10-13-2009

Learning from Lai Changxing?

Jeremy Brown
Simon Fraser University

Xian Wang
Simon Fraser University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive

Part of the Asian History Commons, Asian Studies Commons, Chinese Studies Commons, and the International Relations Commons

http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/567

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
Learning from Lai Changxing?

October 13, 2009 in In Case You Missed It by The China Beat | 1 comment

Last year, Angilee Shah wrote a review at China Beat of Oliver August’s Inside the Red Mansion. The review inspired Simon Fraser University Professor Jeremy Brown to assign the text to a class and he recently invited the book’s protagonist, Lai Changxing, to join his class for a day. Brown and one of his students provide an account of the day’s visit below (for a write-up in Chinese, see this report at The Global Chinese Press).

By Jeremy Brown and Xian Wang

A few days before National Day, Lai Changxing joined our fourth-year Chinese history class at Simon Fraser University. For almost three hours China’s most wanted man answered (and dodged) a wide range of tough questions from students, all of whom had read Oliver August’s Inside the Red Mansion, a book about shady ties between officials and businesspeople in Xiamen, where Lai made his millions and later became ensnared in a corruption scandal that led him to flee to Canada. Lai lives in Vancouver and sent two of his sons to SFU. What did our class learn from him?

In his responses to student questions, Lai alternated between innocent charm and aggrieved combativeness. He denied giving officials cash-filled briefcases and providing them with modern-day concubines. But he admitted that he actively sought out and took advantage of loopholes. In order to avoid customs duties when importing oil and luxury cars to China, Lai said that he had his oil tankers unload when nobody was watching. His overarching goal was to make more money, he said, so he was constantly looking for opportunities. When local officials announced that new businesses would be exempt from taxes for three years, Lai opened a series of ventures, and then shut them down and changed their names before they hit the three year mark, managing to perpetually avoid taxes.

Lai, who has been battling Canadian deportation orders in the courts for ten years, repeatedly sang the praises of Canadian democracy, justice, and human rights. But he also hedged his bets, saying that he admired President Hu Jintao, who came to power after Lai fled to Vancouver. If Hu Jintao were to revisit his case, Lai said, Hu would surely acknowledge Lai’s innocence. Lai said that he was not
worried “one bit” that Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper would arrange to hand him over to Hu Jintao in advance of Harper’s possible visit to Beijing in November. “I trust Canadian law,” Lai said.

Lai’s charm offensive was not entirely convincing to the 22 SFU history students in attendance. After Lai’s visit, some students said that they sympathized with him and admired his ability to build a business empire within a flawed political system. But even more students said that they had a worse impression of him than before the class. Some claimed that his body language and darting eyes signaled dishonesty, said that it seemed unlikely that Lai’s “loopholes” could have been opened so wide without bribery, and protested that Lai’s insistence that he had never sung karaoke was impossible.

When Lai argued that most Chinese officials had bought their positions and that corruption in China is even worse today than when he left in 1999, one student asked if Lai had considered bribing his way back home. If officials are so corruptible, the student wondered, why not just pay them off to avoid the death penalty? Lai answered, “Certainly not! I do not trust the promises of any officials. Why should I believe that they won’t execute me right away?”

Whether or not they believed Lai’s claims of innocence, many students said that they left the class convinced that the Communist Party’s political authority trumps both the rule of law and the seductive power of bribery in today’s China. The reform era may have allowed Lai to achieve incredible wealth through questionable means, but once the political climate turned against him in 1999, no bribe, no matter how big, could have saved him.

*Jeremy Brown is Assistant Professor of History at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia.*

*Xian Wang is an undergraduate in International Studies at Simon Fraser University.*