

# *Digitized Disciplinary System and Social Disenchantment*

## *– An Analysis of China’s Social Credit System*

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**Abstract:** With the advancement in technology and big data in recent years, disciplinary systems present an increasing tendency towards digitization. China’s digital Social Credit system, established to evaluate individuals, businesses, and local institutions’ trustworthiness, serves as a typical model. Through the lens of Michel Foucault’s account of disciplinary power and Max Weber’s account of rationality and disenchantment, the paper is directed to analyze China’s digital credit system’s implications on the public’s moral governance rights. Admittedly, the digital scoring system offers advantages in regard to social stability and public utility; it is suitable to China’s ideological, historical, and geographical character. However, its digital mass surveillance, through fusing value and instrumental rationality and oversimplifying morality, aggravates the spiritual crisis of disenchantment. In return, the collective disenchantment of the public leads to problematic social and political consequences. In response, the paper offers legislative and propagandize related policy suggestions to allay the undesirable outcomes of digital discipline.

**Keywords:** Disciplinary power, disenchantment, digitalization, social credit system, China.

## 1. Introduction

As the development of mass databases soars and technological advancement permeates into every aspect of our generation’s life, the disciplinary system implemented by different nations has become increasingly digitized, no longer limited to street cameras and in-person surveillance. While offering distinct benefits, new challenges have also occurred along this transformation, namely regarding the public’s moral governance rights, information rights, and digital rights [1]. While many scholastic works have focused on the assurance of the rights of privacy and the digital rights of vulnerable populations who struggle to access the internet, this paper would like to direct one’s attention to the relatively untouched aspect of the public’s moral governance right and the prospective spiritual crisis that is emerging [2-4]. Through investigating and anatomizing a typical digitized surveillance system - China’s social credit system - the paper aims to discuss the influences brought by the digitization of disciplinary power through the lens of Foucault’s account of disciplinary power and Weber’s account of value and instrumental rationality.

Illustrating the implications of digital discipline, the paper will first introduce China’s social credit system along with Foucault’s theory of disciplinary power. Then, the paper will recognize the advantages of the system and its applicability to China’s national character. Furthermore, the paper

will present the spiritual crisis inherent to the system by referring to Weber's idea of instrumental rationality, value rationality, and disenchantment. Lastly, the paper will discuss potential policy suggestions and limitations of the study.

## 2. Disciplinary Power

Along with the dramatic population and industrial transformation in the 19th to 20th centuries, French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault identified a new form of power within society that is distinct from the traditional sovereign power, known as disciplinary power. While sovereign power manifests control through external interference, such as the public execution of criminals, disciplinary power internalizes control through a non-repressive tactic of taming individual belief in accordance with social norms and collective goals. Indeed, as Foucault states, it makes "the soul the prison of the body" [5]. This control is attained through the interconnected mechanisms of surveillance and normalization, which is exemplified by the analogy of a prison panopticon [6].

In the panopticon, penitentiary education is offered to reconstruct the prisoners' beliefs, making them fall in line with social conventions. In addition, inmates are kept in individual cells and sequestered from each other yet monitored by an unseen superintendent in the central tower. This configuration establishes a constant sense of unknown and visibility, inhibiting the prisoners from escaping or misbehaving since they don't know whether they're being watched. Therefore, without the need for a group of superintendents constantly surveying the inmates, the inmates demonstrate this self-restraining characteristic that endows the system with superior efficiency.

Likewise, the application of disciplinary power in the real world shares the identical operating logic. Education, indoctrinating the public and teaching them the desired, conventional way of behavior, serves as the major method of normalization. The existence of communities, on the other hand, spontaneously prompts multi-dimensional surveillance. Governments conduct top-to-bottom surveillance, while individuals survey and constrain each other in a thorough, interactive social network. Since humans' social attributes would make them unwilling to be viewed as social outsiders, they are likely to behave in accepted ways when surveyed. Hence, a dynamic surveillance network is ubiquitous and constantly demonstrates an upward spiral in its strength through social interactions. This fosters the growth of the "productive yet docile" public [7].

In recent years, with advancements in algorithms and mass databases, the disciplinary system that is used as a tactic to govern is increasingly trending toward digitization [8]. Surveilled citizens' behaviors are transformed into numerical data points according to standardized evaluations based on norms, tightening the interplay between surveillance and normalization. China's social credit system is, according to some, a leap in the nature of disciplinary power.

