Managing Crises in Mainland China: The Shenzhen Landslide, Tianjin Explosion and Shanghai Stampede

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Introduction

The way in which the mainland police handle crises and contingency circumstances can be seen in the three case studies: the landslide in Shenzhen, the explosion of containers full of chemicals in the Tianjin port, and the human stampede in Shanghai. These three case studies demonstrated how mainland police were ill-equipped to prevent sudden crises from taking place even though they responded to contingency situation promptly. As with the Hong Kong police during the 2016 Mongkok riot, the mainland police appear to be not really well-prepared for the sudden eruption of crises.

The Shenzhen Landslide

At noon on December 20, 2015, a sudden landslide occurred at the hillside of the industrial park located at the Guangming district. The landslide covered a large number of buildings, killing 7 people immediately and making 75 citizens disappear.1 The death toll rose to ten on December 29.2 It was reported in Hong Kong that the management of the Shenzhen Luwei company, which was responsible for the industrial park, contracted out the waste management responsibility to the Yishenglong company that operated illegally for ten months by dumping tons of mud, construction materials and sand while gaining a profit of RMB$75,000,000 yuan.3 The mainland police arrested the executives of the waste management company, but the action was too late.

1 Sing Tao Daily, December 27, 2015, p. A11.
3 Hong Kong Cable TV News, December 21 and 22, 2015.
On December 25, 2015, the official Xinhua news agency carried a commentary that stressed the unfortunate event could test the capability of managing crises in Shenzhen. The Shenzhen landslide demonstrated, according to Xinhua, a number of features in how the local government tackled the crisis. First, the local government officials attempted a cover-up, leading to some netizens’ criticisms that the government just put the blame on the mass media rather than reflecting humbly on any possible administrative errors. Xinhua said that free information flow could actually contribute to the local government’s rescue efforts and remedial measures. Under Xinhua’s criticisms, the local government responsible for the rescue efforts at the landslide scene held three press briefings within 24 hours so as to reveal the progress of the rescue efforts, thus satisfying the demands of the public in acquiring more updated information on the landslide. Moreover, 5,000 rescue personnel, 500 vehicles and 100 rescue equipment were deployed immediately, demonstrating the swiftness of the rescue efforts. The Xinhua commentary also emphasized the importance of local governments to conduct risk assessment so as to find out any potential safety problems and to take measures in addressing them. Obviously, the central government urged that local governments should learn a lesson from the Shenzhen experience, and that Shenzhen itself must prevent another similar incident from occurring.

On the seventh day after the tragedy, the Guangdong provincial party-secretary Hu Chunhua, Guangdong provincial governor Zhu Xiaodan and Shenzhen city’s party secretary Ma Xingrui attended a ceremony to pay tribute to those who died in the landslide. They held white flowers to commemorate the dead, but the relatives of the victims who disappeared could not enter the scene as the cranes and equipment rescuing the trapped citizens blocked them. Some relatives told the Hong Kong media that they sadly waited for the news of their loved ones who were trapped inside the rubbles. However, it would take several weeks for the huge pile of construction materials, sand and mud to be cleared by 800 heavy cranes because the waste materials were piled up for almost 100 meters high. Fire service officers who were sent to the rescue scene had to wear special masks and protected

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
chemical gears for the sake of preventing themselves from being infected with poisonous materials. On December 26, the State Council’s Bureau of Safety and Supervision ordered an investigation into the causes of the Shenzhen landslide, meaning that the central government in Beijing wished to find out the officials and company executives who were responsible for incurring the tragedy.

On December 27, 2015, the bureau chief responsible for waste management of the industrial park, Xu Yuanan, committed suicide. He had been responsible for signing the contract for waste management and its renewal. Xu had no connection with the Shenzhen police, which arrested 12 other people for investigation. As a matter of fact, before he committed suicide, Xu had resigned from the position of bureau chief for a year. His death could not stop the State Council from pursuing the investigation, for Shenzhen as a special economic zone was expected to govern itself effectively with a good image. The landslide tarnished the image of governance in Shenzhen, which had no choice but to look into the causes of the accident and to prevent it from reoccurring in the future.

