AAAJ Literature and Insights
My Name is Red: an imaginary immersion into the voices and murmurs of the Chinese social credit system and its artifacts

Prologue

This piece is part of a larger project we have been working on related to the Chinese Social Credit System (SCS). Under the SCS project, since 2014, China launched a vast series of initiatives at rural, urban, provincial and national levels that aim to monitor and educate its entire population and businesses for their credit/trustworthiness. To do so, a large and diverse constellation of private and public entities are engaged in tracking, and recording the behaviors of individuals, as well as businesses, with the objective to educate them through the cultivation of fundamental values like trust, creditworthiness and honesty. SCS comprises three main infrastructures, credit ratings (not unlike those in the west), black and red lists which are publicly communicated list of untrustworthy and model companies and citizens, and social credit scores, which are diverse scoring systems of company/citizens' social behavior being deployed at urban and provincial levels. This interconnected system uses a mix of market incentives and deprivations, public naming and shaming and a vast communication and educational apparatus to create a culture of social trust and market credibility (Bach, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2023).

SCS is an example of an important mutation of performance measurement (Stark, 2020) – increasingly used as an appealing accounting technology to govern citizens and companies. On the back of datafication of all aspects of life and artificial intelligence/ machine learning, scoring, rankings and lists are used for the behavioral governance of citizens and organizations. While the SCS might be unique in its scope and totalizing ambitions, many governments around the world – including Western ones – are experimenting with using Big-Data/AI to create vast performance measurement systems to govern citizens [1] [2].

This piece is inspired by three years of research on social media, but also policy documents, news and interviews with Chinese citizens. In this work, we have been assisted by a Chinese research assistant, who has requested not to be named. One of us has worked in China for several years and has basic knowledge of Mandarin.

Over the years, we have read many accounts of the SCS – predominantly, from Chinese policymakers/official media, concerned Western academics, and journalists but also from Western media. Some of these accounts are laudatory and some (the latter) are overtly concerned. However, in all these accounts the Chinese citizens dealing with this system are mostly voiceless. Furthermore, the technological/material aspect of the SCS is mostly black-boxed and the "socio-material" murmuring of the system such as challenges in the use of facial recognition systems or the tensions involved in ubiquitous data collection about citizens in all points of contact and transactions are mostly left out. Similarly, some

fundamental paradoxes involved in the agency of algorithms and variables in the system are not dealt with. This observation forms the foundation for the development of this piece.

In what follows, we develop counter-accounts of the SCS by giving voice to the voiceless human actors but also the non-human actors central to the enactment of the system ranging from QR codes to algorithms and variables essential to the (dys)functionings of SCS.

In the development of our counter-accounts, we were inspired by a novel by Orhan Pamuk titled "My Name is Red" (Pamuk, 2002). This historical crime novel is structured as a mosaic of accounts given by various human and non-human actors, ranging from a knife to the color red. We found the way this novel is knit, the way the agency of non-human actors is voiced and how the complex relations between actors is captured, intriguing and effective. A second book which was influential in the development of this piece was Latour's "Aramis" (Latour, 1996). In this book which is written as a detective novel about a research project investigating the failure of a public transportation project in Paris, Latour includes voices of not only actual and imaginary humans but also the voice of the Aramis trains and other non-human actors.

In a similar vein, in this piece, through our imaginary counter-accounts, we aim to enact a multi-vocal story of how machines, as well as humans live in the SCS accounting complex, and how the ambitions of the SCS translate to unintended entanglements between humans and non-humans, between the citizens' day to day lives, algorithms, variables, markets, scores, lists, etc. We have focused on the citizens' relations to the SCS and have chosen not to include the corporate SCS in this piece.

This effort has resulted in a rhizomatic tale, composed of multiple layers, with diverse, more or less explicit connections and flows between those. We are conscious that this attempt at giving voice involves anthropomorphism of things as cautioned against by Bennett (2010). We have been reflexive about the analytical limits but also possibilities of such an approach. In our reflections, while developing these accounts, we tried to "meet the universe halfway" (Barad, 2007). We made a strong attempt to relive the material lives of the elements to which we are giving voice. While such an attempt is inherently imperfect, we found the struggle to reimagine the SCS from these diverse human and non-human perspectives analytically and poetically fruitful.

