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BOOK REVIEW

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LULU CHEN (2022): *INFLUENCE EMPIRE: INSIDE THE STORY OF TENCENT AND CHINA'S TECH AMBITION*, HODDER & STOUGHTON, PP. 240, ISBN: 9781529346855

Lulu Yilun Chen has been writing about China and its technology for *Bloomberg News* and *Bloomberg Business Week* for over a decade. She has received several awards from the Society of Publishers in Asia. This book is much more than just a story about Tencent's journey as an application company. Lulu Yilun Chen describes not only how *Tencent* succeeded in making *WeChat* a messaging medium with 1.3 billion users, but also how few Chinese technology companies are and will be prepared to be high-fliers and transform into giant technology companies. However, and unfortunately, any potential high-flying companies are deliberately thwarted by the Chinese government, which is biased towards *Tencent*. Why? This book will review the answer.

Tencent, a Chinese technology business, surpassed *Facebook* around five years ago to become the fifth-largest company in the world. Although it is still an odd name to many people in the west, *Tencent* is a crucial stakeholder in world-renowned technology companies and products such as Spotify, Tesla, Snapchat, Monzo, and Reddit. Moreover, *Tencent* is behind the world's best-selling video game makers, such as Fortnite, League of Legends, Clash of Clans, and Call of Duty. Lulu Yilun Chen argues that *Tencent* has the ambition for unlimited business expansion revealing that *Tencent's* activities now include nascent programs in the world of finance, cloud storage computing, messaging, video streaming, and film production. A key element in *Tencent's* business expansion was the development of the WeChat super app. This is a versatile platform that can be used as a social media platform as well as a digital wallet and currently has more than 1.3 billion users.

Tencent has achieved international capitalist supremacy in a country that has the world's most significant communist, which is a quite astonishing fact. However, the author warns readers not to be surprised because according to her all companies with close ties with the Chinese government will be financially successful. This, Chun says is because Beijing will fully support any communications and information companies that allow the government to access their information channels and the data they collect each day, such as *Tencent*. The lack of Chinese data protection law means that Beijing can monitor users of WeChat

and even imprison users deemed to be endangering national security through various online messages.

This activity by Beijing intrigued Chen, who has a very sharp reporter's instinct, to conduct further investigations to discover the deep secrets of the core information and communication services provider company in China—*Tencent*. Her journalistic soul is driven to explore and expose the threads that connect the Xi Jinping regime to the population's social media accounts related to apps issued by *Tencent*.

Chen relates the book's story started in 2015 when she managed to conduct in-depth journalistic interviews with *Tencent* programmers regarding the company's access to information-gathering activities. Chen later discovered from various interviews and information searches that the founder of *Tencent*—Ma Huateng—did not have a transparent scheme when he wanted to set up platform. This resulted in Ma Huateng and his friends initially experiencing various failures in the early days of the development process. In 1998, they tried making internet access via a pager device. After realizing his various mistakes in developing this technology, Ma Huateng made various breakthroughs and improvements. Finally, with regular updates, their app continued to attract both users and multi-million dollar investments.

Tencent's success results from the ability of both the company to adapt to the changes in the internet, and Chen to skillfully map out the business diversification over the years. However, it is also clear that Ma Huateng, who was and remains a private entrepreneur, has survived and thrived in a state-dominated economy through intelligent business decisions, diplomacy, and political sensibility. In addition, Ma Huateng is currently a member of China's legislature, which meets once a year in Beijing with other top officials to discuss the national agenda.

The most exciting material in the book is Chen's exploration of the relationship between *Tencent* and the Communist Party of China. Chen describes how the Chinese communist government has deliberately disrupted the communication and information services provided by *Tencent*, especially for foreign users of *Tencent's* services. What is the reason? Chen conveys this happened because the Chinese government wanted to show „they are the boss”.

Chen also describes several occurrences that have resulted in fraught international-level tensions created by Beijing's refusal to allow US auditors to inspect communications companies in China. At this stage, to some degree, *Tencent* has been embroiled in a proxy war between world governments. Chen also wrote that one of the most remarkable was how President Donald Trump tried, before he left the White House, to prevent American companies from dealing with WeChat.

There are many other tipping points and decisive battles for *Tencent*, of which Chen conveys the various dynamics in an enthralling way. In the final chapters, Chen also invites readers to think about how to manage technology giants whose

products are an integral part of the lives of the majority of the global population, particularly if authoritarian regimes have close relationships with them..

In summary, this book tells a story about one of the most influential organizations in the world, particularly in the arena of communication and information. However, the main attraction of this book is that the author involves one of the most authoritarian governments in the world in the various discussions. This book is a must-read for anyone who wants to understand how the strange clash between business, technology, and politics in China today is a unique phenomenon that will reshape our world. Lulu Yilun Chen has written a sharp, witty, and compelling report on the rise of some of China's most influential companies, among which is the world's largest and richest tech giant *Tencent*.

Despite their enormous size and power, only a few people outside China know or understand these companies. For the time being, because of *Influence Empire: Story of Tencent and China's Tech Ambition*, the eyes of the world will be more open.

Dani Fadillah, Zanuwar Hakim Atmantika

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