Book Review

Ariane Ollier-Malaterre (2023) *Living with Digital Surveillance in China: Citizens' Narratives on Technology, Privacy, and Governance*. Routledge Studies in Surveillance. London

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For readers in search of a more nuanced picture of technology, its application and reception in China, which goes beyond the simple dystopian narrative that the 'government controls the people', Ariane Ollier-Malaterre's book, *Living with Digital Surveillance in China: Citizens' Narratives on Technology, Privacy, and Governance*[1] greatly delivers. It explores the paradox between the popular acceptance of surveillance in China as a means to combat moral malaise and the emotional distress it causes individuals when they reflect on the encroachment of personal monitoring in their daily lives. The book delves into various aspects of surveillance and digital technologies in China, including social media, surveillance cameras, electronic payments and social credit systems. As a Chinese and surveillance studies scholar, I found the analysis in the book to be rich and have opted to focus the review primarily on issues of translation and assessments pertaining to the social credit system.

Fifty-eight in-depth qualitative interviews, conducted by the author with the help of an interpreter, form the empirical foundation of the book. Most of the participants were Chinese citizens; however, some foreign nationals with long-term residency in China were also interviewed. The book is divided into four parts, each consisting of two to three chapters, along with an introduction and conclusion.

Part One (pp. 15–58) provides a literature review on privacy, surveillance and the social credit system. Based on the interview findings, Part Two (pp. 59–128) examines intersecting narratives of 'moral shortcomings'. Part Three (pp. 129–180) explores the 'redeeming' narratives that assert that technology and enhanced government control are the solutions to these shortcomings. The acceptance of surveillance is framed against the participants' broad support for the government, 'as well as love, as many equated the government with the country and the country with a big family to which they belonged' (p. 154). Meanwhile, technology is heralded as a 'magic bullet' that could force people to adhere to rules, modernise the country, and uproot secrecy and hidden behaviours. These redeeming narratives contextualise the predominantly positive views of surveillance and broader technological change expressed by the interview participants. Despite their cognitive acceptance of surveillance as a means of controlling social deviance, significant discomfort and occasional protest were uncovered when the participants were asked to contemplate the felt experience of being monitored. The author used the following line to summarise these views: 'surveillance

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[1] Ollier-Malaterre, Living with Digital Surveillance in China.

is good for China; however, I don't like it and I am trying to forget about it' (p. 8). Part Four (pp. 181–254) delves into the emotional burdens of surveillance and explores how the participants mentally distance themselves from the encroachment of digital technology in their daily lives.

Chapters 1 and 2 map out the development of surveillance in China and the West in reference to the different dimensions of surveillance at the interpersonal, commercial and state levels, and literature from the fields of Chinese and surveillance studies.[2] For readers unfamiliar with these areas of scholarship, the author does a commendable job of condensing a large volume of literature through the deft use of a short and concise writing style, clever real-world examples and ample references. The book uses poly-contextualisation as an analytical lens to consider 'interrelations between different systems in a country' (p. 4). Various layers of China's national context are explored to explain the variations in attitudes and behaviours observed in the interviews. These layers include historical factors, such as sovereignty and traumas, cultural aspects, such as beliefs and values, social elements, including the education system, family structure and religion, political considerations, encompassing the political and legal systems, and economic factors relating to the economic system and technology.

In Chapters 3 to 5 of Part Two, the author introduces the reader to the interview findings, gradually excavating a series of 'moral shortcoming' narratives that converge in the imagination of surveillance, its scope and necessity in China today. This narrative family comprises: 1) a *moral quality* narrative that conceives of Chinese people as backward rule-breakers in need of supervision, guidance and punishment; 2) a *humiliation narrative* that infuses understandings of technology, its development and application with a sense of nationalistic pride, part-and-parcel of reviving the past glories of Chinese civilisation; and 3) a *privacy narrative* that conceives privacy less as a fundamental right and more as a means of concealing shameful information. Each chapter explores the dimensions of these narratives in reference to the interview findings and insights from the academic literature. As the author highlights, elements of these narratives have previously been observed by others; however, this book offers the first comprehensive account that illustrates their interlinkages and shared logic. In this regard, the discussion on privacy, as it is understood in Chinese society in comparison to Western societies, is particularly illuminating.

