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## A clear message from Beijing

The appointment of two local officials of the New China News Agency as alternate members of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee is unprecedented. It signifies the importance China attaches to Hongkong during the transition period.

The vice-director of the Hongkong branch of NCNA, Mr Zheng Hua, and its deputy secretary-general, Mr Qiao Zonghuai, know the territory well, having served here for some time.

Admittedly, the director of the local branch, Mr Xu Jiatur, was a member of the Central Committee when he assumed the post here. But that was more related to his previous job as party first secretary of Jiangsu province which he has since relinquished.

It may also be argued that being named as alternate members does not mean they are actually on the committee. Membership depends on being promoted when vacancies occur.

But the significance of the appointments should not be lightly dismissed. Although Mr Xu will not be on the Central Committee, he continues to serve as NCNA director in Hongkong. Moreover, he is now a member of the Central Advisory Committee, headed by China's top leader, Mr Deng Xiaoping. And in that capacity he will continue to speak on Hongkong at party meetings in Beijing. Mr Xu and other members of the Hongkong and Macau affairs offices both in the State Council and in the Foreign Ministry, some of whom are also Central Committee members, will constitute a strong voice on Hongkong.

The psychological effect of having two alternate members of the Central Committee based in Hongkong will also be greatly felt here. And they may not remain alternate members very long; there could well be more changes when the 13th national congress of the Chinese Communist Party convenes in two years' time. So it is very possible at least one of them will become a full member on the Central Committee by 1987, the year when the Sino-British Joint Liaison Office, on which Mr Qiao also serves, will be based here.

There should not be any undue apprehension over the appointments. As is the case with other appointments on the mainland, they are within the Chinese Communist Party and the members are officials of China's Government departments. There should not be any misconception that they indicate China's intention to interfere with Hongkong's affairs before and after it becomes a special administrative region. This is made clear in recent Chinese statements that the NCNA here or any other Chinese representative will not be a part of the future SAR government.

But it does show Beijing is very closely watching the territory's development — both economical and political — with great interest. To those who are intent on too hasty a process of evolution that might affect the stability and prosperity here, this should be a meaningful message in itself.