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LOUISE PERRY: LAND WHERE MY FATHERS DIED

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OPINION COMMENTARY

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# My Book Is Banned in Hong Kong

A store owner and three employees were arrested over a Jimmy Lai biography.

By Mark L. Clifford

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Demonstrators protesting Jimmy Lai's conviction gather in front of the Chinese Consulate General in Los Angeles, Feb. 14. APU GOMES/GETTY IMAGES

Book Punch is a shop that hits above its weight. One of Hong Kong's last independent bookstores, it has been harassed by the government for years. Owner Pong Yat-ming has been dragged into court for giving Spanish lessons and serving sake at a Japanese-themed event.

On Tuesday police charged Mr. Pong and three employees with selling seditious books, including "The Troublemaker," my biography of Jimmy Lai. Under Hong Kong's vague and sweeping national-security laws, that offense carries a penalty of up to seven years in prison. The defendants were released on bail Wednesday, but the store remains closed.

Can a jurisdiction that doesn't want its citizens to read books or learn Spanish seriously call itself a global financial center? Financial centers need freedom—to speak, to debate, to discuss, to argue. Free speech in a modern economy is not a luxury. It's needed for economic efficiency, price discovery, efficient financial markets and good policy.

Throwing booksellers in prison is a major stumble for any government interested in prosperity. Nobody understands that better than Mr. Lai, 78, who has spent decades fighting for Hong Kong's freedom. In early February, a kangaroo court sentenced him to 20 years in prison for practicing journalism. He ran an aggressive press operation that held authorities to account. Beginning in the 1990s, Mr. Lai's Next Media, which published Apple Daily, became the largest independent Chinese-language media organization in the world. (I was a Next Media director.) Mr. Lai is like no opponent the Chinese Communist Party has faced before. He's wealthy, he had a media megaphone, he's principled, and he's fearless.

He smuggled himself into Hong Kong as a penniless 12-year-old escaping famine in communist China. After a successful career in the garment industry, he waded into the media business following the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre in China. His mission: to use a free press to shine a spotlight on government abuses and hasten the end of communism.

China promised the Hong Kong people that it would protect their freedom after it took over the British colony in 1997. It promulgated an impressive miniconstitution and signed an international treaty with Britain. Mr. Lai took Beijing at its word that free speech would remain. He chose to stay even as authorities cracked down after the massive 2019 protests that saw millions of Hong Kongers in the street.

Mr. Lai said he couldn't run away from a city that had given him everything. He stayed to fight for "Western values" and the rule of law.

Now, along with hundreds of other political prisoners, Mr. Lai is behind bars. But as the example of Book Punch's brave owner and staff shows, the spirit of freedom remains in Hong Kong's DNA. Pro-democracy candidates have enjoyed great support in elections since the 1990s and did so well in 2019 that Beijing changed the electoral system to guarantee the election of more pro-Beijing candidates. Six years after forcing a repressive national-security law on Hong Kong, thin-skinned authorities have been fretting about "soft resistance." Well, resistance doesn't get much softer than books.

*Mr. Clifford is president of the Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong Foundation and author of "The Troublemaker."*

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## Videos