

# Pei's Sentinel State: Surveillance and the Survival of Dictatorship in China

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## Book Review

Review of Pei, Minxin. 2021. *Sentinel State: Surveillance and the Survival of Dictatorship in China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 336 pp. US\$31.50. Paperback. ISBN: 0674257839.

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Perhaps it is no secret to anyone that the Chinese government monitors both the electronic and physical activities of its citizens, utilizing methods of surveillance that extend beyond cutting-edge digital technology. Facial recognition, social credit systems, smart city infrastructure, and voice recognition are examples of technologies that have garnered significant attention not only in China but also globally due to their role in surveillance. However, what is still not fully recognized are the most important tools that the Chinese Communist Party uses to maintain its control and continuity—which are not necessarily its use of technological techniques for surveillance.

In *Sentinel State: Surveillance and the Survival of Dictatorship in China*, Minxin Pei delves into the systematic surveillance techniques that surpass the utilization of traditional digital technologies employed by the Chinese government in monitoring its citizens' everyday activities. The author argues that the enduring power of the Chinese dictatorial government does not solely stem from the use of technology for surveillance purposes, but rather from the employment of humans in maintaining social control and enforcing ideological conformity. What makes this argument important and innovative is that it doesn't just focus on the implications of state technology use for surveillance purposes on citizens, as many scholars have studied. Instead, the argument presented in this book emphasizes how the state utilizes the burgeoning economy in China to fund the deployment of spies in the country. This argument is thoroughly developed across the seven chapters of the book, commencing with the historical emergence of Chinese state surveillance employing informants for spying and concluding with the social and civil liberty repercussions resulting from the sophisticated monitoring deployments on citizens. The argument presented by the author appears robust and cohesive, supported by examples and facts that elucidate that the continuity of the Chinese Communist Party is not sustained by economic or technological factors but by the surveillance processes that enlist humans as tools for spying.

The author of this book relies on qualitative research methods, including ethnographic interviews, expert or elite interviews, and text analysis, to delve deeply into the mechanisms of the Chinese government's surveillance processes employed on its citizens. For instance, the author interviewed dissidents from the Chinese government who shared their experiences regarding being spied on by state security agencies, providing specific details documenting their daily lives that were monitored by the government. Additionally, the author presents excerpts from breached official Chinese documents to illustrate the

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network of spies in China who were employed mainly for physical surveillance on citizens. The book also provides a historical analysis of surveillance in China, starting from President Mao Zedong's era during the 1960s and early 1970s, followed by surveillance techniques used to suppress the Tiananmen Square protests in late 1989, and ending with contemporary monitoring tools used under the current government of President Xi Jinping.

Social trust, preventive repression, eye-catching technologies, stability maintenance, Leninist bureaucratic structure, and citizen informants are the main concepts used in this book. These concepts are used by the author to explain the relationship between surveillance processes and the Chinese government's enduring position at the top of the pyramid of power. For instance, in the introduction of this book, the author highlights the definition of surveillance as a systematic monitoring process that has been continuously used by successive Leninist bureaucratic governments, employing both humans and technologies for controlling Chinese society. Further, by relying on these different concepts throughout the seven chapters of this book, the author is able to support his main argument: that the surveillance process aims for preventive repression, which involves monitoring individuals by using both spies and technology.

It is evident that the author achieved his desired goals in many ways but faced limitations in others. For example, a comprehensive study of surveillance cases in China is presented through interviews with specific individuals, as well as an examination of surveillance components and leaked official government documents. This comprehensive examination in the book sheds light on new and important information about the nature and dynamism of the Chinese government in the surveillance of society. However, the author's comprehensive study lacks a discussion of concrete solutions and more criticism of the monitoring methods employed by the Chinese government. Furthermore, the book would also benefit from theories relevant to surveillance, society, and technologies to support the theoretical framework and the argument. For instance, important theories could support the digital surveillance discussion section of this book, such as the chilling effect, cultural theory of surveillance, and privacy paradox (Alrawi 2023; Pecora 2022; Barth 2017).

The unique format of this book provides a range of topics and questions suitable for undergraduate students in the field of communication and media studies. These topics include technology, surveillance systems, and the implications for citizens' civil rights, such as privacy and freedom of speech, resulting from state monitoring processes on individuals. Additionally, the book offers tools for teaching the basics of conducting qualitative research, including ethnographic interviews and textual analysis, at the undergraduate level in the social sciences.

The book contributes significantly to current discussions related to surveillance and information communications technologies (ICTs) by providing new insights and examples of emerging forms digital monitoring technologies, especially those used by governments in less democratic societies. The book also illuminates the ethical ramifications of technology employed by governments on citizens, addressing crucial topics such as the moral implications of state monitoring and its impact on individual autonomy.

The intended audience of this book is media and communication scholars, political scientists, and historians who focus their work on studying issues lying at the intersection of technology and society, with a special focus on surveillance and privacy contexts. The aforementioned scholars would benefit from the following areas: First, the evolving landscape of digital surveillance and its implications for media practices and discourses. Second, the analysis of state surveillance mechanisms and their impact on governance, civil liberties, and political dissent. Lastly, the book is also relevant for policymakers in terms of understanding the complex dynamics of contemporary surveillance societies and the relevant policies implemented by the state on its citizens.

Finally, this book sets up the basis for future research to tackle critical areas of study in the field of media and communications. This includes empirically examining issues between individuals' surveillance

concerns and online communication activities, mediated by factors such as digital self-efficacy and moderated by the degree of trust in their governments.

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