Core values

Arotten newflavourofChinese propaganda

I

T WAS by some distance the year-to-date’s biggest television

event. Some 690m people in China are estimated to have

watched (or snoozed through) the four-and-a-half-hour extrava-

ganza screened nationwide on state television on February 7th,

the eve ofthe Chinese newyear. Itwasa stultifyingprocession of

patriotic songs (“Forge ahead, beautiful China”; “Iron and blood

loyalty”), insipid skits and bald propaganda. “Without the Com-

munist Party, there would be no new China” is a jolly enough

tune, but hardly festive fare. The gala even included a parade of

soldiersstruttingaboutthe stage in combatfatigues.

On the same day, 112m Americanstuned in to the SuperBowl,

a big American football game with more than its share of flag-

waving, too. But at least that event was bone-crunchingly excit-

ing, and its half-time show intriguingly subversive (Beyoncé ap-

peared in a BlackPantheroutfit). Bycontrast, the live broadcastin

China was politically correct to a mind-numbing extreme. The

yearofthe monkeywasushered in bya showthatmanycitizens

decried as a turkey. Moaning about the chunwan, as the pro-

gramme is commonly called, is as much a tradition as the enter-

tainment itself, an annual event since 1983. This year was differ-

ent, however: the show was seen as having plumbed new

depths. Worse, even sayingso was, in effect, banned.

On the state broadcaster’saccounton Weibo, a microblogging

service, the comments section was temporarily shut down as

viewersbombarded itwith complaints. Since then censors have

been busydeletingpostsaboutthe surfeitofpolitical puffery. Pei-

dongYang, a sociologistatthe National Technological University

in Singapore, who hasfollowed the showsclosely, saysthis year’s

was more than usually full ofit. Many viewers joked that it was

like watchingthe news.

What passed for new-year entertainment on television this

yearformed partofa revival ofanotherofthe party’straditions:

the political campaign. Thisneverdied outentirely. But underXi

Jinping, the party’sleadersince 2012, ithasgathered newmomen-

tum. For over a year, the press has urged people to study his ob-

scure doctrine of the “Four Comprehensives” (getting richer, re-

forming the economy, enforcing the law and cleaning up the

party). Thisfeatured, inevitably, in the chunwan, and also in a car-

toon by the official news agency, using rap, zippy animation, Mr

Xi’sown voice and even Beethoven’s“Ode to Joy” to conveythe

message thatthe FourComprehensiveswill bringChina close to

realisingthe “Chinese Dream” (anotherofMrXi’sslogans).

The gala was graced by vast images ofMr Xi, the object ofan

inchoate personality cult. This year the fawning has acquired a

newfeature, with referencesto him asthe hexin, or“core”, ofChi-

na’sleadership. Local leadershave taken to professingtheir loyal-

ty to Mr Xi, using this word. It recalls the campaign in the early

1990s to boost the party leader at the time, Jiang Zemin, through

constant references to the “third generation of revolutionary

leaders”, with Mr Jiang as their “core”—ie, as Mao Zedong had

been to the first generation and Deng Xiaoping to the second.

Back then, Mr Jiang seemed to need the help. Unexpectedly

picked to lead the partyafterthe turmoil ofthe Tiananmen prot-

estsand the killingsthatended them in 1989, he wasseen bysome

asa powerlesscipherfora bunch ofgerontocratswho still called

the shotsfrom theirbath-chairsand bridge tables.

When the party managed its first smooth leadership transi-

tion to the fourth generation in 2002, thatfeatwasalso hailed asa

shiftto a newstyle ofcollective leadership. Itbecame taboo to use

the word hexin to describe the statusofHuJintao, MrXi’sprede-

cessor; among his party colleagues, Mr Hu was always simply

known as “general secretary”. Mr Xi, however, wants to be seen

as more than a first among equals. Chinese media are playing

along. One oftheirnewfadsisthe use ofthe word “Xiconomics”

to describe the president’s professed zeal for “supply-side” eco-

nomicreforms. Thatthe prime minister, Li Keqiang, isnotionally

in charge ofrunningthe economyisconvenientlyignored.

MrXi hasalreadysucceeded in oustinghismostprominent ri-

valsand instillingfearthroughoutthe partywith hisanti-corrup-

tion campaign. Moreover, bystrengtheningthe role ofhigh-level

partycommittees, led byhimself, he hashishandson most ofthe

leversofpower. So itisnotobviouswhyhisstatusneeds further

enhancement. One possibilityisthatthe revived usage of “core”

isa productoffeverish politickingin Beijing. Nextyear the party

will hold a five-yearly congress. According to party rules, five of

the seven members of its highest body, the Politburo Standing

Committee, should stand down because oftheirages. Only MrXi

and Mr Li are due to stay. So intense jockeying is already under

wayforthe vacancies. Officialsmaysee expressionsof loyaltyto

Mr Xi, and acknowledgment ofhis supreme power, as a way of

improvingtheircareerprospects.

It may also be that Mr Xi demands such homage as a way of

stiflingresistance to his policies, his accumulation of powerand

his purge of the corrupt. Economic growth is slowing, and mar-

ketsare turbulent. Leadersmaycalculate thatpre-emptive repres-

sion issaferthan waitingto see ifChina’smyriad malcontentsco-

alesce into somethingresemblingan opposition.

Confidence tricks

Repression carries costs of its own. In one deleted post on the

gala, for example, Ren Zhiqiang, a property tycoon with 37.5m

Weibo followers, asked sarcastically whether stopping criticism

showed self-confidence. In another, WuWei, a liberal former offi-

cial, approvinglyreposted a commentthatthe worstthing about

the gala wasnothowlousyitwasbuthowthe rightto say so was

graduallyvanishing. The censorship lookspetty, sillyand, worse,

panicky. But the party has never been as concerned with how

thingslookaswith keepingan iron grip on power. Ifit were a cor-

poration, thatwould be itscore business.