



# An idealist with 'nothing to repent'

SCMP 23/7/2015

Once upon a time, Tsang Tak-sing was an idealistic young lad who dared to challenge the establishment – and to this day he is unabashed about the anti-British activism that landed him in jail.

It could not have been more ironic then that he was criticised more than four decades later as home affairs minister for “inadequate work” with Hong Kong’s youth, a factor Beijing officials blamed for spawning the Occupy protests last year.

In a bombshell dropped on Tuesday, Tsang was replaced as secretary for home affairs, as rumours swirled that both Beijing and Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying were unhappy with his performance.

Tsang took a circuitous route to respectability. Had the 1967 riots not broken out, he would have embarked on a more predictable path. An outstanding student at St Paul’s College, he could have gone on to further studies in the United States, joined the colonial government or become a professional.

He told Andrew Li Kwok-nang – then a summer intern at the regional magazine *Far Eastern Economic Review* – during an interview at Stanley Prison in 1968: “I recall vividly one incident that left a deep impression on me. One day after school, I saw a policeman overturn a hawker’s cart of tomatoes and then stamp on them deliberately.

“When the disturbances broke out, I felt I had to do something. I met a girl I knew the day of

the Garden Road incident,” said Tsang, referring to the march by leftists to Government House on May 22, 1967, when a violent clash with police resulted in bloodshed. “She told me how revolted she was by the police’s beatings. After this, I was even more convinced I was right.”

Li, who became the city’s first chief justice in 1997, deduced



## What I did in 1967 was just exercising my freedom of expression

TSANG TAK-SING

### Put Up Posters In Class-Rooms

An 18-year-old youth was yesterday sentenced to two years in jail when he was found guilty of placing inflammatory posters in some class-rooms of the school where he was studying.

Tsang Tak-sing, a pupil of St Paul’s College, Bonham Road, and living in 6, Hok Sze Terrace, was found guilty by Mr T. J. van Rees at Central Court.

The press and the public were barred from the court to protect witnesses testifying in the case.

The Post’s report on October 10, 1967 on Tsang’s sentencing.

from this encounter that “Tsang has examined things for himself and concluded Hong Kong is decadent, a city where everyone makes money as fast as they can. Sickened by his views of the colony, he opted for communism.”

The political upheavals of that era brought the city to a standstill. But one could hardly imagine that Tsang, a lover of Ian Fleming’s James Bond fiction and novels by American humorist Mark Twain, would stage an anti-British campaign in the riots.

At lunchtime on September 28, 1967, Tsang – wearing his prefect’s tie as per usual – and several classmates distributed anti-British material in classrooms. He was arrested and sentenced to two years in prison for “distributing inflammatory leaflets”.

Tsang said the leftist students arrested in the disturbances adhered to a “three-no’s” policy – no to stepping onto the witness stand, no to hiring lawyers and no to replying to the charges. He also opted to defend himself in court because his family could not afford a lawyer for him.

“What I said [in the leaflets] was true and did not constitute any sedition,” Tsang told the court. He opposed the judgment, saying his actions were simply “seeking justice”.

“Some people may not agree with my views, but from nowadays’ perspective, what I did in 1967 was just exercising my freedom of expression,” Tsang said.

His deeds were hailed by leftists as “brave” and “righteous”. That he was a student from an

elite school seen to be rising up against the colonial government was of propaganda value for the pro-Beijing media.

Li was sympathetic towards Tsang and other prisoners from the leftist camp. “These youngsters are moved by high ideals, however misconceived. They are angry at what they regard as an unhealthy community,” he wrote in the magazine. “The colony ought not to take refuge in the theory that all will be well as long as the economy prospers.”

Tsang joined the pro-Beijing *New Evening Post* after walking free from prison in February 1969. He quickly became a rising star in pro-Beijing media circles.

He was subsequently promoted to deputy news editor and then news editor, and moved on to become chief editor of *Ta Kung Pao* in 1988. He was made an adviser to the government’s Central Policy Unit in 1998 and became secretary for home affairs in 2007.

“I have nothing to repent, despite losing some time and opportunities. I benefit every day from what I learned in prison,” he said in an interview in 1999.

Reflecting on the 1967 riot, Tsang insisted it had been righteous resistance launched by the patriotic masses against colonial oppression, though he admitted certain acts were excessive. He said it was stupid for some people from the leftist camp to plant bombs in the streets.

“Once you plant a bomb in the streets, other people could follow suit.”

Gary Cheung

## Central Magistracy Court One & Fortress Road 1967 Arrest



This HK 1967 Riots article above may interest those in justice.

**Court to Home Affairs.**

In 1967 the writer was a police prosecutor in Central Magistracy. One can recall some cases I prosecuted. Narcotics, serious traffic and the more exciting 1967 'riot cases'. The court was very busy daily in 1967 prosecuting the cases associated to the disturbances until the following year. I can only remember the more important cases prosecuted. One can never forget Magistrate Mr. Paul Corfe before whom I prosecuted the case of manufacturing of illegal arms at Fortress Hill whose defendants were weighed off for six years imprisonment and who added three months to one defendant for contempt of court. (See above) There is another article in draft which will include the 'Corfe' contempt of court sentence. It is an interesting facet of the law.

Over a period I recall several magistrates hearing cases in Central Magistracy. I believe it was five or six.

My memory was jogged by the SCMP 23/7/2015 article above regarding Tsang Tak Sing who has just been 'retired' from his political appointment as Secretary for Home affairs.

Following his 1967 court conviction I was a humble Principal Assistant Secretary in Home Affairs myself and long before his appointment.

In the SCMP article see the little piece below ('Put Up Posters in Class-Rooms') Tsang was convicted of placing inflammatory posters in some school class rooms. According to the SCMP he was sentenced on 10 October 1967 and found guilty by Magistrate Mr. T.J. van Rees and

**sentenced Tsang for two years imprisonment and was incarcerated in Hong Kong's Stanley 'Guantanamo' Prison.**

**I now remember well chubby and cheerful Mr. T.J. van Rees who sentenced Tsang to a two year spell in the nick. I was definitely prosecuting in Central Magistracy in October 1967. I cannot be totally sure, of course, but it is more than quite possible that the writer was the prosecutor presenting Tsang's case!**

**What is a bit strange in the case according to the SCMP the press and public were barred from the court to protect witnesses testifying in the case! I believe that was correct, I feel, but I cannot recall the reasons behind it now. I never thought about it again until Tsang's government political appointment.**

**I recall Mr. van Rees well enough who was easy going and a bit quicker to make up his mind in finding defendants guilty compared with Mr. Corfe who was extremely careful and measured.**

**In retrospect, I think I might have said then to Magistrate van Rees in mitigation that Tsang Tak Sing was young and 'radicalised' and had not been charged for any form of actually planting bombs or assault on others. In the circumstances, I think the sentence to two years imprisonment was too harsh. It would have been better to have channelled his young path into something more positive and balanced thought instead of becoming bitter over the Colonial government's treatment instead of becoming a rabid Beijing sympathiser? But no mercy on those who planted bombs killing and injuring civilians including children!**



**Prosecutor**