

BOOKS & ARTS

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Up to a point, Professor Hamilton

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Books | Has Clive Hamilton written what one critic called a “McCarthyist manifesto”?

Right:

Silent invader? A Chinese government supporter waves a Chinese flag outside Parliament House during the visit of Chinese president Xi Jinping in November 2014. Lukas Coch/AAP Image



Silent Invasion: China's Influence in Australia

By Clive Hamilton | *Hardie Grant* | \$34.99 | 376 pages

Hardly a day goes by without another tale emerging of the apparently malign influence of the People's Republic of China on Australian life. The growing power and assertiveness of China in the region and the wider world has become the grand narrative of our times, the single immutable fact around which all else must be arranged. What we cannot change, we must learn to live with.

Clive Hamilton is having none of such fatalism. It will only be a Chinese world if we decide that it should be; to suggest otherwise is capitulation or appeasement. Hamilton, an uncompromising critic, seems to mean this literally. In an essay published online in April last year, he compared high-profile academic Hugh White's views about China to an imaginary Oxford don arguing in 1938 that Britain's response to Germany should ignore “the fact that Germany is ruled by a dictatorial, expansionist party bent on European domination.”

Silent Invasion is a call to arms; not literally, but a plea to Australians to resist Chinese interference in their democracy. Hamilton argues that China's efforts to influence Australian politics, business, media, academia and the Chinese-Australian community shouldn't be treated as business as usual. They do not resemble past and present efforts by the United States to influence Australian political and cultural life. Australia and the United States share fundamental values, Hamilton suggests, but China is a one-party state whose ideology and

practice are inimical to our own. And increasingly, he claims, they are also a threat to our own.

Silent Invasion's publication has become a news event in itself. It was widely reported last year that Allen & Unwin had withdrawn from publishing the book because it feared vexatious defamation action. Given the state of Australian libel law, one can understand their lawyers' concerns. Eventually, Hardie Grant — run by Sandy Grant, who published former British spy Peter Wright's *Spycatcher* in the face of the Thatcher government's efforts to suppress it — took on Hamilton's manuscript and published it with a cover picture of Parliament House flying a Chinese flag.

The book has done well on the back of such publicity, apparently enjoying a second printing within a few days of its release. Two former prime ministers, Paul Keating and Kevin Rudd, have criticised, indeed insulted, Hamilton, Keating calling him a “pedlar of prejudice” and a “nincompoop” and Rudd labelling him a “third-rate academic” who supports the views on China of “a second-rate prime minister,” Malcolm Turnbull. (I would have thought that commenting on the quality of recent prime ministers is dangerous territory for Rudd.) Former Labor senator and Right factional chieftain Graham Richardson sounded a bit like a well-trained party cadre himself when he argued in the national broadsheet that “the good ship Australia should shove Hamilton out the back with the other irritating flotsam and jetsam which pollutes our thinking.”

Hamilton's reputation will probably survive Richardson's censure; and his standing will scarcely be harmed by Beijing's reaction. A Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman, responding to a shameless Dorothy Dixier from a “journalist,” condemned *Silent Invasion* as “completely meaningless,” “slander” and “good for nothing.” The ever-reliable *Global Times* published a picture of the book apparently about to be flushed down a toilet.

Silent *Invasion* is a challenging book, especially for anyone with an appreciation of the long history of Australian alarmism about Asian and communist threats to Australia. The title itself is disturbing — the trope of Asian invasion stretches from the anti-Chinese agitation of the gold rushes, through invasion fantasy novels and the cartooning of the fin-de-siècle nationalist and labour press, to Geoffrey Blainey's accusation, made during the rancorous Asian immigration debate in the mid 1980s, that the Hawke government was pursuing “Surrender Australia” policies. The “invasion” theme was implicit in Pauline Hanson's warning in 1996 that Australia was “in danger of being swamped by Asians.”

Hamilton explains carefully at the outset that his concern is about the Chinese government, not about Chinese. He is right to point out that the accusation of “racism” or “xenophobia” is a useful weapon at the disposal of those who wish to deflect attention from the character of their own connections with Beijing and, more particularly, their receipt of Chinese money. But there is a supplementary accusation: that Hamilton is reviving cold war paranoia; that, in the words of reviewer David Brophy, he has produced a “McCarthyist manifesto.” Certainly, Hamilton's suggestion that we shouldn't defend the free speech of those who aim to suppress

free speech is a reprise of the kinds of arguments that circulated in favour of banning the Communist Party in Australia in the early years of the cold war.

