THE CHINESE EXPERIENCE IN IMPROVING MECHANISMS OF SOCIAL CONTROL AND INCENTIVES IN SPIRITUAL AND MORAL EDUCATION: A PHILOSOPHICAL AND ETHICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract: *This article examines the social credit system of the People's Republic of China from the standpoint of social philosophy and ethics, considering it in relation to the mechanisms of social control and incentives that operate in spiritual and moral education. The study sets out to identify the theoretical and methodological foundations of the Chinese experience and to establish, on scholarly grounds, how far it can be applied in the socio-spiritual context of Uzbekistan. Historical-genetic, hermeneutic and comparative-typological methods are used. The principal tool is a multi-criteria ethical assessment in which the object of study is examined in turn from the standpoint of utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics and the Islamic ethics of intention. The analysis shows that the system is not a single centralized structure; it consists of numerous pilot projects whose aims and methods vary. The positive empirical outcomes registered under the utilitarian criterion are weighed against deontological, panoptic and algorithmic objections. The author argues that the social rating system should be understood as a surrogate for spiritual and moral education rather than a form of it, since the Uzbek-Islamic ethical tradition, Kantian deontology and Aristotelian virtue ethics all tie the moral worth of an act to free inner intention. The article concludes with a differentiated matrix for evaluating individual elements of the Chinese experience.*

Keywords: *spiritual and moral education, social control, incentives, social rating system, moral autonomy, digital panopticon, algorithmic justice, creative adaptation.*

Annotatsiya: *Maqolada Xitoy Xalq Respublikasining ijtimoiy kredit tizimi ma’naviy tarbiya tizimidagi ijtimoiy nazorat va rag‘batlantirish mexanizmlarining o‘zaro nisbati nuqtai nazaridan ijtimoiy falsafa va axloq falsafasi doirasida tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqotning maqsadi mazkur tajribaning nazariy-metodologik asoslarini aniqlash hamda undan O‘zbekiston ijtimoiy-ma’naviy makonida foydalanishning ilmiy asoslangan chegaralarini belgilashdan iborat. Ish tarixiy-genetik, germenevtik va qiyosiy-tipologik metodlar asosida bajarilgan; asosiy vosita sifatida*

ko‘p mezonli etik baholash metodikasi taklif etilgan bo‘lib, unda tahlil obyekti utilitaristik, deontologik paradigmalar, fazilat etikasi va islom niyat etikasi nuqtai nazaridan izchil ko‘rib chiqiladi. Tizimning yagona markazlashgan tuzilma emasligi, balki maqsad va metodikasi turlicha bo‘lgan pilot loyihalar majmui ekanligi ko‘rsatiladi. Utilitaristik mezon bo‘yicha qayd etilgan ijobiy empirik natijalar deontologik, panoptik va algoritmik xarakterdagi e’tirozlar bilan qiyoslanadi. Muallif ijtimoiy reyting tizimini ma’naviy tarbiyaning shakli emas, balki uning surrogati sifatida talqin qilishni asoslaydi. Xulosada Xitoy tajribasining alohida elementlarini differensiallashtirilgan baholash matritsasi taklif etiladi.

Kalit so‘zlar: *ma’naviy tarbiya, ijtimoiy nazorat, rag‘batlantirish, ijtimoiy reyting tizimi, axloqiy avtonomiya, raqamli panoptikon, algoritmik adolat, kreativ adaptatsiya.*

