

Beijing's new Hong Kong envoy Luo Huining was a surprise choice. Here's why

Tuesday 7 January 2020, by [ZHENG William](#) (Date first published: 7 January 2020).

Sent to deal with a city in crisis when he was supposed to be easing into semi-retirement, he is seen as capable but has no experience of the financial hub.

Pro-democracy camp's landslide victory in November's district council polls may have been 'final straw' to prompt a change at the liaison office.

Bringing a political veteran with no relevant experience out of semi-retirement and making him the top envoy to Hong Kong shows **Beijing's determination to reset its policy on the city**, according to insiders and observers.

Luo Huining's appointment as the new director of the central government's liaison office [1] in Hong Kong came as **a surprise even to Communist Party insiders**. But while he is seen as capable, he was an unlikely candidate for the job.

Having turned **65** in October, Luo was supposed to be easing into semi-retirement. Under party rules, senior officials of Luo's rank are relieved from key positions at the age of 65. They are then transferred to less demanding roles – usually in China's two parliamentary houses – before they formally retire at **68**.

Luo appeared to be following the script until Saturday's announcement [2]. After stepping down as party secretary of Shanxi province in November, he was named deputy director of the financial and economic affairs committee of the National People's Congress on December 28.

But seven days later, Beijing suddenly appointed him as its new representative in Hong Kong – at a time when the city is facing its worst political crisis in decades, with seven months of anti-government protests [3] showing no sign of abating.

The protests were sparked by a now-withdrawn extradition bill [4] and have broadened to other demands, including universal suffrage.

Luo's abrupt appointment suggests it was a decision made recently, and it was kept on a need-to-know basis until the last minute. A source familiar with the discussions told the South China Morning Post that President **Xi Jinping only finalised the decision after his trip to Macau [5] in the third week of December**.

Without clear instructions from the top, the party's Organisation Department assumed Luo would follow the well-established protocol – so his “semi-retirement” was arranged and his transfer to the NPC was announced.

Even those who will have a direct working relationship with Luo in Hong Kong were briefed just ahead of the official announcement.

Another source said: *“In the last reshuffle, the section heads [of the liaison office] met their outgoing boss and the new boss a day before the formal announcement.*

“This time, the section heads were only briefed less than an hour before the Xinhua announcement. Many were surprised that Wang Zhimin [Luo's predecessor] was not even present at the briefing.”

Under President Xi, other exceptions have been made to the retirement age restrictions established

after the Cultural Revolution. But being sent to the NPC and then brought back to an important position a week later **makes Luo's case unusual.**

Deng Yuwen, a former deputy editor of Study Times, a newspaper published by the Central Party School, said the move showed that Xi wanted to make sure he got the best man for the job – even if it meant bending the rules.

“Xi is flexible. He will not let an arbitrary retirement age rule get in the way of his overall plan,” Deng said. *“He believes that age isn't a major problem, as long as the person is healthy and fit for the job.”*

Alfred Wu, an associate professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, believed **the crushing defeat of the pro-Beijing camp during Hong Kong's district council elections was “the final straw” to prompt a change at the liaison office.**

Candidates from the opposition camp scored a major victory over their pro-establishment rivals on November 24, winning the majority in 17 out of the 18 district councils.

“The liaison office in Hong Kong is clearly responsible for this major defeat as helping the pro-establishment camp to win elections is one of their main tasks,” Wu said. *“There is not much time left and lots of work to do with the [Legislative Council] election only nine months away, so Beijing had to make a decision.”*

That urgency had compelled Beijing to break protocol and cast its net wide, he said.

Luo is also the first liaison office director with no work experience related to Hong Kong. A brief business trip to the city in 2018 is the only known connection Luo has with the former British colony.

All of his predecessors had dealt with Hong Kong affairs before they took the job. Most were technocrats who had spent much of their careers at one of the central government's bureaucratic agencies in Beijing.

In contrast, Luo's career was made in places far from the capital. He spent more than a decade in the northwest province of Qinghai – one of the most impoverished parts of China, better known to the West as the birthplace of the Dalai Lama – where he rose from deputy governor to governor, and eventually party secretary. Qinghai posted fast economic growth under his watch.

In 2016, he was given the tough assignment of party secretary of resource-rich central province Shanxi. At the time, the province was mired in corruption scandals and its once fast-growing economy was on the brink of collapse. It was known as the “political minefield of China” due to the complex web of connections between many local businesses and powerful cliques and ministries in Beijing.

Luo acted fast to tackle corruption and got the economy back in shape – something that showed a skill for problem-solving and deft handling of intricate political relations, according to another source. That caught the attention of the top leadership.

