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Restoring the CCP's moral legitimacy:

An internal perspective on China's Social Credit System

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Introduction

The social credit system (SCS) is a mechanism devised to encourage trustworthiness and constraint untrustworthiness, its goal is reviving the value of honesty and establishing a credit assessment apparatus for the entire society (State Council 2014). The creation of a national SCS is not a project *ex novo.* Conversely, it hinges upon the incorporation of already existing commercial and/or localized SCSs pilots. The system will gather individuals' data in different areas of behavior and, taking these inputs as an assessment criterion, it will punish or reward the users. It was not long before SCS raised concerns outside China (China refers only to PRC) about its real objectives. Creemers, for instance, retained that SCS is an instrument to influence the citizen agency in their daily lives (Creemers 2018, 7). Kostka said "SCS is a component of the CCP's broader plan to automate its social management strategy by utilizing new technologies in order to govern via a feedback loop, a cycle of shaping, managing and responding" (Kostka 2019, 4). Media, for their part, have been depicting the SCS as the Orwellian "Big Brother" (Bloomberg 2019; Marsden 2018). Among politicians, US Vice President Mike Pence described China's SCS, as "an Orwellian system premised on controlling virtually every facet of human life" (Pence 2018). However, Chinese commentators opposed these misconceptions sustaining that "Chinese rules have provided new governing philosophies for other developing nations...Chinese are fed up with Orwellian style preaching from Western elites. This kind of conversation will lead nowhere" (Yu 2018). As asserted in the Outline for Building a Social Credit System (2014-2020), the aim of this majestic project is that of healing Chinese society from a deep-rooted morality crisis that manifests in a widespread mutual mistrust among Chinese citizens (State Council, 2014). Still, as it usually happens in Chinese politics, concepts such as morality are coated with a symbolic significance. Accordingly, in judging the SCS, one has to be aware that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is skillful at employing narratives that are instrumental in constructing its political legitimacy.

Western (English-speaking countries plus the countries of continental Europe) journalists failed in observing the topic through an adequate epistemological lens. In fact, as it often occurs when researching phenomena taking place in China, there is a general tendency to stick to Western theoretical definitions exclusively. In discussing over the SCS, experts have treated the technical aspects of the mechanism (Zhu 2014; Zhang and Xie 2018), the risks for

individuals' freedom (Mistreanu 2018; Creemers 2018), and its role in expanding access to financial services (Kshetri 2016). However, none has yet focused on the implication of the SCS in reasserting CCP's moral legitimacy. Resultantly, because of this vacuum in the state of the arts, the necessity to analyze the SCS from a different perspective arises. Accordingly, in view of the specific socio-cultural features that characterize Chinese politics, I frame the SCS in a technocratic attitude towards social management and depict it as a Party's venture to restore its moral legitimacy.

Overall, the final goal of my work is to make a timely and relevant contribution to understanding where moral legitimacy stems from in the Chinese context during a period of economic, political, and social change. Particularly, how is Chinese government reestablishing its moral authority through the implementation of a centralized SCS? Is it possible, from a Chinese perspective, to restore the government's morality by limiting individuals' agency? What are the risks and benefits of this majestic project? To solve these queries, it is necessary to delve into China's political tradition and contemporary history, and to highlight the role of morality as a source of government's legitimacy. I believe this work will contribute to paving the road to an unbiased understanding of the rationale behind the implementation of the SCS.

In developing this work, I employ the strategic-relational approach (Jessop 2005) for it is concerned with explaining social and political change to map a scheme of their causal mechanisms. This approach hinges upon the duality of strategically selective context and strategic actor. Specifically, for strategic actor I mean the CCP as it is both conscious and watchful in choosing the strategies to realize its intentions. As for the morality discourse, it is possible to infer that this narrative is a powerful tool in the hands of the Party's leadership. In terms of legitimizing the CCP, the morality discourse works by arguing that the continuation of CCP rule is the only way to restore a moral living environment. Additionally, cultural and institutional environments shape CCP's image within Chinese political culture and provide the Party with a legitimacy spring. In the Chinese debate, moreover, a strong inclination toward scientism reinforces such assumptions. Accordingly, since the subject of this study (SCS) reflects both cultural and scientific attitudes of Chinese politics, I deem necessary to look at the phenomenon from an internal perspective to grasp the rationale behind this social management mechanism.

Setting morality within the broader context of CCP legitimacy, the analysis of selected sources has demonstrated that this discourse is dependent on other forms of legitimization. Indeed, the persuasiveness of the morality discourse is contingent, in large part, on economic

success and social stability. Accordingly, I employ a motley range of sources to depict legitimacy as the result of mutually enforcing logics, and to present the SCS under a new light, as not just a means to assure CCP's grasp over society but also as an anthropocentric project leading to a morally superior living environment.

Looking at China as an organism composed of different apparatuses that contributes to the well-being of the system as a whole, I adopted a research approach comparable to that of an internist. The three chapters of this work convey a description of the apparatus under exam (moral legitimacy), a diagnosis of the disease along with its causes and symptoms (morality crisis), and the therapy employed by the government (SCS).

In chapter one, I constructed an operational framework by effectively showing that morality and legitimacy have always been intertwined throughout Chinese history. Though I present the concept of morality at large, I center my efforts on investigating its significance in politics. In fact, power legitimacy is not asserted a priori, but, rather, it results from the emperor's moral disposition and performance in governing the country. Chinese summarize this concept in a famous catchphrase "the water that carries the boat can also overturn it". Largely, in Chinese contemporary political discourse, performance lies in economic development, technological progress, and people's welfare. However, scholars have noted that the locus of legitimacy still relates to the morality of the state. Indeed, the state spends significant efforts in presenting itself as a father with the responsibility to educate his children. With the birth of the PRC, Marxist-Leninist principles also reinforced this paternalistic view of the state. In the last section, I talk about the importance of the 2014 fourth Plenum in determining the Party's legitimacy. The resolution of this Plenum marked the first step for the institution of the SCS as it affirmed the equivalence of the law and morality in shaping Chinese politics.

In chapter two, I investigate the historical reasons for the legitimacy crisis in China. In details, I explore the disruption of the social contract between the state and the citizens, resulting from the economic transition and the rural reforms of the early 1980s. The new economic order converted into a change in social mobility that, in turn, led to the erosion of the Party's penetration in the village life. Alongside, I explain how the decollectivization reforms brought into being a living environment where morality and the ensuing principles attached to it lost attractiveness. An atmosphere where personal profit supplanted people's innate sincere disposition in shaping individuals' behavior in society.

After having depicted the symptoms of China's moral decay, in chapter three I deal with the SCS. The last chapter represents the kernel of the entire work, as it judges the effectiveness

and contraindications of this "social credit therapy". Specifically, I show how the logic behind a peculiar form of Chinese social relation, namely *guānxi* came to influence the SCS. Moreover, I depict the SCS as an educative tool to mold a new kind of society hinging on the concept of sincerity. Nevertheless, I caution about the potential risks and inefficacies of this didactic automated mechanism.

1. Morality as a legitimacy spring

The Social Credit System is an automated mechanism that, collecting citizens' personal information, aims at restoring trustworthiness in Chinese society. At the same time, this system might serve the purpose of restoring CCP's moral legitimacy. To shed a light on this second objective, I explore and explain how morality came to be relevant in sustaining political authority in imperial China and why it is still important in Chinese contemporary political discourse.

1.1 Wángdào 王道 : Origins and significance

Sima Tan in his famous work *On six essentials* describes the existence of different schools of thought during the Warring State Period (475–221 BC), namely Daoist, Confucian, Mohist, Legalist. In spite of the differences in both theory and practice, these different schools shared a common utmost goal: to benefit humankind. However, though all of them strongly influenced the political theory on social management of the various rulers, the Confucian concept of 王道 (*wángdào*, literally "the road of the prince") was the one which received the good grace of the first emperor Qin Shi Huangdi when he breathed life into the unified empire (Deng 2018, 110). Accordingly, Confucianism imposed itself over the other contenders in the midst of the Hundred Schools Contend and stood as the backbone of statecraft ideology throughout the millennial imperial history (221 BC-1912 AD). The term *wángdào* first appeared in the *Esteemed Document* where it is presented as the result of ruling by virtue and ruling by benevolence. However, it will be Confucius' favorite pupil, Mencius, to first conceive the concept of *wángdào* as opposed to a newly coined term: 霸道 (*bàdao*, literally "the road of the tyrant") (Zhang and Yang 2016, 88). Mencius' view embodied the extant great Confucian political ideology and transformed it into the basic value system of Chinese traditional political theory.

