

Paper (Work-in-Progress) Submission for  
The 56<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the  
American Association for Chinese Studies

The George Washington University, Washington, D.C., October 10-12, 2014

## **The “Chinese Dream” in Contemporary Media Culture**

Fan Yang, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor, Department of Media and Communication Studies  
University of Maryland, Baltimore County  
(443) 838 - 6929  
[fanyang@umbc.edu](mailto:fanyang@umbc.edu)

In November 2012, China’s president elect Xi Jinping introduced the “Chinese Dream” (*zhongguomeng*, 中国梦) as a new catchphrase for his administration. While Xi repeatedly emphasizes in various speeches that modern China’s “greatest dream” is the “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” which embodies “the integrated well-being” of the country and its people, the meanings of the term remain ambiguous at best. This ambiguity, however, has not stopped the “dream” speak from taking the Chinese media by storm and garnering global media attention in turn. On some level, Xi appears to have carried out an(other) act of copying, in line with China’s longstanding reputation as a frequent violator of Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) laws. Yet equally worthy of attention is the possibility that the “Chinese Dream” rhetoric signals a new beginning whereby populations of the Third World, who have been “structurally kept outside the

(American) dream of the ‘middle class’,” can assume the subject position of a “dreamer” and “start to engage in the construction of their own life worlds.”<sup>1</sup>

In this work-in-progress paper, I am interested in exploring the discursive formation and ideological operation of the “Chinese Dream” in contemporary media culture in both China and the global context. Today, I would like to use this opportunity to share with you several contemporary media and cultural artifacts whose production, circulation and reception I have begun to examine for the purpose of unpacking the multi-faceted “Chinese Dream” discourse. These artifacts include a commercially successful 2013 film named *American Dreams in China* (*Zhongguo Hehuoren*, 中国合伙人), a series of “propaganda” posters that draw on regional folk traditions commissioned by China Net TV and displayed in urban public spaces, and a song called “My Requirement is Not That High,” performed by the popular film star Huang Bo in the 2014 Spring Festival Gala aired on China Central Television (CCTV). My tentative argument is that the “Chinese Dream” is best understood as a global-national ideological formation, one that manifests the workings of the globally hegemonic imaginary of “America” in shaping how China’s national future is to be imagined.

### **Xi Jinping’s “Chinese Dream”**

I would like to begin by offering an analysis of the first official “announcement” of the “Chinese Dream” rhetoric. On November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2012, after Xi’s visit to an exhibition titled “Road to Revival (*fuxing zhilu*, 复兴之路)” at the National Museum in Beijing, he gave an *unscripted* speech, the entirety of which is later broadcast on *Network*

*News Broadcast*, the longest running news program on the state-run (but increasingly commercialized) CCTV. Xi opens his speech by sharing his thoughts on the exhibition itself, which features China's modern history from the imperial invasions at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (in the form of the Opium War, among others) to the founding of the Chinese Communist Party and its leadership in building the People's Republic of China. "The exhibition has reviewed the past, displayed the present, and declared the future of the Chinese nation," Xi states, before touching on each of these time frames more specifically, including the nation's "suffering" in the modern era and the on-going need to adhere to the "correct path" of "socialism with Chinese characteristics." It is at the moment when "we look to the future" that Xi invokes the "dream":

"Nowadays, everyone (*dajia*, 大家) is discussing the Chinese Dream. What is the Chinese dream? In my view, to achieve the great revival of the Chinese nation (*minzu*, 民族) is the grandest Chinese dream of the Chinese nation (*minzu*, 民族) in the modern era. For the long-cherished wishes of many generations are congealed and deposited in this dream, which manifests the integrated wellbeing of the Chinese people, and is the common wish of every single offspring of China. History tells us that the fate of every one of us is closely connected to the state (*guojia*, 国家) and the nation (*minzu*, 民族). Only when the state is well and the nation is well can everyone be well."

For a term that was to become "the Chinese character of the Year for 2012,"<sup>ii</sup> the first official speech about the "Chinese Dream" is perhaps most unusual for its apparent lack of originality. Not only has Xi seemingly drawn on an on-going conversation that

“everyone” is engaged in rather than offering something entirely new, it is also a phrase that is almost too close a copycat of its American counterpart, as numerous Chinese and Western observers were quick to point out. *The Economist* even went so far as to suggest that Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* might have been an immediate source of inspiration for Xi.<sup>iii</sup> The best-selling author’s piece, “China Needs Its Own Dream,” appeared just weeks before Xi’s 2012 inauguration, which warned that “if Xi’s dream for China’s emerging middle class - 300 million people expected to grow to 800 million by 2025 - is just like the American Dream (a big car, a big house and Big Macs for all) then we need another planet.”<sup>iv</sup> To be sure, the phrase had appeared in previous books published in the U.S. and China, including Helen Wang’s *The Chinese Dream: The Rise of the World’s Largest Middle Class and What It Means to You* (2010, in English) and Liu Minfu’s *China Dream: Great Power Thinking and Strategic Posture in the Post-American Era* (2010, in Chinese).<sup>v</sup> But it is Friedman’s article that was the most frequently cited in the state media’s top-circulating news publications, including *Reference Works*, *Frontline*, and *Globe*. Admittedly, despite its ostensibly condescending tone, the main point of Friedman’s article is in fact to stress the importance of sustainable development for China. But why did so many commentators see this “American expert’s” call for a “different Chinese dream” so important that they immediately interpreted the new president’s first public “dream” speech as an official “response?”<sup>vi</sup>

