



BY TOM PLATE

Might it be permissible, under the rare circumstance of course, for an American journalist to speak positively about a Communist leader and a particular policy?

If yes, then permit into evidence one Deng Xiaoping, the diminutive chain-smoking maximum leader who, though with almost as many major faults as California, carried around a political brain the size of Texas. His achievements include two that remain particularly relevant to the resurfaced issue at hand in Hong Kong: the principle of one-country/two systems.

Deng's re-casting of China's economy to unleash the entrepreneurial ethic of countless Chinese meant curbing his governments' endless robotic enthusiasm for intervention in the economy. That one big forward burst of policy flexibility (too bad India's Nehru never developed such vision) helped tee up a second Deng brilliancy: setting down as policy a sensible formula to protect and enhance Hong Kong's success. And this meant curbing the enthusiasm of know-it-all comrades in Beijing inclined to intervene in the affairs of the former British colony. Bluntly put, Deng was smart enough to know that his comrades, however otherwise capable, could not possibly be smart enough to micro-manage from up north, and certainly not without greatly unnerving capable Hong Kongers: And so came one country/two systems, the label for maximizing autonomy.

So smart: But now that legacy is put to the test by the latest twists in the Bizarre Case of the Disappearing and Reappearing Booksellers. In recent days the plot has been thickened by allegations of secret-police-style snatching and interrogating – and enlivened of course by a proper street protest against alleged Beijing thuggery.

Allow me a personal note first, ok?

By the maniac metrics of American time keeping, I go back a ways with Hong Kong. In 1995, I vowed in the Los Angeles Times to seek to “to overcome my patriotic American inheritance [i.e., bias] and arrive at a balanced, non-ideological assessment of China’s takeover from the British of the jewel known as Hong Kong.” This sentiment appeared in my first column on Asia – around the time that Fortune Magazine, of the Time Inc. Empire, infamously predicted on its cover “The Death of Hong Kong.”

My optimism came from the people I talked to and the best thinking of the time. The underrated Tung Chee-hwa, the first H.K. leader appointed by Beijing, seemed so sincere in his patriotism for Mother China that it had to seal Beijing’s trust (which was the only way one-country/two-systems could ever possibly work). The outgoing, ultra-articulate governor Christopher Patten was so slick in his maneuvers that I had to distrust the British pitch. And the near-pathological negativism of the Western news media, exemplified by the funereal Fortune Magazine cover, made me sad and angry – and eager to uncover a less fatalistic narrative.

Sure enough, post-handover, Hong Kong flourished economically. Though Deng died just months before the handover in July 1997, the wise and Premier Zhu Rongji hovered uncle-like over Hong Kong until retirement in 2003; and the presidency of the quiet but very solid Hu Jintao that ran until 2012 must be credited for its policy of laudable minimalism..

But now things are starting to make a pivot for the worse.

In late 2014 – with a rather different administration settled in Beijing – Hong Kong erupts into demonstrations designed to embarrass Mother China into refining Hong Kong’s election policy into a textbook model. That was not going to happen, of course (hey Umbrella People - we don’t have perfection in the U.S. either; recall that in 2000, George W Bush became president over Al Gore, even though the latter got more votes; and now there’s Trump, etc). Beijing did give a little ground – but not nearly enough for the Umbrellas, as for utopia they cannot wait. Protests ensued.

But utopia always plays the waiting game, and by its infinite inaccessibility will out-wait us all. For Beijing Central, the ultimate issue of the management of Hong Kong was not a matter of conscience but of sovereignty – of power not principle. Who is the boss – us, not them! To reinforce this point, I revert to the timeless insight of Albert Camus: “By definition,” concluded the French literary giant and journalist, “a government has no conscience. Sometimes it has a policy, but nothing more.” It is always foolish to believe otherwise, whether the government is communist, capitalist, religious – or allegedly utopian.

So logically, if Beijing (and not some band of one-off, over-reaching idiot security people in the south) was in fact responsible for the abduction of the irreverent, but ultimately pathetic booksellers, hoping to harvest mainland renminbi from peddling gossipy books about President Xi Jinping, then we know that such action must reflect new policy. This means Hong Kongers may have to learn to live with the current sovereign government that is their present lot - and that is not as wise as ones of recent past.

But I prefer the hypothesis that what happened was not policy but idiocy. China's top leaders simply must be too smart for such nonsense; they just have to be.

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