HONG KONG'S WATERSHED

The 1967 Riots

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Introduction

The 1967 riots: A watershed in the postwar history of Hong Kong

After the Hong Kong Artificial Flower Works sacked about 650 workers in April 1967 for refusing to accept new work regulations, few would have expected it to have repercussions that are still felt today.

In those days when Hong Kong was described by some Western media as a colonial "sweatshop", sacking workers was routine as factory workers had virtually no protection for their basic labour rights and dismissals by employers without compensations were an everyday fact of life. Factory workers in the colony were expected to toil more than 12 hours a day without taking leave. However, the April 1967 sacking of the workers was the immediate trigger for Hong Kong's worst political violence that would claim 51 lives and prompt a huge social shake-up.

On May 6, 21 people were arrested when a group of sacked workers tried to prevent goods from being transported out of the factory. Leftist unions staged protests over the arrests and demanded the release of the arrested workers.

Lau Chin-shek, a mainland-born worker who became a prominent unionist from the 1970s onwards and a Hong Kong legislator from 1991 to 2008, recalled that he was thrilled when he read about the workers' fight for their legitimate rights in the newspaper. "I thought that the workers in San Po Kong voiced our discontent and grievances," he said. Lau, who was working in a factory in Kwai Chung after fleeing from mainland China in 1963, said that he was exploited by the factory owner and was paid a daily wage lower than what his local colleagues received. He was disgusted with the suppression of workers by the riot police on May 6, 1967 and was one of those who showed sympathy towards the workers in the labour dispute.

Liu Yat-yuen, then president of Sun Luen Film Company, also sympathized with the workers in the labour dispute. When the leftist camp launched the struggle campaign against the Hong Kong government, the veteran leader of the leftist film industry believed that it was nothing more than a struggle through nonviolent means like propaganda. Both he and Lau regretted that the anti-British campaign subsequently resorted to violent means.

The Hong Kong government was also puzzled as to why the labour dispute escalated into bloody disturbances. Jack Cater, then deputy colonial secretary and special assistant to the governor, revealed in an interview in 1999 that there was a tacit understanding between the colonial administration and the leftist camp on conditional tolerance of the protests. He said that he had met some leaders of the leftist camp before the demonstrations and was assured that the demonstrators would leave Government House after their protest and would not cause any trouble. At the beginning, the government was tolerant of the protest and exercised restraint towards the leftists.

But Cater was upset that after a few days, the leftist camp began to "stir up troubles" and the protests became violent disturbances. He said it was unfortunate that the demonstration turned into riots. Although he insisted that the action taken by the Hong Kong government during the upheaval was necessary for maintaining order in the city, he admitted that there were some individual cases of abuse of power by the police.

It appeared that the escalation of a labour dispute into a full-scale anti-British campaign also caught the then Chinese premier Zhou Enlai off guard. During the early stage of the anti-British protests, Zhou, who had adopted a pragmatic approach towards Hong Kong since 1949, repeatedly reminded mainland officials responsible for Hong Kong affairs of the need to exercise restraint in the struggle against the British authorities. He dismissed the idea of copying the practices of the Red Guards, which went on rampage in the mainland, to Hong Kong and ruled out the possibility of a military invasion of Hong Kong. He had reservations about the ultra-leftist actions staged by the leftist leaders in Hong Kong who were less amenable to control from Beijing as the central leadership was paralysed by internal power struggle. However, it was politically impossible for him to publicly stop the struggle in Hong Kong during the height of the Cultural Revolution. The Communist Party leadership's lack of consensus on how to handle the situation in Hong Kong also helped fuel the escalation of the anti-British protests.

The left wing was inspired by Beijing's support for the anti-British struggle in the propaganda front, particularly in the *People's Daily* editorial on June 3, 1967, which called on the Hong Kong Chinese to "be ready to respond to the call of the motherland and smash the reactionary rule of the Hong Kong British authorities". The confrontation between the leftists and the government escalated in the second half of 1967 when extremists planted bombs on the streets. On July 8, 1967, five Hong Kong policemen were killed and eleven wounded when the police post in Sha Tau Kok, New Territories, came under machine-gun fire during border violence with mainland militia.

The disturbances brought the colony to a standstill and triggered an exodus of capital amid fears of a military invasion from China. Secret files recently declassified by Britain's National Archives showed that an interim report was prepared by the British government in July 1967 on the prospects for withdrawal from the colony if a military invasion from China was forced upon the British government.

The bloody disturbances claimed 51 lives, with 15 of the deaths caused by bomb attacks. A total of 1,936 people were convicted during the 1967 riots. Of those, 465 were jailed for "unlawful assembly", 40 for possessing bombs and 33 for explosion-related offences. The situation calmed down in December after Beijing reined in the Hong Kong leftists.

As Italian historian and philosopher Benedetto Croce contended that "all history is contemporary", the 1967 riots illustrate how events of the past are very much alive in the present. The event, widely seen as a watershed in the postwar history of Hong Kong, is not just a chapter in history but also has relevance to Hong Kong today. The riots prompted the colonial administration to introduce sweeping social reforms in labour rights, education, public housing and social welfare. The disturbances also reinforced the entrenched division between the left wing and mainstream society. The traditional leftist camp had developed a "siege mentality" after the riots as they felt that they were marginalized by mainstream society. Even a decade after the handover, such mentality still exists among some leaders of the traditional leftist camp.