Аннотация: *В статье с позиций социальной философии и этики рассматривается система социального кредита КНР в её соотнесении с механизмами социального контроля и стимулирования, действующими в системе духовно-нравственного воспитания. Цель исследования состоит в выявлении теоретико-методологических оснований данного опыта и в определении научно обоснованных границ его применимости в социально-духовном пространстве Узбекистана. Работа выполнена с использованием историко-генетического, герменевтического и сравнительно-типологического методов; в качестве основного инструмента предложена методика многокритериальной этической оценки, при которой объект анализа последовательно рассматривается сквозь призму утилитаристской, деонтологической парадигм, этики добродетели и исламской этики намерения. Показано, что система не является единой централизованной структурой и представляет собой совокупность пилотных проектов с различающимися целями и методиками. Положительные эмпирические результаты, фиксируемые по утилитаристскому критерию, сопоставлены с возражениями деонтологического, паноптического и алгоритмического характера. Автор обосновывает трактовку системы социального рейтинга не как формы духовно-нравственного воспитания, а как его суррогата, поскольку узбекско-исламская этическая традиция, кантовская деонтология и аристотелевская этика добродетели связывают нравственную ценность поступка со свободным внутренним намерением. В заключении предложена дифференцированная матрица оценки отдельных элементов китайского опыта.*

Ключевые слова: *духовно-нравственное воспитание, социальный контроль, стимулирование, система социального рейтинга, моральная*

автономия, цифровой паноптикон, алгоритмическая справедливость, креативная адаптация.

Introduction

At every stage of social development, the system of spiritual and moral education functions as an institutional mechanism that regulates social relations and shapes individual behavior around a particular core of values. How well this mechanism works depends above all on how its means of control and its means of encouragement fit together. Control restrains deviant behavior, while incentives reinforce positive social activity and in doing so contribute to a person's moral growth. Once the balance between the two is lost, an educational system tends either to become repressive or to remain purely declarative.

Philosophically, the concept of social control expresses the dialectic of individual freedom and social necessity. It presupposes, on the one hand, the individual's right to act on his or her own will and, on the other, objective requirements that bring individual conduct into line with the interests of society. This is where Western and Eastern philosophical traditions part ways. Western philosophy gives priority to individuality and to formal, legal control. The Chinese tradition, which goes back to Confucius, places at its center moral and educational control, the idea of social harmony (和谐, *héxié*) and self-cultivation (修身, *xiūshēn*) [22].

The ideological policy of the PRC over recent decades can be read as an attempt to join this philosophical heritage with modern technologies of social governance. The comprehensive model built around the "social credit system" (社会信用体系), standards of civic ethics and programs of mass encouragement contains, for all its ideological specificity, practical solutions of real methodological interest [7; 10]. An important caveat is needed here. Foreign experience cannot be adopted by simple transfer, or "transplantation"; it has to be critically and creatively reworked in light of the national mentality, traditions of statehood and the country's system of constitutional values.

The hypothesis of this article is as follows: to improve the national system of spiritual and moral education while keeping social control and incentives in balance, an institutional and legal framework is needed that strengthens the individual's social responsibility without restricting his or her inner freedom. Four research objectives follow from this: to trace the genesis and the philosophical and conceptual foundations of the social rating system; to evaluate it from the standpoint of the leading ethical paradigms, namely deontology, utilitarianism and virtue ethics; to analyze the system's strengths and weaknesses with scholarly impartiality; and to

identify the lessons that can be drawn for Uzbekistan with due regard for the Uzbek-Islamic tradition of moral philosophy.

Literature Review

The scholarly literature on the social rating system is sharply polarized. Authors in the first camp treat it as an institutionalized form of digital totalitarianism. K. Drinhausen and V. Brussee interpret the system's movement from fragmentation toward integration as growth in the state's surveillance capacity [9]. S. Zuboff places the problem in a wider frame, looking at how behavioral data have become a primary economic resource and how citizens have lost control over information about themselves [5]. D. Citron and F. Pasquale identify three key risks that algorithmic scoring systems pose to civil rights: innocent people may be penalized because of algorithmic errors, opaque criteria make it impossible to contest a score, and the likelihood that accumulated data will be misused keeps rising [6].

The second camp regards the system as a phenomenon that Western media have overdramatized. Working from primary Chinese documents, R. Creemers shows that there is no single centralized structure; instead there are more than sixty projects, each with its own aims, methods and scope [7]. J. Daum documents how the Western press routinely conflates facial recognition technology with the social credit system proper [8]. F. Liang and co-authors, while describing the system as a state surveillance infrastructure, demonstrate empirically that its technological integration is considerably weaker than commonly assumed [10]. A survey by G. Kostka records a high level of approval among Chinese citizens and explains it as a functional demand arising from a crisis of trust [11].