## 3. China's Social Credit System as Digital Discipline

The Chinese social credit system, introduced in 2014, is a mass digital disciplinary system as part of China's legal reform [9]. In the credit system, individuals, firms, and local institutions are assigned a score based on their perceived trustworthiness, and individuals can be negatively blacklisted or positively relisted based on their score. Being blacklisted, as in a situation where the score gets excessively low, affects one's economic opportunities, family well-being, access to education, and allowed range of consumption and transportation. For example, one may be prohibited from traveling abroad or purchasing luxuries due to their blacklisted credit condition [10]. Since the restrictions ultimately diminish living standards, it serves as an effective method of restraining social misconduct and internalizing control.

The emergence of this system was partly the result of the infamous 'melamine in infant milk formula', a scandal that captured the attention of the entire country in 2008 [11]. In addition,

prevailing embezzlement misconduct by local government officials on social media further fostered the national government's realization of the importance of constructing a thorough surveillance system. Hence, adopting this social credit model that has been previously implemented independently in cities like Suining, this mass project was initiated [12]. Initially dedicated to the regulation of financial behavior and transactions in China's burgeoning market economy, the system has gradually expanded its scope to incorporate civil judgment, environmental protection, governmental affairs, and internet regulation [13]. Its operation relies on the cooperation between China's mass information infrastructure, the Central bank, and local government institutions.

Different from most government surveillance systems, China's social credit system doesn't solely aim towards political purposes, but rather directs itself towards moral objectives. In the December 2016 meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, President Xi formulated the target of the system. He states: "to combat the acute problem of lack of trust, we need to take a firm hold on creating a system for assessing reliability that covers society in general. It is necessary to improve both the mechanisms for encouraging law-abiding and conscientious citizens, and the mechanisms for punishing those who violate the law and lose confidence, so that a person simply does not dare, simply cannot lose this trust" [14]. This speech explicitly manifests the essence of the system as the moral notion – trust.

#### 4. Advantages of the Digital Credit System

Mass discipline plays a fundamental role in ensuring social stability and maximizing social utility. Multiple philosophers have demonstrated the public's inability to restrain their desires without control. Niccolo Machiavelli argues that humans are disorderly wild, unreliable, and fundamentally immoral [15]. Thomas Hobbes states that society would be chaotic without constraints imposed by governments [16]. Mozi proposes that we have to undergo the process of moralization and humanization to become "civilized" [17]. These positions suggest that a reconstruction process that normalizes the public and the assistance of constant surveillance are required to ensure social stability and order. Featuring a centralized data platform that efficiently gathers behavioral information through its algorithm, the social credit system is an effective way to create an atmosphere of permeating surveillance. Moreover, with its countless numerical data points, it offers a behavioral compass for citizens that can be easily understood and followed. Thus, attaining a high level in the public's cooperation and maximizing social utility.

The digitalization of the system, while offering broad conveniences, is especially suitable for China's national character. The paper will refer to China's unique geographical, ideological and historical context.

Firstly, from a geographical perspective, the digital data model offers a huge convenience in face of China's extensive, vast population. Occupying a land area of 9.60 million km<sup>2</sup> and the world's second-largest population of 1.41 billion, behavioral information's storage in the central government, and immediate data comparison between city-states would be impossible to obtain without digitization [18]. Furthermore, due to its continuous urbanization and dominating domestic migrant economy, China owns a very mobile population structure, with approximately ¼ of its population categorized as mobile citizens [19]. Ensuring social security under this population circumstance demands extraordinarily high mobility and transparency of information between different local administrative parties and institutions. Accordingly, China's geographical configuration and population composition makes the centralized, digitized, interdisciplinary social credit platform a suitable method for monitoring different stakeholders' economic, social, and legal-rational activities.

Second, from an ideological perspective, the digital system's successful implementation in China and the high acceptability that citizens demonstrate towards viewing the system as a moral guidance can be explained by China's ideological tradition - Confucianism. In the Confucian view, the

legitimate authority of the monarch is derived from its charismatic power endowed by heaven. He is the embodiment of the god's consummate morality (tiān dào) and, therefore is the legitimate legislator and hierarch of the country's political and legal system [20]. Accordingly, morality has always been the basis and an indivisible element of legal-rational authority throughout Chinese history. As manifested its declaration of "governing the country by virtue" as equal to "governing the country by law" in the 4th Plenum, the modern Chinese government retained this traditional ideology. Thus, this preposition makes the fusion of the two within the digital credit system relatively acceptable to the public.

