ORWELLIAN TOURISM 2020? CHINA'S SOCIAL CREDIT SCORE

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1. Introduction and methodology

In 2014 the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) outlined their plans for the construction of a *Social Credit System* (SCS) with nation-wide implementation by 2020 (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2014). The stated purpose is the continuous development of the socialist market economy through increasing trustworthiness and transparency of debtors and creditors, reducing risk of fraud and not fulfilling credit obligations (Baidu Baike, 2018). Details of how exactly the system will be implemented are blurry. The People's Republic of China's (PRC) government is monitoring how Chinese tech-giant "Alibaba" uses its large data base to compile individual "credit scores" for its users. At the same time, various Social Credit Systems are rolled out locally by the cities (Zhou, 2018).

Users are rated based on a score between 350 and 950 points. Five factors are taken in account, the first one being "credit history", the second "fulfilment capacity", the third is "personal information", the fourth is "behaviour and preference", and the last is "interpersonal relationships" (Botsman, 2017).

Currently, the SCS is not mandatory, but millions of people voluntarily signed up for trial runs. Higher scores enable Chinese citizens to access loans for shopping online, rent cars without deposits, fast-check in to hotels and Beijing airport, as well as getting fast-tracked for European Schengen visas (Carney, 2018). How the mandatory implementation of the SCS will affect the world's largest outbound tourism market is however anyone's guess.

2. Possible tourism developments related to the Social Credit System

2.1. Outbound Tourism

Cases have been made public, where Chinese passengers were refused a purchase of plane tickets due to being permanently blacklisted by the SCS for "untrustworthiness"; based on any of the five points outlined in the scoring system (Wang, 2017). With full implementation of the SCS, more Big Data will be available to the PRC government and companies; and the number of Chinese citizens blacklisted from going abroad could rise drastically.

It can be speculated that with the implementation of the SCS not only "party-loyal" citizens will have easier access to go abroad, but also that the CCP might be able to employ "digital Leninism"; where citizens are encouraged to demonstrate that the Chinese political system is superior to its western counterparts (Funabashi, 2018).

Travel flows can also be influenced, directly or indirectly, by government policies and companies. Therefore, the PRC government could potentially issue a SCS credit-limit to purchase a ticket or a travel package to a certain destination, thus practically banning visitation; this could be based on diplomatic relations. While the government of the PRC has been already successful in using tourism to influence international relations (e.g. travel to Korea [Zhou, 2017]), the SCS could provide a powerful additional instrument for doing so.

2.2. Inbound Tourism and Domestic Travel

The SCS may also have implications for inbound travellers to China. Inbound tour operators will most likely be subjects to SCS rules and regulations to continue their business. Accordingly, Meissner (2017) suggests that the SCS will result in a "self-regulating" system for businesses, which will aim to enforce desired economic and non-economic behaviour.

In other words, being concerned with potential reductions in scores - which constrains business opportunities, inbound tour operators might be more careful in terms of choosing their overseas partners and foreign target markets. This may lead to more difficulties for overseas companies that promote human rights as part of their responsible travel policies, not complied with CCP views and policies, such as quoting the Dalai Lama (e.g. Daimler has apologised to China after quoting Dalai Lama [BBC, 2018]), list Taiwan as a separate country, or support separatism in Tibet (e.g. Marriott has apologised to China for listing Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau and Tibet as independent countries and sacked the employee who liked Tibet independence group using a corporate social media account [Ng, 2018]).

3. Conclusion and future research

While the details regarding the SCS are still blurry, it nevertheless provides unprecedented opportunities for future research on all of the issues outlined above; especially as the widespread media attention seems not to have reached tourism academia at this stage.

Privacy concerns, especially in regard to Big Data, are not prominent in academic tourism literature - despite a large and rapidly growing area of information technology and smart tourism research (Gretzel, Werthner, Koo & Lamsfus, 2015). Similarly, ethics is an expanding and yet severely lacking area for tourism research (Fennell, 2015). Research on the technology aspects of the SCS, data handling, privacy and ethical concerns represent divergent but vital areas for future studies. In essence, research can take a practical and pragmatic stance, taking Alibaba's and Tencent's current systems as basis to investigate how the SCS can be put into practice, and how companies in the tourism sector may utilise these systems to their advantage. A different approach calls for an ethical perspective, which should critically discuss the ethics of such systems - and broader implications of SCS on the society in the PRC and abroad.

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