

# The Days of Hoisting Flags: Double Ten Riots

**On 10 October 1956, riots broke out in Kowloon, lasting for three days, with many casualties. The then 15 year old Wong Jum-sum saw with his eyes how the wife of the Swiss Consulate was burnt to death by rioters a few hundred yards in front of his home in Sham Shui Po. Reflecting on tragedies like this, Wong knew for sure riots were a price Hong Kong could not pay.**

One often encounters this picture on Internet forums about old Hong Kong: Yum Chou Street in Sham Shui Po, a car overturned, with black smoke whirling. In the background was the building of Garden Company Limited; to its right, the Shek Kip Mei public housing estate, then barely three years old. One can imagine, if possible, the camera moves further right for two hundred feet. There one will see the 15 year old Wong Jum-sum standing by the window of his home, gazing at the black smoke, with mouth wide open (*Pictures: Double Ten Riots*).

On 10 October 1956, riots broke out in Kowloon, lasting for three days, with many casualties. The riots, built on the continued tension between the Communists and the Nationalists, brought terrible scenes of violence that resulted in 60 deaths and 443 people injured. It remains the riot with most casualties in Hong Kong history.

In 1996, Television Broadcast Limited presented a documentary series entitled 'Hong Kong Legends', with the first episode on 'riots'. Wong Jum-sum appeared on the program bearing the title 'an ordinary civilian', giving an eye-witness account on how the wife of the Swiss Consulate was burnt to death by rioters a few hundred yards in front of his home in Sham Shui Po (*James Wong Notes: Cannot Pay the Price*). One can understand why the event left so deep a mark on him. Throughout the early 1950s, his father regularly hoisted the Nationalist flag at their Sham Shui Po home during the double tens. Shek Kip Mei housing estate itself was home to a sea of Nationalist flags. The tension was palpable. Violence laid just around the corner.

After the riots, the colonial government issued a substantial report, appended with a colour map showing the numerous spots of fire, robbery and shooting along the streets from Lei Cheng Uk Estate to Yau Ma Tei in those three days (*Extended Readings: Kowloon Riots Report*). It was reported that, at the height of the riots, Tsuen Wan experienced two hour of 'anarchy'. To quell the riots, the police instigated massive acts of search and arrests. On 14 October, three thousand people were locked in the Chatham Barracks (*Extended readings: Double Ten Riots*). Press reports, which liberally showed the scenes of destruction, reinforced the sense of general gloom (*Pictures: Double Ten Riots 1956*).

Today, reviewing all this, we understand why a whole generation of Hong Kong people would chime with the words of James Wong – Hong Kong is our home, riots are a price we cannot afford to pay (*James Wong Note: Cannot Pay the Price*).