Third, from a historical perspective, the cultural and ideological reforms in modern China have posed the pressing demand for a candid moral compass to elevate the citizen's degree of civility. Unlike the Western world, the Chinese civilization has never possessed a unified, dominating religion. Though numerous ideological factions and religion have influenced the country, it has always been and remain officially atheistic. Without religion serving as moral guidance, moral consensus mainly originated from the traditional ideology of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism [21]. However, under the turmoil of modern history, the guiding moral principles were dissimilated during the Xinhai cultural revolution and consecutive revolutions. In face of invasion after the seclusion policy (bì guān suǒ guó), industrialization and the incorporation of Western thoughts became the emphasis of the reformists. Though enormously promoting China's economic development, a consequence of radicalism during the reform was the collapse of the originally unified, traditional moral belief system. This collapse of moral consensus led to a collective moral landslide within the Chinese society and left the spiritual gap unfilled, often dominated by material desires [22]. The transformation of the public's beliefs, especially moral-orientated ones, is a time-consuming method. But through directly categorizing and bounding behavior through numerical scores, one just has to obey without understanding the deeper meanings behind acts, which makes it more accessible to the general public and a tactic with a higher return in the short run. Therefore, the digital social credit system serves as an essential instrument in reshaping China's culture core value and rejuvenating consensus in morality.

## 5. Challenges and Limitations of Digitization

While aimed as a moral pillar, the digital characteristic of the social credit system poses challenges regarding individuals' moral governance rights, which derivatively lead to social disenchantment and political unipolarity.

### 5.1. The Deprivation of Value Rationality

German sociologist Max Weber has proposed two distinct notions of rationality – instrumental rationality and value rationality [23]. Instrumental rationality concerns the means of achieving something; it is a tool without spiritual meaning that you can rationally know. For example, one can utilize instrumental rationality to answer the question of how to attain a goal productively through calculations. Regarded as the opposite concept in most cases, value rationality concerns the ends and meaning of things; it originates from your inner contemplation and cannot be imposed or taught from an external source. Without the support of value rationality, excessive rationalization and pursuit of production means in society can lead to the spiritual crisis of disenchantment. Through anatomizing the value rationality and instrumental rationality aspects within the digital credit system, the paper will demonstrate how social disenchantment arises as a resulting consequence.

Firstly, the equalization between the value-orientated objective and the instrumental method distorts the notion of morality. In the original disciplinary power model without data points, individuals' value rationality is retained to the extent which they evaluate their own moral behaviors,

though facing a strong social conventional force under surveillance. As in the current digital disciplinary scoring system, however, value rationality is explicitly eliminated, as morality is reduced to numeric. The numerical representation and assessment of social credit scores are completely instrumental. Directly equal to the action they represent, individual component scores serve as symbols of specific conduct that lacks intrinsic meaning. For example, the act of larceny may represent 25 social credits, just as how a bag of chips bears a numerical value of 5 dollars. Earning a higher number by conforming to the behavioral rules is identical to maximizing productivity by following a certain production procedure. In addition, the characteristic of the score being objective and achieved externally through an algorithm further demonstrates its instrumental essence. This instrumental notion, however, is propagated and utilized as a moral judgment of one's trustworthiness [24]. By applying intrinsic moral values to numbers and blurring the instrumental mean of a higher score as a moral end, the system deceptively distorts the idea of morality and diminishes an individual's agency in moral judgment. By complying with the numerical moral codes and viewing a higher number as benevolence, righteousness, and trustworthiness, the public will eventually lose their critical consciousness and reflectiveness upon ethics, leading to a disenchanting worldview.

In addition, the social credit value, when transmitted to institutions like businesses and banks, manifests itself as a single total value without elucidating the individual conduct that contributes to the score. This mechanism fosters an inclination to value the meaningless number over the actual moral implications behind the Numeric. Wittgenstein has stated that the meaning behind a language symbol lies within "the use of the language itself" [25]. Likewise, numerical values are assigned a meaning and connotation. They are supposed to be tools that help preserve social harmony. Yet, in certain cases of digital discipline, the power dynamic and position between the citizen and the number is subverted; digital values are transformed from a symbol to the end itself, leading to the inclination of morally questionable acts that elevate the score. For example, to generate a good-looking score, the local government in Henan Province has once banned the use of harvesters in farmland near a monitoring station in order to ensure the air quality under investigation [26]. Sacrificing citizens' livelihoods in exchange for a superficial number, the case illustrates the formalism of the credit score as it deviates from its moral aims.