Xu’s background illustrated that public maladministration in the Shenzhen Guangming industrial park. He worked in the chengguan (urban management) company contracted out by the Guangming new district. As a chengguan office deputy director in 1983, Xu had been responsible for the urban management issues. From 2009 to 2014 he was promoted as the director of the chengguan supervision command center. Undoubtedly, Xu became the key person dealing with the signing of the contract with the waste management company that handled the tons of mud and construction materials. What was embarrassing to Xu was that, four days before the accident, the waste management company had proposed that chemical wastes should no longer be dumped onto the hillside, but Xu and his colleagues rejected this idea. As a rapidly developing region, Shenzhen’s two-thirds of its workers came from other provinces, but these workers did not really benefit from the fruits of their success. Many of them did not even visit the cities in Shenzhen but stayed in their workplace located at the outskirts, such as the Guangming district. Hence, for the workers who were killed in the accident, their plight illustrated the dark side of China’s workers.

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10 Ibid.
In China, many cities hire *chengguan* or urban management companies to manage a whole range of municipal affairs, including the control over hawkers, urban security and waste management. Quite often, staff members working for *chengguan* are criticized by many ordinary citizens for either abusing their power or mismanagement. The case of Shenzhen landslide reflected mismanagement on the part of the urban management company contracted out by the Guangming district government, for waste management was poorly handled without proper supervision.

Another report in Hong Kong revealed that Xu actually utilized his private friendship with an executive of the waste management company and he was criticized for nepotism and collaborating with the private sector. Some people even suspected that Xu committed suicide for the sake of protecting his higher-level officials in the city government. Xu and his friend from the Yishengloong company tried to acquire the contract of handling waste management, which had already been obtained by another company named Luwei. However, Luwei received RMB$750,000 for the right of waste management to be transferred to Yishenglong. After Yishenglong obtained the management right, it did not really manage chemical wastes effectively; instead the company earned a profit of RMB$200,000 every day by collecting RMB$250 to RMB$300 for each truck going up to the hillside to dump chemical and construction materials. From the beginning of its operation in February 2015 to the day when the accident took place, the company actually netted a profit of RMB$70 million. Hence, when Xu committed suicide, some netizens criticized the Shenzhen police for saying that other reasons apart from suicide were excluded, because there was a likelihood that Xu was “persuaded” to kill himself. Some netizens openly remarked that “one person died, but several persons felt comfortable.” A land developer, Ren Ziqiang, who was often openly critical of the Chinese Communist Party, even went so far as to say that Xu’s death “cut the chain of responsibilities.” Their comments implied that there could be local government officials who were involved in the public mismanagement of the chemical and construction waste, but

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15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 *Hong Kong Economic Times*, December 29, 2015, p. A17.
19 Ibid.
the mainland’s style of accountability often tends to put the pressure on a single person to shoulder the responsibility. In this case, when the police questioned Xu, he felt so hard-pressed that committing suicide became his alternative.

From the perspective of remedial measures taken by the Shenzhen authorities, their response to the landslide was prompt. On January 12, 2016, the Shenzhen local government announced that 69 dead bodies were found in the site of the landslide and eight people remained missing. Meanwhile, 16 people were arrested and 6 others were at large because they were involved in the accountability aspect of the landslide. From the outbreak of the landslide on December 20 to January 12, the Shenzhen government mobilized 10,681 people to the rescue efforts, including the deployment of 2,628 heavy cranes and 55,800 detections of infectious disease and health problems in the affected region. The Shenzhen municipal administration designated December 20 as the annual city safety day, making a gesture to the central government in Beijing that it learnt a lesson from the incident. It also vowed to manage waste materials properly, tackled dangerous slopes effectively and ensured the city’s operational safety. In President Xi Jinping’s Chinese Lunar New Year’s speech to all PRC citizens, he mentioned Shenzhen’s landslide as one of the sudden tragedies encountered by his government and necessitated immediate action. In response to Xi’s remark, the Shenzhen city’s party-secretary Ma Xingrui stressed that Shenzhen had 500 square meters of waste materials that were piled up and required immediate but effective clearance. In terms of remedial action, the Shenzhen government demonstrated its swiftness mainly because of the pressure from Beijing through the Xinhua commentary and partly because of the extensive national media coverage, but the preventive measures had long been absent, not to mention the possibility of pre-empting the occurrence of the landslide.

The police aggressively pursued the suspects who were involved in the landslide. On December 19, Wang Minghui was arrested by the police after his return to China from Indonesia. All other suspects under arrest warrant were eventually arrested, including those who escaped to Hunan province and one surrendering himself to the Fujian police. Clearly, the Shenzhen police had communicated and

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21 Ibid.  
22 Ibid.  
coordination with the police in other provinces on the identity of the criminal suspects so that they could be apprehended very quickly.