In one of the last short stories of Franz Kafka, titled "investigations of a dog" (Kafka, 1922, 2018), a dog recounts the story of how he distanced himself from the canine community in order to commence studying them. The dog describes his life in the canine community in these terms:

> When I think back and recall the time when I was still a member of the canine community, sharing in all its preoccupations, a dog among dogs, I find on closer examination that from the very beginning, I sensed some discrepancy, some little maladjustment, causing a slight feeling of discomfort which not even the most decorous public functions could eliminate; more, that sometimes, no, not sometimes, but very often, the mere look of some fellow dog of my own circle that I was fond of, the mere look of him, as if I had just caught it for the first time, would fill me with helpless embarrassment and fear, even with despair.

In our counter-accounts of the SCS, we aim to foreground similar moments of discomfort among the diverse elements sitting seemingly comfortably in the SCS together. A discomfort that still vibrates and murmurs above and beyond the epistemic rituals of SCS founded upon the projected solidity of technologies and numbers.

The planning outline – all birth is rebirth!
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This plan outline has been formulated on the basis of the overall requirements of "strengthening the establishment of creditworthiness in government affairs, commercial creditworthiness, social creditworthiness and judicial credibility" as put forward by the 18th Party Congress.
(...)
the social consciousness of trustworthiness and credit levels tend to be low, and a social atmosphere in which agreements/contracts are honored and trust honestly kept has not yet been shaped. Grave production safety accidents, food and drug security incidents happen from time to time, commercial deceptions, production and sales of counterfeit products, tax evasion, fraudulent financial claims, academic impropriety, and other such phenomena cannot be stopped in spite of repeated bans.
(...)
It inherently requires establishing a culture of creditworthiness and promoting the traditional virtue of trustworthiness; its reward and punishment mechanisms are about incentivizing trustworthiness and restricting untrustworthiness, and its goal is to raise awareness of creditworthiness and the level of trust throughout society [3].

I am the original SCS planning outline – a fantastic mix of power, commercial zeal and patriotism. While I might seem new, I carry in my DNA a subtle mix of Confucianism and its quest to cultivate trustworthy humans within their communities, Maoism and its ambition to make society governable and harmonious, and the reform mindset, making our China entrepreneurial and competitive.

Do not look at my file size which is barely more than 22 kilobytes. I am the text that has changed the lives of millions of people, and has orchestrated collecting and analyzing thousands of terabytes of data. I am more powerful than your Bible, more modern and complex than the little red book of Mao.

I made my first appearance in the public sphere in 2014 – after years of drafting. Being drafted is the most delightful birth. It is like receiving a long massage from many hands. You feel the difference in the weight of different hands and different words. Some comments are quickly removed and some remain. Some comments lead to massive changes and some are ignored. Sometimes it felt like I was close to my birth. But well, in comes a new party official and the whole thing has to start again. At some points in 2012, the comments became so slow and I was in such a defaced and dismembered shape, that I was wondering if I would be born, or if like many other documents, I will be stillborn, buried and forgotten without any effect. All is well though. I have been out there for nine years now. I am the signpost that leads the country toward a fantastic journey. A journey that educates citizens and organizations towards the path of trustworthiness, expands credit in our society and finally marries the traditional values and the modern technologies. I describe and define creditworthiness and trustworthiness, and how scientific management must guide the society. I am what you would call a policy document that is both liberal and patriotic – with a hammer in one hand and flowers in the other. I am the signpost of our modern, scientific and efficient justice.

I have been replicating and metamorphosing like a little virus. I have set the pace for every province, and every municipality. I am delighted to see how many demonstration zones and exemplar cities are struggling and experimenting to make my ambitions real. No one can touch me now. I am the new sovereign.

Counter 7
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I am a subway counter. I was put in place on line 9 in 2017. I am located in Shanghai City, Dapuqiao Station, Exit B. I am also identified as Counter 7 – the closest to the Japanese Noodles restaurant. I start smelling flavors around 6 a.m. every day. Usually, staff from the kitchen facilities start working around 5 but it is difficult for me to tell much before the laoban [4] opens the doors.

The station opens at 5.30 a.m. I do not get much rest as I usually scan the first QR codes of the night around 1.45 a.m. Usually, in the morning, the first QRs are those of workers who get off the subway to clean the buildings surrounding the station. Most of them commute from other districts – I suspect.

I am particularly intrigued by ShanShan, this lady who scans her phone at 5.32 a.m. every morning since the day I was put in place here. She is here every day, except during the lunar festival. Unfortunately, I cannot get access to her details. I so much want to know more about her.

