

SUNDAY TIMES (London)
11-7-20

Hidden Hand: Exposing How the Chinese Communist Party Is Reshaping the World by Clive Hamilton and Mareike Ohlberg **review**

A revelatory look at the way China's party state is spreading its influence

Michael Sheridan

The hyperactive Chinese ambassador to London, Liu Xiaoming, is an eloquent advocate for “better understanding China”. To that end he helpfully hosted an event last year for British admirers of Xi Jinping, the Communist Party leader, to study that luminary’s thoughts on diplomacy and “a shared future for mankind”.

It is depressing to read in this revelatory book that 70 straight-faced members of the great and the good participated in the ambassadorial salon. They included a clutch of lords, professors, hacks and business folk. Many belonged to the 48 Group Club, the successor to a body founded in the 1950s by a communist fellow traveller to promote trade with the People’s Republic. Today, according to the authors of this book, its chief function is to lavish praise on President Xi in the expectation of advantage.

The echoes with Anthony Trollope’s novel *The Way We Live Now*, in which just before his fall the great rogue Augustus Melmotte assembles high society at a banquet for the Emperor of China, will not be lost on anyone who has read that satire.

Hidden Hand is unlikely to find a place on the Chinese embassy’s approved reading list. It is a partisan, detailed and necessary examination of how a state that officially describes itself as the “people’s democratic dictatorship” has persuaded many who are fortunate enough to live beyond its reach that it is benign, misunderstood and so wisely governed that it offers humanity an alternative way of living.

Clive Hamilton, an Australian author who has already written about Chinese influence in his home country in a book called *Silent Invasion*, and Mareike Ohlberg, a China scholar from Germany, do not spare the footnotes in their exposé of China’s influence operations in the western democracies. They need to document their case because, as surely as the sun rises in the east, they will be suspected of paranoia, racism and, that old favourite, a “Cold War mentality”. Even before publication in the UK, the book has already caused a stir, with the 48 Group Club taking down a digital list of its fellows.

The case against their type of inquiry was put by the Clinton-era official and China expert Susan Shirk, who is quoted in the book. Speaking to a friendly audience in Beijing last spring, she warned of a looming “McCarthyite Red Scare” in the United States.

The authors, therefore, start from two premises. One is that when they say “China” they do not mean Chinese people, but the regime. The other is that to understand Xi and his version of Marxism-Leninism you do indeed have to study them.

In 1937 Mao Tse-tung wrote an essay, *On Contradiction*, that defined the revolution by its enemies and laid out a manifesto for permanent struggle. The party's strategists today speak of "global thought management", dividing interlocutors into friends, enemies and those who may be won over or neutralised. This is known as "united front work", a method that Mao called "our magic weapon".

For the party "the Cold War never ended", the authors say. It runs a United Front Work Department to promote its aims: the defence of the ruling elite; the pursuit of national interests; and the promotion of the authoritarian principle. Foreigners may encounter influence operations without knowing it. They may deal with a foundation, an institute, an association, a think tank, a business circle. The name will be bland, but all are controlled by the party state.

My favourite among these is the magnificently titled China Association for International Friendly Contact. After Tony Blair unwisely accepted its invitation to speak on "philanthropy" in 2012 it proved short work to identify his hosts as three major-generals in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) specialising in psychological warfare, who had somehow forgotten to mention their military ranks on the prospectus.

Then there is the Zhengzhou Information, Science and Technology Institute, which has sent "academics" to the West, but, it seems, does not actually exist. The authors find a PO box, but no buildings, phone number or website. The city is, however, home to a PLA cyber-warfare school.

When a professor from China spoke at Cambridge University recently, he was billed to the respectful dons as a distinguished think tanker in the field of strategic analysis. Nobody seemed to mind that all think tanks in China are obedient to the Ministry of State Security, which censors and locks up Chinese scholars.

This is what Lenin is said to have called "useful idiocy" and it exasperates the authors. They consider Britain a hopeless case, although the government's new stance on Huawei and Hong Kong may be a sign of change.

The rest of Europe is abject. In France, the book reveals, a former prime minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, utters paeans of praise for Beijing while lobbying for its business. In Italy an enigmatic finance professor, Michele Geraci, has persuaded its leaders, who are almost wholly ignorant of China, to sign up for Xi's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, against the advice of the foreign ministry.

The tide has turned in America, Australia and other countries where China is seen with new realism in politics, business, academia and security. The authors may thus expect pushback from disabused supporters of "engagement" who cling to the hope that Xi may turn out to be cuddly, the party can reform and China will become "a responsible stakeholder" in the global system. If the Chinese ambassador ever hosts a soiree to discuss that particular dream, expect masks to be provided.

Hidden Hand: Exposing How the Chinese Communist Party Is Reshaping the World by Clive Hamilton and Mareike Ohlberg

Oneworld £20, ebook £11.99 pp432

MyFile: Reviews/ChineseHiddenHand_SundayTimes