The 1967 riots were certainly one of the most controversial events in the history of Hong Kong. The government's official annual report, the *Hong Kong Yearbook 1967,* describes it as a "communist-initiated confrontation" during which communist organizations in Hong Kong sought to impose their will on the people by intimidating workers and fomenting work stoppages, riots and "indiscriminate violence".

However, to this day, the leftist camp still insists that the riots were a "righteous mass movement" in the wake of colonial oppression by the Hong Kong government and had forced the authorities to introduce social reforms. There is even controversy over how the event should be labelled. The pre-handover government described the disturbances as "riots", while the pro-Beijing organizations call it an "anti-British and counter-violence" movement (*fanying kangbao*).

The 1967 riots were widely seen as a spillover from the Cultural Revolution that Mao Zedong had begun in the mainland a year earlier. It was obvious that such a large-scale event would not have taken place in Hong Kong in 1967 if the Cultural Revolution had not happened in the mainland. What was more intriguing was that the leftist camp did not express support for the Star Ferry riots in 1966, which took place a month before Mao Zedong launched the Cultural Revolution, and pro-Beijing newspapers even called for Hong Kong people's co-operation with the colonial government to restore social order. It spoke volumes for the impact of the Cultural Revolution on instigating the 1967 riots. The Hong Kong branch of Xinhua News Agency (or New China News Agency) could not evade the responsibility for instigating the leftist masses during the disturbances.

Although the terrorist means employed during the uproar was broadly condemned at the time and the impact of the Cultural Revolution could not be dismissed, many independent observers agree that the social background to the

disturbances cannot be ignored. Prior to the riots, the colonial administration was criticized for their slow progress in improving welfare standards and education attainment to the level commensurate with rapid economic development in Hong Kong. Of the 10 to 14-year-olds in the 1966 census, only 13 per cent received some form of secondary education. The colonial government did not introduce free primary education until 1972 and nine-year compulsory education was implemented six years later.

Derek Davies, editor of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, wrote in June 1967 that the people involved in the riots were essentially frustrated lower-middle-class people. "The government must not be allowed to convince itself that the overwhelming expression of public support for its recent actions in maintaining law and order means that the community wholeheartedly approves of its policies in normal times," he wrote.[1]

The report of the Commission of Inquiry on the 1966 riots, sparked by Star Ferry's fare increase in April that year, had revealed the largely sociological background to the disturbances. However, the colonial administration had not taken any action to address the problems and the underlying social unrest was allowed to escalate in the run-up to the labour dispute in San Po Kong.

The British government, which was led by the Labour Party at the time, stepped up its pressure on the Hong Kong government to implement social reforms after the riots. Members of British Parliament and even senior officials from the Labour government called for greater influence on the Hong Kong government to implement the long-awaited reform in the colony.

According to the files declassified by the British government several years ago, Lord Malcolm Shepherd, the minister of state at the Commonwealth Office, wrote in a note to the secretary of state in May 1968 that "much [was] needed to be done in Hong Kong" when he commented on the pros and cons of extending Sir David Trench's tenure as governor. "The disturbances of last year mark, in some respects, the end of a long chapter of laissez-faire. There is a need for change," he wrote.

The British government noted that before the riots, the business community and many unofficial members of the Executive Council and Legislative Council resisted the introduction of social reforms. The riots unexpectedly gave London an opportunity to press ahead with social reforms in Hong Kong. One unintended consequence of the riots was the renewed momentum for reforms which helped overcome the opposition of the business community to improve the conditions of the labour force.

In a memorandum to Britain's Defence and Overseas Policy Committee in May 1967, secretary of state for Commonwealth affairs Herbert Bowden said, "the employers [in Hong Kong], who have in the past shown a considerable amount of resistance to reforms are at present very anxious about the general situation and we could immediately carry through extensive and long-overdue labour reforms. It would be welcomed by the average workers and would give us a better moral position."[2]

In an interview in 1999, Jack Cater described the 1967 riots as a watershed of Hong Kong's postwar history. "The government learned the lesson from the riots and introduced a series of reforms. Certainly we took the opportunity of producing a new system and reform," he said. "Before 1967, there was no real channel of contact between the government and the people. I don't think there would have been any reform at all [without the riots]," he said.

The riots prompted the colonial administration to introduce nine-year compulsory education, shorter working hours and an ambitious public housing project. In December 1967, the government amended the law to reduce the maximum working hours for women and young people to 57 hours a week, which would ultimately be reduced to 48 hours a week by 1971. The colonial government sped up social reforms after Murray MacLehose, a career British diplomat, succeeded David Trench as governor in 1971. The government introduced free primary education for all in 1972 and implemented compulsory nine-year education in 1978. MacLehose introduced the ten-year housing programme in 1973 to alleviate housing problems in the colony. The government also introduced the public assistance scheme for the disadvantaged in April 1971.

The 1967 riots aroused the "Hong Kong consciousness" and a sense of belonging to the city among the young generation. Members of the public, particularly those who were better educated, became increasingly critical of the social problems in Hong Kong. *ICAC 25th Anniversary*, a booklet published by the Independent Commission Against Corruption in 1999, notes that "people were getting sick of corruption and more and more in the late 1960s began to express their anger at corrupt officials and ineffective government. The riots of 1966–67 had challenged many old assumptions about government. The people of Hong Kong increasingly began to openly condemn corruption, and the indifference of the government towards it."[3] It is beyond doubt that the growing awareness of social inequalities among Hong Kong's young generation at the time served as the catalyst for student and social movements in the 1970s.