Before Mencius, the terms *wáng* and *bà* were not characterized by an oppositional nature; rather, both of them were employed to design a political differentiation. On the one hand, *wáng* indicated the central monarch, while, on the other hand, *bà* designated the various feudal lords (Zhang and Yang 2016, 89). Divergently, in Mencius' ideology the difference between *wáng* and *bà* stood on a moral level. In his view, *bàdao* is to use force to fake benevolence (以力假仁), for the tyrant uses punishment to carry out the laws and relies on

military power. Oppositely, *wángdào* is to use the virtue to carry out benevolence (以德行仁), since the monarch stands as a moral example to its subjects by putting 仁 (*rén,* literally "benevolence, humanity, kindness") into practice. According to Mencius, under oppression, common people would not be sincerely supportive of the ruler. Conversely, if the ruler is committed to serving the people, subjects would regard him as the depositary of 天命 (*tiānmìng,* literally "Heavenly Mandate"). This concept constituted the utmost source of legitimacy in dynastic China ever since the Zhou dynasty (c. 1046 BC–256 BC). Pursuant to it, if a monarch succeeded in constraining himself and inspiring subjects' good disposition by standing as a moral example, subjects would have esteemed him as endowed with the Heavenly Mandate. Subsequently, under the moral care of the monarch, commoners would improve themselves and dispose of selfish interests. Oppositely, if a ruler was overthrown, it meant that he was no longer worthy of moral authority, and he had lost the mandate.

Mencius' ideology portrays a humanistic view of the world, as he raised the people as the most precious jewel for a ruler (Zhang and Yang 2016, 90). Moreover, he depicts human beings as naturally endowed with goodness. Only by assuming that all people possess inborn compassion, the ruler would be able to perform moral govern and to pursue the *wángdào*. Actually, in Mencius' view, the monarch's mission is that of rousing people's benevolent disposition by setting himself as a moral guide. That point can be best summarized as "saint inside，king outside" (内圣外王)（Zhang and Yang 2016, 91).This means that the ruler has to restrain his lower instincts and sense of intolerance in order to cherish the people and implement legal measures. Only if the ruler would be able to actively cultivate benevolence and righteousness and to govern the country in accordance with people's good nature, he would be able to lead the other's to follow one's course (Zhang and Yang 2016, 91). If the monarch succeeded in doing so, he would have been able to make its state flourishing and establish a harmonious society. According to Li Chenyang, harmonizing a society means bridging the gap between where people are and where the government wants the people to be, so it entails a sense of transformation (Li 2014, 125).

In the next section, we will see how such transformation calls for moral guidance by the ruler, and how this paternalistic attitude materialized in contemporary China.

1.2 CCP as the father of the nation

Mencius proposed a new vision of social management that puts people at the center of *wángdào* system of values (Zhang and Yang 2016, 90). Still, albeit he elevates people as the foundation of the ruler's legitimacy, the fate of the country rested on the monarch's disposition. Actually, Mencius criticized the monarchs' conduct, but not to the monarchy as a state form. Furthermore, he stressed upon the common mission of the father and the monarch as the head of the state and the family, respectively: 无父无君，是离兽也 (without neither a father nor a ruler, it is like being animals). The common appraisal of the ruler as a caring parent, not only concerned the central ruler. Contrarily, the term "parental officials" (父母官 *fùmǔguān*) was widely used to designate a moral model of feudal governor as well as Party cadre that simultaneously lead and protect his/her people as they were his/her children. Apparently, Mencius seems to be consistent with Holmes' distinction between system legitimacy and regime legitimacy. Holmes pointed out that if a government suffers from a lack of legitimacy, the legitimacy of the system can also remain intact. Contrarily, if the system is delegitimized, the government will suffer a corresponding withdrawal of legitimacy (Holmes 1993, 165-82). Consistent with his vision of *wángdào*, Mencius situated the locus of the regime legitimacy in the ruler's morality. Still, the assessment of the sovereign's stature also strictly intertwined with his factual capacity to create welfare for the country (富民 *fùmín*). In a conversation about good governance, Mencius asserts that before reawakening the natural goodness of the people, the ruler should adopt a policy of enriching the people. Only by respecting this order, the people will be receptive of moral guidance. It is intriguing to notice how this parameter survived in contemporary Chinese society. Today, the CCP's legitimacy is rooted in its capacity to ensure socioeconomic transformation, interest representation, and traditional norms and values (Sandby-Thomas 2010, 67). In the following chapters, I will explore how the moral authority and the capacity to create welfare for society, come to determine, modify, and influence the logic of the SCS.

Mencius' paternalistic view of the state will become the backbone of the Chinese state. In fact, not only it extensively permeated the political thought of the Chinese empire, but it was also inherited in the Republican era by the Kuomintang, first, and by Chinese Communist Party (CCP), later. How does the past relate to the present? Thornton demonstrated that despite the normative dimension of the state-building process changed unrelentingly in breadth and

coherence, it remained of pivotal significance throughout Chinese history. State-making stands as a process that serves a double purpose. It not only constitutes a normative process to impose a particular moral order within which the state can claim primacy, but it also makes the presence of the state as the prerequisite for the pursuit of social harmony (Thornton 2007, 4). The authoress refers to this activity as "the boundary-drawing capacity of the state: the ability of a regime to construct itself as an autonomous moral agent simultaneously separate from and embedded within an imagined political community" (Thornton 2007, 4). Today, like yesterday, state-making attempts to coat the quotidian workings of a state system with a "useful" state idea. Thereby, the government manages to "render the practice of governance accountable to an idealized projection of state as a moral agent" (Thornton 2007, 205-6). Particularly, to testify the constant presence of this moral dimension in Chinese politics, she presented three periods of key reform, that are the reign of Yongzheng emperor (1723-35), the Nanjing-based government of Jiang Jieshi (1927-37), and the Socialist Education Campaign under the rule of Chairman Mao (1962-66).

Under the rule of the CCP, Leninist principles also reinforced this paternalistic view of the state. Traditionally, in Marxist-Leninist regimes the rulers depicted the social world as chaotic, so to justify the need for the state normative dimension. Being the forces of society presented as morally inferior and hostile to normative agenda, the moral guidance of the state come to play an inalienable condition for the survival of the nation (Thornton 2007, 206-7). According to Pieke, CCP uses socialist ideology to perpetuate its rule and to cultivate responsible and trusting citizens that, in turn, give rise to an autonomous and governable society (Pieke 2012, 150). Starting from the 1990s, moreover, the scope of managing society has been touching upon the whole public sector, including the legislative organs and the judiciary (Pieke 2012, 153). During a session of the CCP Politburo in 2005, General Secretary Hu Jintao highlighted the importance of the law in managing society. Specifically, the management of society entailed the creation of autonomous mechanisms that help the government to resolve the social tensions caused by the market economy, and the modernization of more conventional law to curb crimes (Pieke 2012, 155). It is, thus, possible to state that the SCS is the answer to the need raised by the former Chinese leaders. In fact, SCS represents an automated system sustaining the application of the law (Creemers 2018, 12-14).

According to Pieke, the social management mission embraced by the CCP combines two attitudes seemingly at odds with each other: the liberal autonomy of the public sector and an

emphasis on the leading role of the government, typical of Leninist political thought (Pieke 2012, 156). Official statements by the central government testify this two-faced attitude. For instance, in 2010, the fifth Plenum of the seventeenth Central Committee convened on stressing the role of Party leadership, government responsibility, social coordination and public participation (Pieke 2012, 158). Indeed, the initial rule of the CCP was based on its exclusive role of leading the masses toward a future communist era. Still, following the decline of the communist ideology in the Reform and Opening Up period, a eudemonic mode of legitimization emerged in the Chinese context. Consistently with Mencius' 富民, CCP's legitimacy also rests on its performance, particularly in relation to delivering economic growth (Sandby-Thomas 2010, 29). Additionally, by claiming the country's miraculous rise of the last decades hinged on social stability, the CCP is presenting itself as the only conceivable legitimate ruler.

Like an emperor in dynastic China who regarded himself as the only legitimate ruler, the CCP also perceives itself as the only ruling party in the country (Zheng 2009, 22). While the legitimacy of the emperorship stemmed from the 天命, in the post-reform era, the CCP describes itself as representing the most advanced mode of productivity, the most advanced mode of culture, and the interest of the majority of the people (under Jiang Zemin), as the only actor which leads China towards a harmonious society (under Hu Jintao), and as the only political force able to realize the "Chinese dream" (under Xi Jinping). The nature of CCP implies that while transforming itself in accordance with socioeconomic changes, the structure of Party domination over the state and society has hardly changed (Sandby-Thomas 2010, 16). Historically speaking, the political transition from one generation of leaders to another meant that Party-state must modify ideology to pursuing new economic ventures. Furthermore, it requires the decentralization of power towards civil society and the creation of a new space of political expression (Sandby-Thomas 2010, 37). The extension of free expression, clearly enough, posed many risks to the Party's legitimacy. In fact, by allowing different social groups to pursue the realization of their own political interests the natural legitimacy of the party is in jeopardy. Surprisingly, China did not follow the trend and, in contrast with other communist states, managed to maintain its legitimacy by conforming to changing socioeconomic environments (Sandby-Thomas 2010, 38).