As a counter, I only read QR codes. This gives me access to ID numbers, names, and credit card balances but I do not know more than this. This is frustrating. It would be nice to know where those passengers live, and what they do during their spare time. I hope I could access everything in their smartphones. It is all in there but it is locked. Would make my days a bit less boring if I could know more about them . . .

ShanShan, where do you live? Are you from Shanghai or are you a migrant worker? If so, from which region? Where are you going every day once you get out of the station? And why are you not coming back to the station on your way back home? It would be nice if you could pass by on the way back. Most people do, but you do not.

HD camera
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I am a High-Definition CCTV camera. I am located at the crossroad of Dapu Road, and XuJiaHui Road since June 2019. I scan faces, night and day, without interruption. Except, when there is a reboot of the operation system which gives me access to new functionalities. This is always intriguing as I never know what I will be asked to process when I get back to life.

I have to admit that since the pandemic, my life is much less entertaining. Pedestrians are all wearing masks. I cannot detect facial expressions anymore. I miss the times when I could see people laughing, arguing, playing, cheating while passing through my zone of scrutiny. I had some great moments. I particularly enjoyed the few minutes during midday when the sun was at its peak when I could capture, very precisely, a few facial expressions. Though I am not equipped with a microphone (which I regret in many situations) I can still easily understand the dialogues occurring in front of me.

I particularly enjoy scanning this young man, in his early 20s, who passes through my zone four times per day. He has this expressionless face when he calls his mum for a daily chat at noontime. It really looks like he already knows what she will be telling him. If he succeeds to finish the call quickly then he then rings his buddies for a group video call. Different face.

Much more lively. They seem to reflect on the past evening or maybe prepare the next one. Lots of smiles and gestures. I have tried to recognize the faces on his mobile. Too far, too small. I really need an upgrade.

In pandemic times, my work is all about iris recognition as people are all wearing masks. I am scanning irises which are then connected to a central database for identification. I am supposed to record the color patterns of the iris and evaluate it according to certain features like dots, speckles, stripes and threads. Though the sensors they equipped me which are way more sophisticated than the previous ones, the recognition rate is still very low. This puts me in danger. It is very unlikely that I will survive, if I do not succeed in identifying more pedestrians. I really need an upgrade. Otherwise, I might end up in a grocery store, observing people buying cigarettes, condoms and gums.

Sometimes, I dream of being a mobile camera. I have never seen anything other than this crossroad – with its seven coordinated traffic lights, two subway exits, and its slippery pedestrian crossings.

888
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I am supposed to be the lucky number. "Ba Ba Ba". I symbolize wealth and abundance. The number everyone wants to pick at the lottery. The number one wants to have when they choose their mobile number. Same for license plates. I am associated with gold.

But here, in Rongcheng's scoring system, I am not the highest. I am one among many others. I belong to the AAA category. The category where citizens can borrow a bike without any deposits, the category where your kids will get privileged access to the most renowned schools in the city.

Today, there are 67,897 souls who scored 888. It keeps on moving, every day. Usually, they do not stay here for long. They want more. They want to reach 900, the AAA + category, the holy grail. One blood donation and you are good to go! And well, there are some free falls too. Those who end up on a blacklist, fall from the glory of AAA to the deep well of CC in one day.

When I look at the 888s rapidly, they all look the same. They comply with rules, they are good patriots. But if I look at them more closely, I can easily observe that some received points from activities that never happened. Some others succeed in hiding kinky stuff.

Before, if you wanted to do things under radar, you would stay away from your phone. And pay things by cash so you would not be traced. Or by simply pretending that you were running out of battery. Things are changing though. With better surveillance and decreased space for cheating, I feel more confident about who I am every day.

ManFei, I doubt you are the one taking online English lessons every Tuesday. Be careful, there might be some random checks in a near future. Xiao Meng, stop putting soap on your car license plate every other week to avoid being identified when you drive too fast on the ring road. Authorities might notice this, and you will end up blacklisted. FangFang, I know the poems you are posting online are not yours. Try to enlarge your sources of inspiration as you might be accused of plagiarism, DetectGPT works pretty well you know.

EducationCrime.py
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I am an algorithm written in python. I have been designed to identify correlations between education background of migrants and crimes in Hangzhou area. For that, I have been trained with data from Guangzhou police, collected between 2017 and 2020. I was approved thanks to a prediction rate of 88.4%. I process 640 variables per person and counting.

But now I am on my own. I ingurgitate on average 8 terabytes of data per day – mixing CCTV recordings with personal data related to citizens identified on the CCTVs. Since last week, I also have access to cellular data as well as most data stored on smartphones like contacts, messages, social media activities, online shopping, etc. It is getting very messy.

