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PHOTO: ZIPEI XIA



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## Against Chinese Illiberalism

The rising influence of the Chinese Communist Party in Australia is challenging Australian institutions, values and the way we live. This influence can and often does affect Australian political and economic deliberations and public opinion. It also manifests in the way that Australian governments, companies and public institutions behave in dealing with China.

When our political and business leaders stay silent in the face of Chinese violations of human rights, international norms or Australian interests, they are sending a clear message of acquiescence. Not only are they saying it is okay for China to act in a certain way, but the decision of acquiescence is changing who we are as a people and the values we espouse as a nation.

It is time for a frank conversation about Chinese propaganda and political operations in Australia. The stakes have never been higher. The cost of turning a blind eye to these operations carries detrimental consequences for Australia's national interests, social harmony, and democratic values.

What kind of beast is the Chinese Communist Party, and why should we be concerned about its rising influence in Australia? The Chinese Communist Party is the authoritarian regime that controls the most populous country in the world. The Party is powerful, corrupt, and accountable to no one but itself. It denies the basic human right of

freedom of speech, association, and religion to its citizens. It allows no independent judiciary and media, and very few independent civic organisations. The Party seeks to control everything through a combination of propaganda, brute force, and economic incentives. It crushes dissents with cruel efficiency when it feels threatened, and suffers no opposition to its political orthodoxy. This is the reality of a China governed by the Chinese Communist Party.

While China has done well economically in recent years, the regime continues to oppress its citizens through violation of their basic human rights. These are the rights that we take for granted in the liberal West, such as the rights of political participation, assembly, worship, and free speech. In fact, the freedom of thought and expression has shrunk significantly in recent years under China's current leader, Xi Jinping. This includes tighter control of media, universities and cyberspace.

The 'China Dream' espoused by Xi is a dream of a powerful Chinese state. It is a vision of material abundance, ideological conformity, and pervasive social control. In this dream, the rights and dignity of individuals are secondary to the glory and security of the Party-state.

These oppressive tendencies run contrary to Australia's openness, inclusiveness, and democratic values. China's illiberal values have no place in a liberal country such as Australia and we must be vigilant in the face of the increasing activity

of the party-state on Australian soil.

Increasingly, Beijing is exporting its illiberal values and toxic nationalism to Australia through propaganda and political operations. In addition to allegations of interference through political donations by Party-linked businessmen, the Chinese Government is also expanding its hold on the Chinese-language media in Australia. It aims to silence dissenting voices in the Australian-Chinese community and use it as a leverage to shift wider public opinion and affect political deliberations in its favour. Sadly, most of the Chinese-language media have been pulled into China's orbit to a more or lesser degree because of economic incentives and pressure from the Party. The extensive reach of the Party-state is silencing and intimidating alternative voices in the Australian-Chinese community that do not adhere to the Party line. This is unacceptable.

In addition to controlling and censoring news media, the Party also tightly controls and censors social media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo. This means that Australian citizens using Chinese social media platforms in Australia in conversation with other Australians could be censored if they do not tow the party line. This extraterritorial censorship and content manipulation are counter to the free and open debates that underpin Australia's democratic tradition. What right does Beijing have to limit freedom of speech in Australia?

Why should the average

Australian care? Every one of us should care because Beijing's propaganda and political operations in Australia run counter to the liberal values underpinning Australia's democratic society. Each time we acquiesce to Beijing's bullying and decide not to speak out against China's violation of human rights and international norms, we are helping to feed the fire of illiberalism. Each time we stay silent when Beijing violates the rights of an Australian, our freedom as a people is diminished. By staying silent, we are turning away from the liberal values that sit at the core of the Australian way of life.

What can we do about it? We should clearly point out Beijing's abuse of Australian hospitality and its discrimination of the Australian-Chinese community through censorship and attempts at political control. We should speak out with a loud voice. Our choice to speak out against Beijing's illiberalism is not without cost. In fact, it may well have very real economic and political costs for Australia. But an enduring Australia-China relationship cannot be built on trade and investment flows alone. In the longer term, this relationship needs to be based on mutual trust and respect for the liberal values that sit at the heart of Australian society.

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