1.3 Ruling by law or ruling by virtue?

When the Party started to stress the centrality of social management, we could spot the existence of diverse political agendas to reach the objective. Yet, the 2014 fourth Plenum traced a direction for China's future. For the first time, the Party affirmed the equality of "ruling by virtue" and "ruling by law" resonating the traditional vision of the law in dynastic China. For instance, *the Great Ming Code* celebrated the law as a cosmological instrument in the hands of political authority to transform human beings (Jiang 2011, 5). Furthermore, the law was envisioned as a means to manifest the Mandate of Heaven, and legal codes served as a moral textbook to educate the people and transform society (Jiang 2011, 13). Inheriting this vision from the dynastic period, the Plenum laid the foundation for the establishment of a legal system that stressed the role of Party leadership in saying the last word over the application of the law. Thus, the system enabled CCP to exert moral leadership by employing the law as it serves as the framework to bring material benefit to people. This, in turn, provided the CCP the chance to restore its legitimacy basis. The Plenum resolution seems to resound the Daoist vision of a natural law system in which the legitimacy of the legal system as a whole, as well as the legitimacy of specific institutions, law, and practices, are grounded in a transcendent normative natural order. The sage-ruler, being a cosmic mediator between the Heaven and the world of human beings, was supposed to know the difference between right and wrong, and based on such assumption, he retained the utmost authority over promulgating and ensuring the correct application of the laws (Jiang 2011, 178). However, at least in theory, the role of citizens in determining this power structure is all but marginal. In fact, it is necessary for the Party to make a contract and put into practice the entrusting between the citizens and the government. This contract entails the symmetry and equality of rights and duties of both parts. In receiving the public power of social management, the government has to commit itself to the safeguard of the public interest. The citizens, admitting the legitimacy rule of the government, obey to the government's management, see their rights protected, and supervise the government (Zhao 2014, 57).

Yet, the main purpose of the fourth Plenum resolution remained to allow the Party to tighten control over local governmental departments. As shown by the official data, social protests in China today reflect a dissatisfaction attached to localized issues (Zheng 2009, 126). Chinese citizens widely sustain the abstract government (the central leadership) but are often unsatisfied with the institutions representing the state at the local level (Zheng 2009, 127).

Indeed, marking the distinction between the center and the periphery, the leadership found an effective replacement for the lack of separation between system and regime legitimacy (Sandby-Thomas 2010, 23). In fact, albeit the two kinds of legitimacy seem to coincide, given the domination of the Party over the state institutions, this dislocation tactic serves to localize people's discontent, and so the perils threatening the central leadership. In practice, the Party organized many institutions that were to parallel, influence, and directly control those of the government at the same level (Zheng 2009, 101). The goal of this closer supervision is to create an efficient system where officials have sufficient space to perform their duties properly, eliminating the temptations for corruption and holding them more accountable for misconduct (Daum 2011).

The justification for the Party intervention is the construction of legitimacy at both prescriptive and descriptive levels. On the one hand, it is assumed that the Party's course is the correct one for the state and the people, for it is the legitimate ruler of the country. While, on the other hand, the Party bolsters its legitimacy because of its performance as a moral example, guide and reformer of the state and its people. Conforming to this logic, it is not too big a leap to look at the national SCS as a necessary means to lead the country towards a moral society and reconstruct moral legitimacy. Thus, it is necessary to reframe the SCS inside the tradition of Chinese political legitimacy, to establish an unbiased platform for discussion on Chinese social management policies.

The quality of the government as both legal and moral regulator and its free discretionary power represents the objective basis of its duties and virtues and, subsequently, the locus of government's morality. However, this approach to managing legal system is also nuanced by various shortcomings. First, the public role in shaping and contesting the law remains minimal, and the Party prevails over the courts in determining the constitutional validity of the laws. Nonetheless, since the stability of the CCP reproduces its legitimacy basis through conforming to the incumbent socioeconomic environment, such an outlook does not clash with Chinese political tradition. In fact, rulers never thought of power sharing as a viable option in both dynastic and republican China (Sandby-Thomas 2010, 23).

Secondly, Party discipline remains a purely internal matter (Daum 2015). The Party rewards or punishes its members as according to an internal code of conduct. Subsequently, this ritual respect entitles CCP to mete out punishments against errant behaviors and justifies the Party for overlooking the fair application of the law (Sandby-Thomas 2010, 23). The discussion

over the application of the law to regulate Party matters traces back to the Reform and Opening up period. Actually, it resonates an open-ended debate on which is superior, the Party or the law (党大还是法大?) (Zheng 2009, 113). Even though the Constitution determines that no individual or entity is above the application of the law, the Party, in reality, has dominated the judicial system through the Central Political and Legal Committee (CPLC) and the Central Discipline Inspection Committee (CDIC) (Zheng 2009, 113).

The arbitrary use of the law, consequently, affects how people assess the government's moral legitimacy. It is possible to see the outcomes under various interpretative lenses. First, this arbitrary approach appears based on the natural recognition of the Party's moral superiority. Consequently, similarly to the emperor in dynastic China, the Party is able to discern right from wrong and so it is not supposed to rely on the law to solve internecine problems. Simultaneously, CCP's moral stance is automatically implied also because it is a fundamental prerequisite to constructing stability, on which legitimacy rests. Differently, the second hypothesis suggests that the factual ability to benefit the country surpassed the need for the CCP to appear as endowed with moral superiority. Hence, as far as it will be able to keep the current pace of economic development people will passively tolerate the opaqueness about the legal procedures. However, a more plausible interpretation is that the CCP is finally determined to regard the law as the key to reproduce China's social hierarchy, or better to reaffirm itself as the apex of the pyramid: a moral father able to inspire its children.

In conclusion, starting from the fourth Plenum, law and morality became interdependent in reasserting Party's legitimacy. The implementation of the national SCS, a structure supporting the rule of the law (Creemers 2018, 12), is intended for creating a moral society. Once reached this goal, citizens will see the Party as endowed with moral authority for it managed to disclose people's innate disposition to good. On a theoretical level, the law represents the means and morality of the goal. The CCP's is concentrating its effort in constructing an automated mechanism that, collecting citizens' personal information, enables it to regulate society through the implementation of the law. Notwithstanding, what needs to be explained is whether the SCS is also locked in discretionary use or, conversely, it aims at overcoming this difference in judging citizens and party members. Currently, the times are yet ripe to solve this doubt, for the incorporation of the various pilots into a national SCS is far from being completed. Nevertheless, it is possible, at least, to measure the impact of implementing

the SCS on shaping CCP's moral legitimacy. Sticking to political tradition, though the Party does not regulate inner matters by law people can still perceive it as a moral entity.

By doing so, a new social order is expected to rise. The SCS might restore an honest society, where individuals can disclose their natural good disposition and be sincere towards each other. Such morally elevated society, thereby, can contribute to enriching China's image on a global level. Throughout the next chapter, I analyze which kind of problems the economic growth brought about and how they originated.

2. The legitimacy disease: political and moral crisis

As explained in the previous chapter, CCP's legitimacy springs from diverse sources that incorporate, influence and transform each other. The one I focus *inter alia* on is the moral authority, for it serves as useful tools to understand the logic behind the implementation of the SCS. As noted by many scholars, the miraculous growth propelled by Deng Xiaoping's "Reform and Opening Up policy" has not only dramatically enriched the country, but has also shattered the very foundations of Chinese society under different respects. Before 1978, China featured among the most egalitarian countries in the world, given the pauperization resulting from Mao's Cultural Revolution (1966-76). However, after 40 years of development that upheld millions of Chinese from the conditions of dire poverty, China presents to the world as characterized by a huge economic divide between rich and poor. Moreover, under the administrative respect, market-oriented policies have made the Chinese economy less state-centered, increasingly autonomous, pluralistic, and complex (Pei Mingxin 2006, 1). As a result, the decentralization of power brought about an emerging autarchic order where local governments officials are regarded as rainmakers: an order that fostered corruption practices and other forms of abuse towards Chinese citizens. Alongside, this state of affairs contributed to the rise of a living environment where morality and the ensuing principles attached to it lost attractiveness. An atmosphere where personal profit supplanted people's innate sincere disposition in shaping individuals' behavior in society.

2.1 Political crisis

In a speech held in 2002, Li Rui, a Party official and advocate of democratic reform, vocally sustained "since China began its transition to a market economy, our national strength has been rising steadily, and we have gained undisputed great progress. But these problems remain: excessively slow pace in the reform of the political system, the lagging development of democracy, the weakness of the rule of law, and the resultant pervasive corruption" (Li 2002). Li's words stand as a prime testimony of a crisis perceived within the ranks of the Party. However, this sense of crisis (忧患意识) as a national praxis constitutes a widespread topic of discussion in nowadays China, usually formulated in the language of scholarly disquisition. Particularly,

such contributions address the erosion of the normative authority of the government in recent years resulting in the emergence of a public sphere constituted by expressions of fear and suspicion (Thornton 2007, 20). Contribution of academics, journalists and writers actively enrich the critical inquiry on the best way forward for China. In fact, the Confucian axiom of "assuming personal responsibility for the rights and wrongs for all under Heaven" still influences the production of Chinese thought. This precept haunts the Chinese intellectuals in elevating any observation to the status of a declared political position aimed at perfecting China (Davies 2007, 19).

