Towards Graduated Citizenship: A Study of Social Credit Systems in China

Kaicheng Yu
Wake Forest University

Abstract

The Social Credit System (SCS) is the central piece of China's surveillance infrastructure and movement toward a data-driven society. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, this article examines the impact of the SCS on social citizenship in China and argues that it will lead to a denigration of citizenship by eroding components at the center of Marshall's concept of social citizenship toward graduated citizenship. While the SCS might have its merits, this article suggests that graduated citizenship will take hold in China as the SCS slowly transforms people's perceptions of law, morality, and solidarity. This article also encourages continued study of the SCS, especially concerning its regulatory prospects and relationship with civil society, and offers the SCS as an illustration of a reputation state as the integration of technology and governance increases worldwide.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kaicheng Yu at newton_yu@hotmail.com

Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak has drastically changed every aspect of people's life, from social distancing to stay-at-home orders. The virus has rapidly spread across the globe, but the number of new cases in China has recently plummeted. Since the world is astonished by China's progress in containing the virus and questions the authenticity of China's data, the Chinese government has invited 13 foreigners from the World Health Organization to join 12 Chinese scientists to investigate the state of the COVID-19 pandemic and the effectiveness of the country's response. The report published by the World Health Organization affirmed the reliability of China's success in suppressing COVID-19 and noted that China's most effective measure was its "extremely proactive surveillance" (Kuo 2020a; Kupferschmidt et al. 2020).

The primary mechanism responsible for facilitating the surveillance efforts and enforcement measures is the Social Credit System (SCS), which was piloted in 2014 and is to be nationally implemented in 2020. The SCS aims to utilize innovative and home-grown governmental technologies to support, centralize, modernize, and strengthen the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) leading role in Chinese society (Pieke 2012, 150). The SCS integrates big data technology with artificial intelligence to evaluate Chinese citizens' trustworthiness and assign appropriate rewards or punishments, which Chen (2018, 3) believes signals a revival of Confucian ideas in policymaking with China's recent efforts to fill an ideological void. In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, the government has made drastic amendments to its standard rules while adhering to its core mechanism of rewards and punishments (Koty 2020). While China has seen some development in social citizenship in recent years (Goldman and Perry 2002; Liu 2007; Shi 2012; Zhuoyi 2015), the rewards and punishments established by the SCS seem to undermine T.H Marshall's concept of social citizenship, which is defined as a "status extended to all those who are full members of the community" (1992,

68). Through the system of universal social rights, Marshall envisions the state as having the fundamental responsibility to protect the individual from uncertainty and to enforce these rights (Turner 2009, 71). In contrast, the SCS seems to reverse this relationship, delegating to the individual the responsibility to serve the Party's political interests. The aim of this article is to critically examine the impact of the SCS on Chinese citizenship, which is all the more pertinent since the SCS has emerged as the centerpiece of China's response to the COVID-19 crisis that is challenging the social, political, and economic fabric of that country and the world.

An emerging and substantial body of literature has explored the importance and implications of the SCS as a more significant part of China's big data surveillance project (Y.-J. Chen, Lin, and Liu 2018; Liang et al. 2018) as well as how the public responded to the SCS and related pilot projects prior to their scheduled national implementation in 2020 (Kostka 2019; Nopparuth and Fabrice 2019). However, few have sought to apply citizenship as an analytical lens to examine SCS practices in contemporary China. Furthermore, despite a plethora of scholarship concerning citizenship in China, frequent changes in the political and technological landscape necessitate updates on this issue. Thus, this article incorporates the discussion of COVID-19 to assess the SCS via a tangible case and attempts to bridge the gap in the existing literature by answering the following questions: To what extent does the SCS conform to or challenge T. H. Marshall's idea of social citizenship? What are the justifications for implementing the SCS, and to what extent are these justifications valid in the context of citizenship? In answering these questions, I argue that by eroding components at the center of Marshall's concept of social citizenship, the SCS's roots in Confucianism and its mechanisms lead to a denigration of citizenship in China in which rights would be rendered as a calculation of rewards and punishments, and graduated citizenship is introduced.

To examine this thesis, the article first provides a detailed account of the ideological influences behind the creation of the SCS and its current stage since many of its foundational ideas are borrowed

from a storehouse of concepts and approaches that have profoundly shaped Chinese political and legal practices in the past and contribute to the continuous evolution of these practices (Creemers 2018). Second, this article employs Aihwa Ong's argument for "graduated citizenship" (1999) to discuss the system's inherent implications for citizenship and assess how the SCS impacts Marshall's concept of social citizenship in China by examining how the SCS challenges each aspect (political, social, and civil) of social citizenship through the new provisions recently instituted to the SCS. Finally, based on this assessment, the article offers a comprehensive conclusion that discusses its key findings and explores wider implications of the research in order to contribute to the future study of the SCS and its various impacts.