In an attempt to win support for quelling the leftist-inspired disturbances, the colonial administration also strived to foster the "Hong Kong identity" among the local populace. Matthew Turner, a former anthropology professor at the University of Hong Kong, notes that "it was not until 1967 that the rhetoric of 'citizenship', of 'community' and 'belonging' was first deployed on a grand scale as anti-communist counter-propaganda. By the end of the sixties the idea of 'community' was no longer an irrelevance to the majority of the population. For alongside the official discourse, a local and largely unarticulated sense of identity had begun to emerge in Hong Kong."[4]

In the aftermath of the 1967 riots, many Hong Kong people began to treasure the colony — a "refugee society" that served as a haven for those fleeing from political upheavals in the mainland — as their "genuine home". Nelson Chow Wing-sun, professor of social work and social administration at the University

of Hong Kong, said, “at the time of the 1967 riots, I felt Hong Kong people were generally lukewarm towards the government but they were disgusted with the acts of the leftists. Hong Kong people realized that they had to unite together in support for the government. From then on, Hong Kong people appeared to start treasuring this place. At least Hong Kong was their haven where they were sheltered from the disasters arising from the Cultural Revolution.”[5]

The disturbances have been embedded in the collective memory of Hong Kong people and still have impact on local politics today. At an election forum during the 1995 Legislative Council election, Andrew To Kwan-hang, campaign manager of Democratic Party candidate Mak Hoi-wah who contested in the Kowloon Northeast constituency, argued that Chan Yuen-han, a candidate representing the Federation of Trade Unions (FTU), should bear the responsibility for the bloody riots. The FTU contended that the social ills should not be ignored and the incident had facilitated social reforms in Hong Kong. When waves of lay-offs and pay cuts swept across Hong Kong in 1998, some union leaders reminded the then chief executive Tung Chee-hwa of the painful lessons of the 1967 riots in the hope that he would beware how he handled the social discontents exacerbated by the Asian financial crisis.

It is an irony that Beijing has inherited the official discourse deployed by the colonial government during the 1967 riots. Exploiting Hong Kong people’s phobia about social upheavals, the Hong Kong government emphasized the importance of maintaining “prosperity and stability” amid the mayhem wrought by the leftists. After the signing of the Joint Declaration on Hong Kong’s future, Beijing took the banner from Britain by using the catchphrase of “maintaining Hong Kong’s prosperity and stability” since the 1980s to sum up its policies towards the city.

Despite the importance of the 1967 riots, the disturbances were rarely covered in Hong Kong’s history. The leftist camp, which hails the disturbances as a “righteous patriotic movement” in 1967, has regarded the riots as a taboo in the past four decades and Beijing has seldom mentioned the event. The most obvious explanation for the leftist hush is Beijing’s long-stated disapproval of the disturbances. In early 1968, Zhou Enlai criticized ultra-leftists in Beijing and the Xinhua News Agency’s Hong Kong branch for having mistakenly instigated the riots. He ordered them to stop their agitation.

However, the real reason for the leftists’ reticence is a secret understanding in the early 1980s that China would neither raise the issue of “colonial oppression” nor attempt to settle old scores from the 1967 riots and those from the 1950s deportations of more than 100 leftists. Choi Wai-hang, a veteran leftist leader detained at the Victoria Road Detention Centre (Mount Davis Concentration Camp) in Western District in 1967, revealed that Qi Feng (祈烽), deputy director of the Xinhua News Agency’s Hong Kong branch during the riots, admitted to him that Beijing reached a settle-no-old-scores agreement with Britain when the two countries were hammering out the terms of the Joint Declaration. The deal was seen as a means to foster stability in post-handover Hong Kong, and Beijing has since remained tight-

lipped about it. Both sides stuck to the approach of "letting sleeping dogs lie" in the decades following the riots.

That explains why Beijing has over the past two decades seldom mentioned, let alone condemned, "British oppression" of "compatriots in Hong Kong" since 1949, including the crackdown of the 1967 riots. In an interview with the author in 2002, Zhang Junsheng (張浚生), former deputy director of the Xinhua News Agency's Hong Kong branch, said that Beijing saw no point in bringing up the 1967 riots again during the transitional period prior to the handover. "The 1967 incident is part of history, and attempts to settle old scores are not conducive to harmony and unity in Hong Kong," he said.

The 1967 riots are seldom mentioned in mainland publications about Hong Kong's history. Choi said he understood that Zhou Nan (周南), former director of the Xinhua News Agency's Hong Kong branch, repudiated the disturbances on the ground that it was a struggle wrongly staged by the leftists.

But old wounds were re-opened in July 2001 when Yeung Kwong, director of the All-Circles Anti-Persecution Struggle Committee during the 1967 riots, was awarded the Grand Bauhinia Medal. Pro-democracy politicians saw it as an official endorsement of the anti-British riots and bombing campaign that rocked Hong Kong back then, and angry calls flooded popular radio talk shows. The decision sparked a debate on whether the Hong Kong government was trying to rewrite colonial history and reverse mainstream condemnation of the riots.