The author contends that positive attitudes towards surveillance are informed by a pejorative view of privacy that while also existing in Western societies, remains more prevalent in China. As the author notes, two words in Chinese (*yīnsī* and *yǐnsī*) describe different privacy dimensions; the first describes the hiding of shameful actions, thoughts and feelings, while the second expresses a general wish that personal information not be publicly disclosed. It is the first, pejorative view of privacy that is observed in most interviews. As the author explains, 'the scope of privacy was narrower in their [interview participants'] eyes: they understood privacy as the concealment of shameful information and feelings to social groups that could judge them negatively, to save face and maintain moral and social respectability' (p.106). In other words, access to private information only results in a loss of face when specific embodied persons (e.g., parents, supervisors and hackers) are the one's privy to such information. One implication of this understanding is that abstract entities like the government may not represent as great a privacy concern to citizens in China as outside observers typically presume. This observation touches on an important and presently under-examined aspect of surveillance in China; that is, its citizens' attitudes towards peer monitoring. Notable survey-based studies in this space have often commenced from an institutional bias. In other words, the target of analysis has been public attitudes towards monitoring by abstract entities like the government or technology companies.[3] As the author's findings highlight, greater effort needs to be made to contextualise perspectives towards institutional surveillance in China against surveillance wielded by other social groups.

At this point, it would have been interesting to know how these phrases pertaining to privacy were articulated in the interview in respect to the different languages of the participants: English, French and Mandarin. Key information presented in the appendix, such as the fact that 29 (50%) of the interviews took place in English, 26 in Mandarin, and three in French, would have been better placed in the introduction. Indeed, the plurality of meanings associated with privacy in Mandarin, which the author strives to draw attention to, also applies to the concept of surveillance.

For example, in Mandarin the word *Jiānkòng* captures surveillance facilitated by physical devices, such as cameras, but it does not typically denote the kind of monitoring that transpires through the collection and scrutiny of the digital traces people leave through their online engagement. *Jiānkòng* also neglects peer-to-peer, horizontal forms of surveillance, which are better captured by phrases like *'bèi sōusuǒ'* – 'to be searched/exposed' by others. There was limited discussion concerning how descriptions of surveillance vary between languages, how the interpreter and author negotiated and deployed different terms

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[2] Notable works include Lyon, The Culture of Surveillance; Drinhausen and Brussee, "China's Social Credit System in 2021;" Kostka, "China's Social Credit Systems and Public Opinion."

[3] See, for example, Steinhardt, "Dreading Big Brother or Dreading Big Profit;" Kostka, "Between Privacy and Convenience."

during interviews to account for this and how this could affect the responses that participants gave and the analysis overall. The exclusion criteria used during participant recruitment were also unspecified. Despite the book's title implying a focus on Chinese citizens, foreign nationals were included in the same interview sample. It is reasonable to assume that the investigated surveillance aspects affect these participants differently.

In Chapters 6 to 7 of Part Three, the author introduces two redeeming narratives that assuage the moral shortcoming narratives and create the conditions for the principle of digital surveillance to be well accepted: 1) a *paternal, government protector narrative* in which the government is conceived as a morally superior actor that has the best interests of the people at heart; and 2) a *technology as a magic bullet* narrative in which technology makes life more convenient, forces people to follow rules, redeems past humiliations by modernising the country and uproots secrecy and hidden behaviours. Many participants described the Chinese government as a parental figure, a source of protection and care, to which they owed loyalty. Consequently, they perceived surveillance and constraints on personal liberty as a manifestation of parental concern.

In Chapters 8 to 10 of Part Four, the author explores discrepancies between participants' cognitive acceptance of surveillance as an indispensable common good versus the negative emotions they expressed when contemplating the surveillant gaze being turned on them personally. As mentioned, 'imaginaries'[4] of digital surveillance in China reveal an underlying paradox, succinctly captured by the author's summary of attitudes: 'surveillance is good for China; however, I don't like it and I am trying to forget about it'.[5] The perception of surveillance was often framed as caring when it safeguards the majority from the misbehaviour of a minority but as coercive when it restricts the individual being monitored. This paradox intersects with and further nuances the tension observed among Western citizens who support surveillance targeting others but oppose surveillance directed at themselves.[6]

In reaction to these negative emotions, the author uncovers several mental defence mechanisms participants deploy to distance themselves from the encroachment of surveillance in their daily lives, including ignoring or minimalising surveillance, 'othering' surveillance targets and resorting to fatalism. The interviewees expressed the views that technological development and surveillance expansion were 'inevitable', that people 'have no choice' and that thus they 'have to live with these kinds of new things' (pp. 213–215). The interviewees coped with their powerlessness by insisting that because such changes were inescapable, their misgivings did not matter. Meanwhile, one participant's comment that '[p]eople with bad credit scores are criminals' (p. 206) neatly captures the kind of zero-sum perspective many interviewees held towards individuals blacklisted under the social credit system. This finding aligns with my own research into peoples' interpretations and engagements with blacklisted actors in China. Chuncheng Liu and I have observed that people unacquainted with blacklisted actors consistently label them as morally maligned, selfish and criminal, but that such moral pronouncements lessen in severity if the blacklisted actor is a known contact[7]. In such cases, contextual information about the blacklisting judgement is mentioned to distinguish the blacklisted actor as a victim of circumstance rather than someone genuinely 'untrustworthy'.[8]