Historical and Ideological Roots of the Social Credit System

Virtue and Morality
The inception of the SCS can be traced back to several ideologies and philosophical traditions that have directly influenced China's design of policies and mechanisms for governance and are intended to build an effective, powerful, and prosperous state. For centuries, rulers in China upheld the tradition of the Mandate of Heaven, which states that power is bestowed by heaven on a just ruler and withheld from an unjust one. This idea implies that a good ruler should be a virtuous and moral one, should take responsibility for the people's welfare, and should always work hard to resolve the discontent voiced by the people (Zhao 2009). In turn, these responsibilities bestowed on the rulers become effective measures for the people to assess their ruler's performance. If the ruler's performance suffers, the people have the right to voice their discontent and consequently demand a new ruler. Therefore, historically, there is a robust connection between performance and the political legitimacy of the ruling party.

If the Mandate of Heaven describes what a just ruler is required to do, then Confucianism defines what is considered just and not just. Confucianism emphasizes the practice of governance by goodness, maintaining harmony among the people around oneself and thus in the greater society, upholding a hierarchical structure and, most importantly, meritocracy. Consequently, Confucianism holds that social harmony is more important than individual rights, and to build a harmonious society, it is necessary to suppress human desires and individuality. Furthermore, Confucianism's juxtaposition of hierarchical structure in society and the practice of meritocracy creates a kind of social hierarchy that causes gradational differences in moral consciousness and cultural rights between the ordinary people and the elites (C. Wang 2015, 55). With Confucianism's indispensable role in shaping people's perception, the CCP inherited and carried forward the same role of moral authority where the state acts as a promoter of moral virtues (Creemers 2018). In 2014, the State Council of People's Republic of China published the "2014-2020 Planning Outline for the Construction of the Social Credit System," in which the first paragraph states, "its inherent requirements are establishing the idea of an sincerity culture, and carrying forward sincerity and traditional virtues". Shortly after, the 4th Plenum affirmed this directive by denoting "governing the country by virtue" as equal to "governing the country by law" (Compilation and Translation Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China 2014). Finally, remarks made by Xi Jinping in 2017 further corroborate this claim: "We must continue to promote a combination of the rule of law and rule of virtue and combine law-based governance of the country and rule-based governance over the Party" (Xinhua). Furthermore, the stability of the society and the robustness of the market have been challenged by corruption existing in different levels of the government and scandals regarding the quality and safety of consumer goods. Hence, the CCP sees an urgent need to stimulate trustworthiness and sincerity in response to the moral failings in politics and in transactions occurring between individuals and between individuals and corporations.

Harmonious Society

In addition to the emphasis on virtue and morality, the idea of a harmonious society and consequently the reliance on social intervention or management as a means to achieve harmony are essential to the inception of the SCS. In 2002, Hu Jintao, who was the president of China from 2002 to 2012, first introduced the idea of harmonious society. In his words, the idea is to create a society that is "democratic and ruled by law, fair and just, trustworthy and fraternal, full of vitality, stable and orderly and maintains harmony between man and nature" (Chan 2010, 821). Subsequently, the CCP began to investigate and resolve conflicts and problems that were obstacles to attaining this harmonious society. Such conformity strongly suggests that the CCP conceives of society as an "organic whole, where harmony can be achieved if all its members conduct themselves as appropriate to their position in public and civil structures" (Creemers 2018). The 2014-2020 planning outline also stresses the SCS' indispensable role in building a "socialist harmonious society" (State Council of the People's Republic of China 2014).

Moreover, the use of the word "appropriate" seems to imply an expectation that each part of society, whether private or public, is bound by obligations, rights, and responsibilities. Intuitively, a useful measure that ensures a high degree of compliance is some form of comprehensive monitoring and intervention system. More importantly, the benefits of social intervention or management programs lay within their long-term effect on the people, particularly on how they self-regulate their behaviors to conform to the norms set by the government. Therefore, if the SCS were to be implemented, the CCP would not only be capable of proactive capturing and enforcement but also of deterring undesired behaviors.