Nonetheless, Hamilton has not invented the problem to which he draws attention. Much of what he has to say draws on the painstaking investigative reporting of journalists such as Primrose Riordan and Nick McKenzie. Respected Sinologists — such as John Fitzgerald, who provides an endorsement on the book's cover — have expressed serious concerns about the extent of Chinese government penetration of Australian academic life. The intelligence services and leading public servants have warned against complacency about espionage, to the point that the federal government is moving to strengthen its legal instruments for dealing with foreign political influence. And almost everyone seems to be able to acknowledge that China has entered a new phase in its domestic and global politics, one in which it is more assertive in its foreign policy, more hostile to the basic freedoms valued in the West, more concerned with displaying its rising wealth and military power, and more preoccupied with demonstrating national greatness in compensation for past humiliations.

Still, my unease about aspects of Hamilton's argument remains. Central to his case about the aggressive "United Front" strategy of the Chinese government is the critical role that it sees for its diaspora — including Chinese students abroad, who are now, in Hamilton's telling, carefully choreographed by embassies and consulates — in promoting its interests and outlook. This, says Hamilton, extends to "intelligence gathering and technology theft." "The large and growing number of highly qualified Chinese-Australians now working in science and technology labs around the country provide fertile recruiting grounds," he tells us.

Is there not a danger that anyone of Chinese ancestry might come to be regarded as untrustworthy, a potential spy, and therefore suffer baseless suspicion, job discrimination and social marginalisation? Especially so given that, based on conversations with Chinese-Australian friends, Hamilton produces some remarkably crude and unsubstantiated guesstimates of the proportions of the Chinese in Australia who are pro-Beijing, anti-Beijing or neutral. Is it really so simple?

There are points in the narrative where the analysis seems to me to go over the top entirely. Hamilton is worried by the sight of "a group of PRC men in suits" wandering around the campus of the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra taking photos. He seems concerned that ADFA's cleaning contract "is staffed by ethnic Chinese." He gives us the proportion of CSIRO staff — it is "close to 10 per cent" — who were born in China. "It is fair to assume that the results of every piece of scientific research carried out by the CSIRO become available free of charge in China," he claims.

We are in danger, he warns, of becoming "a tribute state of the resurgent Middle Kingdom," which is "a totalitarian regime bent on dominating Australia." The Chinese leadership has "asked the embassy in Canberra to formulate a strategy to subdue us." The book is littered with examples of overstatement of this kind. I defy anyone raised on Sunday morning screenings of *Point of View* not to think of Bob Santamaria when they read that "Beijing has its eye on Australia's north" and "China plans to dominate the world, and has been using

Australia and New Zealand as a testing ground for its tactics to assert its ascendancy in the West.”

This kind of claim can be demonstrated by quotation from this or that official Chinese source, rather as Soviet sources could once be quoted to prove the existence of the desire to expand Soviet power to promote global proletarian revolution in every corner of the globe, not excluding Australia. But this was never really the best way to understand Soviet foreign-policy behaviour. Is it the best way to discern Chinese intentions?

Hamilton brings together much information that should worry Australians who care about the quality of our democracy. The Dastyari affair was not an isolated instance of a politician getting far too close for comfort to a wealthy Chinese donor interested in using his money to advance the Chinese regime’s foreign policy goals, as well as his own prestige and influence in Australia and China. Expatriate Chinese businesspeople are generous donors to Australian politicians and political parties, while a number of ex-politicians seem to have done rather well for themselves as lobbyists, consultants and advisers to Chinese firms. The interval between the end of their time in politics and the beginning of their business careers has often been very short.

But in isolating Chinese influence from the wider problem of influence-peddling in Australian politics, Hamilton falls into the trap of viewing Communist China as uniquely demonic. He is very relaxed about the influence that the United States exercises, and has long exercised, in Australia, seeing in the strengthening of that relationship one antidote to Chinese domination. On this subject, I’m sure I wouldn’t be alone among Hamilton’s readers in thinking, “thanks, but no thanks” — and perhaps simply “no thanks” while we have a dangerous charlatan in the White House. At least up to this point, subservience to the United States and complicity in some of its more egregious foreign-policy decisions have done a great deal more harm to Australia than its relationship with China.

