

A chance for Lu to teach and learn

CHINA'S point man on Hong Kong, Lu Ping, has taken to the hustings in the United States to reassure American business and political leaders that Hong Kong will continue to be a safe place to invest in after Beijing regains sovereignty over this place in 1997.

What is different about his pitch this time is that he is not making it from Hong Kong or Beijing. Rather, he has gone directly to the home turf of the target audience.

He is also using this opportunity to tout China's side of the story to America. He wants to refute some of the fears about Hong Kong's future that he believes were raised by such people as Governor Chris Patten and Democratic Party chief Martin Lee on prior pilgrimages to the United States.

It is no coincidence that he is taking almost the same route as Mr Patten travelled last year.

Lu Ping was greatly critical of Mr Patten's journey at the time but now he appears to have adopted the old adage of "if you can't beat them, join them" to bang his own drum along the same expressways.

He does, of course, convey not the current colonial thinking in a system which has only 832 days to run but the official long-term view of the future masters which longer-term US investors want to hear.

They need to know Beijing's policy — at least the policy as it exists today — before they commit millions of dollars to both Hong Kong and mainland China.

Mr Lu will also provide his American audiences with some much-needed education about what he perceives to be the realities of Hong Kong.

We welcome the insight Mr Lu has offered American audiences into Beijing's forward planning for Hong Kong.

We are glad he has spelt out some vital legal guarantees that will ensure the territory's social and economic system and way of life will remain unchanged for 50 years. But we believe he should do more than that.

We wish he would widen his audiences to include those who have not been targeted previously by Mr Patten and others. Mr Lu and his colleagues should not see themselves as members of a "truth squad" whose mission is to rebut Mr Patten's earlier comments.

Mr Lu should use this trip to improve his knowledge of the Western system. Since he will have to deal with that system after 1997, he must try to understand more about it.

He also should branch out and meet a larger cross-section of the American people — even those who are critical of China's policies. He must not adopt a blinkered approach and seek out only those American businessmen and members of the overseas Chinese community who support China's position. What's the point of preaching to the converted?

Take the blinkers off, Mr Lu. America is a big country. There are other levels of American society who need to understand Hong Kong. This trip offers a magnificent chance to debate the issue with some of America's so-called "China-bashers". It would be a great pity to waste this opportunity.