

# THE PROBLEM OF 1997

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**An interview with Mr. Lao Si Guang,  
Chairman of Hong Kong's Future Study Group**

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*In recent months, the people of Hong Kong have felt more a sense of urgency about Hong Kong's future. On August 20th, in the afternoon, TRIPOD payed a visit to Mr. Lao Si Guang. Mr. Lao is a professor of Philosophy at Chinese University and also Board Chairman for Hong Kong's Future Study Group. We interviewed him about his Group and its work.*

TRIPOD: Professor Lao, can you tell us what motivation lay behind, and the process that led to the formation of the Study Group?

Professor Lao: Hong Kong's intellectual community has been acutely aware for a long time now of the problem of Hong Kong's future. The problem had already been discussed in detail a long time ago in the pages of the monthly periodical The Seventies. Then, last year the Bai Xing semi-monthly published material regarding the 1997 question. After publication, a meeting was held to discuss the problem. As a result, everyone felt that we had to move quickly towards some practical methodology. It was felt that a structure should be established to promote greater public awareness and activity in this area. And so, Hong Kong's Future Study Group came into being on September the 18th of last year. It was formally registered as a corporation and officers were elected, myself Chairman, Xi Dong-Bin Secretary, and Tan Xi-Yong Treasurer. The remaining six board members are: Li Yi, Hu Yu-Ren, Sun Shu-Xian, Lu Keng, Dong Qian-Li and Zheng Yu-Shuo.

TRIPOD: What was your basic plan? What kind of activities were involved?

Professor Lao: Because of the urgency of the problem, we immediately began to look for possible solutions. Finally, we came up

with a three phase programme.

The first phase was to make both the British as well as the Chinese governments understand that the problem of 1997 has to be resolved as quickly as possible. It must not be put off. It seems to us that a major difficulty is that China does not fully comprehend the relationship that exists between investor and consumer. China seems to feel that in order to preserve economic prosperity, it is enough to assure the investor that he can put his heart at ease. The fact of the matter is that should the consumer lose confidence in purchasing, the continual reassurance of the investor is useless. Furthermore, not a few property investors in Hong Kong have mortgages lasting for a period of fifteen years. If the banks should lose confidence in Hong Kong's future, then it would be impossible for this kind of business activity to continue.

Britain, too, has spared no energy in addressing the issue, giving us verbal reassurance that there is no real problem about Hong Kong's future at all. From a legal point of view, however, this kind of reassurance has little effect. It is impossible for verbal reassurances to serve as the basis for legal commercial contracts. In summary, then, phase one of our work was to articulate forcefully our concern to both governments, making them very aware that it is imperative to render a clear and unambiguous explanation of the problem and its possible solutions at this time. If not, Hong Kong's economic crisis can only worsen. Phase two of our work arose from our conviction that if we are to be of benefit to Hong Kong and its future, we must do more than just point out the problem. We must also propose some solutions of our own. And for such proposals to be effective, they must exclude any proposals that either China or Britain may find unacceptable. One has first to consider the political status of the territory as a whole, Hong Kong Island, Kowloon North and the New Territories as a unit. For this reason, the Study Group has formed into two sub-groups, a planning group and what we call a 'members group'. The former is responsible for the collection of relevant data and the on going search for possible solutions. The latter recruits new members and sponsors discussion and study groups among the various social professions, i.e. students, teachers, industrialists, businessmen, etc. The purpose of these meetings and discussions is to arouse public interest in and deeper

understanding of the complex dimensions of the problem. Our Study Group has already begun implementing phase two of the programme.

Phase three involves a public survey. After the public have gained a deeper understanding of the complexities of the situation, and the possible solutions, we intend to conduct a poll in order to determine the opinions of the majority of Hong Kong's citizens. The poll will probably be done through newspapers and magazines. It will differ from the one recently conducted here in the institutions of higher learning in so far as we want the people to be as fully informed as possible about the issues before we take the poll. Work on phase three will begin shortly.

TRIPOD:

Recently, we read in the Ming Pao newspaper, a proposal by the Study Group for the first step in a possible solution to the 1997 problem. You have proposed that China and Britain enter into an Anglo-Chinese Friendship and Cooperation Treaty, which would be in force for a period of not less than thirty years. Why do you think this would be an effective start to an eventual solution?

Professor Lao:

Because it matches the expressed needs of the three parties who are involved, China, Britain and Hong Kong. The proposal does not have Hong Kong as its object, but rather the Anglo-Chinese relationship, which it seeks to redefine. The treaty would urge China and Britain to enter into a relationship of high level cooperation. Under this kind of an arrangement, Hong Kong can continue to develop efficient resources to contribute to China's modernization programme. The central point of the present conflict is sovereignty. While Britain years ago agreed to comply with the United Nations resolution to delete, at the request of China, the name Hong Kong from the list of colonial territories, Britain still holds Hong Kong to be territory ceded to her by China. So the key point for China to regain sovereignty over Hong Kong is how to establish a legal basis for the return. To annul Hong Kong's present legal status as a ceded territory naturally will demand a formal treaty between the two countries. Such a treaty would recognize China's claims to sovereignty over Hong Kong but would also go into the details of how and when the change will be implemented. At the same *time*

China would continue to recognize that the status quo is not only of benefit to the two governments but also corresponds to the wishes of the people of Hong Kong. In this way Hong Kong's efficiency and prosperity can be preserved.

TRIPOD: Why a thirty year limit on the proposed treaty?

Professor Lao: We felt that this arises from the close relationship between economic realities and the political system. Hong Kong's economic prosperity is directly linked to the present functioning political system. If this system is changed, then Hong Kong's present prosperity will certainly vanish. As for its future prosperity, the most optimistic view is that it will take a prolonged period of adaptation and reformation before another kind of prosperity will be able to appear. This possibility has nothing to do with the availability of expertise or ability, nor with the innate characteristics of the system, its strengths and weaknesses, its virtues and faults. Rather, it will arise from the change of the system itself. Although it is difficult to predict how much time this will take, one assumes at the very least ten to twenty years. One cannot within a short span of time transform a whole new system. China considers Hong Kong's prosperity to be very important. It also understands that Hong Kong must be able to preserve what it has achieved in order that it might continue to help in China's modernization programme. If Hong Kong cannot continue to develop its present positive role, it will mean that China in the future, will have to sacrifice its own resources and manpower to support the territory. I have previously stated this very important point in response to the Bai Xing article.

*As we were leaving, Professor Lao said to us: "The Church in Hong Kong represents a significant group of people. It, too, should be concerned about this problem. We welcome the participation of your members in our activities." We thanked Professor Lao not only for giving us so much of his time for the interview, but also for his kind invitation to join in the work of Hong Kong's Future Study Group.*

translated by Patrick TAVEIRNE