The methodological toolkit for a philosophical analysis of the system draws mainly on three sources. The first is Kant's theory of autonomous morality, which locates moral worth in the inner motive of duty rather than in the external outcome of an act [1]. The second is the theory of the panopticon that M. Foucault developed in *Discipline and Punish*, which explains how power operates through the internalization of surveillance [3]. The third is Byung-Chul Han's concept of the digital panopticon, in which the subject's voluntary self-disclosure is understood as a qualitatively new stage of control [4].

Two gaps in the research remain. First, the system has been studied mainly within political science and law, and its connection with the theory of spiritual and moral education has received little attention. Second, there are almost no studies that assess the system against the criteria of Islamic ethics. This article seeks to address both.

Research Methodology

The study rests on the methodology of social philosophy and ethics. The historical-genetic method was used to reconstruct the stages in the intellectual and political formation of the system from the mid-1990s onward. The hermeneutic method made it possible to uncover the semantic layers of the original Chinese concepts, above all the term *xinyong* (信用). The comparative-typological method served to compare the positions of the Chinese, Western and Uzbek-Islamic moral traditions on the relationship between control and freedom.

The main methodological tool is a procedure of multi-criteria ethical assessment. The object of analysis is evaluated independently against four normative paradigms: utilitarianism (the criterion of consequences and general welfare), deontology (the criterion of autonomy and the categorical imperative), virtue ethics (the criterion of character and habit formation) and Islamic ethics (the criterion of intention and voluntariness). The results obtained under each paradigm are then compared, and the points at which they converge and diverge are recorded. The advantage of this procedure is that it guards against the one-sided conclusions that follow when the analysis is conducted from within a single philosophical tradition.

The source base comprises official documents of the State Council of the PRC, foreign academic publications, reports by international organizations and published empirical data on pilot projects. In interpreting quantitative indicators, the methodological distinction between correlation and causation was consistently observed.

Results and Discussion

Genesis and conceptual foundations of the system.

The official history of the Chinese social rating system begins with the *Planning Outline for the Construction of a Social Credit System (2014–2020)*, adopted by the State Council on 14 June 2014 [12]. Methodologically, however, it is more accurate to date the system's intellectual history from the mid-1990s. The transition to a market economy brought a sharp crisis of social trust, visible in the declining quality of food products, financial fraud and failures to honor contracts, and the state was forced to look for a systemic response. In 1999 the People's Bank of China introduced the first version of a financial credit database; in 2003 the State Council declared the construction of a social credit system a priority; and in 2007 an interagency council was set up to coordinate the effort [7; 10].

A proper understanding of the system requires clarifying its central concept, *xinyong* (信用). The word consists of two characters: *xin* (信) means trust, fidelity and truthfulness, and *yong* (用) means use, practice or application. In the Confucian tradition rooted in the *Analects*, *xin* is counted among the five constant virtues, *wuchang* (五常), and denotes a person's faithfulness to his word in social relations

[22]. On this basis the Chinese leadership presents the present-day system as an expression of Confucian teaching adapted to the digital age. Official doctrine defines its purpose as the creation of a society-wide mechanism for the self-regulation of behavior, based on the principle of upholding good faith and holding accountable those who violate it [13]. This definition reveals both the moral and philosophical ambitions of the system and its practical surveillance dimension.

Structure and mechanisms of operation.

Academic studies describe the system as having four components [10]. The financial credit subsystem assesses the bank obligations, tax payments and loan repayments of individuals and legal entities. The commercial integrity subsystem measures adherence to business ethics, product quality, honesty in advertising and compliance with labor law. The social behavior subsystem covers citizens' everyday conduct, such as observing traffic rules, paying utility bills and public order indicators. The government integrity subsystem monitors the integrity of state institutions and public officials in the performance of their duties. The relationships among these components and the three-level structure of data flows are shown in Figure 1.