“Luo managed to fix the Shanxi crisis and found a way for the province to move forward,” said Li Xiaobing, a law professor and expert on Beijing's policies on Hong Kong at Nankai University in Tianjin. *“Hopefully he can use his problem-solving skills to help find ways to move Hong Kong forward.”*

Luo is the only liaison office director with local administration experience at the highest level. Deng said the appointment reflected Beijing's awareness of the complexity of the Hong Kong situation, and its potential impact on other key issues like Taiwan and China-US relations. Beijing realised a different kind of liaison office director was needed, he said.

“I think it is a factor. Xi wants somebody who can ‘connect the dots’ instead of someone with specialist skills and a fixed perspective,” Deng said.

Li agreed, saying an “all weather” administrator could give Beijing a better assessment of the

situation and come up with proposals that were not just for existing problems, but long-term solutions to ensure the “one country, two systems” framework continued to function in the city.

A separate source familiar with the matter said the fact Luo had never held a position related to Hong Kong could be seen as an advantage, since he would bring a fresh perspective. It could also confound the opposition, since they would be dealing with a mainland official they had little knowledge of.

“His deputies and the liaison office officials have the local know-how,” the source said. “It’s actually better that Luo does not have connections with existing liaison office people and Hong Kong’s business and other communities, so he can carry out his work and Beijing’s will without the complications of these relationships.”

His doctoral degree in political economics from Renmin University of China may also help. Song Sio-chong, professor of the Centre for Basic Laws of Hong Kong and Macau at Shenzhen University, said although developing the economy would not be Luo’s priority, **he could help Beijing with the Greater Bay Area project to integrate Hong Kong with Macau and nine cities in Guangdong.**

Luo would also give “valuable advice” to the Hong Kong government on economic issues, Song said. It is still too early to tell what kind of working relationship Luo will have with Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor. But according to another source, Luo’s experience as an administrator would not change the role of the liaison office and he would not be “running the show”.

“His experience will help him to make a more comprehensive assessment of the situation, so the office can give [better] advice to the central government. That’s the job of the liaison office,” the source said. “The one country, two systems arrangement is valuable to China and there’s no reason why it would be set aside.”

A Hong Kong affairs expert from Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou said **providing Beijing with accurate and objective information would be a priority for Luo.** *“The liaison office is said to have submitted an optimistic report to Beijing before the district council elections, but it turned out completely the opposite,” the expert said. “Beijing needs Luo to overhaul the operation so they can come up with **more accurate information** so the top leadership can make the right decisions.”* Luo’s age could also be an advantage – as he nears the end of his political career he could take a bolder approach to tackling tough issues. By the time he reaches the final retirement age of 68, Hong Kong will have just held its next chief executive election.

Another source said that was another reason Luo was in the job – to give Beijing an unbiased representative when candidates began jockeying for power.

Beijing may also be more likely to reach out to the opposition camp through Luo, according to Deng. *“As a new director with no [Hong Kong] baggage, it will be easier for Luo to reach out to different segments in society – including the opposition – and hear them out,” Deng said.*

LUO HUINING’S PATH TO HONG KONG

1954: born in Dangtu county, Maanshan, Anhui province

1982: lands government clerical job after graduating from Anhui University

1985: gets promoted to provincial trade office

1998: named party secretary of Chaohu county in Anhui

1999: takes a provincial leadership role in Anhui

2003: obtains doctorate in economics from Renmin University and becomes deputy secretary of

Qinghai

2010: named Qinghai governor

2013: becomes Qinghai party secretary

2016: appointed party secretary of Shanxi province

2017: made a full member of the Communist Party's Central Committee

2019: steps down as Shanxi party secretary, named deputy director of the financial and economic affairs committee of the National People's Congress on December 28

2020: named director of central government's liaison office in Hong Kong on January 4

Links :

[1]

<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3044784/chinas-new-top-official-hong-kong-hopes-city-can-return>

[2]

<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3044684/china-unveils-its-new-top-official-hong-kong>

[3] <https://www.scmp.com/topics/hong-kong-protests>

[4] <https://www.scmp.com/topics/hong-kong-extradition-bill>

[5]

<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3042920/chinese-president-xi-jinping-heaps-praise-macau-citing>

[6]

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3043984/plas-hong-kong-garrison-holds-joint-drill-citys-harbour-message>

[7]

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/3043583/stay-or-go-hong-kongs-protest-crisis-raises-career-doubts-expats>

[8]

https://surveys.scmp.com/survey/SCMP_Related?utm_source=chinatech_article&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=related_article

P.S.

<https://scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3044905/beijings-new-hong-kong-envoy-luo-huining-was-surprise-choice>