**The Tianjin Explosion**

The second incident that demonstrated the reactions of the PRC police, especially the fire service, was the explosion of the Tianjin port on August 12, 2015. The explosion killed 165 people and led to an economic loss of RMB$680 million.\(^{25}\) It led to the action of the central government to hold 123 officials in Tianjin for being accountable for the incident and 74 of them were penalized. Among the 165 people who died, 99 of them were fire service officers and 11 were police. About 798 people were injured while 304 buildings, 12,000 vehicles and 7,533 containers were destroyed.\(^{26}\) The fire service department was sent to deal with the tragedy, clearing 1.1 tons of dangerous chemical goods, 7,641 vehicles and 13,800 containers. The investigation team dispatched to look into the tragedy labelled it as a “special and important accident relating to production safety” because a large volume of nitrocellulose was stored by a warehouse of the Ruihai Company. However, the dangerous chemicals released a huge amount of heat due to hot weather and caused the fire accident, which in turn brought about the explosion of a large volume of ammonium nitrate and other hazardous chemicals that were transported to and deposited in the container port. The central government found that the Ruihai Company was solely responsible for the fire accident. The police arrested 13 executives of the company and 11 other technicians. The investigation team found that the incident led to environmental pollution, although the maritime area and ocean quality of the Tianjin Bohai Bay was not polluted.\(^{27}\) Five provincial-level officials were punished, including the Tianjin city’s party-secretary Zong Quoying, Tianjin city’s deputy mayors Sun Wenhui and He Shushan, transport deputy minister He Jianzhong, and customs deputy director Lu Peizun.\(^{28}\) They were either warned or demoted, but none of them lost his job.

Beijing was keen to hold the provincial-level officials responsible for the sudden explosion, which tarnished the image of the PRC regionally and internationally because of the extensive international media coverage.

\(^{25}\) *Sing Pao*, February 6, 2016, p. A16.

\(^{26}\) Ibid.

\(^{27}\) Ibid.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., February 6, 2016, p. A15.
According to the report of the investigation team from the central government’s National Security and Supervision Bureau (NSSB), the Ruihai Company violated the existing regulations to ignore production safety by illegally building sites to store dangerous chemical materials from November 2012 to June 2015, when checks and supervision from the relevant departments were lacking.29 The team pointed to the transport officials for failing to inspect the storage of dangerous chemicals in the port, and to the customs authorities for the absence of leadership in monitoring port safety issues. The NSSB also reported that the Tianjin explosion was comparable to the environmental protection release of heat and energy from 445 tons of Trinitrotoluene (TNT).30 It severely criticized a number of provincial departments for failing to adopt strict measures in dealing with the dangerous chemicals, including transport, port authority, customs, safety and supervision, planning and national resources, market and quality control, marine, police and agencies. Despite the fact that five provincial officials were “penalized,” some netizens criticized the penalties as relatively light. The relatively heavy penalties appeared to be levelled at the company executives of the port authority, which had 3 of the top 22 executives – director, deputy director and the chief engineer -- being expelled from the Chinese Communist Party. Penalties levelled mainly at the company executives were one thing, but preventive actions were another. As with the Shenzhen landslide, the Tianjin port explosion demonstrated the poverty of any earlier preventive measures that might have pre-empted the crisis from occurring.

The police and fire service were also criticized in the incident. Among the 165 people who died in the incident, 99 were fire service officers (75 came from the Tianjin port) and 11 others from the police.31 Among the eight missing people, 5 of them were firemen from the Tianjin government. Rumors were rife that the Ruihai Company was opened and led by the children of senior officials and party cadres.32 The investigation report did not touch on these rumors, but the lack of supervision and coordination by the departments concerned, including the customs, safety and supervision and the police, was regarded as of utmost importance. The media also reported that the firemen who were sent to the scene did not really know that dangerous chemicals were stored in the port and that they were instructed to use water to distinguish the fire. Many young firemen who were around 18 and 19

31 Ibid.
years old sacrificed their lives in the incident. Moreover, most of them were on contractual terms and they joined the fire services for the sake of having better benefits. The relatives of the firemen who died in the incident broke down into tears in public, as the mainland media showed. Nonetheless, the use of water exacerbated the explosion because special chemicals should ideally be deployed to tackle the complex mixture of chemical components in the container port. Critics of the Tianjin port explosion charged that the government officials committed serious mistakes by neglecting port safety, that the Ruihai company executives actually smuggled excessive amount of chemicals to be stored in the port, and that the tragedy was actually a man-made one.

