

Police should rethink clumsy whitewashing of 1967 riots



Gary Cheung says playing down mainland China's communist inspiration for the deadly unrest is not only unprofessional, but morally wrong

The famous quote by British journalist and publisher C. P. Scott that "comment is free, but facts are sacred" has endured as the ultimate statement of values for a free press. Police officers are not journalists but they should bear in mind the second part of Scott's motto when they write the force's history.

The force's recent amendment on its website to its official history during the 1967 riots deviates from the principle that "facts are sacred". The description of the culprits who killed five policemen and injured 11 others in a border conflict in Sha Tau Kok on July 8, 1967, has been changed from "communist militia" to "gunmen".

A paragraph detailing the height of the leftist-inspired riots was cut by more than half in the updated version. Deleted passages include references to left-wing protesters waving *Quotations from Chairman Mao* as they marched on Government House and the establishment of the All-Circles Anti-Persecution Struggle Committee.

While I have no clue whether the move was politically motivated, the update was unprofessional and laughable. The end product amounts to disrespect for history. Replacing

the phrase "communist militia" with "gunmen" (or "gunmen from the mainland" in the Chinese version) is factually wrong.

A confidential report submitted by the now-defunct police special branch in March 1968 noted that the armed attacks were launched by "militiamen" on the Chinese border. The special branch even believed that the People's Liberation Army officers stationed along the border had given tacit consent to the militiamen's armed attacks.

What are the police suggesting by choosing the phrase "gunmen" for the updated version? That the perpetrators were armed men, hired to rob and kill people, similar to the gunmen who had crossed the border in the past three decades?

The deletion of details such as left-wing protesters waving *Quotations from Chairman Mao* also effectively obscures the impact of the Cultural Revolution, which inspired leftists to turn a labour dispute into large-scale protests against British colonial rule.

Police commissioner Stephen Lo Wai-chung said last week that the updated version, with a more concise presentation of content, was merely to make the force's history more accessible to readers.

But his explanation is by no means convincing as the "Modern Era 1945-67" section is the only part of the force's history where words were trimmed.

The force, whose suppression of the disturbances earned itself the title "Royal" in 1969, is not equally economical with its words when it comes to the rest of its history. In the "Creating a Legend 1967-94" chapter, more controversial sections, such as one on the Independent Commission Against Corruption's anti-graft operations targeting police officers in the 1970s, were kept intact in the updated version.

It reads: "There were many arrests. Many, both in the force and the community, felt things were going too far, that practices that had for many years been either accepted or to which authorities turned a blind eye were now subject to cynical scrutiny and prosecution."

To its credit, the police force is one of the few government departments – if not the only one – which mentions the history of the riots on its official website; the Hong Kong government has been making subtle efforts to play down that chapter in the city's history.

The force should do its homework before writing or rewriting its own history. It should also bear in mind that, unlike a print edition, there is no restriction to length for online content.

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