

Many a guise

Despite careful stage management, China presents many faces. Here, Beverley Hooper explores the contradictions.

Within barely a week of 4 June, Beijing newspapers announced that normality was returning to the city after a short period of anti-government turmoil. Buses and subways were operating as usual and citizens were going about their everyday business.

By early July, visitors—both Chinese and foreign—were again being photographed on the Tiananmen rostrum, snack-bars were reportedly doing good business and cinemas were claiming rising attendances. This marked the start of the social masquerade which has officially been perpetrated in China since the events of May-June 1989.

But the veneer of social normality has been a thin and sometimes transparent one, barely disguising widespread popular disaffection which has prompted the post-Tiananmen leadership also to

present a second—and contradictory—image of China in the early 90s.

In Beijing the surface image of everyday normality and even of continuing socio-economic liberalisation is so pervasive that it is sometimes difficult to conceive that this is where 'it all happened'. True, there has been an official assault, as in the earlier campaigns against spiritual pollution (1983) and bourgeois liberalisation (1987), on pornography, bars and their euphemistically-named 'hostesses' (acknowledged as a front for prostitution), and the more suggestive Western films.

But there has been little more than a hiccup in most of the familiar—if sometimes frivolous—barometers of post-Mao liberalisation: private markets, tea houses and coffee shops, evening fairs, disco competitions and fashion exhibits. On television there's the American *Dynasty*-style soapie, *Falcon Crest*, British drama with *The Profes-*



sionals, and a modern version of an old Chinese custom: TV Matchmaker.

Popular magazines such as *Culture and Life*, *The Young Generation* and a host of women's magazines have continued to feature the consumer-oriented and increasingly individualistic society of the post-Mao reform era. There are articles on the latest bedroom furniture, leisure activities and, above all, love and romance (though rather less on sex than in the first half of 1989). These themes are matched in full-page advertisements for everything from inner-spring mattresses to Princess beer and a host of beauty products: guaranteed to make you look younger and more attractive.

In their portrayal of post-Tiananmen social normality, officials and the media have consciously utilised particular social groups. Young children, one of the most pervasive propaganda weapons in the PRC, were most cynically and blatantly used in the immediate aftermath of



4 June. Front-page newspaper photographs featured happy well-dressed youngsters welcoming the occupying soldiers with watermelons, enamel bowls and even violin recitals. Since then they have been a regular object of media attention, enjoying themselves at summer camps, boating with their families on Beihai, and studying enthusiastically in their classrooms.

The use of foreigners for both domestic and overseas propaganda purposes has only substantiated the arguments used by some governments and individuals against continued visits. Within days of 4 June, Chinese and English-language Beijing newspapers featured photographs, allegedly taken after the suppression of the protest movement, of tourists chatting and laughing with soldiers on the Great Wall. By late July foreign tourists—who were much rarer than the media suggests—were reportedly making such statements as “Beijing is as normal as the capital of any other country”. Over the past 18 months, not just tourists but foreign business people, teachers and students arriving in China have received heavy media coverage to illustrate both the al-

leged return to normality and the persistence of China's ‘open door’ policy.

Glamorous young women have been a major vehicle for portraying images not just of social normality but of continuing socio-economic liberalisation. A world removed from her baggy-clothed, fresh-faced predecessor of Cultural Revolution days, the fashionably dressed and well-groomed glamour girl of the post-Mao era—whether as cover-girl or advertising model—has served the interests of modernisation and consumerism instead of those of revolutionary fervour. Despite the assault on so-called bourgeois liberalisation, the use of cover-girls on popular magazines and glamorous models advertising everything from eye makeup to washing machines continued unabated after June. Some of the most striking ‘cultural artefacts’ of post-June China, indeed in the history of the PRC, were the 1990 calendars featuring glossy colour pin-ups and disco dancers. These were on sale not only in private markets but in branches of the official New China Bookstore, strung up wall-to-wall like *dazibao* (large character

posters) in the Cultural Revolution. This was social distraction par excellence.

A major aspect of the portrayal of social normality and liberalisation has been the persistent focus on Tiananmen Square. Far from attempting to distract attention from the square which, in most people's eyes, had become a powerful symbol of both popular protest and official brutality, China's leadership has taken pains to reclaim it for itself. Once again, children have been heavily utilised. Barely two weeks after the bloodshed, 10,000 Young Pioneers held a ‘love the Party, love the socialist motherland’ theme meeting in the square which, according to media reports, had been refurbished with over 2,700 square metres of lawns and 175 metres of hedgerows. The cover of the October issue of the magazine *Chinese Children* featured a highly stylised drawing of two saluting Young Pioneers against a backdrop of Tiananmen. The continuing official campaign to reclaim the square as a focus of social normality has included the staging of everything from a mass ‘paint-in’ (on 400 metres of paper) to a group ballroom dancing competition featuring 3,000 dancers.