Official reassessment of the riots actually started within a few months after China resumed sovereignty over Hong Kong. Yeung Kwong and a group of his fellow ageing leftists were invited by Tung Chee-hwa to a tea gathering at Government House in September 1997. The then secretary for justice Elsie Leung Oi-sie, who comes from a pro-Beijing family, told Wu Tai-chow (who was sentenced to three years' imprisonment in 1967 for publishing "seditious articles") that the 1967 incident had been handled in a way that was very "unfair" to the "patriots" and pledged that the Hong Kong government would "tackle the issue gradually". Elsie Leung's uncle, Wong Cho-fun, was detained at Victoria Road Detention Centre in Western District during the riots. He was the former principal of Chung Hwa Middle School which was de-registered in 1968.

The award of the SAR's top honour to Yeung was the latest in a series of such awards to be bestowed, since the handover, on key figures in the 1967 riots. Lee Chark-tim, former president of the Federation of Trade Unions and a member of the All-Circles Anti-Persecution Struggle Committee, was awarded the Grand Bauhinia Medal in July 1999. Wong Kin-lap, the committee's vice-director and former principal of Hon Wah College, was given the Gold Bauhinia Star in the same year. Liu Yat Yuen, former president of pro-Beijing film company Sil-Metropole Organisation Ltd., was awarded the Silver Bauhinia Star in 2000. Liu, who died in 2002, was a member of the Standing Committee of the Struggle Committee.

The “1967 riots” is obviously a subject rarely studied in Hong Kong history. This is attributable to the dearth of historical materials and reluctance of the participants in the riots to recollect the incident. Despite the enduring consequences of the riots, there has been no English publication that documents the disturbances and analyses their repercussions over the past four decades, apart from John Cooper’s *Colony in Conflict*, which was published in 1969. However, the book was largely based on newspaper cuttings at the time and stood on the standpoint of the colonial administration, without recording the recollection of the participants from the leftist camp.

The declassification of British archives related to the 1967 riots since 2000 provides an opportunity for a more in-depth study of this chapter in Hong Kong history. The present volume cites the British secret files substantially so as to present the British government’s deliberation on the strategy to handle the 1967 riots and the Sino-British relationship.

However, any account of the 1967 riots is incomplete without the recollection of the key players in the incident. This book covers interviews with more than a dozen key figures in the disturbances, including the then special assistant to the governor Jack Cater and then deputy director of the Hong Kong branch of Xinhua News Agency Liang Shangyuan. In an attempt to present a more balanced and comprehensive account of the event, I have also interviewed the worker whose beating by the foreman of the Artificial Flower Works triggered off the riots, some victims of the riots, leftists who planted bombs on the streets, and policemen who helped quell the disturbances.

9

Finale to the Hong Kong-style Cultural Revolution

The burning of the British diplomatic compound in Beijing strengthened the hand of the moderate faction led by Zhou Enlai. It also set the stage for secret talks between the left wing and the Hong Kong government to ease the tensions in the colony. George Walden, assistant political adviser to the governor during the 1967 riots, said that the mainland authorities were looking for a way out after the mayhem. He said that he and Political Adviser Anthony Elliott were in touch with rich left-wing sympathizers close to Beijing before the incident. "The crux of our message was that we were in no mood for compromise and the Hong Kong government was not interested in a Portuguese-type solution. The spirit of the message we were conveying was, in a nutshell, that either you run this place or we do. The communists could break the British if they wanted to, but they could not make them bend," Walden said in correspondence with the author.

Walden reveals in his memoir that secret negotiations were held between the Hong Kong government and the mainland officials stationed in Hong Kong in the wake of the arson attack on the office of the British chargé d'affaires. Anthony Elliott and Walden took part in talks with two senior Hong Kong-based mainland officials, including Qi Feng, then deputy director of the Hong Kong branch of Xinhua.[1] "The secrecy was essential to both sides. The communists did not want to be thought to be backing down and nor did we . . . Even agreeing to a location for the talks was difficult. Like petty gangsters, we met in the small back room of a Chinese restaurant in Wan Chai," Walden wrote.

"After the formalities, which is to say a tepid handshake and the grunts, the Number One Chinese communist read out the familiar list of demands in the usual choice language. Fascist atrocities, genocide, the determination of China's patriotic compatriots to resist to the death — everything was there. Anthony said he had fought against Hitler in the war and would not be called a fascist. If they wanted the talks to get anywhere they had better learn to behave civilly, and treat us and our country with respect . . . After that the Chinese watched their language. We ignored their 'demands' and got down to details. We refused to release the rioters and murderers, but agreed to let Chinese representatives visit them in prison, in

part exchange for visits to Anthony Grey [Reuters correspondent in Beijing]," Walden wrote.[2]

Walden told the author that there were two rounds of meetings and it became clear from the meetings that despite the huffing and puffing the Chinese were looking for *chulu*, or a way out. "The meetings did help cool things. The Hong Kong communists obviously had to retreat under a smokescreen by claiming that the righteous indignation of the people had forced us to grant consular access to imprisoned rioters, and so on. There was in fact a deal under which we got access to Anthony Grey. And they did calm the situation on the border. But of course they didn't just agree to stop the riots. They were stopped, I assume, by Beijing," he said.

Starting from mid-September, the left wing launched large-scale celebration of the 18th anniversary of the National Day of the People's Republic of China and the celebratory activities lasted until October 8. On September 18, Yeung Kwong said during a meeting of the standing committee of the Struggle Committee that the anti-British struggle was a "struggle between invasion and counter-invasion" and the "continuation of the struggle against imperialism by the Chinese nation in the past 100 years". He described the campaign as a "part of international struggle against imperialism" and a "great revolutionary movement".