Examining the SCS through the two historical lenses can provide a more thorough understanding of the purpose of and rationale behind the system. By framing compliance problems in both the private and public spheres of society in moralistic terms and

according to Confucian ideologies, the CCP attempts to legitimize the implementation of the SCS and garner support from the people. Additionally, with the help of information technology, the SCS can realize the CCP's ambition to build a comprehensive system that encompasses information from every aspect of an individual's life. The aggregation of the available data would allow the CCP to continuously monitor the compliance of individuals and corporations with regulations and laws and eventually to create incentives for people to act in the desired manner without the direct intervention of state actors (Creemers 2018). This will eventually lead to the creation of a "reputation state" where the government authorities seek to use reputation and conformity as new forms of social stratification where individuals who fail to obtain high social credit scores due to *trust-breaking* behaviors are likely to fall to the bottom of the society (Dai 2018; Raghunath 2020).

The Current State of the Social Credit System
Although the SCS has not reached the stage of national implementation, it has already been test-piloted at the municipal level and has accelerated its expansion at the provincial level in 2020. The SCS is not an independent system that has been newly constructed; instead, it will be a unified system that aggregates information and data collected by existing systems from financial institutions, corporations, the court system, and municipal governments. Given this multitude of involved actors, the SCS will possess an unthinkable amount of information and data. There are two primary categories of information, namely public credit information and market credit information. The former is acquired by governmental organizations and includes information such as fines, warnings, citations, punishments, and court orders as well as professional qualifications, business licenses, official approvals, commendations, and more. In contrast, market credit information is acquired by businesses, organizations, or credit services and includes data necessary to assess one's compliance with the law and regulations. Notably, Sesame Credit of Ant Financial, the leading private credit scoring system in China, receives inputs regarding

defaulters from the Supreme People's Court, which signals the potential merger of the public and private credit scoring systems (Y.-J. Chen, Lin, and Liu 2018, 23–25). However, in theory, there is a limit to the scope of data that could be collected. For instance, information about one's religious affiliations, fingerprints, genetics, and medical histories is not collected as part of either public credit information or market credit information ("Hebei Provincial Social Credit Information Regulations" 2016; "Shanghai Municipal Social Credit Regulations" 2017; "Zhejiang Provincial Regulations on the Management of Public Credit Information" 2018). All information collected is uploaded to the National Credit Information Sharing Platform and shared among government agencies (Y.-J. Chen, Lin, and Liu 2018, 12). This information will then be sorted and bound to one's name and identification numbers and will help to determine whether one's behavior should be considered *trust-breaking* or *trust-keeping*, with the former receiving corresponding punishments and the latter rewards. Finally, the results of the evaluation would place individuals on either the *red list* (rewards) or the *blacklist* (punishments) (Liang et al. 2018).

Since there are no national criteria for evaluating one's behavior, rules administrated by local governments during the COVID-19 pandemic offer some insights into what the future criteria might be. In Shanghai and other cities, people who conceal or lie about their travel history and "spread rumors that disrupt efforts to control the epidemic" will have points deducted from their social credit score and may be placed on the *blacklist*. In contrast, donations of money or materials to support pandemic-related work increases credit scores in Rongcheng, Shandong province (Anonymous 2020; Koty 2020). Particularly, rewards associated with *trust-keeping behaviors* often include priorities in administrative management and using credit in exchange for public resources. Punishments for *trust-breaking* behaviors are generally harsh and specific, such as restriction of qualification for a specific position and restrictions on high-spending, flying on aircraft,

using soft sleepers on trains, entering children in high fee-paying private schools, and purchasing immovable property and state-owned property ("Shanghai Municipal Social Credit Regulations" 2017; National Development and Reform Commission 2016).

Studies of public opinion regarding the SCS in 2019 and during the COVID-19 pandemic are illuminating in terms of the SCS's popularity and effectiveness. A study conducted by Genia Kostka, a scholar from the Free University of Berlin, reveals valuable insights about people's approval of the SCS. In a total sample size of 2,209 Chinese citizens, 48.9 percent strongly approved of the program, and only approximately one percent of the respondents expressed the view that the SCS should not be implemented nationwide (Kostka 2019, 1575). Meanwhile, in response to the SCS's omnipresence and the government's mishandling of the effort to contain the virus in its early stages, human rights activists, scholars, and educated urban professionals have criticized the intrusive, draconian nature of the SCS and voiced their concerns about the SCS's lack of effective regulations (Anonymous 2020; Kuo 2020a; Xiang 2020).

