

Book Review

Eva Dou, *The Secret History of China's Most Powerful Company: House of Huawei*, Penguin Random House, 2025, 406 pages. ISBN 9780593544631.

Huawei is one of the leading global Chinese telecommunication infrastructure corporations, spanning business from switches, submarine cables, surveillance systems, and fifth-generation technology to consumer electronics gadgets. Over the years, it has gained immense popularity by moving ahead of global giants such as Ericsson and Nokia. However, Huawei's popularity stems not merely from its advanced information and technology services but also its tense relationship with the United States. The rise of China's leading tech company is attached to the secret relationship it shares with the Chinese government and how this relationship emerges as a source of geopolitical confrontation with the United States. *The Secret History of China's Most Powerful Company: The House of Huawei* by Eva Dou, was written to unpack the stories of Huawei that move beyond its rise as a tech company.

Eva Dou is a seasoned technology policy reporter for the Washington Post. She had worked for seven years on Wall Street, covering politics and technology in China and Taiwan. Therefore, this book is based on her many years of journalistic experience in China and Taiwan and covers both technology and policy.

The book has 28 chapters and is chronologically structured into three parts, covering its rise from a humble background to becoming the centre of international geopolitical tension. The first part of the book begins with the background of Huawei's founder, Ren Zhengfei, and the company's formative years under three distinct political periods led by Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Jiang Zemin. Unlike many who suffered and died during Mao's Cultural Revolution period, Ren, as the author notes, was 'luckier than many' to work as an engineer for a classified military project codenamed 011 after graduation. Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening Up policy opened new opportunities for rapid development of China, and during this period, Ren Zhengfei founded Huawei Technologies Co. in 1987 with five co-investors. The key point highlighted in this section is how Ren had early on learned the importance of political alignment with the government

for a company's long-term success. For instance, in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square protests, he made patriotism fundamental to working in the company (p.51). When Jiang Zemin took over from Deng Xiaoping, Ren openly committed to ensuring that Huawei would prioritize the nation's security interests above its commercial objectives (p. 70). This approach was crucial to the company's success, especially as competitors such as The Stone Group, popularly known as China's IBM, stumbled because of political participation during the protests.

The second section covers Huawei's global outreach. Dou pointed out another distinctive strategic decision made by Huawei that helped it flourish internationally. Instead of directly competing with major telecommunication infrastructure corporations, such as Ericsson and Alcatel, which dominated the Western market, it made a strategic decision to focus on expanding into territories often overlooked and deemed as rogue regimes, including Iran, Russia, and Libya. This strategic decision, which was instrumental in its early years of global success, was also the reason for the conflict between the company and the U.S. government in the later period. In this section, Dou provides intriguing details on the important relationship shared between the Chinese Communist Party and the company. In addition to the establishment of a party unit within the company comprising half of the employees as party members, notably, Ren himself tasked these staff with providing ideological guidance to employees of Huawei (p. 122). This highlights his dedication to the party to ensure the security of the company. She also highlighted the internal political structure combined with Chairwoman Sun Yufang's background in China's State Security Agency. Moreover, many deals secured by Huawei were negotiated at a diplomatic level. With strong support from the government, Huawei's international outreach expanded the dominant telecommunication market of many Western countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe. Its business, which started with the switches program, expanded to include the production of surveillance systems, submarine cables, managed services, and advanced AI technologies.

The last part of the book chronicles Huawei under Xi Jinping's leadership and the hostile U.S. attack on the company due to alleged violations of Iran's sanctions, theft of technology, data, and surveillance against the U.S. government. When Xi Jinping came to power, his priorities were security and stability. He rolled out various projects, such as Sharp Eyes, to cover all of China by using surveillance cameras. He also declared

the Belt and Road Initiative and Made in China 2025 to be two leading national development projects that aim to establish China as a leading global power. Xi Jinping, like his predecessor, showed strong support to Huawei and, subsequently, Huawei expanded working on the development of advanced surveillance systems including infamous advanced surveillance program called the ‘Uyghur Alarm’ system, which automatically identifies individuals of Uyghur ethnicity, and heightened global scrutiny of Huawei’s involvement in China’s surveillance policies.

While it continues to find strong support from the Chinese government, it is faced with serious pressure from the U.S. government. In 2019, the U.S. intensified pressure, and President Donald Trump declared Huawei a national emergency by imposing sanctions against the company. He also pressured Western allies to exclude Huawei from 5G networks, leading major universities, such as Stanford, Oxford, and UC Berkeley, to terminate R&D contracts with the company. Under pressure from the U.S., Canada arrested Huawei CFO, Meng Wanzhou, the daughter of Ren, further intensifying geopolitical tension between China and Western countries.

The Secret History of China’s Most Powerful Company: The House of Huawei arrives at a critical moment when information and technology reshape global power structures. The author provides intriguing information about Huawei, its mysterious relationship with the Chinese government, and its cooperation in building some of the most repressive advanced surveillance systems. It also reveals how data are transferred from Africa to China through the network system built in Africa. While the book provides intriguing information, much of it, particularly about the tense relationship with the United States, is not secret. There is rich literature available on the subject; therefore, much of the information is repetitive to existing information. Instead of concentrating on the U.S., if the author had focused on the Huawei relationship with rogue regimes and how it expanded its business in these countries, and what kind of role the Chinese government played in navigating those business opportunities would have helped reveal new secrets and offered a new perspective, as there is a lack of deep study conducted about Huawei presence in these countries. Another issue is the references, which are missing in the book but available on the websites of the publishing house.

Overall, the House of Huawei, despite its limitations, forms an important reading in understanding why it is not just a telecommunication company

but also a geopolitical force and representation of China's rise in the global IT sector. This book makes a significant contribution to the discussion of the complex relationship between information technology and geopolitics, offering a detailed analysis that is crucial for grasping their intricate interconnections.

Review by Dolma Tsering
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University
ruthokdzhong66@gmail.com