Abstract

In 2014, the People's Republic of China (the PRC) launched the Social Credit Systems (SCSs or *shehui xinyong tixi*) with the use of big data to improve the country's low-trust social order (Creemers, 2018; Kabanov & Karyagin, 2018). This research is interested in how an authoritarian state handles civilian data and social credit rating. Given China's intricate surveillance network, the SCSs have shed light on the different surveillance approaches that have shifted from monitoring and tracking individuals to shaping their behaviours (Cho, 2020; Zeng, 2016). This dissertation conducts an analysis of how big data surveillance in the SCSs can facilitate political control in authoritarian states such as China. The use of big data in the SCSs may enhance the state's probability of detecting opponents with actionable knowledge whether to repress or co-opt target groups (Xu, 2021). Using case studies of the SCSs in Shanghai, Fuzhou, and Xiamen, this dissertation applies the process tracing case study method to uncover possible evidence that could allow the Chinese government to gain political control through targeted repression and selective co-optation. This dissertation argues that big data surveillance in the SCSs does not facilitate targeted repression because it is subject to sociotechnical limitations in precisely identifying the CCP's opponents, and it still requires manual operation to repress untrustworthy individuals who do not conform with the regime's expectations (Bi, 2021; Lewis, 2020). Unlike targeted repression, big data surveillance could facilitate selective co-optation to reward those who are loyal to the regime because this approach does not require target precision but categorisation instead (Kostka & Antoine, 2018; Lee, 2019). However, selective co-optation could only be possible if the government-run SCSs gain more popularity among Chinese citizens. Overall, big data algorithms are not the silver bullet to solve the CCP's socio-political problems (Shahbaz, 2018).

Keywords: China, Social Credit Systems, big data surveillance, dataveillance, political control, authoritarianism.