The reaction of the Tianjin government to the explosion was swift. On the morning of August 13, several hours after the explosion, 339 police officers were sent to clear the roads and paths leading to the Tianjin port so that the rescue operation could be conducted smoothly. Reporters followed the rescue team into the explosion zone, where hundreds of thousands of containers were destroyed and where drones were used by the police to detect the extent of damage. Apart from firemen who were mobilized to the scene, a special rescue team dealing with nuclear accident was dispatched to extract the air from the affected regions so as to inspect the degree of toxin pollution. It took the rescue team almost 24 hours to use sand to cover a river that led to the port where the explosion took place. The explosion of dangerous chemical materials took place several times in the port area, triggering the police concern about the spread of toxic gas and polluted materials to the city. During the press conference on August 15, the Tianjin government revealed that 1,000 firemen were mobilized to the scene to put off the fire; four rescue zones were drawn up to conduct the operation; the air quality was maintained at a “safe” level; 12 schools and 3 apartments were deployed as temporary shelters for the fire victims; and 10 hospitals with 1,675 doctors, nurses and other staff members were mobilized to help the injured citizens.

One of the most important tasks of the rescue team was to block the passage of all the chemical materials that were dissolved after the huge explosion, while drainage pipes and water drainage system at the port area were all closed in order to avoid the spread of toxic materials and environmental pollution. The preliminary

[33] Hong Kong Cable TV news, August 15, 2015.
[34] Tianjin Daily, August 15, 2015.
[35] Ibid.
assessment of the fire service was that the explosion affected 17,000 households, 1,700 industrial enterprises and 675 shops. One fireman who belonged to those being sent immediately to tackle the explosion was miraculously rescued. The challenge of the rescue team was to stop the explosion and terminate the spread of the toxic gas and materials to other areas. As such, the fire service in Hebei province was fully mobilized and 600 tons of sand were transported by 66 police vehicles, trucks and cranes so as to assist the process of extinguishing the fire. Members of the rescue team wore masks and protected gears to deal with the extremely dangerous and toxic chemicals stored in the port area. An expert team sent by the central government in Beijing worked with the Tianjin experts, discussing ways of dealing with the victims through better coordination among local hospitals. The two teams from Beijing and Tianjin organized themselves into sub-groups responsible for expert advice, resource allocation, victim treatment, hospital room visits, and rescue operation. Clinical psychologists were also sent to tackle the victims and their relatives. Some chemicals had to be handled carefully with the objective of reducing their intensity, including ethylene oxide, chloroform, and toluene. These three chemical ingredients were reportedly under control on August 13 so as to safeguard the health of citizens living near the port area.

The Tianjin government took action to calm the fears of some citizens, who expressed their concern that rainy days would produce hazards to the chemical materials stored in the container port. Its spokesman remarked on August 14 that all the dissolved chemicals were blocked inside the container port so that residents living nearby would not have their health being negatively affected. About 6,300 residents were relocated to reside in temporary shelters and homes with the provision of daily necessities. Donations and logistical supplied were also received and provided respectively so that the victims would be treated promptly. The Charity Association of Binhai precinct donated RMB$1.7 million and other food and medical stuffs. The Binhai housing department took action immediately to inspect those homes where windows and other facilities were damaged by the explosion. Repair work was planned and would be initiated once the dangerous chemical zone was turned into a safe area. To protect the neighboring regions, the water and electricity departments made sure that water and electricity supply continued without any disruption, whereas the transport department allocated additional 200 public transport vehicles to ease any traffic jam. Special sewage treatment was made with regard to cyanide and other toxic chemicals so that any

36 Ibid.
further contamination of the affected port area could be stopped. On August 16, the Tianjin government held another press briefing and admitted that 90 people were missing after the explosion. Officials who met the press include representatives from the PLA and the environmental protection department.\textsuperscript{37} Judging from the reactions of the Tianjin government, its reaction to the explosion was prompt and comprehensive.

In September 2015, the Tianjin Binhai precinct’s local legislature held a meeting to discuss the process of asking the Ruihai Company and relevant departments to compensate for the victims of the port explosion, including the relatives of the firemen who died, and the residents whose homes had windows destroyed by the huge blasts resulting from the explosion.\textsuperscript{38} The precinct chief Zhang Yong announced that the government had figured out the details of compensation in accordance with the assessment of the damages incurred to victims and affected individuals. He also remarked that the precinct would consult public opinion on the areas which were originally planned for an ecological ocean park, a primary school and a kindergarten, and that a green belt would be created after the tragic explosion. Zhang added that the departments concerned learnt a bitter lesson from the explosion, including the need to improve supervision, consolidate medical rescue work, and to facilitate information flow.

