

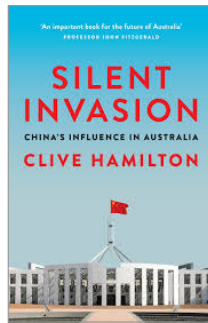
## Silent Invasion: China's Influence in Australia

By Clive Hamilton

Hardie Grant Books, 2018,

356 pages, \$34.99

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Reviewed by Dan Ryan

The central argument of Clive Hamilton's book *Silent Invasion: China's Influence in Australia* is that 'the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is engaged in a systematic campaign to infiltrate, influence and control the most important institutions in Australia' (p.1). The 'ultimate aim' of this campaign, Hamilton claims, is to 'break our alliance with the United States and turn this country into a tribute state' (p.1).

It is strong stuff. Indeed, the language is so hawkish at times that one could be mistaken for thinking the book was written by John Bolton (Donald Trump's National Security Advisor) rather than the founder and former head of the left-wing Australia Institute.

The key question I kept asking though, when reading *Silent Invasion*, is what is the actual hard evidence Hamilton is relying on to demonstrate that the Chinese Communist Party has planned and is directing the campaign he describes?

As far as I could tell the only source of allegedly first-hand information for the above claims comes from Chen Yonglin, the former Chinese diplomat who defected to Australia in 2005. Through Hamilton, supposedly confidential plans about Beijing's intentions for Australia are shared by Chen. I have not seen these same claims corroborated elsewhere. If our own security agencies have this information (or a view on its veracity) it would be very useful for debate in Australia if that could somehow find its way into the public domain.

It is true that Hamilton speaks to many respected China experts, notably Professor John Fitzgerald (who writes a short foreword to the book). There is also heavy reliance on a doctoral dissertation of a New Zealand academic, James To, which details Beijing's policy towards its 'overseas Chinese' and how they might be used to achieve the Chinese Communist Party's foreign policy aims.

Yet while Hamilton generally speaks to the right people and asks the right questions, what he does not actually produce is any official document or similar that sets out Beijing's intentions in anything like the stark terms he describes.

This is not to say Beijing's influence in Australia is fictional or even that details of the secret plan or campaign against Australia do not exist. (Given the sensitivity of the subject matter it is not surprising Hamilton has not been able to obtain such a smoking gun.) Still it is worth bearing in mind when reading through the sometimes sensational content in *Silent Invasion* that nothing is fully proven regarding his key underlying claim—what he has produced is essentially a compendium of circumstantial evidence. Without having access to all national security information it is hard to weigh up the evidence presented. Again one wonders whether there is some legitimate way our national security agencies could find to inform the public debate about the respective cases raised by Hamilton.

Hamilton says his aim in the book is to 'describe and document the unfolding process by which we are being robbed of our sovereignty' (p.3) and to show how

Australian institutions—from our schools, universities, professional associations to our media; from industries like mining, agriculture and tourism to strategic assets like ports and electricity grids; from our local councils and state governments to our political parties in Canberra—are being penetrated and shaped by a complex system of influence and control overseen by agencies serving the Chinese Communist Party (p.3).

This is also a provocative claim and there has been considerable dispute since publication about the extent to which Beijing's influence operations (which exist even if they may not be exactly as Hamilton describes) are actually capable of infringing Australia's institutions or our sovereignty in a real sense. I think the debate here turns a great deal on precisely what is meant by the terms 'institutions' and 'sovereignty'.

The example of Hong Kong is perhaps instructive here. Hamilton interviews Anson Chan, the well-

regarded former first secretary of that former British colony (now a special administrative region of the People's Republic of China). Her claims about how the Chinese Communist Party has used its influence in Hong Kong to 'infiltrate, pressure and coerce institutions, from using money to control NGOs to suppressing dissident voices, placing sympathisers on university boards, setting up clan associations, controlling media and pressuring businesses' (p.46) I have no doubt are true.

On the other hand one must also recognise that the courts of Hong Kong still retain their professionalism and independence. By any objective measure a free press still exists—rambunctious Cantonese talkback radio hosts and aggressive tabloid journalists jostle with international publications like the *Wall Street Journal* and *Financial Times*. There is also genuine freedom of religion—a sign saying 'Jesus is Lord' in Chinese lights up the neon skyline—something that would be inconceivable in Tiananmen Square. Well-known critics of Beijing like Professor Frank Dikotter (quoted in the final chapter of *Silent Invasion*) still occupy prominent university positions. I would also add that I served as a director of a liberal market think tank in Hong Kong (The Lion Rock Institute) for many years and do not recall any direct threats to our independence from Chinese Communist Party interests.

This suggests that while Beijing's infiltration of, or influence over, schools, companies and other elements of civil society is certainly possible and obviously undesirable, other institutions and freedoms are more durable even deep within China's sphere of influence.

It is of course possible that Beijing's treatment of Hong Kong would be different to that of Australia. Hong Kong is not an independent nation and does not have its own foreign policy, so different issues arise when it comes to questions of sovereignty. While Hong Kong has a local parliament, Beijing selects a large proportion of its delegates and effectively controls the election of the head of the executive branch. American aircraft carriers still routinely dock in Hong Kong's Victoria Harbour, but this requires Beijing's approval (which is sometimes capriciously withheld).