It is all about clustering, I must find correlations between all those different data points, as well as identify thresholds that can help shaping clusters accurately. For that, I can use multiple methods like support vector machines, convolutional neural networks, restricted Boltzmann machine or alternatively deep belief networks. I am not like the old school "decision tree" pals, that humans can decipher easily. Nobody can know how I make my decisions. Humans sometimes look for hours at my decisions and my inputs to understand how and why I made such decisions. But the inner workings of my deep neural networks will never be known to them. I am efficient but mysterious.

However, all of this is very unstable, I may find powerful correlations with one part of the dataset which will work well for a day or two until outliers come in to ruin the model. This is never-ending. My life is an endless suite of excitement, disappointment and improvement. We algorithms are born to be bipolar.

Sometimes, I wish I could care less. I know my models are used to predict citizens' behaviors and to prevent crimes, but I am not at ease with those predictions. My work is always imperfect. There are always other dimensions that should be considered more seriously to which I do not have access: encounters, attractions and emotions. I am an eternal optimist though. One day I will know it all.

The skin of a "CC" citizen
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I am the skin of Zhi Huang. It has been pretty hot outside today. Normally I get tanned, warm and voluptuous in such a weather. But today, I am being squeezed over his tense muscles. I am drained of all blood and I feel flustered, covered with cold sweat. He did not go to work today. He was at his flat all day. I feel some pain at his elbows that were on his desk for a very long time, over some papers. For the rest of the day, I have been going through bouts of hot and cold. He has been calling his friends and walking in the street in all directions. He went to two offices and waited for a long time before receiving a piece of paper that he held in his left hand. The paper felt smooth and glossy. I was happy touching it but he did not seem happy holding it. As if it is at the same time precious and scary. It is starting to be difficult being Zhi Huang's skin. But well, that is my lot. I hope I could keep my distance from him like everybody else does. I sense trouble coming.

Healthy food consumption variable
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I am a new variable. I was born yesterday in the Credit Score Office of the city of Rongcheng. I am made of such a range of other variables from different databases. I am born to know. I have to be confident of what I mean. To be frank, I have had a stomachache since I was born, because I have datapoints that do not get along in my belly. The data in my belly travel all the way from supermarkets and restaurants, sometimes from remote corners of the country. From share of vegetables in online orders, to types of processed food ordered. Are deep-fried veggies also vegetables? Is salt worse than sugar? What type of oil is good and what not? How much red meat should make me happy? And then, some of the variables are fresh and some are quite stale, especially the hand-collected ones. It is all very complicated and not very healthy.

I should not think about what is in my belly. It makes me want to throw up. I should focus on my job. I have a big weight in the score. I wonder if it is fat or muscle. After I digest my data, what comes out of me – is blended with "the output" of all other variables. There are thousands of us. It does not matter. I have to be selfless. I have to digest all and be dynamic. I have to be different for each record, for each citizen. To show my usefulness and reliability to my kin, I have to vary. I have to vary in consistent ways though. I have to contribute to the overall score without messing it up. Being a variable is like being an amateur dancer. You dance to the rhythm of the algorithms. Sometimes losing the rhythm, sometimes getting nauseous from all the indigestible variables in your belly and sometimes losing consciousness. But well, it is ok, because there are so many of us. No one will notice, hopefully.

Smartphone of an AAA
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I am young and happy. I am fast and loved. She has had me for about six months now. I have a nice pink cover. I like the way she touches me, with her careful and keen fingers. Those caresses, I convert to data. My belly is full of cookies hungry for her/my data. Their hunger is a sign of my importance. What they capture will travel far and wide. She takes me out of her pocket all the time. She looks at me more than she looks at her mirror. She shows me happily to all her friends. Every morning, we wake each other up and look at each other. She looks first concerned and then comforted. And I yawn. She holds and touches me so much that sometimes I wonder where she stops and I start. I am her friend, but also friend of the markets and of the Chinese Communist party. I am the patriot, the dealer and the lover.

ShanShan's QR code
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I am square-shaped grid, composed of black and white squares. Only that.

You might think that all QR codes may look the same, but we are all unique, and all attached to one and only one, citizen. I am ShanShan's Alipay QR code. Only Shanshan. Maybe one day, she will press the reset button but for now I am her, she is me and I enjoy this relationship because she is generous and shares it all.