Overall, the PRC police, including the fire service, performed professionally during the rescue operation. Nonetheless, preventive measures were not taken effectively to pre-empt the occurrence of the Tianjin port explosion, which was a result of public maladministration comprising not just the police but also other departments, notably customs, safety and supervision, and port authority. Most of the young firemen who were sent to the explosion scene died immediately because of the large volume of dangerous chemicals being stored in the container port; they were the victims sacrificing their lives. It was true that the Tianjin port explosion was the outcome of man-made mistakes; the illegal and excessive storage of toxic chemicals by the Ruihai Company, together with the mismanagement and negligence of the departments concerned, brought about the tragedy. Although the Tianjin government reacted quickly in the face of Beijing’s immediate intervention and the regional as well as international media coverage, its action was too late. Still, it learnt a bitter lesson from the explosion. The pattern of public

\textsuperscript{37} Cable TV news, August 16, 2015.
\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Ta Kung Pao}, September 28, 2015, p. A7.
maladministration, followed by swift police action and local governmental reactions, could be seen in both the Shenzhen landslide and the Tianjin explosion.

The Shanghai Stampede

A human stampede took place in Shanghai on the midnight of December 31, 2014 when hundreds of thousands of people went to the Bund area to celebrate the coming of 2015. During the stampede, 35 people aged between 12 and 36 and mostly female were killed and 42 were injured. The tragedy happened at 11:35 pm on the Chenyi Square of the Huangpu district, around the Bund area, which is the waterfront and popularly visited part in central Shanghai. One week prior to the New Year, the Shanghai authorities suddenly cancelled the city’s annual New Year’s Eve 3D laser display, which had attracted 300,000 visitors in 2014. However, the sudden policy change was not effectively disseminated to the citizens of Shanghai in 2015. Compounding the problem was the lack of police officers in the Bund area, making crowd control extremely difficult.

After the tragedy, President Xi Jinping requested an immediate investigation into the cause of the stampede, asking the Shanghai authorities to “go all out” to the rescue and treat the injured people effectively. Xi added that local government officials should prioritize the safety of the citizens and that they should take measures to address any gap in event management. At the same time, the PRC Premier Li Keqiang appealed to the Shanghai officials to “make every effort” to reduce the number of victims and to console the relatives of the victims.

In the face of tremendous pressure from Beijing, the Shanghai government set up a working team to look into the incident. One witness said that some bartenders from a building threw coupons similar to American dollar bills near the Bund, making the people who stood along the river bank scramble for them, thus indirectly or directly triggering the human stampede. After the tragedy, the police hunted a man and a woman for showering fake bank notes onto the Bund area and for creating the chaos. Another main reason for the stampede was that hundreds of people swarmed onto a raised platform for a good view of the 3D laser show, which they thought would continue but which was cancelled. However, some people pushed

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40 Xinhua news agency, January 1, 2015.
41 Ibid.
the others in front, leading to the stampede in which victims could not breathe and were either injured or trampled to death. The victims said, “I was surrounded by cries for help from women and the sounds of beating and cursing. All I could do was try to keep my upper body in the air to ensure that I could breathe.” Although the chaos lasted for ten minutes, 35 people were killed. Once the stampede stopped, police and ambulance rushed to the scene. Cai Lixin, the police commander in the Huangpu district, told the media that 500 police officers were deployed at the scene to deal with the rescue operation and then disperse the crowd, apart from 700 police officers who had been sent to the river bank on the night of December 31. Nevertheless, it was crystal clear that the police had underestimated the huge number of people who would flock to the Bund area to watch the anticipated but cancelled light show. The 700 police stationed in the river bank were not deployed to guard the key spots effectively. They did not impose any traffic control on the night of December 31, not to mention the need to split the visitors into smaller groups and to ensure that crowds moved in one direction through the relatively narrow space.

The reinforcement of 500 police officers immediately after the tragedy proved to be too late. Some police had conflicts with a few citizens who rushed to the hospital emergency ward to look for their loved ones, but they were barred from entering the ward. The police also circulated pictures and the names of those victims who were injured or killed, asking family members to identify them. Nonetheless, the police did not appear to effectively inform the relatives of the victims, one of whom complained that neither government officials nor hospital staff spoke to them. The desperate family members could only communicate with the security guards at the hospitals. Apparently, the hospital security personnel could have communicated with the police, or vice versa, in a more effective manner so as to appease the anxiety of the relatives of the victims.