There is an all-or-nothing aspect to this book — for Hamilton, China-watchers either see with perfect clarity the danger to our sovereignty and values, or they are moral relativists. Few sit in between, and there is little respect for honest differences of perspective. For instance, I found myself sometimes unable to recognise Hugh White’s views as they were caricatured by Hamilton. White is a foreign-policy realist who makes no pretence of being otherwise, and his understanding of the implications for Australia of growing Chinese power reflects this perspective. When Hamilton criticises White for failing to give sufficient weight to the ideology of the Communist Party in his assessment of the Australia–China relationship, he is really criticising a particular way of understanding international relations. That’s fine — the realist tradition has long had its critics — but that doesn’t mean White is a “capitulationist,” as Hamilton calls him.

No doubt there are too many commentators in Australia who are too willing to cite China’s economic achievement as if it more than compensates for the tyranny of one-party rule and the absence of basic human rights and freedoms. Australian business, academic and political leaders see China as a vast goldmine and many care little about the undemocratic

nature of the Chinese political system. There are Australian scientists, funding bodies, universities and research institutes that have asked too few questions about the end users of their collaborations with Chinese partners, reassuring themselves that work with obviously military applications would also have civilian uses — even if that “civilian” use might be a contribution to more effective mass surveillance of the Chinese population.

Quite apart from the vulnerability of universities (such as my own, the Australian National University) to Chinese government coercion in the context of their dependence on the Chinese student market, some have compromised their ability to stand up for academic freedom. The enterprise university of the post-Dawkins era has been only too eager to accept Chinese money — whether in the form of funding for Confucius Institutes or as donations for academic buildings and research centres from well-connected Chinese businesspeople.

The University of Technology Sydney clearly has some work to do in managing its relationship with Chinese donors in a manner that doesn’t damage confidence in its autonomy. Its Australia–China Relations Institute, or ACRI, is led by former Labor foreign minister Bob Carr, who was appointed at the request of the Chinese-Australian donor, Huang Xiangmo, who in turn was made an adjunct professor of the UTS. All of this would be bad enough, but it’s even worse when you consider the piddling sum, \$1.8 million, that Huang donated to establish the institute. That would be just enough to endow a rather junior lectureship, with little change left over. There must be further money coming from somewhere.

Nonetheless, with Carr at the helm, ACRI provides reliably pro-Beijing commentary to the Australian media. As I was preparing this review, I heard Carr on ABC Radio discussing China’s recent constitutional changes, which have removed the ten-year, two-term limit on Chinese presidents, thereby possibly allowing Xi Jinping to rule for the rest of his life. To be fair, Carr didn’t defend the change, describing it as likely to be “disappointing” to many observers. But Xi would surely not have been upset that Carr, in the same interview, raised the spectre of an authoritarianism that until recently was assumed to have died with Chairman Mao. Such a comparison passes for flattery these days.

It is no pleasure to carp about *Silent Invasion*’s flaws, not least because it is, without question, one of the really important Australian publishing events of recent years and a truly significant contribution to debate about Australia’s future relationship with China. Hamilton is a brave commentator who was always going to incur pain for venturing into this territory. On balance, he and his publisher have done us a service in bringing together a great deal of information about Chinese influence on Australia, as well as guiding us towards the questions that need to be asked in our dealings with the PRC across a range of domains. I find it hard to disagree with Hamilton’s suggestion, made towards the end of the book, that since the 1980s Australians have “set the economy before everything else and put power in the hands of those who tell us we must sacrifice everything to it, including our sovereignty as a free country.”

Or rather — as so often during my reading of this book — I think I can agree with him up to that last clause. I am not sure that our sovereignty and freedom are really in danger at

present. But I do agree that in treating for so long a rather ruthless one-party state as, in essence, just another business opening, we have been storing up some serious problems for ourselves as a liberal democracy. The rapid growth of the Chinese economy, China's rising global power, and its increasingly authoritarian and centralised political turn have magnified the scale and increased the urgency of these problems. Hamilton's book suggests that, at the very least, China spruikers who tell us there is nothing to see here should have their views subjected to the most careful scrutiny — especially if, as "friends of China," they have grown rich and powerful on lucrative consultancies, political donations, research grants and business opportunities. •

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