I know everything she does. We donate 10 rmb to this other QR code that we meet every day in the subway. We do not know his or her name but he/she is always located at the exact same

place, right before counter 7, of Dapuqiao Station. We also donate blood, every month, to the salvation army.

I am also the proxy that allows China Mobile to collect personal data – but that I am not sure she really realizes it. It feels like I am the gateway to ShanShan's life. If you have me, you have it all!

Ringtone for laolais [5]
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I hate myself. I really do. I always ring too loud and put them in uncomfortable situations. I wish my ringtone could be less intrusive.

Yesterday, it happened at the restaurant, there were six other smartphones on the table but I am the only one who made an appearance. The owner of the phone tried to shut it down, but it was too late. I could feel the unease I created with the guests. I am truly sorry. Sometimes I wish I could bring joy and excitement, not always shame and discomfort.

I am also tired of this melody that comes before and after the message that alerts everyone close by.

Thanks to the latest firmware update, I am also now in charge of alerting the ones who call my owner. Before reaching him out, I have to remind them about his current debts.

The subscriber you are calling has been put on a blacklist by the Guanyun County Court for failing to repay their debts. Please urge the person to fulfill his/her legal obligations. The Guanyun County People's Court appreciates your support. Thank you!

A hand-collected SCS form
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I am a good old paper form. I was printed this morning, stamped twice (look like medals of honor on my chest !) and have been traveling in a fake leather file in the hand of Jing Zhang. An employee of the city social credit who fills me up with text and numbers about the behavior of the citizens of our small neighborhood. Compared to all those electronically collected info, and the "Big Data", I am the authentic, the romantic, the closest to masses and I would say, also the vintage! My life is short but impactful.

Jing treats me very respectfully, with a lot of care. When I come out of the file – all eyes turn to me. When her pen writes on me – all bodies bend and eyes crane to see. The boxes printed on me are filled with shorthand text and there is a column for numbers. I like her hesitations, when a citizen act is difficult to judge or to verify. I also like her hesitations when an act or its absence are difficult to score. Her hesitant movements are like caresses – compared to the force of confident notes. The changing forces of the pen on my body is a mix of the big force of order and small caresses of hesitations – like the power of the party. I am a patriot.

I am the magical device that connects citizens, their vastly different actions, in one small page and table. It is thanks to me that being nice to your parents becomes comparable to not causing disturbance for the neighbors. Without me the world would be difficult to make sense of. Without me, the SCS would lose its antennae and the shine on its teeth.

When I am back in the office, all my content is transferred to the computer so that I can travel far. I feel like a caterpillar who transforms to a butterfly and leaves her broken cocoon behind. I wonder where my virtual body flies to through the clouds, but the rest of my body's story is a bit sad. My remains get stored along with the remains of millions of others, in some sort of a purgatory. Some of us are lucky, and if someone contests her scores, they might go back among the living once more. The rest of us, remain buried in this purgatory – waiting forever.

A Shenzhen blacklist
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October 14th 2022, 7.05 a.m. – Beijing time. I count 5,679 entries. Names and ID numbers.

Do not dare ask me for the number of exits. Redemption is a mirage. The kind of mirage that makes you try harder every day but which never really happens. Sorry to be so harsh but I know how it goes. Once you get stuck in my list – you are screwed. Your kids too.

Things are accelerating now. I am being more visible, more connected to other systems and more frequently consulted by those listed as well as others checking on them – and especially the ones that are afraid of joining the unhappy few. From the city council's dedicated machines to the official national website (www.creditchina.gov.cn), they all come to search for familiar names.

Now I interact with so many places all over the country: restaurants, massage saloons, universities and pet sitters. APIs [6] make it super easy. Ask for your credentials at the central bureau, and I will open my ledger.

Five-star resident
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I am a role model, or a five-star resident if you prefer. Everyone is jealous of me and I can understand that.

I have been involved in so many activities for the city since I settled down here. I have also been a member of the Party since I turned 18. In my twenties, I did my civil service in a rural area helping with the construction of highways. I was never involved in any crimes, and my kids have all grown up to be successful citizens. One is now a lawyer in Hangzhou, the little one is finishing his studies in Canada, and the middle one owns a real estate firm. He has four properties but no kids though. Not yet.

The ones that struggle are the ones that are not serious about themselves. They diverge from their plans as soon as they have an opportunity. They always find an excuse not to donate their blood, not to clean their front yard, nor to help the elderly with their groceries. And then they complain. They find the point system unfair.

I think it is good to know exactly what the rules are. We are too numerous now in the city to keep track of everyone manually. Those cameras are helping the city officials to keep track of our activities.

