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Ollier-Malaterre's Living with Digital Surveillance in China: Citizens' Narratives on Technology, Privacy, and Governance

Marcella Siqueira Cassiano

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See table of contents

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Surveillance & Society

Book Review

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

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Marcella Siqueira Cassiano

University of Winnipeg, Canada
m.cassiano@uwinnipeg.ca

In today's China, virtually all domains of life involve using or being exposed to apps, gadgets, artificial intelligence-equipped devices, or some type of surveillance infrastructure. *Living with Digital Surveillance in China* (2023) by Ollier-Malaterre delves into how Chinese citizens, particularly well-educated elites, make sense of digital surveillance. Ollier-Malaterre is interested in how citizens perceive, interpret, imagine, and live under ubiquitous monitoring. Ollier-Malaterre's work is the first scholarly book on China's digital surveillance published in English. The book, supported by carefully collected empirical data, provides numerous insights into why and how the Chinese often support government monitoring. Ollier-Malaterre's methodology also deserves attention, as it serves as a guidebook on operationalizing emotions, imaginaries, and symbolism into surveillance research. Ollier-Malaterre's book will likely delight surveillance scholars and impress sinologists.

Ollier-Malaterre's work complements a small but growing number of books on China's surveillance apparatus (Byler 2021; Cain 2021; Chin and Lin 2022; Pei 2024; Strittmatter 2020; Zhang 2023). These books address the oppressive side of surveillance, particularly the technological and regulatory environment designed by the Communist Party to control and coerce the population. In contrast, Ollier-Malaterre focuses on the "imaginaries and practices of surveillance culture" (Lyon 2018: 5). Ollier-Malaterre approaches Chinese surveillance as a form of power that coerces behaviours and nudges self-censorship while fostering meaning-making. As Ollier-Malaterre accounts for surveillance as conducive to subjectivity, creativity, and resistance, she grasps surveillance's constructive and potentially liberating side. Thus, her book marks a significant advancement in the social study of surveillance, offering a perspective that diverges from the well-established tradition in surveillance studies that presents digital surveillance exclusively as a threat to individual privacy and an enabler of dystopias.

Epistemologically, Ollier-Malaterre relied on a research practice called "polycontextualisation" (3–4), which invites researchers to appreciate and evaluate research evidence within its socio-historical context. Polycontextualisation encouraged Ollier-Malaterre to listen attentively while her interviewees described the ambiguities and paradoxes of surveillance through descriptions of monitoring as a source of discomfort,

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concern, objection, anguish, redemption, convenience, and hope (a "magic bullet" for a better society, see 150–175). More importantly, polycontextualisation helped Ollier-Malaterre embrace these ambiguities and paradoxes and trace their origins to China's culture and political history. With polycontextualisation, Ollier-Malaterre de-westernized her gaze and freed her analysis from the ideologies that depict China's surveillance apparatus as a fearful "Big Brother." Ollier-Malaterre's approach and positionality are reflected in her writing. Her manuscript reads as articulated from a position of appreciation, not for surveillance but for capturing the qualities of surveillance in the sense of its attributes and characteristics.

The book resulted from a year of fieldwork in Chengdu, Shanghai, and Beijing in 2019. Ollier-Malaterre interviewed fifty-eight participants, often with the assistance of well-trained interpreters. Most participants had a bachelor's or a graduate degree. Ollier-Malaterre's sample contrasts with the norm in China, where less than twenty percent of the population has a tertiary degree, and just about one percent has a master's degree (OECD 2024). Ollier-Malaterre tried to counterbalance the sample by interviewing ordinary folks she met through daily life interactions. These interviewees include campus security personnel, residence cleaners and keepers, and taxi drivers. Ollier-Malaterre also relied on her observations, which she kept in a diary, ensuring the reliability of the data. Still, Ollier-Malaterre's findings reflect the surveillance imaginaries of a highly educated section of China's urban population. Notably, Ollier-Malaterre had limited control over her interview sample; as is customary in China, hosting institutions handle participant recruitment.

The book demonstrates that the elites perceived digital surveillance as indispensable (9). Participants endorse China's growing surveillance apparatus despite trying to shield themselves from it. Their perceptions expose surveillance as a source of anguish and redemption. On one hand, participants viewed surveillance as a necessary evil to hold deviants, particularly people of "low moral quality," in check (103–123). On the other hand, participants portrayed surveillance as a legitimate tool for China to redeem itself, that is, to overcome collective shame and trauma imposed by foreign powers (87) and regain its centrality on the global stage (84–102). Often, these portrayals conflated public safety with Xi Jinping's governance, which calls on the Chinese to support the "dream" of a "prosperous" and "civilized" China (99–100). Despite considering surveillance indispensable, participants relied on various "mental tactics" to avoid or minimize exposure to surveillance (179–211). Ollier-Malaterre's work demonstrates that well-educated Chinese draw on a labyrinth of moral values and symbols encoded in deeply rooted, often invisible, social norms to explain and justify surveillance. Ollier-Malaterre's ability to find her way around this labyrinth and produce such a skillful analysis with just a year of fieldwork is admirable.

Nevertheless, Ollier-Malaterre's book embodies a contradiction: In the book's introduction, Ollier-Malaterre contrasts China with liberal democracies, positing that social control in China is visible and tangible, whereas social control in liberal democracies is more surreptitious (2). However, her book is a testament to the invisible, intangible forces (e.g., collective values, discourses, and imaginaries) that circumscribe, shield, legitimize, and thus empower China's social control apparatus. Ollier-Malaterre's interview data often showcase participants navigating a complex environment of opportunities and constraints that guided their choices invisibly under the auspices of "choice." For instance, participants were okay with giving away their privacy, i.e., being exposed to enhanced surveillance, if that was their "choice" (106–107). Another example involves participants reporting they would trade privacy for convenience (155–157). These findings corroborate scholarship asserting that "governmentality" (Foucault 1991) in today's China, unlike in the Mao era, includes and accounts for individual autonomy (Cassiano 2019; Cassiano, Haggerty, and Bernot 2021; Jeffreys 2009). I interpret these narratives involving choice as a reminder that the label "authoritarian" is no longer accurate in describing the Communist Party's governmentality; a governance style that accommodates individual autonomy deserves another name.

Lastly, Ollier-Malaterre presents the argument that "morality is the cornerstone of surveillance imaginaries" as one of her book's innovations (272). According to Ollier-Malaterre, the content of morality may vary

from country to country, depending on their socio-political context (273), but morality is always there, hand-in-hand with surveillance. Indeed, morality offers a cultural platform from which surveillance is operationalized and legitimized. Ollier-Malaterre's argument is an essential reminder that technology alone (i.e., the medium) cannot explain surveillance and its enduring nature. Ollier-Malaterre's argument, however, is not novel, especially if surveillance is analyzed as power from a Weberian or Foucauldian perspective. Despite conceptualizing power from different perspectives, Max Weber (1978) and Michel Foucault (2003) demonstrated that power is rooted in and shaped by context-specific principles that bind interactions and obligations, including values, norms, and subjectivities. Regardless, Ollier-Malaterre's work is still innovative as it offers a clear and compelling recipe for analyzing surveillance and morality empirically and theoretically. Ollier-Malaterre's research makes a significant scholarly contribution that is not highlighted in the manuscript: her findings suggest that China's surveillance apparatus draws most of its power not from its technologies (i.e., equipment, systems, and algorithms) but from its ability to enmesh and articulate individual interests and collective imaginaries, some of them carefully forged and maintained by the Communist Party.

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