

OPINION | MAIN STREET

# Communists in Brooks Brothers

They follow Lenin's idea of 'truth,' even if they send their children to Harvard.



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In those halcyon years before the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong were small, quiet affairs that were lucky to attract a dozen or two people. After one such rally on a sleepy Sunday, the leader of the city's fledgling democracy movement, legislator Martin Lee, offered me a lift back to my office.

The conversation turned to family, and Mr. Lee mentioned his father. A former Kuomintang general who had fought the Japanese in the years before and during World War II, he settled his family in Hong Kong once the Communists had prevailed in China's civil war in 1949. Mr. Lee mused on his father's advice.

"He's always telling me, 'Martin, you can never, ever trust the Communists.' "

Mr. Lee's father has since passed away. The Hong Kong that once provided refuge for his family is gone too. Today's Hong Kong has now arrested and criminally charged Martin Lee for participating in a pro-democracy protest. The old general's words ring loudly in my ears: "Never, ever trust the Communists."

In consequence a new generation is getting a hard lesson that Communists are real, as are the lies and violence necessary to keep them in power. As Lenin made amply clear, Communists have only contempt for the "bourgeois" idea of objective truth, replacing it with a morality that holds "truth" to be whatever is expedient for the party at that moment.

Communism has always been far more about Lenin than Marx—that is, about getting and holding power, rather than any economic arrangement. And it's extraordinary how consistent the lies and violence have been across time and geography, given the many different flavors of communism. There's scarcely a Communist Party in the world that doesn't have a mass killing or two in its past.

Chinese Communism has particularly benefited from the West's naiveté. When Maoism first appeared, it was hailed as a more authentic and humane form of communism than its brutal Soviet rival. Then came the persecutions and purges and the Cultural Revolution, which left millions of innocent Chinese dead in its wake.

In 1989, when Chinese citizens raised a Goddess of Democracy on Tiananmen Square, some pinned their hopes on the People's Liberation Army: Surely the people's army would never fire on the people. In fact, PLA soldiers proved quite adept at firing on the people. And to this day Beijing refuses to come clean about how many it killed at Tiananmen.

Over China's Communist history the Western left has been egregious at excusing Beijing's behavior, sometimes apologizing for Chinese communism at its bloodiest moments. In fairness, however, the anti-Communist right has not been without its own illusions.

China's opening to foreign trade and investment—which many of us supported—proved tremendously successful at lifting ordinary Chinese out of desperate poverty. As genuine an achievement as this has been, the mistake was assuming that just because communists traded in Mao jackets for Brooks Brothers and sent their children to Harvard Business School, they would be transformed into Jeffersonian democrats who play by liberal rules. Instead, the Chinese Communist ruling class has learned it can have it all.

Except truth. This is the one thing no Communist can afford. In his famous 1974 essay "Live Not

By Lies,” Alexander Solzhenitsyn said the only way for an individual to resist was to refuse to participate in the everyday lies required to get by in any Communist society.

In the West, communism is often treated as a relic of the past, with figures such as Castro, Che and Mao reduced to cartoons on T-shirts. But real Communists are alive and well. So are the lies they tell to keep themselves in power, whether it’s spreading disinformation about the origins of coronavirus, denying the concentration camps that hold at least a million Muslim Uighurs, or releasing videos of PLA military exercises to intimidate the people of Hong Kong into submission.

Most Westerners look at Hong Kong, observe that the big protests from last year have gone away, and believe the way ahead is by letting things continue to cool down. Hong Kong people, after all, aren’t looking to overthrow China’s government; all they want is to be left alone. So Westerners have a hard time fathoming why Beijing is being so heavy-handed, treating an elderly barrister who wouldn’t harm a soul as a criminal.

But this isn’t how a Communist thinks. He sees protests in Hong Kong as a challenge that must be crushed, at all costs. And when he looks at that 81-year-old lawyer, he doesn’t see a gentle old man. He sees an enemy brandishing the most fearsome weapon of all: the truth.

Until we understand this, we will never understand the wisdom behind a Chinese patriot’s prophetic warning to his son: Never, ever trust the Communists.

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