



THE RISING ASIA REVIEW OF BOOKS

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THE PARADOX OF A NATIONAL CHAMPION Technology, Power, and the Making of Modern China

Eva Dou. *House of Huawei: The Secret History of China's Most Powerful Company*. New York: Portfolio, 2025, 432 pages, INR 559.

Huawei has become one of the most influential technology firms in the world. What started out in 1987 as a modest telecommunications reseller from Shenzhen has turned into more than a story of profit and loss. From expo showcases to courtrooms, board rooms, and policy meetings, its wide-ranging influence has become a trigger for debates regarding national security, espionage, globalization, and competition.

Veteran telecoms reporter Eva Dou's *House of Huawei: The Secret History of China's Most Powerful Company* not only chronicles the rise of a telecom company but of China as an economic superpower. The story of Huawei is told through a sociopolitical lens focusing not solely on the company's origins and evolution but the history surrounding it. The book serves as a biographical account of its founder Ren Zhengfei and his

family, a historical architecture of the company's rise, and constructs the emergence of China as an economic and technological superpower. Dou splits the book into three parts which focus on the history, the rise to global stature, and the contemporary debates surrounding Huawei's reach and alleged ties to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Huawei was a result of China's economic reforms, molded by the political turmoil of the Cultural Revolution. Its founder Ren Zhengfei was a victim of Mao Zedong's vindictive policies, which led to widespread poverty and famine. His ability to survive and continually learn allowed him to take advantage of the policies put in place by Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping. The ethos of the company and the organizational culture were largely shaped by Ren's unrelenting ambition, determination, and sacrifice. Ren regularly used military aphorisms with references to an "iron army" and "wolf culture" to inculcate a staunch belief in discipline and dedication to achieving his singular vision of success. Patriotism was another defining characteristic of Ren's workplace as employees were required to "love their motherland."¹

A Creation Of Political Patronage

While the book does not cast aspersions or give weight to overly simplistic Western narratives of Huawei being a conduit for China's surveillance ambitions globally, it does objectively explain how the company is a product of interdependence. It emerged from an environment in which political patronage was necessary for any company to succeed and Ren was masterfully adept at gaining state support while achieving the ambitions of a private enterprise. As a result, Huawei made sure to accommodate the needs of the CCP, which allowed

¹ Ren Zhengfei, "To New Employees" [致新员工], preface to *First Time Shaking Hands* [第一次握手] (Beijing: China Youth Publishing House [中国青年出版社], 1998).

it to take advantage of favorable policies to innovate without the hindrance of bureaucracy. Huawei has always stated that it is a private company with commercial autonomy and has continuously worked to distinguish itself from state-owned enterprises.

The relationship between Huawei and the state, and the degree of autonomy is the central theme in the book which pushes the narrative further into geopolitics. Huawei's rise was enabled by the entry of foreign companies into the economy. Ren's goal was simple—to absorb information from these companies and then eventually replace them. Huawei took advantage of lax laws regarding intellectual property as “imitation was legalized.”² The book shows how the early success of the company was achieved with a blend of mastering foreign technologies and large investments in research and development.

China's conception of national power was fueled by a need to be technologically self reliant. This was an objective shared by Ren, who never shied away from advocating for the need to help the nation and called chipmaking a “national activity.”³ He also entered into technology sharing arrangements with the government as he believed “a country without its own program-controlled switches is like one without an army.”⁴ Dou illustrates how the growth of the telecommunications

² Ren, “Let the Life of Youth Radiate Brilliance: Minutes of Ren Zhengfei's Speech at the Internet Product Line Striving Conference” [让青春的生命放射光芒：任总在网络产品线奋斗大会上的讲话纪要], in *Huawei Selected Writings* [华为文摘], vol. 10 (Shenzhen: Huawei Technologies Co., 2010), 13.

³ Ren, “Notes on a Trip to America” [赴美考察散记], in *Huawei Selected Writings* [华为文摘], vol. 1 (Shenzhen: Huawei Technologies Co., 1996), 120–24.

⁴ Ren, “A Few Thoughts on China's Rural Phone Network and Switching Industry” [对中国农话网与交换机产业的一点看法], *Huawei People* [华为为人], no. 8 (July 20, 1994).

industry made it increasingly intertwined with military capability, and geopolitical influence.

Growing Geopolitical Trouble

Huawei's geopolitical troubles become clearer as the book progresses. Dou outlines the emergence of Western suspicions concerning cybersecurity, surveillance, and Chinese influence as Huawei was forced to work with "rogue regimes" (Dou, p. 100) in order to make headway in markets not dominated by Western companies, such as America's Lucent Technologies or Sweden's Ericsson. The third part of the book reconstructs how Huawei's growing market share was damaged with investigations in the United States, restrictions imposed by allied governments, allegations concerning sanctions violations, and debates surrounding fifth-generation telecommunications networks.

Dou avoids presenting these controversies in simplistic moral terms. They are juxtaposed against the contradictions that exist within Western intelligence frameworks. The infamous Snowden leaks are revealed as a means of displaying how Western surveillance practices have been corrupted in the pursuit of increased government oversight. Dou also uses the example of American intelligence agencies hacking into Huawei's systems as a means to show that Western countries are just as familiar in engaging in illicit practices to gain an upper hand.

The book places the reader in the midst of the geopolitical rivalry as Dou recounts an episode in which Ren Zhengfei's daughter was arrested in Vancouver airport in 2018. China responded, in turn, by arresting two Canadian citizens alleging they were involved in espionage. Dou uses this international hostage crisis to show how Huawei's significance had expanded far beyond commercial considerations. The

company had become a symbol of China's growing power and strategic autonomy was being negotiated using Huawei.

Dou also examines Huawei's ability to withstand geopolitical pressures and continually grow in the face of mounting obstacles. Despite extensive sanctions, export controls, and restrictions on access to advanced semiconductor technologies, the company has demonstrated a capacity for adaptation that many observers underestimated. Dou attributes this resilience to the foundations of the company—a strong work ethos, and Huawei's early realization for investment in research and development. Dou believes that many other firms may have been crippled by the external pressures that Huawei has faced repeatedly.

House of Huawei is limited in its scope, in that it does not add much beyond what is publicly available about the company—as the subtitle suggests—but does succeed in compiling the information in a coherent and comprehensive manner. The book is fast-paced and accessible to all readers given Dou's ability to provide a strong background and situational understanding of the different complexities affecting Huawei along its journey. The complicated nature of technology is easily digestible without sacrificing analytical depth. At the same time, scholars of China, international relations, and technology policy will find substantial material for reflection.

The biggest takeaway from the book is that Huawei's story is a reflection of China's growth trajectory. The balance between public and private ambitions may sometimes become blurred in pursuit of a common goal, but that is not only limited to China as Western narratives portray. Huawei's continued success and China's growing technological capabilities will continue to transform the international landscape with the advancements in new technologies such as artificial intelligence and increased chip capabilities.

Note on the Reviewer

Aurko Chakrabarti is a Managing Editor at *Rising Asia Journal*. He was employed at the Advanced Study Institute of Asia (2022–2026), where he worked since the organization's founding as an Applied Geopolitical Researcher, and served as the editor of the quarterly *Decypher Journal*. He began his professional career in 2022 as a Narrative Designer at the Sanrachna Foundation, following an internship with the *Economic Times* in 2020 and earlier volunteer work in Kolkata. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Media and Communication from Swansea University. Aurko has more than four years of research experience working on a range of projects and contributing to various conference discussions.