

October 20, 2019

## JIMMY LAI

### JIMMY LAI AND THE FIGHT FOR FREEDOM IN HONG KONG

INTRODUCTION: Welcome to *Uncommon Knowledge*. I'm Peter Robinson.

Born in mainland China, Jimmy Lai fled at the age of 11, reaching Hong Kong as a stowaway on a fishing boat. He went to work in a garment factory for seven dollars a month. By the age of 27 he had purchased his own garment factory. By his mid-thirties he had created Giordano, making it into an international brand.

Then came the 1989 massacre at Tiananmen Square.

Mr. Lai sold his stake in Giordano, founding the pro-democracy Next magazine in 1990 and the Apple Daily, again, a pro-democracy outlet, in 1995.

Since the protests began in Hong Kong this past summer, Mr. Lai has been on the forefront of the movement—literally on the forefront, marching in one protest after another at the very front, where the authorities can see him.

Jimmy Lai, welcome.

[[Jimmy makes his statement.]]

FIRST QUESTION: Two quotations:

The late foreign policy expert, Hoover fellow Harry Rowen, writing in 1996: “When will China become a democracy? The answer is around the year 2015. . . . [This prediction is based on] China’s . . . impressive economic growth, which in turn fits . . . the way . . . freedom has grown [elsewhere in Asia].”

Jimmy Lai, writing in the *Wall Street Journal* in October: “[The West hoped] that open trade would encourage an open society. Under Mr. Xi’s rule that hope has died.”

China was supposed to become a democracy. Instead President Xi is tightening central control.

What went wrong?

SEGMENT ONE: The protests

Protests in Hong Kong began last summer when the chief executive, Carrie Lam, proposed legislation that would have allowed extraditions to mainland China. By mid-June, some two million people—or more than a quarter of the entire population of Hong Kong—had taken to the streets.

The legislation seemed reasonable. Reportedly a young man murdered someone, then fled to Hong Kong to escape punishment. Why *shouldn't* China have had the right to extradite criminals from Hong Kong?

The background.

After 150 years as a British colony, Hong Kong returned to Chinese control in 1997. In a treaty with the United Kingdom, China promised Hong Kong 50 years of substantial autonomy—including freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and an independent legal system.

How well has China kept those commitments?

The chief executive withdrew the legislation in September. The huge protests have ended, but sizable demonstrations have continued. Even though doing so has been declared illegal, protesters have begun wearing masks to evade the recognition technology and have adopted the tactic of flash mobs, appearing in one place, dissolving, then appearing in another. And there has been sporadic violence—among the protesters, the police, and, evidence shows, thugs sent in from the mainland.

As I said, the chief executive backed down, withdrawing the extradition legislation. Why are the protesters still marching? What do they *want*?

SEGMENT TWO: The true character of the People's Republic of China

On one hand, President Xi heads the Chinese *Communist* Party. On the other, listen to China scholar Gordon Chang: “[President] Xi’s signature concept is the ‘Chinese Dream’ . . . [which] evokes restoration of the imperial system.”

Communism is committed to world-wide revolution, but the old Chinese imperial system concerned itself only with China and its immediate neighbors.

Which is it. Is President Xi a Communist or a nationalist?

The character of the Chinese economy. Two quotations from Jimmy Lai:

“China is not as strong as it pretends. . . . [The so-called] . . . ‘market economy with Chinese characteristics’ has run its course.”

“Mr. Xi is arguably the most absolute dictator in human history . . . more absolute than Mao, because [Xi has] artificial intelligence . . . controlling devices.”

We all used to believe—your friend Milton Friedman used to teach—that political and economic freedom go together. But that was before artificial intelligence. Isn’t it possible that President Xi can use technology to assert political control—while permitting markets to remain free? Isn’t it possible that the Chinese economy experiences its ups and downs but has *not* run its course?

What does China want? If President Xi could arrange the world just as he wanted, what would the world look like—and what place in that world would the United States occupy?

SEGMENT  
TWO, CONT'D.

What place in President Xi's world would Hong Kong occupy?

China has already connected Hong Kong to the mainland with a high-speed rail line and a new, 22-mile bridge. Phillippe le Corre of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: "All the infrastructure built over the past few years . . . has only helped to dilute Hong Kong . . . into a vast economic zone where it is no longer the center."

Is that what China wants for Hong Kong? To render the city irrelevant?

SEGMENT THREE: Hong Kong and the United States

Jimmy Lai: “President Trump understands the Chinese like no president understood [them]. I think he’s very good at dealing with gangsters.”

Explain.

President Trump, tweeting on October 1: “Congratulations to President Xi and the Chinese people on the 70th Anniversary of the People’s Republic of China!”

Congratulations to a dictator. Does that trouble you?

Jimmy Lai: “The . . . hardships of the trade war to America are real, but they are also short-term. . . The question is whether America is willing to endure short-term sacrifice for long-term peace.”

