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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

1997 not the only cause of brain drain

I AGREE with P. K. Lee's comments (*South China Morning Post*, September 13.) that "Hongkong should not seek any special passport arrangements for a select few..." and that "all professionals would emigrate to places such as Australia and Canada if they could find an equivalent professional job..."

However, P. K. Lee seems to miss an important aspect of Hongkong's brain drain problem: some professionals are leaving without first obtaining an equivalent professional job in the country of destination.

During my infrequent visits to Vancouver, I have met several who have left good technical/professional jobs in Hongkong and have had to content themselves with low grade jobs in Vancouver. Two typical cases are a former top technician with Hong-

kong Telephone Company who is working as a butcher, and a former Hongkong factory manager now working as a taxi driver.

These people and their families usually become Canadian citizens after a period of three years. The interesting question is whether those people - who have qualified for citizenship and do not have an equivalent professional job in their new country - can be attracted back to Hongkong.

My feeling is that these families would not uproot themselves again and return to Hongkong. After three years in Canada, they would have purchased a home, a car, and their children would be well settled in schools.

They would also have acquainted themselves with a new style of life and would see their long-term future in the new country. Returning to settle in Hong-

kong would also involve a considerable loss of "face" which non-Chinese readers may not appreciate. Their Hongkong friends would regard them as second rate, having failed to establish themselves in the more advanced and desired country.

These people will not be attracted back to Hongkong via the typical expatriate contract of service, which was designed to bring an entire family to Hongkong for a period of two to five years.

What could work is a contract designed to bring back the professional member of the family only, while children and wives remain in Canada.

The contract should provide accommodation for one person, perhaps some eight weeks of annual leave, and four paid return air tickets to Canada per year that could be used by his family to visit

Hongkong, or the employee to spend time in Canada.

Another interesting question is whether these people are leaving Hongkong purely because of 1997. It is possibly true that 1997 has provided the initial impetus for the brain drain. A foreign passport has now become an envied social status symbol in Hongkong, and those returning for short visits are quick to flash their passports and new found culture about when they meet old friends.

Increased earning power has also enabled many more Hongkong people to travel and to see how other people live in places such as Canada and Australia. It seems that Hongkong's brain drain problem will continue unabated for many years to come, even if 1997 were to disappear from the horizon.

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