

Review: We Have Been Harmonized: Life in China's Surveillance State

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Kai Strittmatter's *We Have Been Harmonized* begins with several assertions: "The China we once knew no longer exists;" "Something is happening in China that the world has never seen before;" and, "the greatest challenge for our democracies and for Europe won't be Russia, it will be China."¹ The statements themselves are not necessarily groundbreaking, but the author's work in this recent publication is certainly noteworthy for the comprehensive manner in which it details the facts which support such statements. The book explores the "harmonization" of China under the Chinese Communist Party as it is being revived by Party General Secretary and the nation's president Xi Jinping. Although there are criticisms to be made of certain points which the author makes, his warning that China poses a threat of authoritarian influence to the world should not be ignored.

It is difficult to summarize the concepts presented in the work very succinctly, as the angles from which China may be viewed are as multifaceted as a dragonfly's eye—a significant and meaningful motif of which Strittmatter makes good use—but it may be useful to describe the state of the CCP's rule over the nation now according to the following passage concerning the statement of Mao Zedong, that "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun."²

This is one of Mao's most-quoted pronouncements. But what people often forget is that, alongside and equal to the barrel of the gun, Mao always had the barrel of the pen—propaganda. The Maoists used to mention the two in the same breath: "The Revolution relies on guns and pens." One stands for the threat of physical violence and terror; the other for mind control.³

The two are undeniably complimentary, and very much interdependent. Strittmatter describes their use in China at length. He mentions, in terms of the gun, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, which has been used to "fight corruption" and "also investigate comrades' ideological loyalty."⁴ The author describes this exercise as "a modern-day Spanish Inquisition,"⁵ though a more modern example does come to mind—specifically, the Red Scare of the twentieth century. He also mentions, in terms of the pen, that the CCP's propaganda, "which to outsiders often comes across as crude, vacuous, and absurd," should not be discounted because of it—"Much propaganda is crude and vacuous—and it works surprisingly well."⁶

An illustrative example is apparent in a story related by writer Murong Xuecun; in this story, Xuecun mentions questioning a friend—a Party functionary—about whether the Party really believed that it could really influence people

with propagandist posters which "drew the reader back to the People's Republic of yesterday via the familiar, stale slogans that were printed across the cheerful images."⁷ Acknowledging that the posters were indeed "stupid," Xuecun's friend dismissed this point—"that doesn't matter ... We can cover the walls with this stuff. Can you?"⁸ Strittmatter elaborates on the relevancy of this story in the following paragraph:

The implication was: "This is how great our power is. The whole world around you belongs to us. We are going to wallpaper your heaven and your earth. And you are only a guest here by our grace." This isn't only about the words, it's about overpowering people. Haifeng Huang, a political scientist at the University of California, calls it "hard propaganda." He carried out a field study in China which came to the conclusion that such propaganda could "worsen citizens' opinion of their regime" while at the same time fulfilling its purpose: "signalling the state's power and reducing citizens' willingness to protest."⁹

But of course, just as intimidation is not unique to authoritarian regimes, neither is propaganda and censorship. As Strittmatter justly notes, "Hardly anyone in China found out what was really happening in Hong Kong, not in 2014, when its citizens were on the street, still hoping, and not in 2019, when hope had already died..."¹⁰ However, a similar example can be cited from very recent events, when Facebook—a platform which is banned in China—was observed censoring information concerning the Israeli attacks on Palestine in May 2021.¹¹

These notes of intimidation and censorship in the West are not to diminish that which exists in China and other authoritarian regimes—it is merely meant to drive home one statement which Strittmatter leaves readers with in the final chapter of his book: "In the end, rather than just pointing the finger at China, we need to look at ourselves."¹² As the author touches on, Western democracies' betrayal of their proclaimed values plays into authoritarian regimes' characterization of democratic states as hypocritical, and only self-serving.

It is the responsibility of these states to correct their own acts of intimidation and violence—Strittmatter rightfully mentions the US' torture of prisoners in Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo as examples—and exercise of censorship and propaganda, as exemplified by the instance noted above. They must do this *in conjunction* with their criticism of China and its authoritarian influence. And they must demand more than simple promises: they must demand real change for the benefit of all people. They should not act as the character

of the prisoner described by author Yan Lianke, who, once the window of his cell has been unshuttered, may not “dare ask for the prison gates to be opened for him.”¹³ If Western democracies truly stand for democratic values, then they must demand it all—they must demand for democratic values to be upheld.

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ENDNOTES

1 Kai Strittmatter, *We Have Been Harmonized: Life in China’s Surveillance State* (New York: HarperCollins, 2020), 1.

2 Strittmatter, *We Have Been Harmonized*, 32.

3 Ibid.

4 Strittmatter, *We Have Been Harmonized*, 34.

5 Ibid.

6 Strittmatter, *We Have Been Harmonized*, 47.

7 Strittmatter, *We Have Been Harmonized*, 50.

8 Strittmatter, *We Have Been Harmonized*, 51.

9 Ibid.

10 Strittmatter, *We Have Been Harmonized*, 74.

11 “Advocates demand Facebook end ‘blatant’ Palestinian censorship,” *Al Jazeera*, May 26, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/26/advocates-demand-facebook-end-blatant-palestinian-censorship>.

12 Strittmatter, *We Have Been Harmonized*, 334.

13 Strittmatter, *We Have Been Harmonized*, 116.