Emilie Szwajnoch, PhD dissertation summary

University of Silesia in Katowice, Institute of Political Science

Beyond Trust and Authoritarian Surveillance: Building the Social Credit System Within China's Fragmented Bureaucracy

This dissertation examines chosen aspects of the development and operations of the Chinese Social Credit System (SCS). Frequently portrayed in popular accounts as an Orwellian tool for omnipresent monitoring of citizens, the SCS has attracted public attention as emblematic of China's turn toward technologically enhanced authoritarianism. By analyzing over 400 Chinese documents alongside relevant literature, this study seeks to provide a more nuanced assessment of the System's role within the governance structures of the People's Republic of China, especially its potential contribution to strengthening authoritarian control over citizens.

Two main research questions navigate the analysis. The first concerns the ways in which the Social Credit System may strengthen Beijing's authoritarian control and censorship efforts targeted at individuals, and thus support the authoritarian nature of the Chinese regime. The second explores what the Social Credit System construction reveals about the ability of the Chinese state to develop complex projects that involve numerous bureaucratic agents.

The dissertation comprises seven chapters preceded by an introduction and followed by conclusions and recommendations for future research. Chapter One introduces theoretical frames that were important for the study design. It covers issues from traditional and non-traditional security, through the discussion of the assumptions of the securitization theory and its applicability in non-democratic settings, to a brief discussion of the literature on Chinese bureaucracy. The chapter also offers an explanation of the roles securitization and bureaucratic angles play in the research of the SCS.

Chapter Two presents a review of the literature on the SCS. It includes information about the basic shape of the SCS, its operations, history, and perception by the Chinese society. Chapter Two ends with the identification of a research gap that this dissertation aims to fill. Chapter Three describes methods and phases of the study. It offers explanations to, among other issues, what parts of the System I focus on and why.

The following four chapters are empirical ones. Chapter Four focuses on SCS solutions designed at the central level of administration that are to be implemented at lower levels. It discusses those elements of the System that were created in line with the core assumption of the SCS (understood as raising the cost of violating legal provisions through joint and reputational sanctions) and those that diverge from it. The latter cases are accompanied by a discussion on the potential reasons for the lack of proper coordination at the central level of administration. Apart from solely covering solutions

belonging to the areas of governance that are directly related to the regime's censorship and control measures, Chapter Four also tackles the solutions that are most commonly used against individuals.

Chapter Five is partly analogous to Chapter Four, albeit it discusses findings of the analysis of SCS solutions introduced at the local level. It covers solutions that are compliant with and diverging from the central guidelines and discusses their compliance with the core SCS assumption. Chapter Six also covers local solutions. However, it is exclusively focused on the locally developed scores for natural persons of different kinds. It discussed the scope of scorings, as well as other information that was accessible, including the operability of the scores, the technicalities, the consequences of scorings for individuals, and their ability to increase authoritarian control over natural persons.

Chapter Seven discusses the problem of the so-called 'trustworthiness dossier'. The dossiers – or records – are an important and reappearing element of the System that could potentially serve as a comprehensive source of information on individuals covered by them. From an unclear mass of dossiers or records listed in the accessed documents, I identify particular recurring types. I discuss what purposes the different types of records may serve, and discuss the challenges inherent in data sharing, even locally. Apart from discussing how the records might potentially increase the surveillance capacities of the regime, I point out how hazy their scope and use are. Finally, to highlight that the complexities of the SCS scope do not end with all of the solutions discussed in previous chapters and with the trustworthiness dossier, I discuss yet different elements of the System, such as ratings and grades appearing in various areas of governance and localities.

In accordance with the results of the study, I argue that the Social Credit System is not potent in strengthening Beijing's control and censorship efforts. Being embedded in previously existing laws and regulations, the SCS naturally supports the logic of various areas of governance (and thus the nature of the regime) but does not offer major developments. Moreover, the findings suggest that the case of SCS construction reveals that Beijing's capability to efficiently develop and implement complex projects that involve the cooperation of multiple bureaucratic agents at different levels of administration may be impaired by the interplay of bureaucratic self-interests that appear already at the central level. This happens in contrast to the trend of centralization and control over institutions under Xi. Relatedly, in shaping their SCS solutions, the bureaucratic agents at different levels of administration often seem to prioritize supporting the pre-existing logic in their areas of governance and serving their own purposes over contributing to the construction of a coherent SCS.