

# China Watchers Are Not China Stooges

By Jocelyn Chey

*John Menadue – Pearls and Irritations*, 16 April 2018

Link: <https://johnmenadue.com/jocelyn-chey-china-watchers-are-not-china-stooges/#more-17062>

*Australia needs informed and balanced study and reporting on China more than ever before. Informed opinion depends on the ability to see both sides of the picture and to avoid over-simplification.*

My career has been devoted to the development of bilateral relations between Australia and China and I have always sought to maintain an impartial and balanced view. I have been subjected to suspicion by Australian security agencies in the past and I have been tailed by Chinese agents. At times I have taken a stand on issues that prejudiced national interests or impugned my intellectual integrity – some instances are recorded by former Ambassador Stephen FitzGerald in his memoirs. More than ten years ago, I was one of the first people to warn of the potential threat to academic freedoms if Confucius Institutes took over responsibility for China-related teaching and research in Australian universities.

Last month I joined a group of China scholars who signed a statement to the parliamentary review of new national security legislation, published by the ANU as an Open Letter <https://www.policyforum.net/an-open-letter-from-concerned-scholars-of-china-and-the-chinese-diaspora/>. This legislation as it stands could affect legitimate work of those who collect and discuss developments in China and in overseas Chinese communities. We warned that it also fostered an atmosphere of suspicion, in which positive comments about the Chinese government or the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were taken as parroting lines being fed by Beijing.

Clive Hamilton's 2017 book *Silent Invasion: The Influence of China in Australia* capped a year in which the Australian media focussed on Chinese activities in Australia, starting with real estate and agricultural investments, and concluding with political donations. Real estate prices are a hip pocket issue, particularly for Sydney residents. Chinese buyers were widely blamed for pushing up prices. Mid-year, Sam Dastyari showed appalling judgment in seeking and accepting funds from a Chinese businessman to settle his travel expenses. In this climate, Hamilton had a ready audience for his thesis that the CCP was working to bring Australia into its sphere of influence, particularly through ethnic Chinese regarded as "sons and daughters of the

motherland” [https://www.policyforum.net/chinese-communist-party-influence-critics-wrong/amp/?\\_twitter\\_impression=true](https://www.policyforum.net/chinese-communist-party-influence-critics-wrong/amp/?_twitter_impression=true). He claimed his book was almost not published because publishers were “afraid of punishment by Beijing,” and that I and the other signatories of the Open Letter were largely motivated by anti-Americanism. Finally, he accused the signatories of having been “missing in action,” that is, of not having engaged in public debate with him.

I would like to respond to these allegations.

- Chinese Australians comprise an important sector of our society. Studies show that overseas Chinese purchases have had little influence on the property market. Even after the Chinese and Australian governments stepped in in 2017 to restrict real estate investments, prices remained generally high. Further, Chinese Australians hold a variety of political and social views. They are more likely than the average Australian to know how China works because they visit more often and have family ties there. They are less apt to be taken in by propaganda statements. There is no reason to see them as the section of Australian society most likely to be influenced by the CCP or to be agents of the CCP. The consequence of Hamilton’s accusations, well ventilated in the media, however, has been that Chinese Australians are increasingly targets for racist abuse and attack. Details were provided to the public in a March symposium jointly hosted by the Challenging Racism Project, the Whitlam Institute and Western Sydney University <https://asiasociety.org/australia/events/public-event-community-sentiment-and-chinese-australian-experiences-symposium>.
- Billionaire businessman Chau Chak Wing, an Australian citizen, lodged a defamation action against Fairfax and the ABC in July 2017 after a series of articles alleging that he was a key member of Chinese propaganda organisations in Australia and that ASIO had warned political parties about associating with him. In his defamation writ, Chau said the allegation that his political donations were improper was false and defamatory. Leaving aside the question of whether he is or is not a Chinese agent, this defamation case had to be taken seriously by any publisher considering Hamilton’s book, and this was the case when Hamilton approached Allen and Unwin with his *Silent Invasion*. Not surprisingly, the publisher declined to publish before the case was settled. Hamilton, however, wanted to capitalise on current media interest, revised his manuscript to minimise the legal risk and found a publisher in Hardie Grant. He was also able to turn the threat of “punishment by Beijing” into publicity for his book. There is no evidence to support Hamilton’s claim that Beijing tried to suppress his book before publication.
- Many scholars and commentators are concerned about our international alliances and relations with China, Japan, Korea and the United States. Hugh

White's recent Quarterly Essay is a case in point. There is no doubt that the chief topic at the recent ASEAN Summit in Brisbane was what to do about China's growing regional influence. Many others share my belief that the ANZUS Treaty remains strong but since China is increasingly dominant in the Asia-Pacific and Australia's interests are surely to safeguard regional stability and security we have to find ways to engage with China. This should not be difficult, because China also shares our interest in a peaceful regional environment. If we agree that this is a useful way forward, then we should not accuse China at every opportunity of undue influence in our internal affairs and of flouting the rules-based international order. There may be a variety of views on regional relations but there is no evidence that the signatories to the Open Letter were motivated by anti-Americanism.

- The signatories to the Open Letter have not been "Missing In Action" but Hamilton has simply failed to listen. Did he read Stephen FitzGerald's 2017 Whitlam Lecture <https://www.whitlam.org/publications/2017/10/4/managing-ourselves-in-a-chinese-world-australian-foreign-policy-in-an-age-of-disruption>? How about Alan Gyngell, David Lampton, Andrew Nathan, Wanning Sun and Ien Ang on "China's Influence" December 2017 <http://chinamatters.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/East-Asia-Forum-Quarterly-Chinas-Influence-Dec2017.pdf>? Certainly he read David Brophy's review of *Silent Invasion* <https://www.smh.com.au/national/the-book-xi-jinping-wants-you-to-read-for-all-the-wrong-reasons-20180227-p4z1x7.html>, but he has not the grace to accept its warranted criticisms of his work.

*Jocelyn Chey's last diplomatic posting was as Australian Consul General to Hong Kong 1992-95. She was the founding Director of the Australia-China Institute for Arts and Culture, Western Sydney University 2016-17. She is an Associate of China Matters.*