Yeung went on to say that the struggle had dealt a "serious blow" to the "reactionary rule" of the Hong Kong British authorities and had "gained a tremendous victory", adding that the left wing should continue to mobilize the masses to take part in the struggle.

Yeung, however, reminded the masses of the left wing about the "complexity" of the anti-British struggle. "We need to take note of the history of occupation of Hong Kong by British imperialism. It retains certain foundation of reactionary rule in Hong Kong and enjoys the support of other counter-revolutionary forces. The enemy will continue its suppression, coercion, bribery, spreading rumours and libels. It will even send spies to infiltrate into our camp and carry out activities to disintegrate and sabotage. The struggle and counter-revolution will continue for some time," he said. Yeung said it might take a "somewhat longer time" to gain victory in the struggle. "The development of the struggle will look like waves which have ups and downs at times and we should be prepared about it," he said.

It appeared that the left-wing leadership had recognized the strength of the colonial administration and was not confident about bringing it to its knees. But Yeung still called on the masses of the leftist camp not to fear being arrested, jailed or tortured and "disregard death entirely in the pursuit of victory".

In an article entitled "We will certainly win while the Hong Kong British authorities are bound to lose" published at the end of September, the All-Circles Anti-Persecution Struggle Committee said "the days of the Hong Kong British authorities are numbered" and the authorities were "digging their own graves". "Our struggle has created serious political crisis for the Hong Kong British authorities

and exacerbated its economic crisis. Our struggle is pushing the reactionary rule of the Hong Kong British authorities to a place of doom," the committee said.

Although the left wing claimed that they would certainly win while the colonial government was bound to lose, the colonial government stood firm and the situation gradually calmed down by the end of 1967.

The 1967 disturbances were the colony's worst ever riots since the Second World War. According to the statistics by the Hong Kong government, the disturbances claimed 51 lives, with 15 of the deaths caused by bomb attacks, and 832 people were injured. As at December 31, 1967, a total of 1,936 people were convicted during the riots. Of those, 465 were jailed for "unlawful assembly", 40 for possessing bombs, 33 for explosion-related offences and 209 for "possession of inflammatory posters".[3] According to the statistics compiled by the left wing, 26 people were killed from May and December while 4,979 people were arrested.[4]

The left wing and the Hong Kong government made completely different assessment of the impact of the disturbances. The left-wing played up the economic crisis facing the Hong Kong government while the colonial administration insisted that the mayhem had not seriously disrupted the economy. According to *Storm in Hong Kong* published by the Struggle Committee, Hong Kong's economy was facing "all kinds of troubles" and danger might come any time. "Property market has suffered a slump and the industry's value saw a loss of HK$3 billion. Tourism and external trade is in the doldrums. The number of closure and relocation of factories is on the rise while consumer price index hits the record high in 20 years. Stock market has plunged significantly, with market capitalisation falling by HK$1 billion from May to September. Bank deposits saw a sharp decrease of about HK$1.5 billion and capital outflow is estimated at more than HK$1.4 billion. The fiscal deficit between April and August was more than $70 million."[5] The left wing believed that the Hong Kong British authorities were in a place of doom because of its "anti-China activities and national oppression".

Hong Kong 1967, the government's official annual report, delivered a more positive assessment of the impact of the riots. "In spite of the strident claims in the communist press, the efficiency of the colony has been surprisingly little disturbed. There has been no significant disruption in any of the major sectors. Industrial production was not affected at all, and exports continued at substantially higher levels than in previous years . . . At the height of the disturbances substantial deposits were withdrawn from banks. From the end of August deposits began to return to the banks at a satisfactory rate. There had been no significant adverse effects on public revenue," the annual report said.[6] Trading figures for 1967 showed that the value of exports increased by 17 per cent compared with 1966, while re-exports increased by 14 per cent.

The then financial secretary John Cowperthwaite, however, admitted that the estimate of $75 million for land sales in 1967 proved overoptimistic and the revised figure was $34 million less.[7] John Cooper, author of *Colony in Conflict*, noted that

steel, cement and construction showed a marked decline. The number of building projects in particular was down nearly 40 per cent in the first ten months of 1967 compared with the corresponding period of the preceding year, and hopes of a building boom were dashed.[8] The total value of new private buildings was only HK$577 million, compared with HK$1.058 billion during 1966.[9] Tourist arrivals in September and October saw a year-on-year decrease of 9.9 per cent and 17.9 per cent respectively. A total of 527,365 tourists arrived in Hong Kong in 1967, compared with 505,733 in 1966. If the disturbances did not occur, tourist arrivals in 1967 might have exceeded 600,000.

As troubles and disorders engulfed Hong Kong, neighbouring countries took initiatives to attract capital from Hong Kong. The Philippines government announced in July that the country would relax the restrictions on Hong Kong people travelling to the Philippines and set up a free-trade zone to attract capital from the British colony. Taiwan also set up a special working group to facilitate Hong Kong people who would like to visit and invest on the island. Those Hong Kong people who invested HK$250,000 to set up factories in Singapore would have their whole families granted permanent residency in the lion city. Many professionals such as doctors and engineers emigrated to North America and European countries during the disturbances.