Now the Trump administration and China agreed on a deal—this is just over a week ago. China will buy more American farm products and take several other limited steps at opening its economy. In return the United States will forgo another tariff increase.

Has President Trump surrendered too much?

SEGMENT

THREE, CONT'D. Policies the United States might adopt:

- Amending the Hong Kong Policy Act of 1992. The act held that the United States would treat Hong Kong as a free and law-abiding entity, apart from China. Some senators—notably Marco Rubio—are suggesting that if Hong Kong is no longer as free as it should be, we should amend that act. Doing so would punish China—but also Hong Kong itself. Jimmy?
- Magnitsky Act sanctions. We could announce that if China engaged in brutality in Hong Kong, then the United States would impose Magnitsky Act sanctions on individual leaders in China and Hong Kong itself. Jimmy?
- Expand student visas for citizens of Hong Kong and Taiwan—but deny them to the children of Chinese and Hong Kong officials. Jimmy?

SEGMENT

THREE, CONT'D. Hong Kong and American business.

Earlier this month, Daryl Morey, the general manager of the Houston Rockets, tweeted a message in support of the democracy protesters in Hong Kong. The Chinese government denounced him—and Morey was subjected to trolling, tens of thousands of pro-China tweets.

Then last week LeBron James, one of the finest basketball players ever, entered the controversy. “I just think that when you’re misinformed . . . you never know the ramifications that could happen. . . Not only for our league, but for all of us in America, for people in China as well.”

Morey stuck up for Hong Kong—and LeBron James slapped him down. After all, the NBA has investments to protect.

Did LeBron James have a point? Can we really ask businesses—entities with investments to protect—to stand up to China?

General Joseph Dunford, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, testifying in the Senate this past spring: “The work that Google is doing in China is . . . benefiting the Chinese military.”

Google headquarters is located just over five miles from here. Is there anything you would like to say to the people who run that company—and to investors up and down Silicon Valley who are putting money into China?



SEGMENT FOUR: The true nature of liberty

Chinese with whom I've spoken make a couple of observations:

When Hong Kong returned to Chinese control in 1997, its economy represented one-fifth of the entire economy of China. Today? Just three percent.

Young people in Hong Kong have been priced out of their own housing market—in large part because wealthy investors from the mainland are buying up Hong Kong real estate.

In other words, what really bothers young people in Hong Kong is that the city is no longer the powerhouse it once was—and living there is going to be harder for them than it was for their parents. The protests aren't about democracy. The protests are about economics.

Jimmy?

Democracy, freedom of speech—Beijing argues that these are only superficial concerns. What really motivates people is economics. The protesters argue just the reverse. Once people have clothes to wear and food to eat, economics becomes a superficial concern. What really motivates people are questions of a higher good—including democracy and freedom of speech.

This isn't a fight about political systems. This is a fight about what it means to be human. Is that right?

Democracy, liberty, freedom of speech and religion—we're often told that those are western values. You see those as universal values? China has a different history—a different civilization—from the West. You see democracy and liberty as *universal* values? You hold that they would be as valid in China as in the United States?

SEGMENT FIVE: Last questions

How will this all end? China itself. Two quotations:

Arthur Waldron a China historian at the University of Pennsylvania: “[In Chinese history, disintegration] begins at the limits of empire. . . . China’s disintegration is now under way.”

Yvonne Chiu of the U.S. Naval War College: “It is too optimistic to start looking toward the end of China’s empire. . . . Far too many people support them . . . trade-off of civil liberties for economic growth.”

Jimmy?

How will it all end in Hong Kong?

Andrew Nathan of Columbia University, writing recently in *Foreign Affairs*: “There is little indication that . . . Xi’s position has been weakened by the upheaval [in Hong Kong] . . . . Beijing is determined to stay the course, relying on the Hong Kong government, police, and business community to keep pressure on the demonstrators until the pro-democracy movement dies out.”

Until the movement dies out.

Jimmy Lai, are you leading a lost cause?

How do you believe it will all end in Hong Kong? Or let me put it another way. Describe the situation in Hong Kong one year from now.

SEGMENT

FIVE, CONT'D.

In 2009 you were the target of a thwarted assassination attempt. In 2015 your house was firebombed. Revenues at your publications have dropped in part because the Chinese have pressured companies to avoid advertising with you. And just a couple of months ago your house was firebombed again.

After the Communists consolidated power in the mainland, your father got out, leaving China. When will Jimmy Lai leave Hong Kong?

Last question.

Once again, Jimmy Lai in the *Wall Street Journal*: “We are not asking you [Americans] to send the Seventh Fleet to take on China. The American flags you . . . see at our rallies are our way of saying that we share your values.”

A moment ago, I asked what you would request of President Trump. Now a different question. What do you ask of the American people?

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in thanking Jimmy Lai.

[WWW.HOOVER.ORG/UK](http://WWW.HOOVER.ORG/UK)