

God's gift China declares itself a global power

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David Parkins

IN RECENT days government employees across China, from postal officials in the north-east to tax auditors in the south-west, have been corralled into watching state television. The Communist Party often orders bureaucrats to study propaganda. This time, however, the mandatory viewing has deviated from the usual themes of domestic politics and economic development. Instead, it has focused on China's emergence as a global power, and the role of the president, Xi Jinping, in bringing this about.

In late August and early September the state broadcaster aired six 45-minute programmes on this topic at peak viewing hours. The Chinese title could be rendered as "Great-Power Diplomacy", but some state media prefer to call it "Major-Country Diplomacy". That sounds a little more modest. Describing China's growing global clout has long been a problem for propagandists. In 2003 they seemed to have settled on the term "peaceful rise", only to abandon it a few months later in favour of "peaceful development"—the word "rise", they thought, risked causing alarm abroad.

There is not a hint of reticence, however, in the series' portrayal of China's purported foreign-policy successes under Mr Xi, and his personal involvement in them. The programmes, made with the help of the party's own Publicity Department, are peppered with fawning remarks by Chinese and foreigners alike. In a clip from a speech given in 2015, Zimbabwe's leader, Robert Mugabe, says of the smiling Mr Xi: "We will say he is a God-sent person." (China has long admired Mr Mugabe's contempt for the West.) "I really liked him, we had a great chemistry, I think," America's president, Donald Trump, is shown telling an American television interviewer after meeting Mr Xi in Florida in April.

The main message is that Mr Xi is responsible for crafting a new approach to foreign policy that has won China global admiration: "great-power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics". Mr Xi emphasised the need for this in November 2014 in a speech on foreign affairs (official translations of which often used the words "major country" instead). Last year the term appeared for the first time in the government's annual work report. Like Deng Xiaoping's "socialism with Chinese characteristics", the phrase serves more to obfuscate than enlighten.

The nub of it is said to be "win-win co-operation". But its introduction marked a clear departure from Deng's more

reticent approach to foreign policy, which was often described in China as *taoguang yanghui*, or “hiding brightness, nourishing obscurity”. By contrast, in the television series, the narrator says: “Maintaining world peace and stability is the unshirkable responsibility and burden of a great power.” It shows Chinese troops evacuating Chinese (and others) from strife-torn Yemen in 2015, the Chinese navy on anti-piracy missions off the Horn of Africa and Chinese marines setting off in July to establish the country’s first overseas military base in Djibouti.

While the series was being aired, a party newspaper published an article by the foreign minister, Wang Yi, on Mr Xi’s “diplomatic thought”. It said the president’s approach to foreign affairs had “blazed new trails and gone beyond traditional Western international-relations theory of the past 300 years”. The programmes aim to show that, unlike other rising powers in history, China (thanks to Mr Xi) has managed to maintain stable relations with established powers. They gloss over huge underlying tensions with Japan and America. Time and again Mr Xi is shown standing still while foreign leaders walk towards him to shake his hand. “It’s the ancient Chinese tributary system re-enacted,” says a Chinese academic, referring to emissaries from neighbouring states who brought gifts to the Chinese emperor as a means of securing peace.

But for all the talk of Mr Xi’s skills as a global leader, he still shares Deng’s aversion to risk-taking abroad. The series skates over the crisis on the Korean peninsula (a day after the final episode was shown, North Korea tested what appeared to be a hydrogen bomb.) Mr Xi’s great-power diplomacy had clearly failed to avert a grave international crisis—one that has developed not least as a result of China sitting on its hands.