

# After the law, China addresses a personnel problem

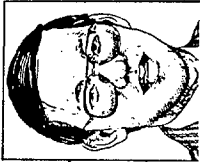
There are still about four months to go before the Basic Law is formally promulgated. However, the shape of the law is already in sight.

During the meeting between mainland drafters and the Basic Law Consultative Committee in Guangzhou recently, Chinese officials made it clear that they were not going to concede to new demands from Hongkong.

Rather, they would add clauses to the present draft to prevent Hongkong from becoming a base for "subversive activities".

As the drafting process of the Basic Law is near its end, the time is ripe for Beijing to turn to another pressing issue - appointing successors to the Chinese officials now responsible for Hongkong.

The solution to this problem has been delayed because Beijing wanted to ensure smooth progress in the Basic Law drafting.



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## POINT OF VIEW

At present, the key Chinese officials responsible for Hongkong are all past retirement age.

Both the local Xinhua chief, Xu Jiatun, and the director of the State Council's Hongkong and Macau Affairs Office, Ji Pengfei, are in their 70s, much older than the normal retirement age for ministers of 65.

According to the plan three years ago, Mr Xu should have retired after the Chinese Communist Party's 13th Congress in October 1987. The plan was upset

by the downfall of the party secretary, General Hu Yaobang, in early 1987.

In order to maintain the image of stability, Mr Xu has remained in office.

Mr Ji took up his present post after the former Hongkong and Macau Affairs Office director, Liao Chengzi, died in 1982.

Mr Ji was already beyond retirement age and due to his failing health he is unable to work full-time and can only oversee major policies concerning Hongkong.

The Chinese leader of the Sino-British Joint Liaison Group, Ke Zaisuo, is a younger man but he too has reached retirement age.

Since the days of the Sino-British negotiations on the Joint Declaration Mr Ke has been responsible for the foreign relations aspect of Hongkong affairs.

In recent years, many of the

second-in-line positions have been filled by new faces.

Mr Xu was accompanied to Hongkong in the early 1980s by Li Chuwen, Chen Daming and Chen Bojian. All three have retired from their posts as vice-directors of Xinhua, but they have been replaced by younger officials who have, at least, a few more years in them.

In Beijing, the Hongkong and Macau Affairs Office has recruited a number of new officials who are poised to take over from the ageing officials in charge of the various bureaux under the organisation.

Nevertheless, it is not that easy to find replacements for Mr Xu and Mr Ji - both are well-known to Hongkong people and are very experienced administrators.

Moreover, they are also influential figures within the power corridors of the Communist

Party. Both have strong political credentials and good links with top leaders.

Before coming to Hongkong, Mr Xu was the party chief of China's most affluent province, Jiangsu. He was also a member of the powerful party Central Committee, having personal access to Deng Xiaoping, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang.

Mr Ji was once a trusted aide of late premier Zhou Enlai. He served as foreign minister in the early 1970s and sat on the Central Committee. He is also close to veteran leader Li Xiannian.

Because of their political status, the appointment of Mr Xu and Mr Ji to their current positions demonstrated the Chinese leadership's concern about Hongkong affairs.

To replace them with less powerful figures may suggest that the importance of Hongkong has been downgraded.

There is another tricky issue which may further delay solving the succession problem. That is, the relationship among the three offices responsible for Hongkong: Xinhua, the Hongkong and Macau Affairs Office and the Foreign Ministry.

Before Mr Xu came to Hongkong and when Mr Liao was still alive, the relationship was simple - Xinhua reported to the Hongkong and Macau Affairs Office.

As a rule of Chinese politics, the power of an office depends on the person who is in charge. After Mr Liao died, the power pattern changed.

Mr Xu and Mr Ji are roughly on a par in terms of political influence, but Mr Xu has an edge as he lives in Hongkong and is therefore better informed.

In recent years, Mr Xu has gradually expanded the influence of Xinhua and assumed the leading role in Hongkong affairs.

But the June 4 massacre rocked the position of Xinhua. Beijing's leaders were infuriated by the local community's support for the democracy movement on the mainland. Xinhua's ability to manage Hongkong affairs was obviously suspect.

The first high level meeting on Hongkong convened after June 4, was chaired by Mr Ji. Since then, the Hongkong and Macau Affairs Office has overshadowed Xinhua.

It is probable that the top leaders in Beijing are undertaking a review of the relationship between Xinhua and the Hongkong and Macau Affairs Office. Before this issue is settled, replacements in key positions have to wait.

When these replacements are finally announced, they will provide great insight into the new relationship between the two offices.