The Huangpu government made serious mistakes by failing to publicize the cancellation of the large 3D laser light show. While a smaller light show was organized in another venue where admission tickets were required, but very few

42 “New Year celebrations cancelled in Shanghai after 36 die in riverfront stampede,” South China Morning Post, January 1, 2015.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid. For the 700 police officers who had been sent to the river bank, see Didi Tang, “Witnesses: Sequence of events led to Shanghai stampede,” Associated Press, January 1, 2015.
citizens appeared to know the event change. The police were simultaneously making another error by urging the crowds to move forward when the Square was actually and increasingly packed. As the police could not control the crowds moving up and down the 17 flights of stairs between two levels of an observation tower on the platform of the Square, the stampede suddenly occurred due to the large number of people converging in a relatively narrow corridor. A group of about 10 young people shouted warnings to other people for the sake of clearing the chaotic area on the Bund, where people were trampled to death. They appealed to visitors to go back rather than pushing themselves onto the platform. Without their voluntary appeal, the death toll could have been higher. But the phenomenon also illustrated the lack of police officers near the platform to maintain law and order.

One witness, Ma Xiaobang, said: “The tragedy could have been avoided if enough police officers has been dispatched to maintain order. I have been there every year to join in the fun but there had never been such chaos like this.” The elevated platform provides clear views of the Pearl Tower and other landmarks on the Huangpu River. Wang Yuancang, another eye witness, said: “There were conflicting flows of people on the steps. Some people were being pushed down the steps, but people continued to crush forward. Some police officers yelled to the crowds to disperse, but it didn’t work. It was total chaos.” Three witnesses told the Hong Kong media that there was no police officer being stationed to maintain law and order at the observation tower on the platform – a testimony to the failure of the police deployment. This error of judgment was admitted by the police commander Cai, who remarked that the number of police being sent to the Bund was lower than that on the National Day. The reason was, according to Cai, the government did not organize any event in the Bund area on December 31, but his comment ignored the fact that the Huangpu government did not communicate effectively to the Shanghai residents about the cancellation of the light show just one week before the New Year Eve. Clearly, risk assessment was not conducted by the Huangpu government and the local police force. A foreign resident who lived in Shanghai for thirteen years wrote:

46 Teddy Ng, “Youths who shouted warnings in Shanghai New Year stampede hailed as heroes,” South China Morning Post, January 2, 2015.
In fairness, China has a lot of people, and it’s not hard to draw a big crowd. But drawing a crowd and drawing a crowd safely are two different things. For too long Shanghai has emphasized the former while ignoring the latter. If this year’s tragedy accomplishes anything, it’s likely to be the end of badly managed free entertainment on the Bund and in other prominent city venues. In the hours since the stampede, Chinese media shifted from covering Xi’s Jinping’s politically important New Year message, to covering the stampede – and Xi’s reminder that a ‘profound lesson’ should be learned from it. Meanwhile, Shanghai’s longtime [party secretary] Han Zeng demanded that the city’s districts and counties take steps to ‘prevent similar tragedies.” Alas, the real tragedy is that the [former] mayor didn’t send the message a decade ago. 49

The Shanghai mayor, Yang Xiong, said immediately after the tragedy that his government had to reflect on the event. 50 But it was obvious that his municipal government had long neglected the importance of being vigilant of crisis management during large events.

Although the reaction of the police to the stampede was swift, it also illustrated the limit of police tolerance to online public criticisms. Some citizens posted their comments on the websites to criticize the police for failing to maintain law and order on the tragic night, but police officers interrogated dozens of netizens not only to listen to their witness accounts but also to deter them from continuing to level their criticisms at the police. 51 One police officer admitted to the Hong Kong media that such interviews aimed at containing rumors and maintaining social order. 52 Police responsiveness to Internet criticisms and accounts clearly had its limits. Police intolerance of public criticisms hampered their self-reflections of any error in event management.

49 Adam Minter, “Shanghai’s Anxieties Result in Tragedy,” Bloomberg, January 1, 2015, in http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2015-01-01/Shanghais-anxieties-result-in-tragedy, access date: February 20, 2015. The article referred to Han as mayor, which was wrong as Han was a party secretary in Shanghai.
52 Ibid.
In the past, the Shanghai police had deployed more officers to maintain law and order whenever the city organized gala shows on the western bank of the Huangpu River, especially during the New Year Eve. This phenomenon was not seen on the New Year Eve just prior to the arrival of 2015. Even worse, it took five to eight minutes for the police to arrive at the tragic spot where people were trampled to death. It was estimated that at least 100,000 to 150,000 people visited the Bund area on the night of December 31 – a number totally unpredicted by the police. After the tragedy, the Shanghai police became more nervous in managing events. On January 2, 2015, the Dapuqiao sub-district examined safety work in the Tianzifang area in order to consolidate safety measures and ward off another possible accident in crowded places. The reason was that more tourists were visiting Tianzifang than ever before. At the same time, barricades were installed by the police on the river bank in Huangpu, while the police line was established to control human traffic flow during the public holiday on May 1. The Shanghai police appeared to quickly learn a lesson from the tragedy. Human stampede occasionally took place in China. In 2014, a mosque in Ningxia witnessed a stampede because of food distribution, leading to the death of 14 people and 10 injuries. In the same year, six students were killed in Kunming city during a stampede at a primary school, where a stairway corridor was accidentally blocked.