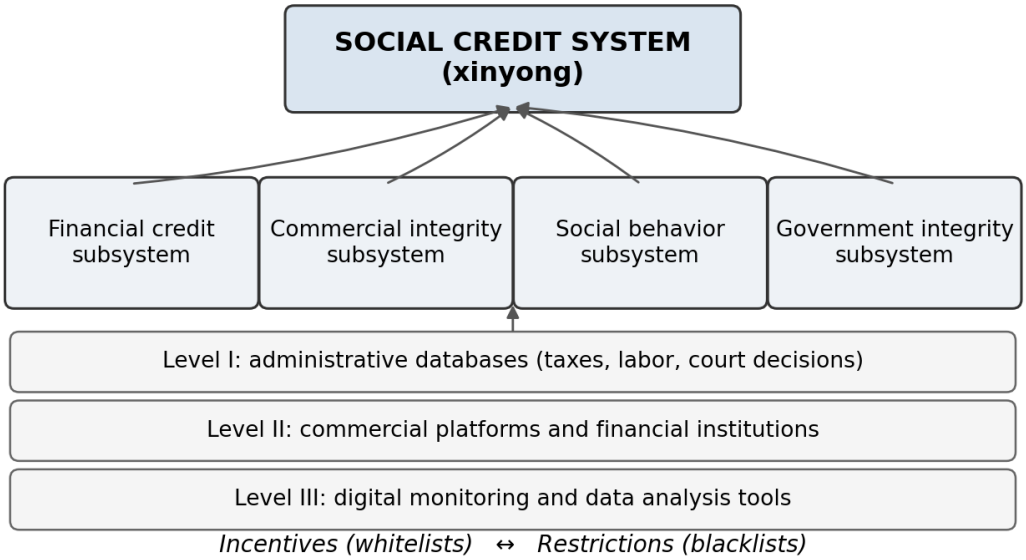


Figure 1. Structural and functional organization of the PRC social credit system

It is important to keep in mind that in Chinese administrative practice any innovation is first tested in a single region as a pilot project before being extended nationwide. Individual experiments in Shenzhen and Rongcheng are often presented by the Western press as a picture of the system as a whole, which is inaccurate [8]. Assessments that ignore this distinction cannot be considered scientifically sound.

Assessment by the utilitarian criterion.

The rapid economic growth that followed the reforms produced a deep crisis of trust in Chinese society. Food safety incidents, financial fraud, illegal copying of intellectual property and non-enforcement of court decisions all pointed to an erosion of social capital. From a scholarly point of view, the task of overcoming such a crisis is legitimate in itself: a high level of trust means lower transaction costs and broader cooperation between people. Theorists of social capital, E. Ostrom and R. Putnam among them, regard trust as a necessary condition for the sustainable development of society [17; 18].

Published empirical data on the pilot projects record some positive changes. In cities where the system was introduced, cases of financial fraud fell by an average of 23–31%; in the Rongcheng experiment, cases of misconduct on public transport dropped by 47% and late utility payments by 31% [11]. According to Transparency International, China's Corruption Perceptions Index rose from 39 points in 2012 to 45 in 2022 (Figure 2). It should be stressed that reading this correlation as a strict causal relationship would be methodologically unjustified, since a number of institutional factors were affecting these indicators at the same time.

