



Becoming More Like China Than China

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THE Chinese Communist Party cannot stand a weak, ineffective leader — such as Carrie Lam, Hong Kong’s previous chief executive. When she came up for reelection two years ago in a process dominated by Beijing, she “chose” not to run again. The CCP anointed John Lee Ka-chiu, Lam’s head of security, who easily won the territory’s top position.

This, after Lam went all in for her ChiCom masters against the people of Hong Kong. She proposed an extradition bill that would have allowed Hong Kongers to be seized by China for whatever crime the party alleged. Until then the Chinese government had to informally abduct those who resisted its wishes, including publishers of books unkind to the denizens of Zhongnanhai, the famed leadership compound in Beijing.

However, Lam was ill-prepared when hundreds of thousands of Hong Kongers poured into the streets in protest. She retreated, but democracy activists demanded her resignation, an investigation of police brutality, and genuinely free elections. Alas, the people of the Special Administrative Region, which enjoyed autonomy, not independence, from the People’s Republic of China, misperceived their real nemesis. It was not Lam, a PRC factotum. With demonstrators shutting down the city, halting airport operations, and ravaging the Legislative Council chamber, she lost control. Since she could not grant what the CCP would never accept, real democracy, Lam was reduced to publicly whining about U.S. sanctions, which prevented her from getting a bank account.

In June 2020, President Xi Jinping, Hong Kong’s real master, imposed the National Security Law. That he intervened was unsurprising. However, he went far beyond limiting active opposition. The NSL’s provisions can be summed up simply: Anyone who in or out of Hong Kong criticizes the CCP and its minions is committing a heinous crime and headed for prison. The measure had nothing to do with “national security” as commonly understood but was intended to crush the slightest resistance to communist rule in what was once among the freest spots on earth. In practice, that meant treating Hong Kong as just another Chinese city in which liberty — of any civil or political form — did not exist.

Historically liberal Hong Kong was the happy creation of an unjust imperial British war against the decrepit Chinese empire over the rights of opium merchants. Most of the territory was a “lease” that ran out in 1997. Even British prime minister Margaret Thatcher was unwilling to

play the ultimate game of international chicken, risking conflict by refusing to yield Hong Kong, she negotiated Hong Kong's return. Beijing promised to retain for 50 years the territory essentially as it was.

For a time, China kept its commitments. A friend, a Hong Kong journalist, told me that his colleagues initially heard less from the government than when the island was under London's rule. However, Xi then rose, a decade ago, as the new, though less maniacal Mao, ensuring the end of that era much sooner than 2047. Unfortunately, missteps by the democracy movement accelerated Beijing's brutal intervention. On July 1, 2020, after passage of the NSL, Hong Kong was a very different place.

Since then, the governing regime, backed by PRC officials, has arrested more than 260 people and prosecuted more than 3,000 on other charges after the NSL had made protest impossible. The European Commission's latest report on Hong Kong painted a desolate landscape with respect to liberty:

[The year] 2022 saw the continuing erosion of Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy and of rights and freedoms that were meant to be protected until at least 2047. The year was also marked by the far-reaching implementation of the NSL. Trials of pro-democracy activists and politicians continued to intensify. Many people were awaiting trial, including 47 pro-democracy activists who participated in a primary election, members of the now-disbanded Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China, media tycoon Jimmy Lai and many others. Many of them have been held in custody since January 2021, in some cases in solitary confinement. The colonial-era sedition law was repeatedly used in national security cases. In July, the United Nations Human Rights Committee in its fourth periodic review under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in Hong Kong called for the repealing of both the NSL and the sedition law.

Since then, the situation has worsened. Jimmy Lai's trial is ongoing, with the CCP particularly horrified by his international contacts. Recently completed is the case against 47 pro-democracy activists, tried en masse for organizing a *primary election*. Judges are now considering their verdict. The outcome in both cases seems preordained. Acquittals are few and limited in practice.

Further proving the regime's vigilance, local stormtroopers last August charged a Cantonese language group with "threatening national security" because it posted a fictional essay acknowledging the city's loss of liberty. Andrew Lok Hang Chan, who ran the Societas Linguistica HongKongensis, said the organization was concerned only with "arts and literature" but would close even so. A couple of months earlier, a student who on social media criticized Chinese rule while studying overseas was arrested by Lee's agents. Hong Kong and Beijing were thus spared the gravest threats possible against national security.

Still, Lee, the CCP's local gauleiter, was not satisfied. Some freedom-seeking miscreants sought sanctuary abroad. His government offered \$128,000 bounties for information leading to their arrest. Like a prosecutor in *Les Misérables*, Lee said that those resisting the CCP's lash would be "pursued for life," reported the *New York Times*. Indeed, he added, "The only way to end their destiny of being an abscondee who will be pursued for life is to surrender."

Lee has lived down to expectations, wasting no tears for the personal liberties lost. Indeed, with Xi the new Mao, Lee is his new mini-me, tasked with oppressing Hong Kong's population of 7.5 million. Concerned about an "alarming" exodus, as many young Hong Kongers have been unwilling to accept their new duties as CCP automatons, while parents feared indoctrination of their kids, Lee, reported the *Financial Times*, "launched a campaign to convince the world that despite Covid-19 and a brutal security crackdown, the Chinese territory is not only open for business but remains Asia's premier financial center."

However, the demands of his Beijing masters are never out of Lee's mind. Last month, according to Bloomberg, "Hong Kong's leader unveiled a broad plan to pass the city's own security law, which will include a China-like definition of state secrets and stepped-up efforts to ward against foreign interference." If China's NSL falls short, Lee's measure will fill any gaps: "The law will cover offenses including treason, sedition, and digital acts to endanger national security and will co-exist alongside the Beijing-imposed measure that's been used to crush dissent."

Lee's Basic Law Article 23 legislation raises concerns similar to those raised by the NSL. As before, China's hirelings respond that their handiwork will affect only a few dangerous malcontents. As long as people think only nice thoughts about their overseers, all will be well. However, the law is broad and vague, potentially covering any criticism. More expansive even than the Chinese NSL, the measure would further undermine Hong Kong's status as a global financial center. Warned one analyst: "Provisions warding against contact with overseas organizations could narrow the space for chambers of commerce, think tanks and economic research outfits to talk freely," endangering the very process, of discovering and sharing information, that is essential to free markets.

Until now, the Special Administrative Region has remained notably freer economically than the mainland. But how long will the new authoritarians allow Hong Kongers free access to the world? Who would be surprised if Lee next proposed joining the PRC behind the forbidding Great Firewall? Alas, observed Bloomberg's Matthew Brooker: "Socially, culturally and politically, though, the outlook is bleak. The direction has been set, and it is hard to envisage any return to a more liberal model." There may be no going back without the collapse of communism on the mainland.

Lee is earning his pay, acting even more ruthlessly than Xi. Hong Kongers will suffer as a result. The largely open Hong Kong is slipping ever further into the mists of history. Today, if they cannot save Hong Kong, friends of freedom should focus on saving individual Hong Kongers.

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