Assessment of the Social Credit System's Implications for Citizenship

Unlike credit scores that exist in Western countries where low credit scores might prevent a person from obtaining a loan or financing plan under favorable terms, the SCS operates differently as the scope of both the inputs and outputs have expanded considerably with a high level of interventionism (Mac Síthigh and Siems 2019). A low score has more implications than one could imagine. Therefore, unearthing the SCS's innate concept of citizenship makes it possible to unpack the convoluted implications of its punishments and rewards and its effect on the greater society.

Aihwa Ong's theory provides a framework for delineating the concept of citizenship employed and perpetuated by the SCS. Graduated citizenship asserts that the government employs varied techniques in different segments of the city to regulate populations in relation to their perceived value and performance (Teo 2015; Ong

2006). Consequently, citizens of different social classes, ethnic backgrounds, and geographic areas enjoy different sets of civil, political, and social rights. Ong argues that "the practices of graduating citizenship have effaced the legacy of social citizenship under the Keynesian welfare state" (Teo 2015, 223; Ong 2006). Thus, by practicing graduated citizenship, the state can "maximize the returns on doing what is profitable and to marginalize the unprofitable" by transferring resources to facilitate private investments and a robust economy (Ong 2006, 79). Under graduated citizenship, rights and engagement have become auxiliary to the state apparatus rather than to one's flourishing and ties with other citizens. Under her theory, the state mainly employs two types of social regulation—"dependent subjects" approach and the "caring society" approach (Ong 1999, 196)—to achieve stratification of the population. The dependent subjects approach promotes the ethics of self-reliance, the authority of the state, and the cultural collectivity sanctioned by the state. The caring society approach entails the state's active involvement in devising various social policies that ensure people's prosperity and stability. The two approaches together would transform people's perception of their role in society and their relationship to the state. Thus, graduated citizenship creates an interdependent relationship between citizens and communities where achieving maximal economic performance necessitates inputs from both actors. The communities assign roles and allocate resources correspondingly; meanwhile, citizens perform their duties accordingly in exchange for significant economic benefits. This process inevitably blurs the boundary between the public and private spheres since the state believes "society can be understood and engineered through a holistic, scientific approach" (Creemers 2018).

The SCS fits squarely into Ong's theory and embodies graduated citizenship. While Ong discusses graduated citizenship in the context of a city, the SCS practices graduated citizenship at a larger scale because of the CCP's conception of the society as an "organic

whole" and its priority of achieving harmony (Creemers 2018). The SCS attempts to allocate and shift resources, which in this case are rights, to ones who engage in *trust-keeping* behaviors and thus morally worthier. Even though the overarching objective of the SCS is not to maximize economic performance, economic strength and stability could reasonably be interpreted as an expected result of increasing trustworthiness among individuals and in the market. Furthermore, the SCS's political implications also show that the state sees an increasing need for monitoring and enforcement of non-compliance and law-breaking behaviors. The SCS's roots in Confucianism enable citizens to evaluate behaviors in cultural and moralistic norms rather than legal norms because behaviors that do not break the law, such as rejecting university admission after passing the national exam[1], are now deemed as *trust-breaking*. Instead of determining whether an individual is conducive to better economy, the SCS focuses on what behaviors are *trust-keeping* and *trust-breaking*. Through Confucianism, the ideological aspect of the SCS represents a calculated attempt to justify the hierarchical structure and differentiated treatments. People who frequently exhibit *trust-keeping* behaviors consequently contribute more value to the society and are worthy of better access to public goods because they have demonstrated what Confucianism has defined as "the correct, stylized behavior which was attached to social roles and forestalled the idiosyncrasies of individual expression" (C. Wang 2015). Hence, the emphasis on misaligned duties over social equality undermines individualization and promotes collectivism since certain groups' individual rights and freedom might be suppressed in order to maintain the overall stability and prosperity of the society and the hierarchical structure of assigned roles.

Most importantly, punishments that are associated with *trust-breaking* behavior become justified when perceived from a rehabilitation perspective. Since Confucianism stresses the importance of education in the process of obtaining morality and virtue, punishments are taken as an opportunity for self-improvement and a

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[1] This is employed in the Henan Province.

lesson to be learned. On the contrary, the benefits one receives from the SCS are justified because the morally good ought to be rewarded and further incentivized. Once the SCS is nationally implemented, the scale of the program will proportionately reflect the state's authority. The SCS resembles Ong's *caring society* approach. In Kotska's survey, respondents who have participated in pilot programs commonly perceive the SCS as a mechanism that will improve their quality of life and encourage more trustworthy and law-abiding behaviors in society by effectively closing the loopholes that exist in current legislation and regulations (2019, 1586). Since the number of new coronavirus cases remains minimal in China, the SCS's indispensable role in controlling the spread of the virus is also widely acknowledged and praised by the ordinary public; as a result, many think the surveillance measures associated with the SCS are a great idea (D. Chen 2020; Hogue, Lee, and Zhang 2020).