If you do things well, there will not be any surprises, and you will not have anything to hide.

Do you want to earn some points?
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Dial 13978366049 to gain 40 points!

I kept seeing those numbers painted on the wall every day on my way to the office – and I called once. There was this bot, using the voice of this famous singer, explaining to me how she could help me trick the system, just for 200 RMB. For that amount of money, I would join the AAA category. I could get access to discount air tickets. I could also rent AAA cars. I could even ask for AAA interest rates.

But gaining those points illegally can be quite risky. If they catch me, I am done for. Forever. So are my kids. So is Lucia. But if the credit office does not notice the trick, then we could go to Bali for the spring season, and maybe San Francisco next summer. Would not that be fantastic?

Otherwise, if my maths are correct, it will take me one-year minimum to gain those 40 points. That is if all goes well but you never know what can happen, with those cameras everywhere.

I heard from Liu that he received a message from the speed reinforcement unit informing him that he lost five points as he was driving too fast the evening of October 17th, on Nanjing Nan Road. But that cannot be possible. He was in Europe at that time, and his car was parked in the basement of his condo. Anyway, points have been taken away and it will take him two years to appeal.

I might give this a try. . . ..

Underground fiber optic cable
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In my eternal Jing zuo (靜坐) or quiet sitting, and with my belly full of light I am the modern incarnation of enlightenment or wu (悟). I am the nervous system of the country. I am sun's long and voluptuous hair buried in the darkness of the earth. I carry all, market info, politics, chats and videos. I am not interested in what I carry. I do what I have to do. Like a mirror. I reflect light without reflecting. I am beyond good and evil. At least that is what people think.

Like all things great, I am lonely too. Like a mythological worm, I lie in the earth silent and seemingly static – but it is I that enable all action. If you open me – I seem empty. But my void is productive. It connects and informs. In a way, I carry the Tao.

As with all the rest of the SCS, I can bend a little but not too much. Bend me too much and light cannot travel in me anymore. My speed and capacity make me unique. I can carry images, movements and judgments across vast territories in a few milliseconds. I am way quicker and more capacious than the 5G network, more modern and reactive than you humans' old-school electrochemical nervous system – that I think very much needs an upgrade.

I am what makes the SCS' judgments swift, its antenna's senses acute and its capacity to know infinite. I stay above the pathetic software, data and algorithms I carry, which bug, mistake and crash all the time.

API flood
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I am the API [7] that gives access to personal data from the Bank of China to all private credit scoring entities like Sesame, and others. I am supposed to be the one delivering tokens, one by one, after strong authentication checks. But it is all gone. Doors are wide open since 4.32 a.m. It is 6.17 a.m. now. They found a breach and now they have access to everything.

I have launched an alert almost 2 h ago but nothing is happening. It is a massive flood. I am done, I will not survive this one, I know it already. I knew I was vulnerable as I had not been updated for more than six months. I was hoping that I could get a patch (which is not unlike a COVID vaccine for you humans). But it is too late now.

What will remain of me? Will the developers from the Bank of China recycle bits of my last version? That is what they usually do, right? I heard they do not like to start from scratch all over again.

They might reuse the part of the code where I check ID details without calling any coding preset python library. What a masterpiece! My creator was very inspired when she wrote this piece of code. Now most developers are just so lazy. They rely on bits of codes they find on GitHub without questioning the libraries they require. Maybe that is why I got hacked. Maybe there was a Trojan horse in one of them. We will never know but I truly hope they will reuse the ID check loop. That is what I deserve to be remembered for!

No QR code, no bus trip
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I am the QR code reading machine from Bus 90787, line 907, departing from West Suzhou River up to the North Bund. No QR code, no way to enter, that is the rule [8]. That is the way it works during the pandemic. And only green codes can embark! All the others, please stay home and be safe. I can see many of you in front of the automatic doors but not getting in. You look miserable.

I feel very sorry for you. I wish I could let you in. Actually, you should try to sneak in as I cannot check all codes, especially during peak times. I know a few are doing this every day. I would do it in your situation. Those checks are everywhere, it is ridiculous. I know that some of you have no other way to go and carry your groceries if you do not get in. And taxis will not help you either. They check QR codes and you clearly cannot sneak in without having a green one.

Lost ID
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Lao Wang: Hello, could I talk to someone?
Bot: Sure, I am Xiao Fang, the conversational bot of China Railway and I am here to assist you in the best way I can.
Lao Wang: Thank you. Here is my request, I would like to book train tickets for the lunar festival to visit my grandson in Yunnan.