Sources close to Beijing said Zhou ordered the left wing in Hong Kong in December to stop bomb attacks and the anti-British struggle was called to a halt. Yu Changgang, who claimed that he had participated in Beijing's policymaking process during the anti-British struggle, said Zhou instructed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in December 1967 to review the anti-British struggle in Hong Kong. The conclusion was that the struggle started prematurely under the guidance of ultra-leftist thoughts and had divorced from reality. The anti-British struggle ended quietly and nobody was held responsible. Liang Weilin retained his post of director of the Hong Kong branch of Xinhua after the riots and stayed on until he was transferred to the post of deputy secretary of Guangdong Revolutionary Committee in December 1977. Liang's deputy, Qi Feng, retired in 1984 and had served as a vice-chairman of the Guangdong People's Political Consultative Conference. Liang died in May 2008 at the age of 98.

Lau Nai-keung, former chairman of the Meeting Point, said that he treated Qi to lunch before the deputy Xinhua director returned to the mainland in 1984. "I asked Qi which post he would take up after returning to the mainland. Qi said he had made 'serious mistakes' in 1967 and his career has been adversely affected," Lau said. Qi was responsible for maintaining contacts with the Meeting Point, which was a pro-democracy group at the time. The group merged with the United Democrats of Hong Kong in 1994 to form the Democratic Party. Lau is currently a member of the Basic Law Committee.

In early January 1968, Zhou talked about the Hong Kong question and the disturbances in 1967 when he met some leftists from Hong Kong. "Between June

and September, there were problems with mainland newspapers' propaganda on Hong Kong and the slogans targeting Hong Kong were nearly the same as those we used in the mainland. The mainland newspapers adopted the slogans used by the Red Guards in the reports on Hong Kong."[10]

Kam Yiu-yu, chief editor of *Wen Wei Po* at the time, recalled that Zhou ordered Xinhua's Hong Kong branch in early 1968 to stop the riots. Zhou, who had just put the armed conflicts among different factions of the Red Guards throughout the country under control, told Liang and Qi to go to Beijing to present a briefing on the anti-British struggle. After returning to Hong Kong, Qi passed on Zhou's directive to Kam: "Your anti-persecution struggle had gone on the wrong track. Of course there were people in Beijing who sent the misleading messages and I was tied up by other matters and did not have much time to care about the struggle."

"I recently sought the views of Chairman Mao on whether there was any change in the policy towards Hong Kong. Chairman Mao said there was no need to make any change and the status quo should be preserved. The chairman's remarks show that he does not have any plan to change the status of Hong Kong, such as taking Hong Kong back. Some people in Beijing had given you directives on how to deal with the situation in Hong Kong, including editorials published in the *People's Daily*. Now we should recognize that according to the spirit of Chairman Mao's directives, those instructions had violated the policies decided by Chairman Mao and the central government towards Hong Kong and Britain," Zhou said.

Zhou instructed Qi to stop the "erroneous" "anti-persecution struggle" after he returned to Hong Kong. "You should immediately rectify the erroneous decisions and measures and mobilize different sectors to join hands in restoring the stability and prosperity of Hong Kong. You should also strive to start talks with the Hong Kong British authorities and try your best to restore peace and stability," Zhou said, "you should also convey the views of Chairman Mao and mine to the groups and institutions under your supervision and apologize to them. You should differentiate your mistakes from the actions taken by ordinary cadres, Hong Kong compatriots, workers, farmers and students out of patriotism and affections towards the country. You should shoulder the responsibility of making the mistakes but they were innocent for taking action during the struggle. Their spirit is commendable."

There has been a long-standing debate on whether the riots instigated by the left wing were backed by Beijing. Between May and August, the *People's Daily* published two editorials and eight commentaries in support of the leftist-inspired disturbances in Hong Kong. The left wing in Hong Kong also interpreted the protests made by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the British government during the riots as full backing from Beijing. The All-China Federation of Trade Unions offered the Struggle Committee a total of HK$20 million for financing the general strikes organized by the leftist unions.

Beijing, however, only showed passive and half-hearted support for the left wing in Hong Kong. Liang Shangyuan, deputy director of Xinhua's Hong Kong

branch at the time, said that the Communist Party's policy towards Hong Kong since the 1950s was "long-term deliberation and making full use of Hong Kong" and Chinese leaders had said repeatedly that they did not intend to recover Hong Kong by force.

"It was not Beijing who launched the anti-British struggle. Instead, the movement was initiated by Xinhua's Hong Kong branch. They also masterminded and took command of the leftists during the riots," he told the author.

"However, the Hong Kong and Macau Works Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, which operated in Hong Kong in the name of Xinhua's Hong Kong branch, could not initiate the struggle if it did not have support from Beijing. The central government's policy towards Hong Kong was very clear and the Hong Kong and Macau Works Committee knew full well about it. However, the ultra-leftists thoughts of Lin Biao [then vice-chairman of the Chinese Communist Party and heir apparent to Mao Zedong] and the 'Gang of Four' brought obstruction to Beijing's handling of Hong Kong's affairs. They also controlled certain important media organizations, such as the *People's Daily* which was taken over by Chen Boda (陳伯達), head of the Cultural Revolution Group under the Communist Party's Central Committee," he said.

"Under the circumstances, the Hong Kong branch of the Xinhua News Agency used the tactic of 'implementing countermeasures to circumvent the central policies' (上有政策，下有對策), and forced the central government to shoulder the responsibility with a fait accompli."