What is plaguing the CCP, is that despite the various attempts at identifying the Party as the embodiment of particular national goals, on a less speculative level, it has lost its true identity (Zheng 2009, 6). It is, thus, necessary to examine to what extent China is still a socialist state. This specification is crucial to understand the narrative the CCP selected to construct the ideological basis of its legitimacy. According to Naughton, to judge whether China is still a socialist state we need to look at four criteria: capacity, intention, redistribution, and responsiveness. First, capacity means controlling a sufficient share of economic resources, so to be able to shape the country's economy (Naughton 2017, 3). As of 2015, the Chinese state had direct or indirect control of 38% of GDP: the government is well resourced and has the skills to intervene significantly in the economy (Naughton 2017, 7).

Second, the government not only owns the means to intervene, but it intervenes indeed. Taking into account that the CCP uses economic outcomes to pursue its legitimization agenda, it comes without saying that the Party is intentioned to shape the country's economy. Among the strategies put into being, it is worth to mention the five-year plans, the system of bureaucratic incentives for reaching economic goals, and, most recently, the SCS.

Third, China's government is not successful in redistributing wealth. Notwithstanding that in the last 20 years Chinese witnessed meaningful progress toward the establishment of a universal welfare system, few rural dwellers enjoy such income redistribution (Naughton 2017, 18).The main obstacle lies in the weak taxes leverage. In fact, as of 2017, personal income tax accounted for only 1.3% of GDP; furthermore, income tax is levied only on wage income and some types of interest income (Naughton 2017, 17). Such an attitude reflects CCP leadership's obsession with development at all costs, for it constitutes a crucial strand of its power legitimization. Yet, China's ideological pursuit of a "Harmonious Society", first set out by Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao during the 2004 fourth Plenum, set the focus on the "development with

equity" strategy (Joshi 2012, 184). Testimony to this commitment, the central government financed the "Develop the West" project and potentiated the "New Model Cooperative Medical System" (Joshi 2012, 182).

Fourth, the Chinese government does not show a responsive attitude to people's demands. Oppositely, it makes use of its full control of the media to shape public opinion and to absorb criticism (Naughton 2017, 18). Overall, though China fulfills two out of the four criteria listed by Naughton, we cannot label it as a socialist state in the traditional sense. Then, how the Party does identify itself? In line with the mysticism surrounding Chinese politics, this query remains difficult to solve.

Sticking to the official Party's narrative, Socialism still represents the pivot of the Party's legitimacy, as it encloses the legacy of Maoist and Marxist-Leninist thoughts. Since 1978, however, key tenets of Capitalism have enriched Socialism; employing a pragmatic economic model was, according to Deng Xiaoping, the only way to increase national wealth. To quote his famous catchphrase "It does not matter if a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice". Actually, it is possible to see CCP as a transforming entity, for transformation is the logic behind the construction of political legitimacy. Joshi claimed that the "theory of a socialist harmonious society" might represent the third stage of China's reform era: a period characterized by the realization of social fairness and justice under the CCP's auspices (Joshi 2014, 174). Still, Zheng sustained that CCP somehow refrains from reforming the Party. According to him, being the Party the only ruling political body in China, and its all-pervasive penetration into state institutions, changing the Party implicitly means redistributing political power among different social and political groups (Zheng 2009, 4). Any power redistribution might give birth to social upheaval and, consequently, jeopardize social stability that represents a crucial narrative for CCP's legitimacy. Moreover, given China's monolithic political system, CCP leadership's imputability for the side effects of rapid economic transformation would be further exacerbated (Zheng 2009, 4).

Pei Minxin also has argued that China is facing a crisis of governance. According to him, the power and strength of the CCP have declined in recent years in the following areas: the shrinkage of its organizational penetration, the erosion of its authority, and the breakdown of its internal discipline (Pei 2006, 11). The weakening of Party's penetration into state institutions is the natural result of the political and economic devolution carried out from 1978 to mid-1990s aimed at passing the burden of managing potential social unrests to local governments. Economic responsibility passed on to communities and lower government apparatuses since

these were given more resources and broader discretion to pursue localized plans of growth (Shue 2004, 29). Additionally, under the post-Mao reforms, the government attributed more importance to the market forces. This newly formed state of affairs, made it difficult to define who might take the credit for successes or be imputable for economic failures (Shue 2004, 29). Yet, local governments became de facto owners of state enterprises and strengthened their own power base (Zheng 2009, 137). Responsively, the central leadership realized that the delegation of power might eventually undermine Party's stronghold on the state machine. Therefore, since the late 1990s, the government has been implementing reform programs aimed at shifting power from state to society (Zheng 2009, 135). Likewise, it has employed a mix of "strategies of power" to shore up popular support, sedate local protests, and incorporate the beneficiaries of economic reform into the political system.

It is good to keep in mind that the CCP is skillful in selecting concessions that are not detrimental to its legitimacy. Among these, village elections represent the first step towards extending political participation in an authoritarian regime (Pei 2006, 7). According to Shue, even if a certain phenomenon does not represent a peril for legitimacy per se, drawing on historical parallels, the CCP is able to attribute the potential of devastating social insubordination to it (Shue 2004, 26). By engaging symbolical narratives, the Party reaffirms its moral duty to suppress such phenomena to pursue social stability. Thus, in China political reform can occur only within the framework drawn by the CCP. In practical terms, these limits have hindered the development of an effective legal system, constrained the constitutional role of the legislative branch, and restricted the emergence of civil society (Pei 2006, 7).

Actually, strengthening the rule of law, in turn, demands institutionalized curbs on the power of the government, so it runs counter to the CCP's obsession to retain political supremacy (Pei 2006, 9). Following the same prevention logic, the government is also committed to repressing anything challenging its legitimacy (Zheng 2009, 129). Yet, on the one hand, the CCP's traditional instrument of control – propaganda, coercion, and organization- have all lost efficacy over time. While, on the other hand, the range of challenges the CCP has to face today widens. The increasing social stratification and inequality, widespread corruption, pervasive unemployment, rising crime, and rural unrest figure prominently among these (Zheng 2009, 126). Resultantly, as statisticians proved, from 1996 to 2011 the number of mass incidents increased yearly. Looking at the figures, in this 15-year span, the number of mass incidents grew at an average rate of 17% and the number of participants rose up to 70 million (Liu 2011, 54).

From a democratic point of view, the increasing occurrence of protests can be seen as a lack of government legitimacy (Zheng 2009, 125). Still, if we observe legitimacy in China as lying in the differentiation between the central and local governments, we are able to state that social protests do not constitute a real threat to CCP's control on society. In fact, though the grievances they are born out of being serious, social protests are mostly rooted in localized concerns (Liu 2011, 53-59). As the responsibility for economic performance has been dispersed towards the periphery of power, the burden of dealing with social unrests has been delegated to lower level government institutions (Shue 2004, 29). Ironically, delocalization served to bolster a complementary aspect of CCP's legitimacy, namely moral superiority. Actually, the Party managed to find a solution to ensure its moral legitimacy by marking a line between the abstract (center) and concrete government (periphery). Being people's discontent usually directed towards local officials, when necessary the central government can intercede in defense of the people and appear as endowed with moral superiority. Therefore, decentralization and marketization made it easier for the central leadership to contain social protests (Shue 2004, 29). The central government is, thus, still commendable for economic successes, but it is able to pass on the bill to local governments for potential breakdowns. As a result, the Party not only ensures its moral authority, but it can still be regarded as the champion of economic development.

Additionally, in spite of all restraints to social transformation posed by the CCP, personal freedom and social mobility expanded significantly; alternative channels for political participation popped up; many civil society organizations are allowed to discuss diverse issues, and NGOs have been spreading in China in the last years (Brookings 2016). Moreover, a program of legal reforms strongly affected political, economic, and social behavior (Pei 2006, 6). In order to restore the constitutional order devastated by the Cultural Revolution, growing importance was attached to the legislative branch. Looking at these efforts, we can delineate a temporal continuum along which the CCP's leadership increasingly coated the law with significance, particularly for managing society and securing political legitimacy. Such process started with extending the role of the National People Congress in policy-making, it passed by the 2014 fourth Plenum resolution and it culminates in the implementation of the national SCS as a means to restore morality through legal enforcement.

Furthermore, the Party steered its efforts to a series of initiatives to reinforce the supervision of local governments. We can trace these attempts as culminating in the enforcement of the national SCS. Nonetheless, the deeper penetration into local institutions will

not deprive the Party of its moral authority. Contrarily, by employing a tool that reinforces the legal system to reassert people's predisposition toward sincerity (SCS), the Party's moral stature will increase.

