

Cashing In On the Road to Beijing

The new Chinese Revolution — the one that is flooding the world with Chinese-made goods has created more than a few unexpected scenarios. To the evaporation of various U.S. industries and other results, add the story of American consultant Sidney Rittenberg. A recent New York Times article profiles Rittenberg as a superstar among U.S. capitalists looking for guidance on their road to Beijing. What's unusual is that Rittenberg is an ex-Communist who lived in China for 35 years, 16 of which he spent in Chinese prisons.

Born to a wealthy family in South Carolina, Rittenberg, 83, now emerges as one who knows China as well as the Chinese. For his typical six-figure fee, Rittenberg not only helps clients like Microsoft, Intel and Polaroid maneuver China's bureaucratic maze, he joins them in negotiations where his nuanced perspective on the Chinese equals that of an insider.

The key is that Rittenberg was an insider. He not only lived in China from 1945 until 1980, he was a one-time Communist-Party functionary, well-known as the odd American in China's government.

Rittenberg's saga began after World War II, when he joined Mao Tse-tung's mountain-based revolutionaries at the end of his U.S. Army enlistment. Though that would endear him to the Chinese, when the Communists took over China in 1949 they imprisoned Rittenberg, falsely accusing him as a U.S. spy. Released six years later, he remained in China and rose in the Communist Party, eventually working with Mao himself. But by the next decade, that relationship soured, and Rittenberg was jailed again on the same unproven spy charge, this time from 1967 to 1977. Rittenberg's clients sometimes balk when they learn of his Communist past, but they quickly see its value at the negotiating table. According to the profile, in the many trips he makes to China, Rittenberg gains quick access to relevant government and party officials "because people are curious to meet me," he says. Millions in China know Rittenberg by his American or Chinese name because of the role he played in the Chinese revolution.

Today, Rittenberg fuels a new revolution: one that has less to do with utopia than it does with how two countries manufacture goods and market them for maximum profit. He does this not from a mountain camp or prison cell, but from a three-acre estate on Puget Sound where he lives with his Chinese-born wife.

Funny how things work out.

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