



The China Dream and Chinese Exceptionalism

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The presentation was a summary of a recent book written by the presenter that was yet to be released called China's dream. The title was a deliberate take on the often talked of American Dream and exceptionalism. So if America can have a dream why can't China have one? How different people have been dreaming different dreams?

The dreams that he highlighted were of those whom he terms as 'citizen intellectuals' and they were differentiated from the political class and the dissidents. Dreams were generally associated with values and the political class like, Hu Jintao had come up with some ideas and spoken about harmony while Xi Jinping talked of 'rejuvenation of China' and that 'each person's future and destiny is closely linked with future and destiny of the country and the nation.' These values may have been spoken of but had never really come out clearly and remained vague. The dreams of dissidents like Liu Xiaobo, a writer who is in jail and Ai Weiwei, an artist who describes China as a nightmare have not been included. There was this other category called 'citizen intellectuals' who were different from public intellectuals, officials and dissidents. This group worked with the state and was also critical on the other side. This group was also influential, futuristic and constantly talking of China's future and their ideas linked up to policies. They talked in terms of what China should be, in a normative way. Sources that were used for doing this analysis were novels, blogs, art and film.

The presenter summarised his analysis of three kinds of dreams: First was the *economic dream* as was seen in the 12th Five Year Plan adopted two years ago where the discussion was framed in terms of values and views on society, for example, terms like 'a moderately well-off society' and more 'sustainable, balanced, innovative, people-centred development' was the official view.

The citizen intellectual whose dream was highlighted here was Hu Angang, a famous and influential political economist. His writings were analysed to understand his values and goals. He was on several government committees and was involved in the five-year plans. He argued that China would be a new type of super power by 2020 and would contribute to human development, scientific development and world culture and raise the quality of living of poor people. On closer analysis one realised that his concern was not the poor but his interest was in GDP and his main goal was to surpass the US. His book on *China 2030* talked of a Sino-centric world order of great harmony.

The second citizen intellectual was Pan Wei, a political scientist whose book called *The Chinese Model of Development* was analysed. Pan's dream was an economic model having a unique and distinct feature. His idea was interesting as most people looked towards big cities and his idea was to get back to village life with no division between state and civil society that had to merge as one. His goal was also of 'great harmony' but the key values here were of stability, unity, statism and he

argued for a stronger CCP control. The speaker summed up Pan Wei's ideas 'Mao was good, West was evil and democracy was a trap'.

The second dream was the *military dream*. Here the presenter picked one citizen intellectual called Col. Liu Mingfu. His China dream can be summarised as follows: economic reform has gone too far and there is a need to rebalance China's power from civil to military; China should aim at surpassing US in terms of military power. The values included China's competitive spirit that was not just economic but to rejuvenate the Chinese nation and its martial spirit. The goal was to strengthen China's party state and dominant values of statism and socialism. His view was also that Chinese tradition should also emphasise more on China's heroic warrior emperors and not Confucianism. The official policy may have stated peaceful rise and harmony but the citizen intellectuals thought differently. PLA's response to Xi Jinping's China dream was: 'duty bound to take up the task of forging the saber of a great power'.

The third dream was the *social dream*, a dream of a civil society. The idea of a civil society of whether there should be one or not was contested by intellectuals. The 12th FYP talked of 'social management' which appeared to be very state centric. Artist Cai Guoqiang in his last exhibit criticised the China model as urban centric and inequitable. He depicted values such as freedom, creativity and ingenuity in the country side. According to him inventions challenged gravity and were 'born out of a desire to escape the gravity of one's circumstances'. Models had been reinvented by farmers that probably failed to function but were creative. Lot of these inventions were militarist – aircrafts and submarines and also an aircraft carrier. Cai observes "At a time when the first Chinese aircraft carrier is anticipated and feared by many, it seems that peasants have already begun its constitution".

The social dream discussed here was also through a film called Du Lala's Promotion Diary that had become a success and showed American and Chinese people working together for mutual benefit. It also showed how women dream of China? The crux of the film was that any kind of freedom could be found outside China. Film's theme was modern with post-materialist values and highlighted the idea of 'free to live life on your own terms'. There is politics in this kind of a dream but it is politically apolitical and talks of social and political freedom.

The presenter summarised by saying that China's exceptionalist dream had many voices in debates about the good life, civilisation and progress; the dominant view was stability, unity, statism, rejuvenation of China as a party-state; it was a move from nationalism to exceptionalism; there was a collective right turn by China's New Left and people who were liberals in the 1980s and nationalists in the 1990s were now statist. The debate on values is increasingly essentialised and exceptionalist and ideas are still conservative in a hierarchical society and what the presenter summed up as geopolitical Occidentalism.

The questions focussed on the lack of minority voices, methodology of selecting the few individuals to construct China's dream and whether it was really the mainstream voice or just an interesting formulation. Comments raised were that dreams were supposed to be inspiring as was the American dream but what seemed to be emerging was that China dream was constricted. The dream of the overseas Chinese population would also be important to add to the China dream.

The presenter acknowledged that he came from a post-structuralist perspective and that his book was very Han and male centric and the book was trying to look into mainstream debates and voices of ethnic and religious minorities were missing.

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