The Shanghai stampede, from the perspective of comparative policing, brought back immediate memories of Hong Kong’s Lan Kwei Fong tragedy in 1993, when 21 people were killed in the popular bar district just minutes into the first day of the new year. An estimated 20,000 people flocked to the Lan Kwei Fong area to celebrate the arrival of the new year, but the slippery slope and the narrow street saw revelers pushing, shouting and spraying foam, beer and champagne on each other. At 12:05 am, when the crowds of people pushed down D’Aguillar Street at the Lan Kwei Fong alley, some people started to fall and piled up themselves. Twenty people died immediately as they trampled on each other, while one other passed away in hospital four days later. A report written by High Court Judge Kemal Bokhary recommended that the police should override personal freedoms to ensure better crowd control measures in major public events. In fact,

55 “Shanghai stampede brings back memories of Hong Kong’s 1993 Lan Kwai Fong tragedy,” South China Morning Post, January 1, 2015.
the police had been warned of a possible tragedy before the Lan Kwei Fong incident because of the relatively lack of crowd control strategies. After the tragedy, the police have learnt a bitter lesson and installed guard rails and better crowd control measures since 1994. One-way walking system for pedestrians was implemented in 1994 so as to prevent another tragedy from happening.

On February 3, 2015, the Shanghai government held a press briefing to publicize its report that investigated the causes of the Shanghai stampede. Xiong Xinguang, the director of the Shanghai municipal emergency office, remarked:

It was confirmed that the ‘one-way’ warning banner on the north side of the passage stairway at the southeast corner of Chen Yi Square on the Bund was broken through at 10:37 pm. Although the on-site policemen strived to keep the order, a large number of residents and visitors rushed in the wrong direction up to the viewing platform. Streams of people in both directions hedged in the middle of the stairway, where the situation remained stalemated from 11:23 pm to 11:33 pm. People from the viewing platform surged down the stairs suddenly at 11:35 pm, which caused some people at the bottom of the stairway to lose balance and fell to the ground. More people fell on each other, which led to the occurrence of the stampede.56

This was the first time the Shanghai government implicitly admitted the failure of imposing on-way human traffic flow in the Bund area.

Secondly, Xiong severely criticized the Huangpu government for committing several mistakes: the lack of risk assessment and prevention for the New Year’s Eve countdown event; the failure of its tourism office to inform citizens of the cancellation of the light show; the negligence of the local police in taking preventive and preparatory measures for any crisis situation; the failure of the Huangpu public security bureau to control the crowds effectively in the Bund area; and the sluggish response of the local police to the continuous increase in the number of visitors and its failure to report the rapidly changing circumstances to the Huangpu government immediately.57 He also criticized the Shanghai public security bureau for failing to supervise and monitor the situation. Clearly, the

57 Ibid.
Shanghai government had to conduct self-criticisms in the aftermath of the stampede, criticizing not only the Huangpu government but also the police at the levels of both Huangpu and Shanghai. Xiong concluded in the following way:

The incident … has given us an unforgettable lesson. We must always remember that to protect the security of people’s life and property and the entire city’s operation is the legal responsibility of the government. The investigation report raises five detailed suggestions. First, enforcing the safety responsibility system and strengthening the consciousness on ‘red line’ and ‘bottom line’; second, improving the safety management of venues and propaganda on public security to improve the societal consciousness; third, improving the monitoring, early warning and prevention of emergency situation; fourth, improving joint action and emergency response; fifth, strengthening education and warning us that negligence among government officials is the biggest hidden danger of public security, and that weak enforcement of safety measures is the biggest threat. The result shows us that the government and officials at all levels shall always put the security of people’s life and property in high priority and cannot slack off at any moment. We must be completely responsible for the Party and our people, and make all efforts to protect the people’s life and property and the city’s safe operation. This is the sacred mission that the Party and people have entrusted to us.\(^{58}\)

The Shanghai government’s self-criticisms and proposed solutions were directed at the police force, which had no choice but to accept the responsibility for being negligent, unprepared, inefficient and relatively unresponsive to the entire tragedy.