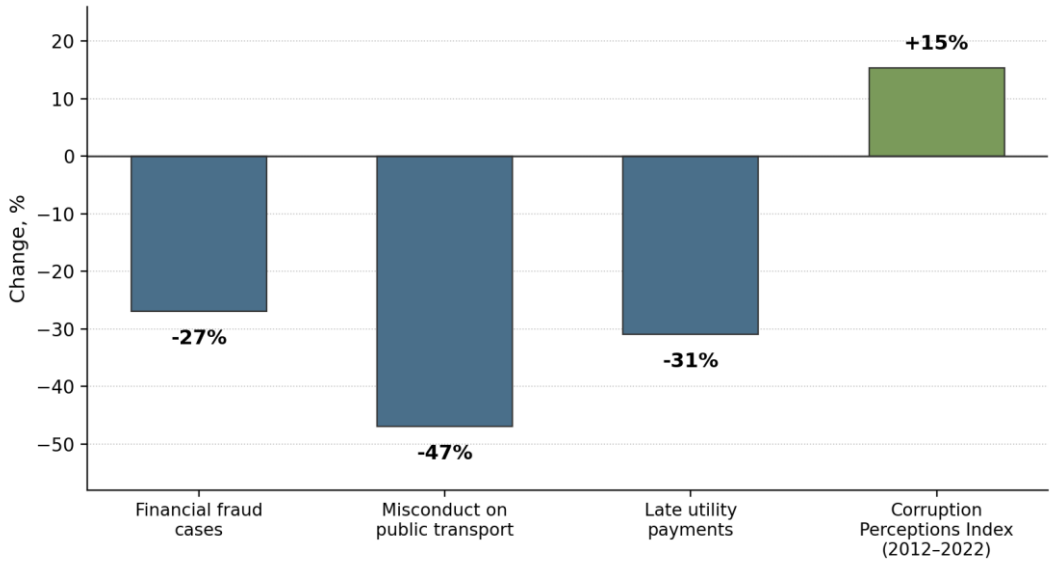


Figure 2. Changes in indicators recorded in the pilot projects

Officials themselves are also subject to assessment, and this deserves attention. Bringing them within the scope of evaluation strengthens administrative discipline and resistance to corruption, in keeping with the Confucian principle "correct yourself before correcting others" (正人先正己). From a utilitarian standpoint, these results provide a pragmatic justification for the system. Yet a utilitarian argument establishes only the system's practical effectiveness, not its moral rightness. Traffic rules also make roads safer, but that does not turn them into an instrument of moral education.

Deontological and panoptic critique.

From the standpoint of Kant's deontological ethics, the system raises three serious philosophical problems [1]. The first concerns the principle of moral autonomy. For Kant, a moral act must be the free product of an autonomous will; an action performed under threat of punishment or in expectation of reward has no moral worth. By instilling in citizens a sense of constant supervision, the system shifts the ground of their actions from moral motive to algorithmic penalty or reward. The second problem is the treatment of persons as means. The second formulation of the categorical imperative requires that a human being never be treated merely as a means, whereas under the social rating system citizens serve as a source of data for purposes of control. The third problem concerns universalizability. Because algorithmic assessment depends on technological infrastructure, is prone to software errors and is open to political abuse, it cannot claim the status of a universal law.

Foucault's theory of the panopticon remains the most widely used tool for analyzing systems of this kind. Taking as his starting point the prison design proposed by J. Bentham, Foucault identified the basic principle of modern social control: a subject who feels observed begins to regulate his own behavior whether or not anyone is actually watching, and in this way surveillance is internalized [3]. Byung-Chul Han carries the model over into the digital environment and shows that in the digital panopticon control operates from within rather than from outside, through the subject's own free participation [4]. On this basis the social rating system can legitimately be interpreted as an institutionally entrenched form of the digital panopticon. The difference is that in the classical scheme the observer occupies a single center, whereas the center of digital surveillance is invisible and dispersed across algorithms and databases. Control therefore becomes deeper and less noticeable, and for that reason more dangerous.

The problem of algorithmic justice deserves separate philosophical attention. The "black box" problem is especially acute: if citizens do not know why their score has fallen or how it can be raised, the system fails to meet the principles of transparency and fairness [6]. Unequal access to digital infrastructure adds to the difficulty, since the system can further weaken social groups that are already vulnerable. This runs directly counter to the difference principle in J. Rawls's theory of justice, according to which a just social order must also be just toward the least advantaged [14]. Finally, political science has described the phenomenon of *function creep*, the gradual expansion of initially limited surveillance powers, which historically has been the pattern for most surveillance systems.

