

Fiftieth anniversary of the Peoples Republic of China: a celebration of nationalism and the market

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The October 1 parade in Beijing marking 50 years since the establishment of the Peoples Republic of China was a grotesque celebration of Chinese nationalism, military muscle and free market economic reforms. It was a stage-managed affair from beginning to end, aimed at projecting an image of China as united under the existing political regime, devoted to the country's president and marching toward wealth and prosperity.

A carefully vetted crowd of some 500,000 watched an array of 12,000 soldiers, sailors and airmen marching across the expanse of Tiananmen Square in central Beijing. With jets roaring overhead, columns of tanks, armoured vehicles and a regiment of intercontinental ballistic missiles were intended to display China's military might. Massive portraits of China's three officially recognised post-1949 leaders—Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and the current president Jiang Zemin—were exhibited. An elaborate procession of thematic floats represented stages in China's recent history and its ambitions for the future. The grand finale was a fireworks display launched from 10 locations in the city.

Clearly a great deal of time and effort had gone into preparing for the occasion. Behind the theatrical façade, however, lies a political order wracked by contradiction and crisis.

The support for the government exhibited by the crowd was largely due to the fact that each and every person had been individually selected for his loyalty to the regime. Concerned at the possibility of any opposition protests, police blocked every conceivable entry point to Tiananmen Square. The celebration itself had been preceded by mass arrests of suspected opponents and the expulsion from Beijing of thousands of immigrant workers, unemployed and homeless people. All non-Beijing residents were banned from even entering the city

on October 1, let alone attending the celebration.

The display of expensive military hardware was no doubt meant to arouse patriotic fervour and symbolise the willingness of the Beijing Stalinists to defend the borders of China. But the main purpose of the army over the last 50 years has been to serve as the primary base of support for the regime. In Tiananmen Square in June 1989, troops and tanks were used to crush large anti-government protests by students and sections of the working class.

The themes of the parade served to highlight the gulf which separates the world of the Stalinist bureaucracy and wealthy business elite from that of ordinary Chinese workers and peasants. One float celebrated the re-establishment of China's stock market in the Special Economic Zone of Shenzhen near Hong Kong in 1979. Recent studies estimate that less than 4 million out of China's 1.2 billion people take part in share trading, and that two-thirds of all bank deposits are owned by just 10 percent of the population.

Another float promoted the development of world-class opera in China—a ticket can cost more than three months of the average workers' income. Yet another was occupied by 40 models parading the latest fashions from the designer boutiques in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou.

The parade put on display the consumerism, self-gratification and new-found wealth of a privileged few in Chinese society. A social class of private entrepreneurs, now numbering in the millions, with an average income well over US\$11,000 and with an expanding appetite for pleasure and money, has emerged, in part, out of the traditional elite of party and state functionaries and the military officer caste.

The spectacle included teenagers skating past on roller blades, couples attired for a western-style wedding and people dressed as businessmen or stock market

speculators, waving silver stars over their heads, supposedly to indicate where China is heading. In sharp contrast, the vast majority of Chinese are struggling to survive on less than \$400 a year. More than 40 million Chinese peasants are unable to feed themselves.

Even more bizarre was the attention given to President Jiang Zemin—a 30-foot photographic portrait and high praise of his leadership in every anniversary speech apart from his own. Everything from his demeanour to the sycophantic accolades was calculated to invoke memories of Mao Zedong and the personality cult that surrounded him in the 1950s and 1960s.

Mao Zedong could at least claim to have led the peasant armies that swept away the remains of the disintegrating Chinese Nationalist regime led Chiang Kai Shek, and, in October 1949, opened up a new chapter in Chinese history. Jiang Zemin, on the other hand, is a historical nonentity—a career bureaucrat and technocrat whose main claim to high office is that he, unlike many others, negotiated all the Machiavellian twists and turns of Chinese politics over the previous decades. He survived the politically turbulent days of the Cultural Revolution relatively unscathed, successfully manoeuvred himself into the position of mayor of Shanghai in the 1980s, and then into the highest circles of government.

Such was his reputation among workers that in 1989 they added him to their list of government officials to be investigated for corruption, despite his relatively low public profile. His rise to party leader in 1994 after the death of Deng Xiaoping reflected the ascendancy of the “Shanghai group,” a faction within the upper echelons of the ruling party that advocated speeding up the pace of free market reforms.

Over the last five years, Jiang has based himself on the mistaken belief that the expansion of the world economy and large foreign investment into China would go on indefinitely and that key state-owned companies could be transformed into internationally competitive private corporations. The eruption of the Asian financial crisis beginning in mid-1997 has led to a slowdown in the Chinese economy, mounting problems in the banking system, and rising levels of unemployment and poverty, exacerbated by the wholesale closure of unprofitable state-owned enterprises.

Fifty years after taking power the Stalinist regime is now dismantling the limited social reforms of the past. The closure of state-owned industries not only means the destruction of jobs but the loss of social provisions ranging from housing, to healthcare, aged care and

education. Tens of millions have been made unemployed in the urban centres, and forced into taking jobs with foreign or private companies that have no social benefits, horrendous working conditions and wage levels often lower than \$20 per month. In the countryside, living standards have stagnated for nearly 20 years and unemployment is variously estimated at between 20 and 30 percent of the population.

Social evils that marked pre-1949 society have re-emerged. Child labour is rampant. China officially now has 600,000 heroin addicts. Prostitution is ever present in the major cities. The country has the highest female suicide rate in the world, with 500 women taking their own lives every day. Every city has a sizeable population of homeless people and beggars.

Such is the degree of alienation from the Stalinist regime and the lack of any avenue to express political opposition that there has been a resurgence of religion in China, for the most part encouraged and abetted by Beijing itself as a harmless outlet for social discontent. When the Falun Gong religious sect showed a degree of independence, and threatened to become a channel for protests, Beijing brought the full force of the state apparatus to bear.

The regime in China has nothing to do with socialism. If the fiftieth anniversary celebrations reveal anything, it is the Chinese bureaucracy's extremely narrow social base and tenuous grip on political power. Jiang and his cronies are no more animated by the ideals of social equality and justice than the stockbrokers, corporate lawyers and business executives in New York, London and Berlin that they emulate.

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