For scholars and journalists, this section sheds welcome light on the challenges and difficulties associated with conducting qualitative fieldwork in China in addition to other authoritarian contexts. The author is obviously a skilled and self-reflexive interviewer. Strategies for navigating political speak and sensitive topics are listed in significant detail. Lessons learnt during the course of the project when participants reacted poorly to the phrasing of certain interview prompts are also bravely admitted to. Special attention was paid to participants' body language, which is included in [parentheses] in interview quotations. This enables the reader to grasp the feeling of the interview, its lightness or tension, in a way that quotations of words alone would altogether miss. An additional layer of meaning is added to the analysis through this technique, highlighting the misgivings and unspoken agitation people convey when asked to ponder how they personally *feel* about being monitored rather than what they *think* about surveillance at an abstract, aggregate level. Quantitative, survey-based studies prominent in this space have failed to capture this crucial dimension, which the author suggests underlies and contradicts popular support for surveillance in China.

Notable differences between the Western and Chinese contexts were also observed. The interview participants expressed great concern about horizontal peer groups and family members knowing too much about their lives as opposed to abstract vertical groups like the government. This finding is consistent with studies conducted in other Asian societies, such as Singapore.[9] Rather than being seen as a threat to privacy, the government is viewed as a champion of privacy, safeguarding citizens from

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[4] For a detailed description of this word's usage in relation to surveillance see Lyon, The Culture of Surveillance
[5] Ollier-Malaterre, Living with Digital Surveillance in China.
[6] Lupton, "'Depends on Who's Got the Data.'"
[7] See Trauth-Goik, "Black or Fifty Shades of Grey?"
[8] See Trauth-Goik, "Black or Fifty Shades of Grey?"
[9] See, for example, Jiow, "Lateral Surveillance in Singapore."

profit-driven businesses and predatory individuals. The author explains that many Chinese people look to their government for protection, perceiving surveillance cameras as enhancing security. In the words of one participant, 'The government is at some level like a parent or a grandparent […] it's good to have someone looking after you' (p. 143). Conversely, many Westerners seek protection from their government's scrutiny.

The focus of the book was on uncovering popular 'surveillance imaginaries' in China (i.e., uncovering peoples' mental images of surveillance and how they respond to it); however, the phrasing of some of the interview questions seemed to reproduce early misnomers about the social credit system, including its scope and current level of operationalisation. For example, the amount of alcohol you purchase reducing your credit score is something that has only been reported in foreign media accounts. A very early pilot project in Suzhou reported that drunk driving would be included into the scope of credit records (not scores);[10] however, this is seemingly the only case to date that has connected alcohol consumption with social credit.

Both the National Development and Reform Commission and State Council have criticised and restrained local governments from using credit scoring to penalise individuals for trivial infractions such as those the author put to interview participants (e.g., jaywalking).[11] These criticisms also extend to local authorities including such minor infractions in the scope of personal credit records.[12] Admittedly, this may be less the author's fault and more a matter of the time at which the book was written. Regardless, the stereotypical accounts of social credit systems borne out in the interview questions may have had the unintended effect of asking the participants to respond to the very Western surveillance imaginaries that the author was trying to distance herself from.

Indeed, this touches on my primary criticism of the book, which is that the author stopped short of interrogating the picture of totalising surveillance in China construed in the popular literature and replicated in the framing of some interview questions. Interagency competition and territoriality,[13] and standardisation issues preventing the data collected from surveillance systems from being pooled and meaningfully analysed,[14] are some examples of barriers to surveillance in China which the analysis remained relatively silent on.

Aside from these points of consideration, this book makes a significant contribution to our knowledge and understanding of surveillance and its effects both in China and abroad. It is suitable for academics, students and the general public interested in internet, surveillance and Chinese studies, and it offers accessible insights into the implications of technology in daily life.

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[10] Xinhua, "Suzhou."

[11] Tencent Net, "Development and Reform Commission."

[12] Daum, "Social Credit 2022."

[13] Chen, "Collective Territoriality."

[14] Grosse-Bley, "Big Data Dreams and Reality in Shenzhen."

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