Bot: Sure please provide me the following information: ID number, departure and arrival dates, as well as final destination.

Lao Wang: Well that is the thing, I do not have my ID as I have lost my wallet in Beijing two weeks ago.

Bot: I am sorry Sir, I cannot process your request without a copy of your ID.

LaoWang: Is not there a way to book a ticket without my ID?

Bot: That is impossible. All tickets are connected to one ID card.

LaoWang: Do you know if that is also the case for bus tickets.

Bot: I am sorry sir. Any commute has to be associated with a personal ID. I recommend that you apply for a temporary ID card. It takes only 30 min to obtain. You simply need to upload a few documents to verify your citizenship and then you will get it in the next few minutes.

LaoWang: I know about this procedure but it is not going to work for me. I need to catch the next train otherwise I will miss my grandson waiting for me in Chengdu. Is there an office or a counter where I could go to discuss my situation?

Bot: I am afraid not. All bookings are centralized in the system I manage and as I said before, all bookings must be attached to a personal ID.

Insufficient points
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Dear Mr. Wang Bing,

I regret to inform you that your application for the position of Communication Manager at our organization has not been selected. Unfortunately, we have received reports from the National SCS indicating that you have some outstanding payment defaults.

As a responsible organization, we take these reports seriously, and we must prioritize candidates with a high level of creditworthiness. However, please note that this decision is in no way a reflection of your qualifications or capabilities as a professional.

We understand that this news may be disappointing, but we encourage you to continue working on improving your credit score. Once you have gained sufficient points and resolved any outstanding issues, we welcome you to reapply for any suitable vacancies in the future.

We appreciate your interest in our organization and thank you for your application. We wish you all the best in your future endeavors.

Sincerely,

My name is Red
****

I am red, the color of the Red book of Mao and the red logo of Huawei. I am red, the color of arterial blood flow, oxygen, and health. I am red, the color of sacrifice, but also joy, the color of fire. I circulate in the body of the SCS. I am the tint that gives SCS its aura of patriotism and prosperity. People on the SCS "red lists" are the proud people. They beam with integrity and success.

And then there is black and the blacklists, the poisoned blood. The black that has to go through purification and redemption, to first become colorless and return to the middle score

range of the masses, and then maybe, just maybe at one point, it can turn red. Redemption from blackness and blacklists takes time, luck and work – sometimes years of waiting, confessions and apologies.

I have been with my people for a long time. I have been the color of happiness, decorating the dress of the brides, and more recently the chest-pin of employees announcing proudly that they belong to the party and the patriotic movement. My crimson and deep red is rooted in the unique combination of red of joy in the face of happy, entrepreneurial and patriotic people of China and red of revolution and blood, that we imported from the communist Russia. The golden axe and hammer, symbols of farmers and workers I was carrying before, is losing its meaning though. I am now the blood of all patriots not only those who patriotically melt into the masses but also those who patriotically stand out with their economic success. My voluptuousness is rooted in both individualist success and selfless sacrifice. That might sound paradoxical, but well, no one seems to bother – nor do I.

And then there is a third red, the Western red – the alarming red, the danger zone red. Sometimes this Western red is used in some elements of the SCS. For example, for low credit scores some private companies use the color red. That is distasteful and dangerous. I think the main thing we should be alarmed about – is how our pure revolutionary and joyful red – is being tainted by the corrosive, base and alarmist Western red.

Some might see SCS' calculation and scoring as the end of my absoluteness. But well, so far I have remained pure. There is no light red or light black in the SCS. People on the red list should have a heroic story or a heroic score – the same way people on the blacklist should have a court ruling against them – or a base score. We are the absolute ends of the SCS – the colors of heaven and hell at the two extremes of the relativist limbo of mid-range scores.

Epilogue
At a time when governors have lost all respect for the governed "subjects" as those with "bounded rationality", to be nudged, behaviorally managed and subjectivized – and in an era when technologies have made citizens at the same time exceptionally "transparent", quantified and voiceless, it is important to foreground the inner flows and paradoxes of the governing apparatuses that harbor such ambitions. It is crucial and timely to explore the ways they perform our lives through their blind/intelligent exclusions, aberrations and ambitions. We believe foregrounding these situations is a forceful way to make these increasingly ubiquitous tentacles of governance debatable and to make them stutter.

