

DAILY COMMENT

WHY BEIJING SHUT DOWN HONG KONG'S LEADING PRO-DEMOCRACY NEWSPAPER

The fearlessness and irreverence of Apple Daily was highly prized in a society tilting toward authoritarian dominion.



By Jiayang Fan
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The pro-democracy Hong Kong newspaper Apple Daily printed a million copies of its final edition, last Thursday. Photograph by Ivan Abreu / SOPA / Getty

It might not be known when, precisely, the fate of *Apple Daily*, Hong Kong's most prominent pro-democracy newspaper, was finally sealed, but its readers may have guessed that its demise had long been a question of when rather than if. In April, [Jimmy Lai](#), the paper's septuagenarian founder, was sentenced to fourteen months in prison for unauthorized assembly during the city's pro-democracy protests in 2019. Another charge, filed under the new draconian national-security law, accuses him of foreign-collusion offenses and carries a maximum punishment of life in prison. Two weeks ago, the police froze the paper's accounts, raided its offices, and arrested five editors, including the editor-in-chief, and top executives. The next day, the newspaper printed half a million copies—more than six times its normal circulation. For its final edition, published last Thursday, the paper doubled that number. As rain drenched the city, *Apple Daily* featured a tribute to its readers under the headline “Hong Kongers Bid a Painful Farewell in the Rain.”

Hong Kongers have simultaneously been bidding farewell to their collective experience of a city that holds civil liberties essential to its definition of self. Like many of the young people who participated in the 2019 demonstrations, *Apple Daily* was born at a moment of anxious transition, when the handover of the city's sovereignty from the United Kingdom to China sparked an existential debate about a future over which the city itself had little control. In the twenty-six years since the newspaper's launch, twenty-four have been lived under Chinese rule. As Hong Kong has chafed against pressures to cede aspects of its autonomy, Beijing has clamped down ever more unequivocally, determined to bring the famously freewheeling city to heel.

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When I went to Hong Kong to cover the protests, I was most interested in the way that local journalists, artists, and playwrights were reappraising how the city's present is woven through with its past. They felt an urgent need to document the moment—and the ability to do that relies in large part on a free press, which is something that Lai has long understood. He was born in the late nineteen-forties and lived in a village near the southern port city of Guangzhou. At the age of twelve, he fled to Hong Kong, as a stowaway on a fishing boat. Working odd jobs in sweatshops, he learned to speak English, and, over time, started his own clothing factory; in 1981, he launched the international apparel retailer Giordano. The Tiananmen massacre, in 1989, spurred his transition into advocacy. As a vocal critic of not only the massacre but of the regime itself, Lai established a Hong Kong-listed company, Next Media Ltd (now Next Digital), in the nineties, that went on to become one of the city's most influential media companies. He launched *Apple Daily* in 1995. "Information is freedom," Lai told me in his office at the newspaper, when I visited him there, in 2019. The decision to go into publishing had been easy. "I didn't think there was much risk," he said. "I believed that all of China was going forward."

From the start, the newspaper engaged in a complicated interplay of politics, capitalism, and populism. Although always pro-democracy in its outlook, it first acquired a reputation for its eye-catching headlines and sensationalist exposés, in the style of the *Sun*, in Britain, or the New York *Post*. But, over time, alongside the celebrity gossip, it began publishing unsparing stories about political and economic malfeasance. While other media outlets deferred to Beijing, for

economic and political reasons, *Apple Daily* remained uncompromising, particularly since 2019, when it used its front page to call on citizens to join the demonstrations. After the shutdown, last week, Ian Buruma summarized the paper's idiosyncratic nature in a piece for Project Syndicate. "Neither Lai, nor his paper, fit the high-minded ideal of progressive activism," he wrote, "but *Apple Daily* was principled in its way." Certainly, its fearlessness and irreverence were highly prized in a society tilting toward authoritarian dominion.

In the mainland press, news of *Apple Daily's* closing has been reported with glee. "Doomsday has finally arrived for the rotten apple after it scoured Hong Kong for more than 20 years," an editorial in *The Paper*, an online publication based in Shanghai, read. "Poisonous Apple Cuts Off Its Own Lifeline and Reaps What it Has Sown," read part of the headline of a piece on the popular news site Phoenix Media, which claimed, in reference to the 2019 protests, that the newspaper had "discredited the legislative amendments, fabricated lies, incited people's hatred, and concocted a large number of public opinions that are anti-China and make Hong Kong chaotic." When Lai founded *Apple Daily*, he had a different metaphorical apple in mind. As he told the Lianhe *Evening News*, "If Eve hadn't bitten the forbidden fruit, there would be no sin, no right and wrong, and of course—no news."

Last week, Geremie Barmé, an Australian writer and academic who has followed Chinese politics for five decades, posted his translations of some *Apple Daily* columns on his Web site, China Heritage. In an introduction, he wrote that "the fall of Hong Kong under Xi Jinping's lugubrious rule—from the arrest of book-

sellers and publishers to the death by a mere few dozen surgical cuts of the city's publishing, media, academic, arts and intellectual life, is also a direct assault on culture worldwide." He told me on the phone from New Zealand, where he currently lives, "What is happening to Hong Kong now is a version of what happened on the mainland when the Party began its rule. Under the name of patriotism, thought reform, and security, every sector of society was transformed.

Hong Kong is falling prey to the same socialist ideological transformation in every sphere, and likely more measures like the Chinese security agency will follow.” A city that has developed an independent self-consciousness and a desire to write its own narrative is the hardest to oppress. That, Barmé added, “is what makes Hong Kong so dangerous.”

In 2016, on a public tour at the headquarters of the three main Communist Party and state news organizations, Xi declared that “all news media run by the Party must work to speak for the Party’s will and its propositions, and protect the Party’s authority and unity.” That edict aligned with a Party statement, made a year later, after its nineteenth National Congress, that “government, military, civilian, and academic; east, west, south, north, and center, the Party leads everything.” China’s Communist Party is marking its centenary this week, and it seems to be celebrating with a return to primitive orthodoxy; not since the days of Mao has society been so tightly monitored. The Party is also waging a campaign against “historical nihilism,” which it defines as any discussion or research that challenges the official version of the past, on the ground that “history has chosen the Communist Party.” Online, censors have deleted some two million posts that they considered to be “distorting” Party history.

When I was in Hong Kong I visited Lee Yee, a prominent political commentator who had been involved with *Apple Daily* since its inception. At the time, he was writing a regular column for the newspaper, and told me that he didn’t know whether resistance would be futile, but that the act of resistance was important in and of itself. Last week, he posted a tribute to the newspaper. “As an editor and as

a writer, I have enjoyed a long career and it's only because I've always been based in Hong Kong,” he wrote. “It’s also why I’ve been able to reach old age with few regrets.”

He continued, “As I’ve learned more about the ugly side of human nature, I’ve also come to realize that it’s all but impossible for truth to defeat raw power. Yet the

human quest for freedom can never be quashed. Even if the power-holders might appear to succeed, freedom itself will remain irrepressible. Power can never unseat truth.”

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