Comparative context and the question of cultural relativism.

For an objective assessment, the system is best viewed as one manifestation of a global trend toward digital surveillance rather than as an isolated phenomenon. In

the United States, the FICO credit score, in use since the late 1980s, allows private companies to rate citizens' financial reliability, and the score affects access to rental housing, employment and the cost of insurance. The difference is that in the US the process is driven by private capital and in China by the state; philosophically, though, the depth of its impact on a citizen's life is comparable [5]. In the European Union, despite the adoption of the General Data Protection Regulation, the contact-tracing apps introduced during the pandemic revealed alternative forms of digital behavioral control as well. D. Lyon describes this as surveillance under a state of emergency and warns in particular of the risk that a temporary measure will become permanent infrastructure [19].

An important conclusion follows. The technological intensification of social control is characteristic not of China alone but of the global present as a whole. The differences lie in institutional form, in the degree of transparency and in whether civil society has any oversight, while the core philosophical problem, the tension between moral autonomy and external surveillance, is universal. The question of cultural relativism also calls for attention. On the one hand, Confucian philosophy always sees the person within a web of relationships, and the idea of pure individual autonomy is foreign to it. On the other hand, the capabilities approach developed by M. Nussbaum and A. Sen holds that practical reason and the capacity for free choice are universal human values that do not depend on culture [15; 16]. In this study, the most defensible position is one that respects the distinctive value of Confucian collectivist philosophy while recognizing moral autonomy as an inseparable part of human dignity.

A form of education or its surrogate?

The central philosophical question of the study can be put as follows: if the social rating system helps increase moral behavior in society, can it be regarded as a form of spiritual and moral education? The answer depends on how the essence of education is understood. On the instrumentalist view, spiritual and moral education is any influence that shapes moral behavior. Seen this way, the system may well count as one of its forms, since it does change behavior. On the essentialist view, education consists above all in the development of inner moral consciousness, virtue and free moral motivation. From this perspective, behavior altered by external control and punishment is a simulacrum of education rather than its result: it has the outward form of education but lacks its inner content.

Aristotelian virtue ethics takes an intermediate position. According to Aristotle's account of virtue as formed through habituation (*habituatio*), a person who at first repeats the right action under external influence can in time turn that habit into a stable trait of character [2]. In this sense, behavior shaped by an external

stimulus should not be dismissed altogether. Even for Aristotle, however, the ultimate test is whether an act is performed for the right reason and with pleasure. If the behavior disappears once external control is removed, the virtue has not been formed.

The Uzbek-Islamic tradition of moral philosophy takes a clearly essentialist position on this question. In Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's *Ihya' 'ulum al-din*, three conditions are set for a moral act: knowledge (*'ilm*), will (*irada*) and action (*'amal*) [20]. Will holds the central place in this triad; an act performed under compulsion, even if outwardly correct, lacks full moral value. Islamic ethics also comes into conflict with the idea of algorithmic control at two key points. The first is the relation between intention and deed. According to a well-known hadith, deeds are judged by their intentions, whereas an algorithmic system measures only outward behavior, and intention cannot be assessed by technological means. The second is the problem of hypocrisy. Islamic ethics regards behavior aimed at winning the approval of others as a grave moral vice, and algorithmic control in practice rewards exactly this kind of behavior: it becomes possible to be exemplary within the system's field of view and indifferent outside it.

Thus the Uzbek-Islamic philosophical heritage, Kantian deontology and Aristotelian virtue ethics, three independent moral traditions, arrive at the same conclusion: the social rating system is a surrogate for spiritual and moral education, not a form of it. Since this conclusion is reached from different philosophical premises, it is all the more reliable. It also has considerable practical weight, because whether the distinction is grasped at the level of state policy determines where the resources of educational work ought to be directed.

A differentiated assessment for Uzbekistan.