The Social Credit System and Social Citizenship
Marshall's social citizenship, which is essentially universalist, introduces a bundle of substantive rights—social, political, and civil rights that ought to be delivered by the state, and that would ensure that citizens "live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society" (Marshall and Bottomore 1992, 8; Rogers and Darcy 2014). In Marshall's theory, social rights are defined as "a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being" (Marshall and Bottomore 1992). Political rights encompass the right to participate in the exercise of political power such as voting. Finally, civil rights concern the achievement of individual freedoms and include such elements as freedom of speech, the right to own property, and the right to justice (Isin and Turner 2007). Marshall's three components work together to design a welfare state that would promote social equality and that "increases the level of obligation on the part of states toward citizens," fostering a sense of community and

loyalty toward one another (Klausen 1995, 249). The SCS, which embodies the idea of graduated citizenship, thus seems to be in tension with Marshall's social citizenship insofar as it takes a market-centric stance where the state no longer extends its protection to "all those who are full member of the community" (1992, 68). Therefore, this section examines how the SCS would challenge the three elements of Marshall's social citizenship, namely civil, social, and political rights.

Civil Rights
The SCS, through its surveillance mechanism, puts individual freedom at risk and introduces the possibility that a person can be unjustly punished. The SCS inadvertently creates new loopholes that will enable the government or other parties to abuse the system, thus leading to issues with the civil component of Marshall's social citizenship. First, as discussed, by framing behaviors in moralistic terms, the system effectively broadens the scope of behaviors under government scrutiny and the definition of what constitutes *trust-keeping* or legal and *trust-breaking* or illegal behavior, juxtaposing the rule of trust and the rule of law. Among the most notorious categorizations are so-called "pocket crimes,"[2] which are abused by the police to punish dissidents, activists, and petitioners (Congressional-Executive Commission on China 2014).

Furthermore, the system would encourage the formation of norms that are artificially imposed by the government (Y.-J. Chen, Lin, and Liu 2018, 28–29). When rules of enforcement are no longer clearly outlined, people are stripped of the predictability that is guaranteed by the government and enables them to make a rational and free choice under the legal framework. Without a high degree of predictability, people would be less able to make a free choice since they are uncertain what behavior would break the law. For example, freedom of speech does not excuse one from shouting "Fire!" in a crowded theater or from comments that are intended and likely to incite imminent lawless

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[2] Pocket crime refers to "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" and "gathering a crowd to disturb order in a public place"

action. In theory, therefore, one would expect that one has the right to exercise one's rights as long as the speech is not in contest with the exception. According to the new local provisions added to the SCS, people will be swiftly punished and put on the *blacklist* for spreading rumors that have adverse effects on the containment of the virus and destabilize the society (Koty 2020). However, the story of Dr. Li Wenliang has caused considerable backlash in China. He and the other eight doctors who tried to warn the public about the possibility of a novel virus were dismissed and labeled as rumormongers by the official media in early January (Yuan 2020). This ironic and heart-wrenching event showed how the SCS could be instrumental in constructing a new norm that stresses the individual's sacrifice to the state rather than the state's duty to protect the rights of individuals. Inevitably, this new norm would identify, divide, and marginalize specific groups in order to preserve the Party's legitimacy and accomplish its political interests.

Another SCS challenge to Marshall's social citizenship is a concern for people's right to privacy. China's success in containing the virus largely depended not only on gathering data on people's movement, health records, and biometrics but also on rewards and punishments from the SCS that ensure adherence and deter wrongdoings. In the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, the CCP was able to calibrate the SCS to its priority of virus prevention. The loss of privacy has become a necessary sacrifice for achieving the greater good of the society, and many fear that such surveillance will only become more permanent (Kuo 2020b). The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that the SCS will continue undermining of civil rights since the loss of individual rights has been normalized in the face of CCP's grand goal. Hence, in the long run, people will likely become more accustomed to the increasingly sophisticated technologies for surveillance programs, and the space for privacy will continue to diminish as the public develops greater tolerance for them (Y.-J. Chen, Lin, and Liu 2018, 31–32).