With regard to the penalties on the Shanghai government officials, eleven of them were singled out for punishment, including Zhou Wei, the chief of the CCP in Huangpu district, who was dismissed from his position in the party. Three other officials were dismissed from their position in the party; one was demoted and six other were given administrative demerits. Most importantly, of the eleven officials being penalized, three of them were high-ranking police officers, including Zhou Zheng and Chen Qi, the director and deputy director of the Huangpu public security bureau respectively, and Chen Changjun, the vice director of the

\(^{58}\) Adapted and modified from *Ibid.*
commanding division of the Shanghai public security bureau. Chen was given administrative demerit for failing to supervise the Huangpu police, but Zhou and Chen were severely criticized for failing to take leadership responsibility and both were dismissed from the party. The PRC accountability system was operating in the immediate aftermath of the Shanghai stampede, leading to the downfall of the local police commanders.

In response to the reporters’ questions on the responsibility of the police force in Shanghai and Huangpu, Wang Yu, the deputy commissioner of the Shanghai Supervision Bureau, elaborated on the verdict as follows:

The Huangpu public security bureau was responsible for drafting and implementing security and contingency plans for celebrations … in the region it administered. It failed to implement detailed orders from the routine conference of the Huangpu district government … It failed to issue early warning after monitoring changes of people flow with inadequate risk evaluation on December 31 … It did not timely report the emergency situation to Huangpu district government and its higher level of government agencies. It executed orders from higher level of government agencies inadequately. As a result, the Huangpu district public security bureau is directly responsible for the incident. The Shanghai municipal public security bureau is responsible for the direction and inspection of security work at public venues in the whole city. The municipal bureau failed to adequately inspect and execute Huangpu bureau’s order, such as the drafting of a detailed security plan, contingency plan and police enforcement at the venue. The municipal public security bureau failed to adequately inspect the security work on the Bund area by Huangpu bureau on December 31. As a result, the Shanghai municipal public security bureau is responsible for the incident.59

The Shanghai stampede can be seen as a classic example of how the local-level police have to shoulder the responsibility in the event of any tragic accident, for they are expected to come up with contingency plans and respond to crises promptly, effectively and efficiently.

Conclusion

59 Adapted and modified from Ibid.
The three case studies in this Chapter show that the PRC police, including the fire service, had varying responsibilities in the incidents concerned. In the Shenzhen landslide, the police response to the landslide was swift, but the main responsibility came from the Guangming district government, which contracted out the waste management task to Luwei company that in turn signed a contract with the Yishenglong company to deal with the construction waste in the industrial park. The urban management companies contracted out by the Guangming district government failed to deal with construction wastes properly, piling them up on a hill that eventually led to the landslide. Public maladministration at the industrial park level had to shoulder the responsibility of the landslide, for the Guangming district administration should have monitored the process of handling waste management. The chengguan companies, including both Luwei and Yishenglong, were just interested in economic profits rather than the safety of residents living near the hill. The police role in the Shenzhen landslide appeared to be minimal. However, the degree of police responsibility in the Tianjin port explosion tended to be much higher as the fire service department failed to grasp the serious extent of the dangerous chemicals that were stored in the port area. Again, public maladministration at the level of Tianjin provincial government existed; the lack of supervision and coordination from the customs department and the supervision and safety bureau demonstrated the limited power of the local police. But the death of many young firemen who rushed to the rescue operation was arguably innocent, for their tragedy was the outcome of provincial-level maladministration, which tolerated the Ruihai Company to pile up excessive amount of dangerous chemicals in the container port. The degree of police responsibility was the greatest in the Shanghai stampede compared with the Shenzhen landslide and the Tianjin explosion. The lack of contingency planning, the absence of crowd control measures, and the clumsy response of the police to the Shanghai stampede all illustrated the extent of police maladministration at the level of Shanghai and Huangpu governments. Although the police commanders concerned were penalized and dismissed from the party, lessons have to be learnt bitterly so as to avoid another Shanghai stampede in the future. The three case studies displayed a common pattern: public maladministration persisted and brought about the tragedies. While police accountability varied in the three cases, the most serious incident that exposed police maladministration was the Shanghai stampede. Overall, the PRC police can be seen as being responsive to crises quite promptly, but they must take preventive measures together with better coordination, communication and collaboration with other government departments with a view
to avoiding other tragedies parallel to the Shenzhen landslide, the Tianjin port explosion and the Shanghai Bund stampede.