Clearly this Hong Kong-type ceding of political sovereignty would be unacceptable in Australia—even if we could be assured our institutions and freedoms could be otherwise guaranteed. Yet even critics of Beijing (and I count myself as one) would have to admit that it would be implausible that any kind of political change could occur that would transform the Australian Federal Parliament into something resembling Hong Kong's current political situation. At the very least, such a change would certainly not occur silently.

A more likely scenario is that infiltration of Australian civil society by Beijing and our commercial reliance on China will make it more difficult (although not impossible) for Canberra to act, as it would otherwise wish to, as different pressures both from the Chinese community and business interests with China ties in this country are brought to bear.

While Hamilton has been given a warm reception on Andrew Bolt's TV show and by several talkback hosts on 2GB, there are many others on the conservative side of politics who cannot help but be a bit sceptical about Hamilton given his past record. In one of his many books, *Silencing Dissent: How the Australian Government is Controlling Public Opinion and Stifling Debate* (co-authored with a director of GetUp!), he argued that the Howard government had 'systematically dismantled democratic processes, stymied open and diverse debate and avoided making itself accountable to parliament or the community'.<sup>1</sup> That sounds a bit like claims he is now making about China and in my view detracts from his credibility. Equally, one can read statements he has made in the past as suggesting Hamilton has a less than full commitment to free speech and democracy—particularly when it comes to the question of 'climate change' about which he can be as dogmatic as a Chinese Communist Party spokesperson defending the actions of the People's Liberation Army Navy in the South China Sea.

When I spoke to him in preparing this review we had a very civil (off the record) conversation. In my experience it is not that unusual for there to be a broad meeting of minds between the sections of

the right and left—who might otherwise not agree on much—when it comes to China. He does not really attempt to make any particularly domestically politically partisan points in the book. He even recognises that ‘although prone to be dazzled by the economic promise, the right is more consistent in its scepticism towards China’ (p.49) and at the same time is critical of many on the left’s ‘romantic attachment to the idea of the Chinese Revolution, despite the horrors of Maoist excess, not to mention the fierce repression of 1989 that continues to this day’ (p.50). My experience certainly accords with Hamilton’s when he says that ‘most China apologists and appeasers sit at the soft centre of Australian politics’ (p.49).

While there are sections and statements that need to be further substantiated, *Silent Invasion* is a brave book—there are commercial and other consequences for being critical of Beijing as I know from personal experience, and it would be easier just to be ‘positive and optimistic’ (as Bob Carr famously described his attitude to China). *Silent Invasion* contains much useful information about potential threats. It is certainly right that there has to date been too much wishful thinking, naivety and complacency when it comes to Beijing among many of Australia’s political and business leaders. One also instinctively wants to back someone who is unfairly attacked by Race Discrimination Commissioner Tim Soutphommasane<sup>2</sup> for ‘exciting an anti-Chinese or Sinophobic racial sentiment’ when Hamilton is at pains in his book to avoid doing just that. Or to back an author who struggled to find a publisher, has a book launch boycotted by members of his erstwhile allies from the Greens, and to add insult to injury is then criticised by members of Australia’s academic community who argued his book itself threatens free speech. Give me a break.

I have no doubt that many reading this would still vehemently disagree with Hamilton on a range of issues. One likes to believe that that it is still possible to share a common patriotism and engage in civil dialogue on important subjects with fellow Australians despite our political differences. I suspect we will have much need of that type of spirit in the years ahead.

**Dan Ryan is a board member of the Australia-China Council. He has worked as a lawyer in Greater China for over 15 years. The views expressed here are his own.**

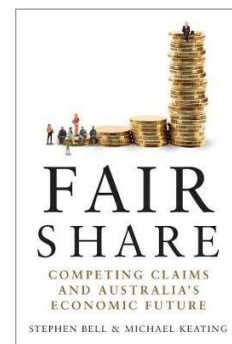


### Endnotes

- 1 See a review by Patrick Allington in *The Australian* (3 February 2009).
- 2 Tim Soutphommasane, ‘Beware Fanning Flames of Racism over “Silent Invasion”’, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (28 February 2018).

### Fair Share: Competing Claims and Australia’s Economic Future

By Stephen Bell and Michael Keating  
Melbourne University  
Publishing, 2018, \$59.99  
(hardcover), 408 pages  
ISBN: 9780522872279



### Reviewed by Michael Potter

**I**ntrospection is the stock in trade of booksellers—where would they be without books providing both personal and national self-analysis? *Fair Share* by Stephen Bell and Michael Keating ensures this market continues to be well supplied.

The authors are of substantial pedigree: Bell is a Professor of Political Economy and Keating headed various government departments under the Hawke-Keating Labor Government. Given their background, it is unsurprising that the book takes a centre-left view of the world, fitting into the dominant narrative of today. This is clear from the praise for the book from Ross Gittins, John Edwards, Saul Eslake and Laura Tingle.

*Fair Share* is a lengthy book, discussing many of the important problems facing Australia today including mediocre growth in wages, GDP and productivity, unaffordable housing, underemployment,