Finally, the SCS could violate people's right to justice by undermining the due process. The rules for removing incorrect information are insufficient, meaning that a person could be unjustly sanctioned. In theory, a person has the right to request the removal of inaccurate information (The Supreme People's Court 2017). In practice, there is no rule that obligates agencies to notify the person who has been wrongfully listed on the *blacklist*. Furthermore, there is no public hearing that allows the person to state his or her opinion. Even if the procedure is swiftly and flawlessly completed, it is very likely that the incorrect listing will have already negatively impacted one's day-to-day activities and reputations. In addition to inaccurate information, the lack of transparency in the determination process can become a hurdle for a fair, accountable procedure. If the system was to be administrated by algorithms, these algorithms would still be biased because of their creators. The decisions made by the algorithms would also be difficult to challenge and understand (Y.-J. Chen, Lin, and Liu 2018, 33–34).

Social Rights

The social component of Marshall's theory builds on his vision in which citizenship acts as a mechanism that counteracts the inequalities created by the market economy (Turner 2009). Therefore, Marshall's social right should be regarded as "contributory rights" that "make significant contributions to the community for which individuals and their families are rewarded through a range of benefits" (Turner 2009, 71). Entitlement and participation are two defining characteristics of Marshall's social rights. The SCS's joint rewards and punishments program aims to promote *trust-keeping* behaviors that will make contributions to the community. As a result, people who exhibit *trust-keeping* behaviors deserve rewards and should receive different treatments. The *red list and blacklist* would enable the public to more closely bond with people who are *trust-keeping* and distance themselves from those who are *trust-breaking*. There would be greater social cohesion through the standardization of morality and virtue as people become more inclined to trust people with a higher credit score. The

incentives associated with acquiring a higher credit score through good behavior can potentially have a positive effect on the frequency of a particular behavior's occurrence (Nopparuth and Fabrice 2019, 174). Interestingly, the new COVID-19 provisions for the SCS have included donating as a *trust-keeping behavior* that would increase one's social credit score in order to encourage the donation of medical supplies from the public (Koty 2020). Similarly, in 2019, the National Health Commission commented that cities should explore the possibility of including donating blood into the SCS as a *trust-keeping* behavior (J. Wang 2019).

In China, one way to interpret social rights would be "guarantees," which give people facing indigence a claim to some level of assistance from the collective institution to which they belong (Woodman 2016, 352). These guarantees are comparable to the social security in western countries and encompass a wider range of welfare schemes, such as healthcare, education, and housing in China. Furthermore, they exist at both urban and rural areas. However, in rural areas, villagers and the village committee primarily fund the guarantees. If one were unable to claim his or her benefits from the committee, there would be nowhere else to go. In comparison, urban dwellers can make their claims to various institutions. The SCS will likely include other good behaviors that are conducive to a stronger civil society and the idea of a harmonious society. A higher rate of participation in generating greater social welfare would ensure that the guarantee at the local level is sufficient for meeting the demands of the less fortunate at the rural level.

Nonetheless, the SCS is not compatible with Marshall's social rights in several other areas. The disparity between urban dwellers and rural migrant workers in China is a challenge to Marshall's social rights since the government continues to devote more resources to developing urban areas (Jensen 2019; Kovacheva et al. 2012; Liu 2007). The nationwide implementation of the SCS could further widen the gap. Although the incentives are available to both urban and rural

workers, most of the incentives tend to have a robust urban bias since the incentives could be less relevant for rural workers (Kostka 2019, 1584). Hence, it is likely that rural workers do not benefit from being compliant to the system and are also more likely to be impacted by punishments. Restrictions on schools, modes of transportation, and access to public goods could have less impact on urban workers since they have more resources and flexibility. For rural workers, these restrictions could alter their life paths and hamper their upward mobility. Therefore, the SCS system indirectly created a de facto subordinate social class that is identified as an unwelcome group and isolated from much of the public sphere (Ma et al. 2019). Rural workers who fail to pay a parking ticket could be barred from taking trains and planes in certain classes. Since few efficient modes of transportation are available, rural workers would therefore be discouraged from seeking better opportunities in urban areas.