Finally, albeit there are justifiable doubts about the enforceability of the same standards of judgment to citizens and Party members indiscriminately, the national SCS might represent a natural evolution of Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaigns initiated in 2012. In the next section, we will set the focus in the Chinese individuals' crisis resulting from the reform period. Specifically, we will investigate the circumstances that led to the deterioration of morality in Chinese society.

2.2 Morality crisis

Looking at economic development standards, the CCP appears successful at realizing Mencius' *fùmín*. However, it is necessary to reevaluate this triumph taking into account other factors. In the previous section, I maintain that, despite the government's will to extend the fruits of economic growth to a wider audience, a great part of Chinese society is still cut out from enjoying such benefits. Moreover, the pursuit of economic reforms led to the erosion of the state organizational structure that exert normative restraints, producing a vacuum of moral authority (Thornton 2007, 20). In fact, the market-oriented economy produced a series of social contradiction and differences of interest lacking in the pre-reform society (OECD 2019). According to Pieke, one of the main effects of the economic transition consists of people changing from work unit people (单位人) to social people (社会人) (Pieke 2012, 158). The end of the collectivization period brought about the enhancement of people's social mobility that, in turn, undermined the central government's ability to legitimize its rule.

Before the decollectivization campaign of 1982-83, the Party regarded the differentiation between the formal and concrete government as detrimental to its authority. As for the Mao era, it would be more appropriate to see the two components like the head (the central government) and the arms (local cadres) of the same entity, namely the CCP. Based on such uniqueness, the central leadership was able to create its legitimacy basis through the works of the cadres. In turn, the villagers perceived the cadres as the representatives of the official political narrative at a local level, and so the latter were highly respected. On a less ideological

level, however, the villagers' subjection to cadre powers also hinged upon materialistic reasons. In fact, because the cadres controlled almost all resources in the collective economy, the villagers had no choice but subject to the cadres' authority (Yan 2009, 29). This living environment allowed the Party to secure its political legitimacy at the roots of society.

This process of legitimization resulted from basic conditions. First, the administrative structure of the communes gave cadres the full authority to monopolize resources, from the basic means of livelihood to opportunities for upward mobility. Second, cadres recruitment use to take place on the basis of political correctness and class origin, thus only those who closely followed the party line and their superiors' instruction could stay in power (Yan 2009, 28). Since the figure of the revolutionary honest cadre was a profoundly accepted idea within the village collective imaginary, the central government secured the penetration into village life and the resultant political legitimization. Finally, given the hegemony of the communist ideology at the national level, the cadres could claim to be the delegation of the central authority at a local level. Ergo, the masses could not question cadres' political correctness (Yan 2009, 29). The villagers were imprisoned in the collective life of the village, as no viable strategy for villagers to eschew cadres' authority was available in the pre-reform period. Furthermore, political mobilization massively changed personal relationships in the Mao era. Comradeship came to substitute any kind of spontaneous interpersonal relationship between individuals, for they were deemed as deleterious to Party loyalty (Qi 310, 2013). Shortly, any member of Chinese society had to neglect individual interests for the sake of common good or, better, this was the only way to live in this kind of "familiar society" (熟悉社会).

However, the rural reforms brought into being the erosion of the Party's legitimacy at the village level, for they gave room for alternative resources and opportunities outside the bureaucratic redistributive system. The main aspect of the reforms was the shift to household farming. Besides from being a fundamental means of production, the land was also a source of social welfare. Actually, the introduction of the new pattern of economic and social stratification had two main consequences: villagers eventually gained the status of independent legal persons, and agricultural productivity rose dramatically in rural China (Yan 2009, 30-31). Resultantly, due to the eclipse of the previous social hierarchy pattern, many villagers gained sufficient strategic resources to evade cadres' authority.

Simultaneously, Party progressively retreated from rural society; in contrast, social networks made of *guānxi* gained momentum in village life (Yan 2009, 32). Hence, communist

ideology stopped to function as a compelling basis for the legitimacy of the CCP and comradeship stopped being the main form of social relationship. In details, the common appraisal of cadres as delegated with the central political and moral authority turned into widespread suspicion towards cadres' corruption (Yan 2009, 33). In fact, if economic corruption augmented cadres' wealth, it weakened their ability to compel obedience from their subordinates (Yan 2009, 43).

Shortly after the reforms, though the villagers could access a range of new opportunity of social as well as physical mobility, in their eyes the cadres still represented the interests of the center. Witnessing the moral deterioration of the cadres, however, central Party's moral authority eroded consequently. In fact, perceiving the cadres as pursuing personal gain rather than implementing policies for the common good, the masses started to doubt about the morality of the central leadership too. Yet, due to the ability of the central leadership to mark the differentiation between formal and concrete government, the moral correlation of the two components progressively waned away. Doing so, the center presented itself as a superior entity able to protect the masses from local officials' abuses. Hence, the Party leadership began to reassert its moral stature. Ultimately, the masses no longer perceived center and periphery as components of the same body, but rather as two distinct entities that entertain a conflictual relationship with one another.

According to Ci, the main aspect of this morality crisis is that the norms that are violated are those affecting people's everyday life, as the cases of unsafe food and altered drugs *inter alia* testify. Additionally, individuals no longer perceive this moral decay as exceptional; contrarily, it represents the normal state of affairs (Ci 2014, 15). In Ci's opinion, the Party normalized the infringement of morality, through the routinized exposure of immoral events through its controlled media (Ci 2014 16). Such hypothesis entails that the Party managed to channel people's outrage without, though, providing concrete solutions to the moral crisis. However, this strategy manifested as successful in securing CCP's rule over the country. Popular media images of corruption fuel what Lipschutz addressed as "political economy of danger". By representing a modern world rife with moral ambiguity and the ever-present possibility of violence, the Party legitimates itself as the only hope for preserving social stability (Thornton 2007, 217).

Under the sociological respect, Ci suggested, the range of activities the members of Chinese society enjoy or abstain from is a conglomerate of diametrically opposed conception of

what is just/unjust. Moreover, a superior moral order dictates the rationale behind the adoption of one specific behavior in a given situation (Ci 2014, 17). He suggested that there is no structural differentiation in Chinese moral culture between the good and the right, between morality and politics. This, in turn, means that China's moral crisis is permeating China as a whole, blurring the distinction between society and politics (Ci 2014, 17). The author locates this moral order as solely rooted in socialist and communist ideologies. Still, he failed at understanding that the heritage of the traditional conception of shame, which is typical of the pre-reforms "familiar society", also influences the assessment of what is commendable/uncommendable in both politics and society. Furthermore, lacking any separation between what is good and what is right, we can consider the moral crisis as the corollary of a justice crisis. Ensuing, the moral crisis is entrenched in the shortcomings at creating an unbiased effective legal system. Indeed, as far as the government will not be able to establish a legal system free of contradictions the moral crisis is doomed to exacerbate. The 2014 fourth Plenum resolution represented a benchmark in this very respect. By overcoming the "ruling by law" vs "ruling by virtue" dichotomy, it paved the way for the establishment of a "just" legal system.

Hence, the unified SCS stands as a supportive measure to create an egalitarian society where justice is the same for both common citizens and Party members. Still, there are dubious implications on the implementation of an all-pervading monitoring system. To what extent a system that limits individual's agency by putting the Chinese society under a scrutinizing eye stands as a viable way to solve the moral crisis? In other words, sticking to Ci's definition of good, may we regard an individual as a good member of society if his/her agency is narrowed and consequently piloted? The next chapter provides a detailed answer to these queries.

3. The cure: the Social Credit System

As introduced before, from the implementation of the rural reforms, the range of "mechanisms of power" available to the CCP dramatically narrowed, so the Chinese polity had to resort to different means to ensure an economic growth model that could screen its political legitimacy. However, the Party has not always succeeded in enforcing such strategies. In different terms, many experts of China pointed out that what is at stake is the moral strand of CCP's political legitimacy. To understand this morality crisis, it is necessary to find the locus where the social transformation is rooted: the people as agents of the change (Ci 2014, 13).

3.1 The basic form of relationship: *guānxi*

As exposed by Ci, the moral crisis articulates on different levels. Firstly, the basic norms of coexistence are shattered. The erosion of communist ideology also brought about the substitution of comradeship with *guānxi* as the basic form of personal relationship in Chinese society. *Guānxi* is a Chinese form of interpersonal connections that ensures the maintenance of long-term relationships between individuals based on mutual trust and assistance. Many commentators asserted that the social disruption derives from the weakening of the social norms attached to the *guānxi* traditional concept, such as trustworthiness (信用), face (面子), norms of interpersonal behavior (人情), and obligatory reciprocity (回报) (Qi 2013, 310). People might view *guānxi* concept as entailing a sense of opportunism and as lacking civil morality, since it arises from opportunities created by the inadequacy of the legal system. In fact, the benefits derived from entertaining a *guānxi* are not based on legal entitlement, but rather on a sense of reciprocal trust between the parties that is constructed over time through social occasions (Qi 2013, 312). Nonetheless, the *guānxi* concept sustains a kind of interpersonal relationship that lacks any sense of diffidence and that, in turn, promotes positive cooperation among the participants in the relation. *Guānxi* is born out of the necessity to regulate everyday social life, given the absence of the law and the practice of civil society in dynastic China. Accordingly, if an individual is able to entertain a wide network of long-term *guānxi*, the others will look at him/her as mastering the norms of interpersonal behavior, and so as a moral member of Chinese society (Qi 2013, 314).