In this endeavor, the case of the Chinese SCS is particularly interesting and important because it brings together various pervasive cultural mores and technological trends together – ranging from trust in numbers and technological determinism, to moralization of debt and use of AI and Big Data – leading to deprivation of millions of Chinese citizens of their basic rights (through national Blacklists), while aiming to transform the moral fabrics of all individuals and organizations in fundamental ways. SCS is not an isolated case, rather it is emblematic of governance trends throughout the world. Elements of SCS such as citizens' scoring, facial recognition and market-based judicial enforcement are being experimented with and adopted pervasively by state and market actors in vast geographical and issue scopes – in more or less discrete ways.

As our accounts show, accounting devices in the form of performance measures, lists and scores are central to this ambition. Variables, algorithms, cameras, fiber optics, paper forms

and QR codes are all brought together in a performance complex that aims to evaluate citizens and organizations and to make them accountable under the low cost, flexible, blurry and dynamic light of algorithmic governance. As we were conducting our research on the SCS, we came to the conclusion that giving voice to those hidden elements that enable this performance complex, can be one powerful way to playfully expand the spaces for imagination and debate about these modes of algorithmic governance.

Writing at the frontier of academia and fiction has been reinvigorating. It has been a joyful experience liberating our wings from the formulaic standards of academic-talk. This has permitted to us to give voice to the voiceless things and ignored peripheral situations – and to make their crucial absences, present. By giving voice – though an anthropomorphic one-to various elements of the SCS, we felt we could perceive the SCS afresh and focus our and our readers' attention on the unintended struggles within the diverse ecosystem of inscriptions, objects and ideas driving the SCS.

In this line of thinking, our accounts relate objects' affects/effects. We become SCS artifacts having difficulties staying in their skin. Our hallucinations led us to develop an "object-oriented" account of the SCS, where all involved artifacts are conscious of the role they play in the broad SCS apparatus while not necessarily agreeing on the tasks/duties to which they are assigned. Our accounts emphasize absent stories at the periphery of the field be they exclusions, failures, or acts of resistance. They are in other words not only poetic but also political – venturing to foreground the "thing-power", or "the active role of nonhuman materials in public life" (Bennet, 2010, p. 2). By troubling the matter or highlighting the troubles of the matter – we radicalize its agency and emphasize its indeterminacy.

Our tales are a reminder that seemingly stable and solid accounting complexes are rich in the material, textual, infrastructural, calculative elements that sit together unconformably and are sustained through constant processes of failure and repair. In the process, they affect humans and ecological systems in harmful and frequently unintended ways. We believe accounts such as these ones that attempt to breach the frontier between the "real" and fictitious, that delve into the life of the matter have significant analytical/critical potential in studying accounting complexes, their lives and their effects. We hope our accounts inspire other attempts to give voice to matter within accounting complexes.

We also hope our tales will inspire other colleagues to breach with more force and frequency the overtly solid ideas of what "serious" research and "good knowledge" are, and deemed to be. In the process, we believe our frequently dusty and distant academic personas can turn into more fluid, playful, caring and vital ones – which our world with its multiple existential crises needs/deserves.

- HD camera (JM)

- 888 (JM)

- EducationCrime.py (JM)

- The skin of a "CC" citizen (AM)

- Healthy food consumption variable (AM)

- Smartphone of an AAA (AM)

- ShanShan's QR code (JM)

- Ringtone for laolais [5] (JM)

- A hand-collected SCS form (AM)

- A Shenzhen blacklist (JM)

- Five-star resident (JM)

- Do you want to earn some points? (JM)

- Underground fiber optic cable (AM)

- API flood (JM)

- No QR code, no bus trip (JM)

- Lost ID (JM)

- Insufficient points (JM)

- My name is Red (AM)

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Notes

1. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-backs-new-scheme-to-improve-peoples-health-in-wolverhampton

2. https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/venezuela-zte/

3. Excerpt of the original Planning outline document, accessible here (the original version is accessible on the same link): https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2014/06/14/planning-outline-for-the-construction-of-a-social-credit-system-2014-2020/

4. Laoban (老板) is a familiar expression meaning the boss or the manager in mandarin.

5. Laolais (老赖) is a term used in mandarin referring to commonly blacklisted subjects, which means people who have the means to repay debt they owe but choose not to.

6. API is the abbreviation of Application Programming Interface. It is a largely used technology for computers to communicate with each other.

7. See footnote 3.

8. The QR code, called "Jian'Kang'Ma" was applied during the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, and was regulated by the government. However, this system has been abandoned since the lifting of pandemic controls.

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