Liang said Premier Zhou Enlai was reluctant to initiate the anti-British struggle but the leadership of the Communist Party lacked consensus on how to respond to the situation in Hong Kong. Both Zhou and Mao Zedong had no intention of recovering Hong Kong but Mao wanted to show some gestures to threaten the British government. While Zhou disagreed with many policies during the Cultural Revolution, he did not dare to openly oppose the Mao-inspired political movement and the Red Guards movement. Meanwhile, Zhou had to handle plenty of problems in the mainland and could not take care of every aspect of external relations. In this context, the group led by Lin Biao and the Hong Kong and Macau Works Committee had room for manoeuvre during the riots. It resulted in a situation in which nobody was responsible for the event and it was also difficult to find out who was to blame.

Liang said that Beijing had agreed to organize general strikes in Hong Kong but did not back the bomb attacks. "During the 'anti-persecution struggle' in 1967, Zhou Enlai ordered the People's Liberation Army not to cross the border. The mainland did not provide arms and bombs to the leftists in Hong Kong and the official media had never explicitly spread the message of taking over the city," he said.

Liu Yat-yuen believed that Xinhua's Hong Kong branch played a crucial role in orchestrating the anti-British struggle. He said that some top Xinhua officials in Hong Kong were worried that they would be sacked or transferred to the mainland

where they could face political struggle. Senior leaders or heads of government departments in the mainland became targets of political struggles during the Cultural Revolution.

"They [senior officials of Xinhua's Hong Kong branch] launched the anti-British struggle on their own initiative and acted in an extremely antagonistic way towards imperialism so as to retain their official posts. They wanted to show that they were 'politically reliable' in order to win the recognition of the Cultural Revolution Group under the Chinese Communist Party's central committee," he said.

Apart from the need to protect themselves, mainland officials stationed in Hong Kong, who were influenced by the ultra-leftist thoughts during the Cultural Revolution, also felt that there was a need to show their ideological purity and that they were "revolutionaries". The colonial government was an obvious target to display their revolutionary fervour.

Beijing's half-hearted support for the Hong Kong leftists originated from its long-standing pragmatic policy towards Hong Kong since 1949. Shortly after the People's Republic of China was founded, the Chinese Communist Party announced that it did not recognize the three unequal treaties which the Qing Dynasty signed with Britain in the nineteenth century. Beijing would, however, maintain the status quo of Hong Kong before resolving the Hong Kong issue through negotiation at an appropriate time. Zhou Enlai believed that maintaining the status quo of Hong Kong was conducive to breaking China's diplomatic isolation imposed by the West.

Hong Kong could serve as a link between mainland China and the rest of the world, which was essential for attracting foreign capital and foreign exchange, if it remained under Britain's control. In 1966, China's annual foreign exchange receipts from Hong Kong was between £200 million and £210 million, accounting for more than a third of her foreign exchange earnings.[11] Of those earnings, £170 million came from trade surplus on visible trade with Hong Kong while £30 million to £35 million were from remittances by overseas Chinese in or through Hong Kong. China's foreign exchange reserve only amounted to US$167 million in 1978.

According to a report on the future of Hong Kong prepared by the British Defence and Overseas Policy Committee in August 1967, Hong Kong also provided China with a window on the outside world and an easy point of access for trade and travel. "It has served as a centre from which to mount subversive activities against the free world," the report said, "Hong Kong is in addition a useful trading outpost for China, especially as regards commercial dealings with countries with whom it does not have diplomatic relations. Preliminary negotiations for grain deals with Australia and Canada have often taken place in Hong Kong. Western firms, too, can readily make contact with Chinese commercial negotiations in the colony."

The Chinese government stuck to its policy of "long-term deliberation and making full use of Hong Kong" even when it faced the challenge from the Soviet Union. Responding to Soviet Union leader Nikita Khrushchev's attack on China's failure to settle the issue of Hong Kong and Macau, the *People's Daily* editorial on March 8, 1963 said:

> With regard to the outstanding issues, which are a legacy from the past, we have always held that, when conditions are ripe, they should be settled peacefully through negotiations and that, pending a settlement, the status quo should be maintained. Within this category are the questions of Hong Kong, Kowloon and Macau . . . There is no need for the Chinese people to demonstrate force on the questions of Hong Kong and Macau in order to prove our courage and determination in the fight against imperialism.

Zhou had been following the struggle organized by the left wing in Hong Kong since May and had warned against taking radical action in the colony. After the incident at Artificial Flower Works erupted, he said that it was necessary to react to the suppression by the Hong Kong government but the struggle should follow the principle of conducting "on just grounds, to our advantage and with restraint". He disagreed with organizing armed struggle because it would give British a pretext to suppress the masses of the leftist camp.[12]

Zhou also opposed staging a general strike in Hong Kong. "Hong Kong workers can stage some short-term and impromptu strikes but should not copy the format of the general strike in 1925 because the situation is now different. The major investors in 1925 in Hong Kong were foreign businessmen and a general strike could reduce the colony to a 'dead port'. But in the 1960s, most investors in Hong Kong are Chinese businessmen and 90 per cent of foodstuff consumed in Hong Kong was supplied by the mainland. Japanese businessmen would fill the vacuum in the market if there was a general strike in Hong Kong. Besides, Hong Kong workers would have no salary if there was a long-term strike and they would have to count on assistance from the country. It would exert a financial burden on the country," Zhou said.