Apparently, *guānxi* can serve as a complementary relationship model to a legalistic approach to social management. Yet, *guānxi* itself also possesses some limitations. *Guānxi* is somehow contradictory: on the one hand, it stands as an incomparable system of guarantees between the participants in the relation; on the other hand, it discriminates the "outsiders" (Qi 2013, 316). Thus, a society based on this relationship pattern provides breeding ground for phenomena as favoritism and corruption. In this regard, the government steps in to transfer the positive attributes of *guānxi* to the entire Chinese society through the institution of a universal legalistic structure. By selecting the strong points of *guānxi*, the CCP wants to institute a universal structure to restore morality in Chinese society. In details, the SCS aims at transforming the common good into the utmost rationale pushing social actors to adopt moral behaviors.

One of the main goals of the national SCS is to preserve this form of relationship by promoting the sincerity and trustworthiness (诚信）concepts. If this project will turn out as a triumph, the opportunity for the CCP to concretize its legitimacy will arise. Specifically, it would be possible for the Party to appear as both endowed with morality and skillful at creating welfare. On the first respect, by fostering the sincerity, the Party aims to restore a society where the common good outdoes personal interests. By doing so, CCP will gain the status of sage-ruler for it succeeded in pursuing the *wángdào* and managed to breed people's morality. Furthermore, the SCS is a strategic tool to fight various economic-financial (e.g. tax fraud and insolvency), healthcare and medical (e.g. food and drug safety), and environmental problems. Accordingly, the SCS is a majestic project aimed to reconstruct the Party's organizational penetration in Chinese society. Surely, through the implementation of this system, the CCP will be able to exert normative restraints.

Will the Party actually succeed in reinvigorating its moral stature? Looking at the data we already possess, Chinese's appraisal of the SCS seems to corroborate this soothsaying. In her 2018 survey, Kostka showed that 80% of the interviewees expressed a positive view of the SCSs (Kostka 2018, 9). Additionally, 59% support that the government should be responsible for the management of a nationwide SCS (Kostka 2018, 24). The survey reveals that citizens perceive the SCS as an instrument to improve the quality of life leading to more honest and law-abiding behavior in society. In fact, 76 % of the respondents assert the existence of a deep-rooted mutual mistrust in Chinese society. Moreover, they see the SCSs as an effective tool to close institutional and regulatory gaps (Kostka 2018, 21). Most of the respondents declared that they

do not conceive the SCS as a means of surveillance and social control because they assume that the Chinese security apparatus is able to access citizens' sensible information already. Nevertheless, the authoress cautions that the citizen's positive appraisal of SCS arises from their belief that fair and transparent methods are used to determine social credit ranking. Still, the algorithms that fuel the SCS are not yet in the public domain. Furthermore, because the SCS is still in a pilot stage, it may be possible that harsher punitive features will appear in the future (Kostka 2018, 24). Additionally, these results might be flawed by the nature of conducting a survey in an authoritarian state. Despite the respondents' data were anonymized, some more cautious may have falsified their answers because they feared reprisal from the authorities (Kostka 2018, 9).

Briefly, the widespread acquiescence towards the SCS stems from individuals' flawed perceptions, rather than from conscious evaluations of the system's pros and cons. Nonetheless, these perceptions are the basis of political legitimacy and therefore shape the whole realms of Chinese politics and society.

The SCS plan also carries a certain amount of risks. Since *guānxi* was born out of the need to create an alternative to the rule of law for regulating Chinese everyday lives, it is possible that the SCS will eventually undermine this model of relationship. Actually, the national SCS represents a unified monitoring system intended for strengthening law enforcement. Following the progressively deeper penetration of the law in the country's social life, the reliance on *guānxi* to establish interpersonal durative relations might dwindle drastically. From a neoliberal point of view, this kind of living environment can appear as being beneficial to China's economy. Still, from a Chinese perspective, regulating economic transactions exclusively by means of legalistic norms rather than by long-term relationships might produce undesired effects. First, it might exacerbate further the mistrust and suspicion among the members of society. Furthermore, transaction costs will rise, while the level of guarantees and mutual assistance on which *guānxi* rest will fall. In fact, *guānxi* work as an institution of assurance that prevents all the parties from defecting. Being entirely dependent upon symbolic elements, *guānxi* provides its participants with assurances otherwise not available (Qi 2013, 318). Additionally, the participants in a *guānxi* type transaction can create their personal credit by putting into practice trustworthiness (Qi 2013, 317). Hence, the individual is not just an element of the *guānxi* but rather it has the power to shape the structure of the relationship network he/she belongs. However, *guānxi* does not stand merely as an *inter partes* relation, for it includes an external audience that unwittingly or

not influences the network itself (Qi 2013, 320). The SCS will have the greatest impact in this very respect. If during the collective period it was the public gaze to represent the audience, the SCS is going to substitute this social factor with computerized scrutiny. No change will happen concerning the driving force of such an audience, for it will keep hinging upon the sense of public shame.

Many Western commentators conjectured about how the morality concept inspiring the SCS might weigh in on the freedom of agency. From a democratic perspective, it is more than licit to raise this kind of concerns. In fact, the bias lies in the kind of analytical approach, rather than in the nature of the subject. Specifically, most of the people who have treated the SCS so far have done so adopting a synchronic attitude. They failed at reconstructing a timeline that depicts the evolution of the Chinese social environment, and how the public gaze remained pivotal over time in shaping social relations. Thus, it is crucial to look at the subject through a diachronic interpretative lens, so to reveal the significance of public gaze in influencing individual agency. In fact, despite it lacked a supportive legalistic structure, in the pre-reform period the social exclusion resulting from the infringement of moral norms was not weaker than that envisioned by the SCS. Confucian ethics considers shame as a catalyst for an individual to improve one's own behavior. Simultaneously, it also represents a tool for the others to judge "the kind of person you are" (Li, Wang, and Fischer 2004, 772). The public gaze has always been pushing the members of society to adopt morally acceptable behaviors and so limiting the scope of one's own agency.

During the planned-economy period, since Chinese society was divided into work units there was no need to devise a monitoring system as pervading as the SCS. Common citizens could not access social mobility and entertained face-to-face relations exclusively. Individuals exchanged information on a symmetrical basis. Consequently, adopting immoral behaviors, such as breaking one's word, was not something easily conceivable. Moreover, in this cellular living environment, it was almost impossible to establish relationships outside one's own work unit. Therefore, those who behaved immorally also had to sustain the public gaze blast. Moving toward the transition period, people gained an increasingly wider range of opportunities to establish relations with strangers, thus the information exchanged became asymmetrical (Zhu 2014, 163). Today, those who do not respect one's word can move to another living environment eschewing repercussions. Above all, these individuals can also avoid criticism by the public eye. The establishment of the SCS became inevitable to correct the information asymmetry. The

function of this structure is to create a national database to store information regarding all the members of society (physical persons, legal persons, and governmental departments alike) under the slogan "if you break your word somewhere, you will be punished everywhere (一处 失言，处处受制)"(State Council 2014).

One ancillary of the concept of shame is that of social credit. In fact, the culture of personal credit is not something SCS is aiming at creating *ex novo*. Oppositely, Confucius first pointed out this conception of credit as the basis of a harmonious society in *the Analects* "自古 皆有死, 民无信不立". It means that trustworthiness is pivotal to awaken people's spirit of working hard so to shape a prosperous society (Luo 2018, 171). In dynastic China, Chinese believed in the existence of celestial creatures known as old immortals. These creatures had the duty to record the merits and demerits of any human being. Moving toward the contemporary hyper-connected era, the SCS comes to replace these demigods in assessing people's social credit. Specifically, this system takes big-data as its basis, technological capabilities as its braces, and the rule of law as its guaranteed credit management structure (Luo 2018, 171). As reported in the 2014 State Council's *Planning Outline for the Establishment of the SCS* creditworthiness is the foundation for establishing the SCS. Only when people treat each other with good faith and put honesty first, it will be possible to establish amicable interpersonal relationships, to promote the improvement of society and civilization, and to create a harmonious society (State Council 2014).