Political Rights
Marshall understands political rights as a necessary step to one's attainment of social citizenship. The political component of Marshall's theory explicitly concerns the ability to exercise one's political power. At the local level, elections are often regarded as democratic and sustainable since people are able to exercise their constitutional right to voice their complaints, assert their entitlement to social welfare, and shape community norms (Woodman 2016). Nevertheless, the SCS could undermine the progress that has been made in advancing political rights in China. The ambiguity of the definition of *trust-breaking* and *trust-keeping* behavior might deter people from voicing their complaints as people become unsure about the morality of their behaviors under the standards set by the SCS. Additionally, the credit score generated by the SCS can have a significant impact on how people perceive political leaders in their locality. The punishments assigned by the SCS create a problematic situation. People who have exhibited *trust-breaking* behaviors would receive a lower score, which implies that their behavior does not reflect the morality and virtue promoted by the SCS. Equating a score to a low sense of morality and

virtue is tough to justify. The leap from a low credit score to potentially being prevented from exercising political rights is almost certain to be even more challenging to justify. A low credit score for a political candidate does not necessarily reflect his or her incompetence in politics. The bias that stems from one's low social credit score can undermine the integrity of the election at the local level since "damaging the good reputation of an authority figure" is a principal method of critique (Woodman 2016, 356). Subsequently, a low credit score might become an effective way to discredit a candidate and provide an unfair advantage to the incumbent at the local level.

The ability to protect one's political rights is also a crucial part of Marshall's theory (Isin and Turner 2007). Therefore, the increasing political rights of urban and rural workers primarily depend on their ability to protest and voice their discontent (Liu 2007). However, with the SCS, rural workers might be discouraged from utilizing protests and strikes as practical means of protecting and promoting their interests because 1) rural workers are considered outsiders in cities, which prevents them from articulating their discontent through collective action, and 2) rural workers are uncertain about and fearful of the potential punishments that could result from their commitment to an activity that could be either *trust-breaking* or *trust-keeping* (Congressional-Executive Commission on China 2014). Through effective silencing and deterrence, the SCS might marginalize and divide rural immigrants in order to maintain the desired harmony and prevent further incitement.

Moreover, the SCS could also be used as a mechanism for the government to oppress the political rights of ethnic minorities and political dissidents in China. Since the SCS essentially attempts to achieve "stability maintenance," a product of the Confucian traditions and "harmonious society" behind the system, the COVID-19 pandemic has tested the SCS's effectiveness and the CCP's resolution to secure its stability. The story of Dr. Li Wenliang and the other eight doctors has prompted scholars to voice their discontent with the

government. Xu Zhiyong, a prominent legal activist and civil rights lawyer, wrote a letter to Xi Jinping to ask him to step down (Barmé 2020). The letter questions CCP's handling of the virus in the very beginning and asks, "Stability at all costs—at the price of the freedom of the Chinese people, their dignity, as well as their pursuit of happiness?" (Xu 2020). As a result of his forthrightness, Xu was then arrested by the police (Feng 2020). While the SCS had no bearing on Xu's arrest, the question he asked exposed a critical problem with the system. The trust and stability resulting from the SCS might not be worth sacrificing citizens' rights. Furthermore, the oppressive nature of the SCS is bound to generate new dissents, and with the CCP's misaligned political intention, it is difficult not to believe that the SCS would facilitate further political repression. Additionally, political dissidents under the SCS would be easier to identify and place under close monitoring because of the amount of information and discretion available. For instance, the pilot programs in Zhejiang and Hubei provinces all listed "other seriously untrustworthy conduct provided for by the state" as one of the factors for inclusion on the *blacklist* ("Hebei Provincial Social Credit Information Regulations" 2016; "Zhejiang Provincial Regulations on the Management of Public Credit Information" 2018).

With an understanding of how the SCS might challenge each component of Marshall's theory, an analysis of how the three components could function together under the SCS is necessary to conceptualize how social citizenship in China will continue to develop and adapt, especially when the COVID-19 pandemic has provided critical insights into the system and the future. When the SCS assigns a set of universal moral standards, citizenship characterized by the membership of a single culture may lead to exclusive and unjust ends (Revi 2014). While this shared culture has created solidarity among citizens in the time of COVID-19 (D. Chen 2020), it is built on the sacrifice of individual rights and the silencing of the minority. When the high level of solidarity relies on citizens' tolerance and the SCS completes its full-fledged implementation in the future, it will erode this solidarity as the negligence of the minority's rights grows and the