When Zhou discussed the Hong Kong question with senior officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Communist Party's Hong Kong and Macau Work Committee, he criticized the increasingly radical stance taken by the relevant mainland departments.[13] He criticized the ultra-leftist slogans put forward by the departments responsible for Hong Kong affairs. The Communist Party's Hong Kong and Macau Work Committee sought the central government's approval for launching attack on several police posts in Hong Kong and for killing several "most unscrupulous police officers" in order to "warn others not to follow their example". Zhou dismissed the idea as "anarchism". "Hong Kong is still under the British rule. We do not intend to take back Hong Kong immediately, nor do we plan to wage a war against Britain. We should exercise restraint in our struggle against Britain. It doesn't work if we copy the practices of the Red Guards to Hong Kong," he said.[14]

On July 10, two days after the border conflict in Sha Tau Kok, Zhou talked about the Hong Kong question and called for restraint. "Hong Kong is not another Macau. Using force in Hong Kong is not in line with our current policies. The struggle in Hong Kong is a long-term process. We should not act rashly, otherwise

we would be in a difficult position,"[15] "Chairman Mao said yesterday [July 9] that we will not use force [against Hong Kong]. If we sent troops to Hong Kong, it would be a strike on our own initiative. If we sent units of the regular army in the fight, it would be impossible to stop the situation from worsening," Zhou said.[16] The premier instructed a vice-minister of Foreign Affairs to travel to Guangdong in the second half of July to pass on Mao's directives on Hong Kong.

Zhou Enlai told Malcolm MacDonald, a member of the British Parliament from the Labour Party, in October 1971 that China had no intention of taking Hong Kong back until the New Territories lease expired.

Zhou apologized for the burning of the office of the British chargé d'affaires during his meeting with British Foreign Secretary Sir Alex Douglas-Home on November 1, 1972. "A country can't be always correct. It is unavoidable that it makes some mistakes but recognition of them is necessary. The Chinese government disagrees with the actions taken by the extremists in 1967 and the policies they made in Hong Kong. But the problem got worse after you [the Hong Kong government] started suppression," Zhou said, "the status quo of Hong Kong can be preserved so long as there is no major war in Asia. Maintaining Hong Kong as a free port is beneficial for both China and Britain."[17]

Zhou also made the clearest expression of China's policy on Hong Kong during the meeting with Douglas-Home. According to a file on the British Foreign Office's record of the talk between Zhou Enlai and Douglas-Home on November 1, 1972, Zhou said: "The British were ruling Hong Kong and were responsible. The Chinese did not quarrel with that. They respected the British position."[18] Zhou said that India had taken back Goa without warning but that on the other hand China "had not taken over Macau". He went on to say that "Sir Alec Douglas would understand the Chinese attitude to international issues of this kind. The Chinese view was that such matters should be settled through negotiation and consultation." Zhou added that Hong Kong was "a matter left over by history" and that "the issue of Hong Kong was one which would be settled by negotiation. The Chinese government would take no 'surprise action'."[19]

It appeared that the left wing had recognized that Beijing did not support the anti-British struggle wholeheartedly when the struggle entered the final stage. In an article entitled "Regarding several questions about the anti-persecution struggle", published by the Struggle Committee on July 2, 1967, the committee said that the anti-British struggle was a "long-standing, tough and volatile struggle". "Some people are so quick-tempered that they want to fight a quick battle and finish it quickly. They simply hope that the People's Liberation Army would march to Hong Kong," the committee said, "the atrocities made by the Hong Kong British authorities are irritating and it is very natural to expect the PLA to march to Hong Kong to punish British imperialism and its running dogs. Whether the PLA would march to Hong Kong depends on the actual situation and we should not rely too much on it. We should recognize the fact that the strong support of the people on the motherland

is indispensable for the victory of the ongoing anti-British struggle. But the victory must be secured through our arduous struggle. All support from the motherland is no substitute for the force shown by the masses in Hong Kong. We should count on ourselves to liberate ourselves and should not simply long for the arrival of the PLA."[20] The Struggle Committee aimed at cooling down the expectations of the leftist camp about Beijing taking over Hong Kong prematurely.

The left wing frankly admitted their failure in the 1967 disturbances in 1978. On August 31, 1978, Qi Feng, deputy director of Xinhua's Hong Kong branch, said during the first meeting of the Preparatory Committee for the National Day Celebrations that the 1967 riots violated the central government's policy towards Hong Kong. According to a report by *Ming Pao*, Qi said that the anti-British struggle was an erroneous struggle manipulated by the faction headed by Lin Biao.

"In the beginning of the labour dispute at Hong Kong Artificial Flower Works, there were opportunities for resolving the dispute. The Hong Kong government demanded negotiation with us in the hope of resolving the dispute peacefully but their request was rejected. When we review the decision made at that time, we made a mistake at that time. The masses who had been under oppression rose up to join the struggle in 1967 and they did not make any mistake. The mistakes lied in the leading officials," Qi said.

"There are common ground and differences between the Chinese and British government. We must not use the methods employed in 1967 to handle the conflicts with the British government in the future," Qi said.[21] Lo Fu, who was deputy editor of *Ta Kung Pao* in 1967, said he was present at the meeting and confirmed that Qi's speech on the riots as reported by *Ming Pao* was accurate.

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