Since every actor of society is unable to maintain a resemblance of morality, it is thus possible to talk about the corruption of an entire people (Ci 2014, 15). Apparently, the SCS takes this generalized erosion of society as one of its driving force. Accordingly, various local SCSs are characterized by the 连坐（*liánzuò*) logic (Luo 2018, 171). This term means that even though an individual has committed no offense, it can be still included in a blacklist only for being related to a culprit. Consequently, the SCS is going to shake *guānxi* at its very foundations, rather than healing it. If in a *guānxi* network the individual has the capabilities to transform his/her personal social credit, after the implementation of the national SCS, this will be no longer possible. In fact, sticking to the logic of "relational imputability", one's own social credit, or better the benefits and disadvantages resulting from it, will also depend upon the social performance of the others participants in the network. Probably, this is the most inauspicious premise of the SCS. In fact,

in the hyper-connected contemporary world any individual inevitably relates to all the other members of society. Consequently, losing the control of one's own moral image, all the individuals are, consequently, at fault a priori.

Notwithstanding, it is possible to see the SCS as a revolutionary project supported by the heritage of Chinese traditional political thought. Particularly, the CCP aims to invert the trajectory of the relational imputability. Being all the members of society inevitably connected to each other, a moral individual can also serve as a model that serves to disclose other's morality. Thus, CCP seems to embrace an Aristotelian vision of the state. According to the philosopher, the best state should be designed to educate some citizens to become virtuous, so they can rule and inspire others (Aristoteles, 1993).

3.2 The role of education

As the concept of *wángdào* demonstrates, education is the basis for human society to develop and transform over time. Education is the rule that cultivates the potential of the outside world and develops it according to the innate quality of the individual (Yang 2012, 2). To ensure the progress of humanity towards a harmonious society it is necessary for the individuals to practice self-cultivation.

Once again, it is possible to notice that Confucianism displays an anthropocentric vision of the world and society. In fact, the *Great Learning* emphasizes "one is all based on self-cultivation". First, it happens from outside to inside, that is, from personality to self-cultivation; then, from inside to outside, that is, from self-cultivation to governance and peace (Yang 2012, 3). If we stick tightly to this logic, since the SCS will restrict the opportunities for the individuals to pursue self-cultivation, it might further deteriorate China's morality crisis. Therefore, the SCS not only would appear as a draconian instrument to limit people's agency, but it would also endanger the moral strand of CCP's legitimacy. With this scenario, it would be wiser to depict the Party as a tyrant rather than a sage-ruler. However, these conjectures do not take into account that, given the emphasis Confucian and communist thoughts put on social management, the ruler's intervention is crucial to create a favorable living environment. In line with the long-standing tradition of regulating society, the central authorities devised the SCS to erect a supervisory apparatus to guide people in their individual self-cultivation process. The goal is to

make them individuate and, consequently, adopt morally acceptable behaviors for the sake of Chinese society (State Council 2016).

As Jiang Zemin highlighted in the 1990s, the function of education is to elevate people's quality or, better, to make people's inner disposition manifest. This kind of education stresses on shaping both individuals' abilities and morality. Yet, it is crucial to put morality at the first place (Yang 2012, 4). Jiang's words are deeply rooted in Confucian thought. Particularly, Han Yu in *Discourse on teacher* asserted that the teacher has the role to transmit the morality to elevate the spirit and make the principle clear. Resultantly, there will be cultivated people to form a human society (Yang 2012, 4-5). It is, thereby, possible to view the Party-state as a master that, implementing the SCS, manages to fashion a national spirit devoted to the common good.

Education is about allowing people's good disposition to manifest. How to do so? It is crucial to nurture people's self-willed disposition (素质, *sùzhì*). Such disposition derives from the combination of inborn qualities and acquired qualities (Yang 2012, 5). In particular, the latter are dependent upon environmental conditions and individual subjective factors. Accordingly, the responsibility of creating a moral living environment falls on the government. In this regard, in 2006, former president Hu Jintao laid out the discourse on "the eight honors and the eight disgraces" (八荣八耻 *bāróngbāchǐ*) calling it "new moral yardstick to measure the work, conduct, and attitude of CCP's officials" (Hu 2006). As the role of the functionary is to lead, administer, instruct, and serve the people, this speech conveyed a list of precepts to shape Party member's behavioral code. This document resounds various CCP's attitudes to social management treated so far, namely an anthropocentric vision of the state and the equivalence between law and virtue. Two precepts, in particular, laid the grounds of the SCS's logic: 'honestly and forthrightness is praiseworthy while sacrificing principle for profit is disgraceful" and "obedience of the law is praiseworthy while indulgence and pleasure-seeking is disgraceful". The former stresses on education, self-cultivation, and social supervision, while the latter means that the Party has to establish the awareness of the Party constitution and sense of discipline. It is not too big a leap to state that the SCS extend these moral regulations to social management. To improve the quality of education it is crucial to create the environmental/social conditions that help the fostering of people's morality (Yang 2012, 5). As pointed out in the *Great Learning,* it is not necessary to teach a seed on how to turn into a tree, but it is fundamental to create a suitable environment for the tree. The tree, which represents human beings, will grow according to its self-willed disposition. The comprehensive advancement of the SCS hinges upon

completing systems of credit laws, regulations, and standards, and on the formation of a credit investigation system that covers the whole society. It has to promote a culture of creditworthiness and establish mechanisms to encourage trustworthiness and punish untrustworthiness. Moreover, it must put people first, to form an environment across all society in which people abhor untrustworthiness, and make honesty the standard behavioral norm. This process has to start from strengthening trustworthiness education in schools (State Council 2014). Furthermore, the State Council highlighted the role of media in constructing the SCS. Particularly, it is indispensable to create artworks and advertisements that blend the traditional Chinese culture of creditworthiness with modern values, and regularly advertise on exemplary deeds of creditworthiness (State Council 2016).

After all, the government is made of people. Molding a morally elevated living environment is contingent on the edification of ethical officials. That is why Chinese legislators also stressed on establishing models of social creditworthiness so that citizens have role models to learn from and goals to pursue, and on making creditworthiness and trustworthiness the conscious pursuits of the entire society (State Council 2014).

3.3 Contraindications

Professedly, the SCS aims at labeling the infringement of morality as something blamable. Specifically, the CCP stressed the strict bond between economic performance and morality. Ensuing, it adopted a series of strategies to shape a society model that hinges on the value of trustworthiness. The SCS will stimulate people to self-cultivate one's own disposition and activate a mechanism to improve environmental conditions. The main strategy to reach this goal is to elevate sincerity as the main pillar of Chinese society (State Council 2016). By doing so, people will more easily refrain from adopting immoral behaviors. Yet, there is another query that needs to be answered: if individual's change in perception of the common good results from an intolerant method can the Party still be regarded as a moral prince able to disclose his subjects 'good nature?

As Kostka's survey proved, in China perceptions of legitimacy mold politics and society as effectively as realities. When necessary, in a Machiavellian fashion, the CCP is able to adopt a dissimulation strategy to reach its goals in administering the state. As Machiavelli asserted "it is

not necessary for a Prince to be virtuous, but only to appear as such. Conversely, to remain virtuous in any circumstance can be detrimental to stability. A prince cannot observe all those qualities that make a commoner good, as sometimes it is necessary to act as a tyrant to maintain the state in order" (Machiavelli 2013, 26). "Where there is no court to appeal to, one looks to the end. So, let a prince win and maintain his state: the means will always be judged honorable, and will be praised by everyone" (Machiavelli 2013, 127-8). Nowadays, as in the past, the foundational logic of the ruler's moral mission implies that in pursuing the *wángdào* he/she might eventually end up reaching the *bàdao*. In fact, the quest for the *wángdào* is not always a virtuous one, for it is usually constructed on a dominating vision of the state. To appear to Chinese as a sage-ruler the CCP's leadership might resort to despicable means leading to "the path of the tyrant". The SCS too is a double-edged sword. In one extreme, it can heal Chinese society from the morality crisis; in the opposite extreme, it can turn out as an oppressive means to limit citizens' freedom. These two poles only mark the ends of a continuum containing a great variety of intermediary forms. Still, to make an unbiased judgment of the SCS is necessary to refer to the Confucian vision of moral guidance.

The message Mencius conveyed was that it was necessary to substitute the culture of intolerance with that of benevolence. Intolerance was identified with punishments and so the law, while benevolence as moral guidance. The first attitude is relatable to that of Legalist philosophers. They asserted that the strict enforcement of the law would be the only way to maintain social harmony (Li 2014, 119). Conversely, Confucian tended towards the minimization of legal measures, as they could give rise to conflicts. To make people virtuous is the first step to attain a harmonious society. To reach such a goal, it is necessary that people develop a sense of shame, rather than making people to fear repercussions. Hence, the harmonious society represents a temporal continuum that links together the technological advancement of material civilization brought about by the CCP and the revival of a collective identity in the sphere of spiritual civilization (Anagnost 1997, 80). Thus, the SCS serves as a link between past and future to reach a higher status of civilization.