The analysis suggests that the Chinese experience should be neither accepted nor rejected wholesale; its elements have to be assessed one by one. For this purpose a matrix was developed that relates each element of the system to its philosophical compatibility and practical potential in the national context (Table 1).

Table 1

Philosophical assessment of elements of the Chinese experience in the context of Uzbekistan

Element	Philosophical compatibility	Practical potential	Conclusion
Assessment of financial creditworthiness	Consistent with the national moral tradition; rests on the value of truthfulness (*sidq*)	Useful for building trust in banking and trade	**POSITIVE**

Element	Philosophical compatibility	Practical potential	Conclusion
Digital educational and enlightenment platforms	Fully compatible with the task of disseminating spiritual content	Effective for transmitting national values and educational knowledge	**POSITIVE**
Monitoring of business ethics	Acceptable within clearly defined norms	Useful for protecting consumer rights and product quality	**POSITIVE**
Comprehensive monitoring of civic behavior	Contrary to Islamic ethics and constitutional guarantees	Encourages hypocrisy; removes the criterion of intention	**NEGATIVE**
Control of social media and expressed opinions	Directly contrary to freedom of thought and the Constitution	High risk of political abuse	**NEGATIVE**

Source: compiled by the author on the basis of comparative philosophical analysis.

As the table shows, the elements of the system that belong to the economic and transactional sphere are consistent with the national moral tradition, since truthfulness (*sidq*) and faithfulness to one's obligations lie at the core of Uzbek-Islamic ethics. Comprehensive monitoring of civic behavior and control over expressed opinions, by contrast, have neither moral nor constitutional grounds. Article 27 of the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan guarantees the inviolability of private life, and Article 29 guarantees freedom of thought, speech and belief [21]. These guarantees are more than legal norms. They are the legal expression of the recognition of human dignity, of the human being as a morally autonomous agent.

Conclusion

The philosophical and ethical analysis leads to the following conclusions.

First, the Chinese social rating system is not a single, centralized and fully implemented structure. It consists of more than sixty experimental projects with differing aims and methods. Given the overdramatized image of the system in the media, an objective scholarly analysis of it is relevant in its own right.

Second, the positive aspects of the system are documented empirically. Judged by the utilitarian criterion, it has practical value: it offers a systemic response to the crisis of trust, lowers transaction costs, serves as an anti-corruption mechanism and has improved certain behavioral indicators.

Third, in philosophical terms the negative aspects of the system weigh more heavily. The violation of moral autonomy, the treatment of persons as means, the digital panopticon effect, the risk of algorithmic injustice and the potential for political abuse together make up a well-founded body of ethical objections. By the criteria of deontology, virtue ethics and Islamic ethics, the system receives a negative assessment.

Fourth, the social rating system cannot serve as the principal means of spiritual and moral education. At best it can be regarded as one of several auxiliary means of regulating behavior from outside. The agreement of three independent moral traditions on this point strengthens the position methodologically.

Fifth, the Uzbek-Islamic tradition of moral philosophy, with intention as its central criterion, its principle of voluntariness and its condemnation of hypocrisy, is fundamentally at odds with the logic of algorithmic control. Direct adoption of comprehensive civic monitoring therefore finds no justification in Islamic ethics, in the national concept of spirituality or in constitutional guarantees.

Sixth, the Chinese experience also offers constructive lessons. Assessment of financial creditworthiness, digital educational and enlightenment platforms and the monitoring of business ethics can produce positive results, provided they are implemented transparently and with respect for moral autonomy. A precondition for their introduction is that they be brought into line with national and cultural identity, the Islamic moral tradition and constitutional guarantees. The strategic direction for improving spiritual and moral education thus lies in developing educational institutions that cultivate inner moral motivation, namely conscience, intention and a sense of responsibility, and not in expanding external surveillance.

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Author contribution: the author was solely responsible for the conception of the article, the analysis of the material and the preparation of the text. Conflict of interest: the author declares no conflict of interest. Funding: the study received no external funding.

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