draconian nature of the SCS exceeds people's tolerance. Furthermore, the solidarity and sense of membership associated with citizenship are mainly generated vertically rather than horizontally since the CCP, the SCS, and its ideological roots assert significant dominance over the definition of what the "best interest" entails and restrict active political participation. In essence, graduated citizenship dismisses Marshall's concept of citizenship as shown by the emphasis on new obligations instituted by the SCS to contain COVID-19. Under the SCS's concept of citizenship, the universality of civil rights is not impossible but also not desirable since it might hinder achieving the maximal level of trustworthiness in the society. More importantly, rather than universality, one's individual rights are undermined as they slowly become auxiliary and situational units of the hierarchical structure that promotes meritocracy based on morality and virtue. Finally, rights are becoming a reward for successfully performing one's assigned duties; as a result, the society would become increasingly stratified in terms of rights enjoyed by different sectors of the population, and universality might exist within a particular sector. Noticeably, the SCS has not specified the duration of punishments; therefore, it is possible that if such stratification was to occur, it might be difficult for an individual to gain upward mobility. Most importantly, the SCS's graduation of citizenship suggests that the sacrifice made by individuals is worthwhile because it directly contributes to the overall stability and prosperity of the community and the Party. However, in the time of COVID-19, containing the virus has become a medium for the CCP to boost its legitimacy at home as well as a part of the propaganda machine (Weiss, 2020). The rising prevalence of targeted marginalization, diminishing space for private life, and false solidarity with the state would inevitably contribute to the spread of graduated citizenship. When the great communitarian good and trust become synonyms for the CCP's political interest, it raises the question of whether the common good is really good.

Conclusion

The SCS is unique in its incorporation of morality and virtue, which in turn introduce graduated citizenship where the state subjects different sectors of the population to different regimes of valuation and control to achieve maximal economic performance. As a result, the SCS would undermine Marshall's concept of citizenship and instead will introduce graduated citizenship in China. The loss of universality of social rights under graduated citizenship is not comparable to the erosion of one's individual rights and the disposable nature of these rights. Rights are becoming a reward for successfully performing one's assigned duties; as a result, the society would become increasingly stratified in terms of rights enjoyed by different segments of the population, and certain rights might only apply to particular segments. The *blacklists*, the *red list*, and any information on subjects' trustworthiness are to "be made publicly available, and in some circumstances even actively broadcast" (Creemers, 2018). This radical transparency serves to further facilitate governance and the discourse of self-enforcement and monitoring since it encourages obedience with tangible rewards. Subsequently, the carrot-and-stick approach of the SCS utilizes transparency to augment its effectiveness. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown problematic trends for the SCS and suggests that the erosion of social citizenship caused by the SCS could continue and even develop further.

Even though graduated citizenship might bring tremendous economic success for the greater society, the loss of individualization and the "rights to have rights" cannot be compensated for. In the age of big data and digitization, various entities collect every piece of information regarding one's personal life. Therefore, guaranteeing and securing one's rights to have rights and to social citizenship are essential to a person's just way of living. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, countries such as Israel, Singapore, and South Korea have turned to surveillance and technological methods, hoping to replicate China's success (Kharpal 2020). This is not a novel trend given that some countries have already explored the possibility of greater synergy between technology and governance. In the US, the government's no-fly lists employ algorithmic "predictive assessments"

of one's threat level (Ackerman 2015). Moreover, the proliferation of private databases has also been rampant and controversial. For instance, in 2015 Facebook patented a credit rating system that would factor in users' friends' credit scores, and Facebook has also been assessing its users' trustworthiness (Dwoskin 2018; Epstein 2015). The pandemic again offers a glimpse into the future as White House senior adviser Jared Kushner's task force has hinted at the possibility of a national coronavirus surveillance system that would draw from private-sector databases (Cancryn 2020). If reputation and rating systems in Western markets are further consolidated, the SCS will act as "illustrations of the implications of today's emphasis upon quantification and reputation across a range of domains, personal and official" (Mac Síthigh and Siems 2019, 29–30).

Thus, it would be useful for future studies to focus on China's propaganda machine for its surveillance methods and the possibility of exporting SCS to other countries. Furthermore, this article has not attempted to assess the regulatory side of the SCS, which is essential to its integrity and any discussion of the benefits of the SCS. Hence, it is paramount to study how regulations would work in the presence of the agency problem (Dai 2018, 60). Studies could also be done on the current development of civil society and the efficacy of non-governmental organizations and government organized non-governmental organizations in China in terms of how they would hold the government accountable. Different actors in society must all take action to hold the SCS accountable. The media should include events and opinions that help people better understand why their privacy matters and how big data projects undermine it. More importantly, future scholars should be cognizant of how the study of citizenship will evolve and adapt to the drastic advancement of technology and governance. In the end, despite all these efforts to legitimize the SCS, it is likely that graduated citizenship will slowly erode social citizenship in China.

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