As conveyed before, the culture of shame characterized the pre-reform period, however, in the current network society this attitude has waned away. Accordingly, the SCS comes into play to cover this morality vacuum, to recreate a society where it is shame to pilot people's agency. Nonetheless, to bring into play this kind of environment the government is relying upon the implementation of the law. Sticking to the differentiation drawn by Mencius,

this strategy might represent a major contradiction. Nevertheless, the SCS project is completely consistent with the Confucian ideal of a harmonious society. Admitted that the kind of environment that Confucius envisioned has not to depend solely on penal law, he also permitted that exclusive reliance on virtue is unrealistic and ineffective (Li 2014, 119). Thus, CCP largely constructed upon this hypothetical as well as empirical shortcoming of Confucius "ruling by virtue" concept. By devising a supportive structure to the rule of law, the government paved the way for establishing a society where it would be possible to rule mainly employing the rule by virtue. In fact, by instilling the sense of right and wrong into people, it would be easier for the government to inspire Chinese citizens by standing as a moral example to follow.

Yet, this process requires pragmatism that means being concerned more about results and less about theories. Subsequently, SCS is the result of the mutual transformation and integration of two opposite political attitudes, which are "rule by law" and "rule by virtue". Such an effort is in line with what settled during the 2014 fourth Plenum, where the Party claimed the equivalence between the two positions.

Observing morality under the sociological and philosophical respects is necessary, but not enough. To grasp what influence the individual to adopt or refrain from certain behaviors, it is necessary to operate a cognitive analysis. As Epstein hypothesized, after internalization and frequent practice, ordinary law-abiding people view honesty as the most natural choice and unconsciously opt to adopt honest behaviors (Zhi and Hing 2014, 372). Moreover, many researchers have proved the interconnection between moral identity and moral behavior. For Zhi and Hing "a moral individual is one for whom moral constructs are chronically accessible, readily primed, and easily activated… Moral considerations pervade every aspect of a moral individual's everyday life because morality is rooted at the core of their being". As a result, moral choices attain chronic accessibility because of the frequency of use (Narvaez et al. 2006, 966-985).

Individuals need an external stimulus leading them to higher accessibility to moral concern (Zhi and Hing 2014, 373). Epstein's theory seems to be consistent with the goal of the SCS. If it is true that the living environment influences the individual's inborn qualities, to solve the morality crisis the CCP has not to compel people to behave in a certain fashion. Oppositely, the Party has to modify the living environment through a legalistic structure that pervades every aspect of society. Accordingly, the government envisioned SCS as an all-embracing regulatory system encompassing different spheres of the individual's experience as a member of a

community. Nonetheless, this external influence does not aim at constraining individual agency for fear of repercussions. In fact, the government takes law as a deterrent tool, rather than a coercive one. Being law in China coated with a religious and ritualistic value it does not necessarily present as a strong-arm tool: its assertion lays upon the intention of its users.

After these considerations, it is so possible to state that the national SCS has all the potentialities to facilitate people's access to moral behaviors and to elevate the Party to the role of a moral guide. Hence, it is necessary to make access to moral behaviors easier, so that individuals will more easily behave honestly. Furthermore, being the SCS a Party-state project, CCP will automatically secure moral legitimacy. Still, further reflections on the success of this project need to be developed. Especially, is the SCS effective? Is it reaching its goals? Currently, is not feasible to provide these queries with satisfactory answers, for the SCS is not yet fully established. Yet, taking into account that Chinese people experienced other social experiments, probably it will not be long before people's reaction to these moral stimuli become manifest.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is possible to state that the SCS is the answer to the need raised by the former Chinese leaders to invert a trend toward moral decay pervading Chinese society at all levels. In fact, SCS represents an automated system sustaining the application of the law that promotes a new kind of society rooted in sincerity (State Council 2014). Sticking to a less opportunistic interpretation, the SCS appears as a powerful tool to restore Party's moral legitimacy. Building on the 2014 fourth Plenum resolution, this automated supervisory mechanism combines two attitudes seemingly at odds, namely "ruling by law" and "ruling by virtue" to make the CCP appear as endowed with moral legitimacy. As proved, the SCS represents the acme of a political debate over the virtuosity of the law, particularly in the field of social management. In this regard, the government endeavors to transfer the positive attributes of *guānxi* to the entire Chinese society through the institution of a universal legalistic structure. The national SCS, therefore, aims at transforming the common good into the utmost rationale pushing social actors to adopt moral behaviors.

Potentially, the SCS might allow the Party to reconstruct its moral legitimacy at both prescriptive and descriptive levels. On the one hand, it is assumed that the Party's course is the correct one for the state and the people, for it is the legitimate ruler of the country. While, on the other hand, the Party bolsters its legitimacy on the basis of its performance as a moral example, guide, and reformer of the state and its people. If the plan will turn out to be a triumph, CCP will gain the status of sage-ruler for it succeeded in pursuing the *wángdào* and managed to breed people's morality. Furthermore, the SCS is a strategic tool to fight various economic-financial, healthcare and medical, and environmental problems. Accordingly, the SCS is also majestic project directed at reconstructing the Party's organizational penetration in Chinese society.

Implications on the infringement of individuals' freedom of agency undeniably exist. Yet, without a proper understanding of the Chinese socio-cultural environment, I deem as intellectually dishonest to make such a harsh judgement. In fact, the SCS logic is situated within the spectrum of conventions that have been influencing and molding individuals' social behavior throughout Chinese history. In the past, the social exclusion resulting from the infringement of moral norms was not less compelling than that envisioned by the SCS. Confucian ethics considers

shame as a catalyst for an individual to improve one's own behavior. A distinguishable difference between the past and the future is the enforcement of a legalistic structure supporting the concepts of social credit. The function of this structure is to create a national database to store information regarding all the members of society under the slogan "if you break your word somewhere, you will be punished everywhere" (State Council 2016). Hence, the SCS aims at molding a morally elevated new citizenry that can eventually give life to a harmonious society. In line with the long-standing tradition of regulating society and the Confucian didactic vein, the central authorities assumed a crucial role in leading people in their individual self-cultivation process. The goal is to make them individuate and, consequently, adopt morally acceptable behaviors for the sake of the Chinese society. Hence, the harmonious society represents a temporal continuum that links together the technological advancement of material civilization brought about by the CCP and the revival of a collective identity in the sphere of spiritual civilization (Anagnost 1997, 80). Fittingly, the SCS serves as a link between an idealized past and an envisioned future to establish the system of core socialist values and putting them into practice, have creditworthiness education run through the entire process of establishing citizens' morality and building a spiritual civilization (State Council 2014).

Unfortunately, from an ethical perspective, these attempts are not sufficient to restore CCP's moral legitimacy. In fact, in addition to improving the knowledge about moral responsibility and strengthening the inner consciousness of public interest, the government also has to focus on its self-discipline responsibility. There is the urgency to standardize efficiently the moral responsibility in order to ensure the unification of public and government interests. First, the Party must spend efforts on the moral cultivation of government officials. Particularly, it has to improve officials' awareness of public interest by means of studying political philosophy and Party's historical practice of serving the people. Second, the CCP must lead the officials to establish a correct moral belief. The moral belief of the socialist state takes faith in Communism as the basis; it conforms to and reflects the masses' freedom rights and general interests. Accordingly, the Party has to elevate the public interest as the supreme value standard, and asses whether a certain policy is beneficial to public interest or not. Apparently, Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign paved the way for this process. Still, one can conjecture that this process aims at Xi's personal political consolidation rather than to fostering the morality and the sense of justice of Party members.

China has an opportunity to create a different kind of civilization, one that sets an example for the rest of the world. Concerning the social aspect in particular, there is ground to claim that China is somewhat uniquely positioned to tackle it: its army of computer science graduates that can fine-tune the SCS according to the government's agenda, the monolithic political system that can take a longer-term view in policy planning and implementation, and the Confucian culture that emphasizes community moral education. The CCP is bustling with technocratic optimism about the possibilities to transform society and people, improve their social and moral quality and create genuine cultural revolutions. This theoretical basis for cultural engineering has been widely implemented in practice by both KMT and CCP and it is manifesting, nowadays, in the form of the unified SCS.

The moral duty of the government is the basis for the healthy development of society. The government has to assume the moral role of public arbiter, so to regulate the conflicts among different groups of interest and values. Only after undertaking this role, the government can resolutely get rid of pursuing the development model of pure economic growth, set up a legitimate economic model consisting in environmental protection, economic growth, raising people's qualities, and sensitizing people on their responsibility for creating a brighter future. If the CCP will be able to accomplish this goal, it would eventually create the society of sincerity, and resultantly regain its moral legitimacy.

Nonetheless, it is safe to keep in mind that when a society strives to transform itself, problems will inevitably occur. The quest for a golden future might lead to chaos unless the superstructure and the ideological apparatus can fit into the new system. In short, the CCP is venturing on a dangerous journey leading to two opposite poles: human transformation and quality on the one side, or the chaos on the other.

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