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‘The Troublemaker’ Review: Jimmy Lai, the Man Beijing Fears

On trial in Hong Kong, Jimmy Lai has spoken out for freedom, democracy and the rule of law. His judges may not be pleased.

By Tunku Varadarajan

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Jimmy Lai, under police escort, at the Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club in August 2020. PHOTO: ANTHONY KWAN/GETTY IMAGES

“Why won’t you try to escape?” The question was asked of Jimmy Lai by Natan Sharansky in late 2020, a few weeks before Mr. Lai was jailed on charges of sedition for his crusading role in pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong (as well as on obviously politically driven charges of fraud). “I can’t do it,” he answered. “I called my people to fight. They look at me. I can’t let them down.”

A self-made media magnate who fled Communist China as a penniless 12-year-old, Mr. Lai could have left Hong Kong on a private plane, and the Chinese

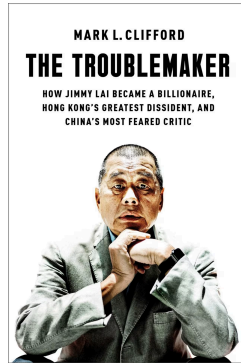
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The Troublemaker: How Jimmy Lai Became a Billionaire, Hong Kong's Greatest Dissident, and China's Most Feared Critic

By Mark L. Clifford

Free Press

288 pages



authorities would have probably welcomed his departure as a troublesome thorn removed. “China’s Communist Party cannot fathom Jimmy Lai,” writes Mark L. Clifford in “The Troublemaker,” a sympathetic and inspiring biography. Mr. Clifford aptly describes Mr. Lai as “a Chinese patriot” and “militant anticommunist” with a libertarian’s robust belief in open markets and limited government. Prison was the only way this irrepressible—no, magnificently stubborn—man could be silenced.

Mr. Clifford, an American-born journalist who first met Mr. Lai in 1993, heads the Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong Foundation, which (as he writes) “seeks to free all of Hong Kong’s political prisoners, including Lai.” He served on the board of Mr. Lai’s media company, Next Digital, from 2018 to 2021, when the Hong Kong authorities forced the company to shut down.

“The Troublemaker” charts the various stages of Mr. Lai’s life with admirable economy: his hardscrabble origins in Guangzhou, in southern China; his stunning success as a clothing tycoon (a “garmento”) who made a fortune selling sweaters to J.C. Penney and other department stores; his emergence as the publisher of Next, Hong Kong’s favorite weekly magazine, and Apply Daily, its feistiest and most independent newspaper. Most eye-catching is Mr. Lai’s evolution from “pragmatic businessman” into a man who, after the Tiananmen Square massacre in June 1989, came to realize the true nature of Communist China and sought to counter its poison with his own tireless advocacy of freedom and liberty.

Mr. Lai pulled no punches. He wrote a weekly column for Next, in one of which (in 1994) he described the Chinese premier, Li Peng, as a *gui dan*—a “turtle egg.” Mr. Clifford explains the insult: “an everyday curse implying that the object of the curse, like a turtle, doesn’t know who his parents are.” In other words, a

bastard. The premier was widely regarded as “the butcher of Beijing” for his role in the Tiananmen Square massacre. In retaliation, the Chinese government shut down one of Mr. Lai’s most profitable businesses in Beijing. When, in June 2020, Hong Kong’s authorities banned public gatherings during Covid-19—political repression coinciding with ostensible sanitary measures—Mr. Lai drove up to the city’s most popular park and held a lone prayer for those who had died at Tiananmen. This act is cited in evidence against him by state prosecutors.

Mr. Lai was jailed on Dec. 31, 2020, and has now spent nearly four years in prison, much of it in solitary confinement. His trial for sedition under Hong Kong’s notorious National Security Law—imposed by China in June 2020 in violation of every assurance made to Britain and the people of Hong Kong at the time of the handover of sovereignty in 1997—drags on. Earlier this month, he appeared before a hostile court that might sentence him to life in prison after convicting him. (His current sentences for alleged public-order offences and contentiously conceived fraud run to 2028.) Speaking from the stand, he did himself no favors when he recited his “core values,” every single one anathema to Xi Jinping, China’s leader: “rule of law, freedom, the pursuit of democracy, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly.”

Mr. Lai, writes Mr. Clifford, “is one of the most important political prisoners of our age” and certainly the best-known prisoner of conscience” in Mr. Xi’s China who isn’t an ethnic Uyghur or Tibetan. Unaffiliated with any political party, he doesn’t seek power, which makes him unlike Nelson Mandela, for instance, or the murdered Russian Alexei Navalny. Readers of this newspaper will know of its numerous editorials written in his defense. William McGurn, a current Journal columnist and editorial-board member, served as his spiritual godfather when Mr. Lai converted to Catholicism in 1997, the year the Communists took control of Hong Kong.

Mr. McGurn, who then worked for the Hong Kong-based Far Eastern Economic Review (owned by Dow Jones, The Wall Street Journal’s publisher), recounts for Mr. Clifford how Mr. Lai took him aside and said, “I want Jesus Christ in my life.” Conversion to Catholicism is an extended process, generally taking about a year. Mr. Lai did it in a week, Mr. Clifford writes, and “a long-standing friendship with Bishop Joseph Zen jump-started the process.” (Cardinal Zen, an eloquent spokesman for freedom and democracy, was bishop of Hong Kong in 2002-09.)

Did the church fast-track Mr. Lai in a way it wouldn't have done, perhaps, for others? Of course. But it also, surely, saw the essential Christian impulse behind his political actions and the great personal risks he took on behalf of his people.

No one should doubt that Mr. Lai's conversion was genuine. Proof of his devoutness can be found in his daily activity in prison: When not engaged in mandatory punitive labor (such as making 600 envelopes a week, for which he's paid a penny per piece), he spends his time making pencil drawings of Christ on the Cross, and of the Pietà. These drawings are also evidence of his determination to retain his dignity in the face of daily torment. Mr. Clifford tells us that a prison guard once asked him for a drawing as a cherished keepsake, and among the book's many vivid and welcome photographic plates is a Crucifixion he drew (signed "Jimmy, 23/11/2021, Stanley Prison").

Mr. Sharansky, himself a political prisoner of global renown in the former Soviet Union, writes in his foreword to "The Troublemaker" that Mr. Lai's resolve to "remain a free person to the last day of [his] life" is what makes "Jimmy and people like him so dangerous to a totalitarian regime." But for every unbowed Jimmy Lai there is a multitude of frightened citizens, less able to withstand China's intimidation.

Mr. Clifford reveals that a "disheartening aspect" of writing Mr. Lai's biography was that "a good number" of the roughly 100 people who helped with the book requested anonymity, "afraid that the Chinese Communist Party could punish them, their family, or their business." It is for these people, for the millions who live in Hong Kong, and for the hundreds of millions who are denied freedom in mainland China, that Jimmy Lai speaks out.

—Mr. Varadarajan, a Journal contributor, is a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and at New York University Law School's Classical Liberal Institute.

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