It is somewhat ironic that the people of Beijing, of whom a substantial proportion had become personally involved in the protests from mid-May 1989, have themselves contributed to the social masquerade. In the aftermath of 4 June, they once again donned the mask of public compliance, reverting to a situation that has been more ‘normal’ than unusual in post-1949 China. Some of the older generation had learnt the lesson of removing the mask during the 100 Flowers movement in 1957, at that time in response to official pressure, only to find themselves denounced and incarcerated as ‘poisonous weeds’. During the Cultural Revolution, the public mask—sometimes even when communicating with one's own children—had become essential to survival. It was only in the heady years of the 80s that people tentatively began lifting the mask and not until May 1989 that such large numbers, carried away by the sheer

ment, discarded it completely. Their bravado was short-lived as state authority was reasserted and they had little alternative but to mask their private thoughts once again.

This time, though, the mask of public compliance has been almost visibly transparent. The inhibitions that most Chinese had during the Mao era about revealing their private face to foreign colleagues, for example, have largely evaporated—in all but the most ritual official situations—in an atmosphere of almost total contempt for the current regime. Academic colleagues and their relatives, for example, eagerly tell personal stories of corruption throughout the system, most particularly at the top. They discuss not just whether the Communist Party has any future but whether it has really been beneficial to China. Most of all, they express their sense of despair about China's present and even its long-term future, and expend a great deal of energy—as well as money—on personal efforts to obtain jobs or scholarships for themselves, and particularly for their children, in Western countries.

Faced with such sentiments, China's so-called hardline leadership has resorted to making sustained efforts to instil 'correct socialist principles' among the population. At a time when communism elsewhere has been disintegrating, China's ideological clock has been turned back to the 60s and early 70s. This has resulted in the incongruous juxtaposition of the discredited ideological stereotypes of the Mao era against the consumer-oriented images of socio-economic liberalisation: model socialist workers against pinup girls; thrift and clean living against advertisements for colour TV sets, washing machines and cosmetics.

Anyone with memories of Mao's China cannot help but have a strong sense of *déjà vu* as, one by one, the old 'socialist spirit'slogans that were drilled even into foreign students in China—in 1975 we learnt to recite them off by heart—have been revived. CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin has urged the revival of the Yan'an spirit of self-reliance and arduous struggle that officially characterised life at the communists'

pre-revolutionary base in north China. Mao's call for industry to 'learn from Daqing', China's model oilfield, has also been revived, along with a campaign to revive the Daqing spirit of hard work and self-sacrifice.

The past 18 months have also seen the re-emergence of the model socialist worker, with well-publicised ceremonies being held in the Great Hall of the People to present awards to citizens ranging from a 16-year-old Inner Mongolian acrobat to an 84-year-old university professor. According to Premier Li Peng, the award recipients are 'national heroes, the backbone of the people, the mainstay of society and prop of the People's Republic'.

Even that most model socialist of all, Lei Feng, has been recycled, despite the ridicule that accompanied his previous reincarnation in the mid-70s. Since March last year, when a three-day 'national forum on learning from Lei Feng' was held in Beijing, a fresh generation of Chinese youth has been told about the virtuous young soldier (see box on page 25).

The major targets of ideological revival, however, have not been school children or marketing assistants but intellectuals, a group regarded as ideologically suspect throughout most of post-1949 China; the younger echelon, of course, dominated the 1989 protest movement. (In China, the term 'intellectual' basically describes anyone who has graduated from senior high school, although it is also used more narrowly in terms of academics and professionals.) Since Tiananmen, academics and students, in particular, have again been attending regular 'political education' sessions where they are enjoined to "realise that the leadership of the Communist Party and the socialist system are indispensable to China's prosperity".

'Participation in labour'—another familiar slogan from Maoist and particularly from Cultural Revolution days—has also been revived. Television broadcasts feature smiling intellectuals, including party cadres, strengthening their ties with the masses. Bemused peasants

watch their urban brothers (and occasionally sisters) helping with the grain harvest and no doubt recalling earlier days of the unpopular 'down to the countryside' movement.

The official rhetoric of success is as dated as the slogans. Predictably, the media claims that those people who had temporarily been led astray by Western culture and ideology, as well as by the likes of Fang Lizhi ("the scum of the Chinese intellectuals"), have realised the error of their ways and are now 'firmly adhering to the four cardinal principles of maintaining the socialist road'. Students who previously could not keep their hands off books by Sartre and Freud have reportedly returned to Marx. Privately — and sometimes not so privately — intellectuals and students tell a different story, dismissing the outdated rhetoric as the ramblings of a bunch of geriatrics stubbornly clinging to power for themselves and their family entourages.

As China enters the 90s, the social images portrayed are probably more contradictory than at any time since 1949. The dramatic juxtaposition of images of the post-Mao reform era and those of the Cultural Revolution decade makes one realise just how far Chinese society, at least in some respects, has changed in the course of little more than a decade. What the conflicting images reflect more than anything else is the present leadership's lack of direction and complete ideological bankruptcy. But the images are probably too incompatible to co-exist for very long. The question is, of course, who will win out: the model socialist worker or the pin-up girl?

BEVERLEY HOOPER teaches in Humanities, Murdoch University, WA.

