

Discourse power 'with Chinese characteristics'



BOOK REVIEW

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Clive Hamilton gained prominence as the author of *Silent Invasion*, which investigated in careful detail the insidious manner in which China had managed to penetrate the government, political parties and civil society of Australia through a mix of blandishments, blackmail and open threats. It was a lesson in how the vulnerabilities of an open and democratic society can be exploited for political subversion. Mr Hamilton has now joined Mareike Ohlberg of the Berlin-based Mercator Institute to produce a comprehensive survey of how the Communist Party of China (CCP) operates a sophisticated and variegated tool-kit to engage in a well-orchestrated and increasingly expansive exercise to

create and sustain a "global discourse with Chinese characteristics". The aim is to foster a narrative about the inevitability of China's overwhelming power, the superiority of its Party-led governance system, and the futility of any resistance or opposition.

China has economic clout. What it lacks is an image to match. For this it needs "discourse power". How it is going about acquiring that power is what the book is about. The focus is on Chinese influence-seeking activities in Western democracies, the United Nations, and other international institutions. We learn virtually nothing about the strategies adopted by China in the developing world. Some of the same instruments would be in play but the context would be different. One gets only a partial picture.

The book offers a couple of important insights. The agency we are dealing with is not some conventional notion of a state with a national identity, irrespective of the nature of its political dispensation. In China it is the Leninist Party that conflates its own survival and endurance as the interest of China and its people. The external world must, therefore, be

persuaded to acknowledge the CCP as the sole legitimate representative of China. The authors suggest that it is vital to make a distinction between China as a civilisational entity and a distinctive culture and its current capture by an authoritarian regime; that opposition to the regime's policies is not to suggest a clash of civilisations or hostility to Chinese as a race but to oppose a Marxist-Leninist party for which "the Cold War never ended". I would submit that this was always

obvious but was convenient to ignore. The authors demonstrate how there is virtually no distinction between functionaries of the Party State and those who interact with foreigners as ostensibly representing civil society, business and industry, non-governmental organisations, the media, and academia. As they point out, most "independent"

individuals wear double or multiple hats, occupying party, official and non-official positions that may be used, depending on the identity of the interlocutor. Under Xi Jinping, the party's leadership is not just supervisory but must be actively

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this means is that the interests of the party must always over-ride any other interest or relationship. Again, most of us who have dealt with China over the years have always known this and factored it in our interactions with various Chinese counterparts.

Hidden Hand is most useful in identifying the various components of



exercised through participation in the governance structures of all institutions, public or private. Thus, even a successful private entrepreneur such as Jack Ma of Alibaba swears by his membership of the party. What

China's elaborate machinery for influencing, interfering and subverting its targets in western democracies.

Chapter 7 has an excellent organisational chart of hierarchical links between the Party's central leadership and its propaganda instruments at various levels. At the senior-most levels there is the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), the United Front Work Department (UFWD), the Propaganda Department and the party's International Liaison Department. They are responsible among themselves for managing several institutions, think tanks and committees such as the Chinese Peoples Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, the Chinese Students and Scholars association and the Chinese Institute for Contemporary International Relations (associated with the otherwise secretive Ministry of State Security). It is mainly western elites who are cultivated, cajoled or coerced to serve the Party State's interests. Overseas Chinese communities, Chinese students studying at western universities and ethnic Chinese business leaders and academics in these countries are particular targets. There is frequently a combination of influence peddling,

interfering and information gathering that often graduates to espionage. The instruments used are financial, commercial, and access to Chinese leadership, among others.

Hidden Hand may have overstated the range and reach of Chinese influence operations and their effectiveness. There is a growing pushback against China's expansive and arrogant behaviour across the world despite the massive resources deployed to alter the discourse. China's rise as a front-ranking economic power drew substantially from Western support through capital and technology. But the West also provided China with international legitimacy and stature. Western discourse highlighted China as a historically great power and leading economy in the world. It exaggerated and romanticised China's role as the centre of the ancient Silk Roads and helped nurture Chinese mystique. China is using these very same ideas to construct its own narrative "with Chinese characteristics". The West needs to cure itself of the China syndrome before it can truly confront its challenge. That *Hidden Hand* awaits investigation.

The reviewer is a former foreign secretary and senior fellow, Centre for Policy Research