the lack of mutual exclusivity which is often implied through other interpretations which assert that the SCS serves one function above all else. Properly used, the welfare state only ever refers to a specific realm of governmental activity and allows for the recognition that the SCS has a multitude of functions. However, the function of the SCS to enforce a degree of social control cannot be denied, and in conjunction with the obvious cultural and ideological aspects of social credit, its function as a tool to enhance state legitimacy claims warrants further examination. Altogether, the SCS is an emerging technology with effects across a wide range of divergent areas, many of which are deserving of further analysis. By adding on the new frame of welfare state analysis to the rapidly bourgeoning body of literature on the SCS and the way it may affect social and economic life in China, this thesis hopes to demonstrate the programs versatility and encourage further studies into the social credit system.

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