Furthermore, claims that are morally irrelevant are included as components of the namely moral-orientated digital credit system, further aggravating the moral disenchantment schema by elevating a sense of alienation and detachment from the original goal. Numerous localities and governments identify "uncivilized" behavior, such as failing to correctly sort the garbage, running red lights, and not paying your property fee on time, as morally blameworthy acts [27]. Though the behaviors are admittedly disruptive to social rules and criteria, whether they constitute immoral behavior is highly debatable. Taking a step further, even if one argues that the undue payment of one's property fee is itself considered a blameworthy act of default, does the same still apply if the fee was unpaid because the person used that money to cover a relative's cancer treatment? Moral goodness and badness are a complex question that has been infinitely debated throughout history, yet the digital credit system simplifies it to an excessive degree that disregards any exemption or motive, only looking at a number. This oversimplification and veiling of morally irrelevant agendas under morality further obfuscates the boundary between value rationality and instrumental rationality.

Finally, from a neurobiological approach, the human mind is inclined to accepting simplified inputs that reduce cognitive load, such as numeric [28]. Therefore, with the strong impulse in accepting the discipline of straightforward numbers, the public easily neglects the value rationality orientated question of the reasonability of the system when its implemented. This further elevates the public's inclination in numbly falling into conformity.

Through the four interconnections between digitalization and rationality manifested above, individual moral governance rights and moral autonomy are gradually undermined, leading to a collectively disenchanting public.

## 5.2. Social and Political Implications of Collective Disenchantment

Disenchantment and the deprivation of value rationality pose further existential crises and problematic social phenomena.

From an individual's perspective, the inability to seek intrinsic meaning within incidences and acts fosters the worldview of moral and existential nihilism. Since ethical rules and moral compasses are simply government-guided constructs, they are alienated from individual's own reflection, hence inherently hollow. From a public perspective, the collective disenchantment of the public ossifies social conventions and increases the difficulty of rectifying problematic political decisions. By depriving an individual's ability to critically evaluate political incidences and propose a unique voice, the yoke on the spirit also impedes social progress. This situation is especially dangerous since social and political progress tends to require countercurrents that rectify the regime's poor decisions. However, by having a docile public that can't make judgements independently, addressing social issues becomes a herculean task. A typical exemplification is China's silent public during the pandemic's zero COVID quarantine policy. Manifesting the docile quality under rigid discipline, minimal Chinese citizens were able to realize the unnecessary of the prolonged quarantine, leading to social consequences such as people starving to death at home.

## 6. Policy Suggestions

To reduce the moral autonomy challenge and disenchantment crisis arising from digital discipline, the paper will suggest three aspects for consideration. Firstly, drawing on Schmidt's distinction between the moral and the political [29], policymakers can propagate and clarify the system as a political tactic aiming for social stability and the prevention of existential crises rather than a moral compass. As the moral landslide is gradually redeemed, individual's conscious moral agency should be appreciated above social conformity. Secondly, policymakers can consider incorporating detailed reasons for credit score fluctuation in an individual's account so that the score serves only as a direct representation of corresponding actions rather than a dogmatic moral judgment. Thirdly, policymakers can establish legislation that clarifies the specific components of the credit score and unify credit standards between local governments to prevent digital formalism and ensure a humanitarian approach to score attainments.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper analyzed the advantages and limitations of China's social credit system's digital discipline by incorporating Foucault's disciplinary power model and Weber's rationality theory. The digital credit system offers distinct benefits of enhancing social stability and generating social utility, and it is suitable for China's national condition considering its ideological, historical, and geographical context. However, unique challenges always emerge along with new advancements. Digitization, while efficient and convenient for centralized monitoring, poses challenges to an individual's moral governance autonomy through its confusion of instrumental and value rationality, digital formalism, unclear components, and facilitation of numb conformity. These consequences, leading to a disenchanting public, deprive social and political countercurrent, which indulge problematic norms and decisions. Propaganda and legislative reforms are suggested as potential solutions to the challenge. Focusing on the discussion of moral challenges derived from the digitization of social credit systems, the anatomization offered in this paper is mainly abstract and

theoretical. It does not provide quantitative measurement or neurological experiment support of the public's degree of obedience or moral agency. Future research can provide a more thorough account with quantitative statistics regarding the change in human behavioral tendency and moral agency in the face of numeric. The credit system's effective short-run outcome in allaying moral landslides and its current challenge of impeding moral consciousness highlights the importance of timely policy adjustment in the face of social transformations. Further, with the digitation of disciplinary systems being a trend in global society, it is important for policymakers and citizens to realize the quantitative, not only qualitative, changes that numeric brings to our surveilled life. As moral values serve as the foundation of individual autonomy, the paper hopes to incorporate these nuanced moral agency considerations into the discussion of the field of discipline.

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