The answer to this question, I argue, is best provided through the analytical model of the global-national imaginary. This is a concept that I have developed in my book, *Faked in China* (forthcoming, Indiana University Press), to account for globalization’s cultural impact on China’s WTO-era state apparatus. In that book, I argue that the

cultural forces that helped shape the state's post-2001 vision for the nation, "From Made in China to Created in China," stem from a "branded imaginary" promulgated by the globalizing regime of IPR. Even though the "Chinese Dream" discourse is not directly connected to IPR, the cultural conditions of globalization that shape the state's national visions in these cases seem to share much in common, since what has prefigured the "Chinese dream" is arguably another globally hegemonic discourse, that of the "American Dream." After all, for *The Economist* and for many others, the only national-specific "dream" that can lay claim to global recognition is the American one. In both instances, the Chinese state is interpellated, as it were, by a globally operative cultural regime even as it seeks to reclaim and reinforce its own legitimacy through formulating distinct visions for the nation. In the nation-branding campaign, the vision of "Created in China" works in conjunction with the global consumer confidence crisis of "Made in China" to secure the state's subject position as a guarantor of the nation's development towards an IPR-friendly future. Likewise, the linking of President Xi's "Chinese Dream" to the comment by Mr. Friedman is indicative of a global-national ideological formation at work in subjugating the state to the hailing of a "middle-class" version of an "American Dream" while simultaneously allowing the state to re-insert its subject position as the leader for the nation and its "people."

The working of this global-national imaginary can be discerned in Xi's first "dream" speech and subsequent reiterations. In the passage cited above, the invocation of "history," or more specifically the nation's "century of humiliation" exhibited at the National Museum, offers a backdrop for stressing the idea that "the fate" of "every Chinese" is "closely connected to the state and the nation." While China's "great revival" is, in the first iteration, the "grandest Chinese dream of the Chinese *nation*," it is also an expression of

the “integrated wellbeing” of the Chinese *people*. Here, Xi has made not only a clear distinction between the nation and the state, but also an attempt to reinforce an alignment between the people and the nation, as if the link is in need of restoration. This attempt became more pronounced at the National People’s Congress, when Xi downplayed the nation as the “dreamer” and emphasized that “the Chinese dream is the people’s dream,” a statement that prompted the English-language media to adopt “Chinese dream” as a preferred translation, as opposed to the earlier version, “China dream.”<sup>vii</sup> Nonetheless, the oscillation between the nation and the people has persisted in Xi’s later public addresses on the topic.

These incongruent articulations of the identity of the “dreamer” are perhaps better seen as symptoms of what I call a *split-subject status* of the state, whereby the interpellation of the citizenry is itself subject to the hailing of a global imaginary - in this case, the “American Dream.” It is important to note that the globally hegemonic working of the discourse is not carried out through a direct imposition. Rather, the “American Dream” functions as an “imaginary social signification,” in Cornelius Castoriadis’s sense of the term,<sup>viii</sup> not unlike the branded imaginary of IPR. While its global visibility is closely tied to the various intended projects of global integration on the part of the U.S. state (in seeking global markets for American products, for example), its cultural work is more aptly described as operative through an *internalized cultural logic*. The fact that global media representatives like Friedman and *The Economist* so easily laid claim to the universal appeal of the “American Dream” - an appeal seemingly resonated among the Chinese commentators - speaks precisely to the internalization of such an imaginary. In this sense, the unequal relation of power that persists in contemporary globalization manifests itself as a *productive* force, at once disrupting the hyphen between the state and the nation while proffering a specific kind of national vision, one that the state has

deemed most effective in re-establishing its tie to the nation. In the case of the Chinese Dream, this vision appears to be conforming precisely to an “American middle-class” version of “good life,” which Friedman has seemingly “denied” China - a denial that numerous Chinese commentators have sought fit to contest, by endorsing Xi’s national dream in turn.

### *Chinese Partners/American Dreams in China*

These global-national tensions are played out most vividly in the film *American Dreams in China* (hereafter, *ADIC*), whose Chinese title literally translates as “Chinese Partners.” *ADIC* is a fast-paced urban film that was widely celebrated in the media as a domestic hit to have beaten *Iron Man 3* during its opening weekend. It tells the story of three 1980s Chinese college graduates who join in a partnership - over three decades and through various struggles - to form New Dreams, an English test preparation school modeled on New Oriental Education and Technology Group (a Chinese equivalent of Kaplan). The film went on to gain 500 million RMB (close to \$100 million) at the box office, even though its reception was not uniformly positive. Among other things, its popularity brought suspicions that it has copied a Hollywood production, *The Social Network* (David Fincher, 2010), in terms of style and plotline.<sup>ix</sup> Both films, after all, are based on real stories of several young college graduates’ entrepreneurial experience and the deterioration of their friendship during the process. Both narratives also prominently feature one or more IPR lawsuits faced by the protagonist: in *The Social Network*, Mark Zuckerberg is accused of stealing the idea of Facebook from his Harvard schoolmates, in addition to being sued by one of his former partners for the unfair dilution of his shares;

in *ADIC*, New Dreams is charged for copyright infringement due to the use of unauthorized test-preparation material in its own tutorials. Both films portray their main characters as eloquently defending themselves against their opponents during settlement talks - a plot that grants them an on-screen “victory” of sort, despite the actual outcome of the (real-life or cinematized) lawsuit itself, which in both cases involved the defendant’s payment of a sizable sum for settling out of court.

Numerous Chinese critics have come to interpret the film’s explicit invocation of the “dream” signifier as lending “subtle” support to the “mainstream state ideology” that is the “Chinese Dream.”<sup>x</sup> Yet this kind of analysis falls short in mapping the historically specific conditions that give rise to a cultural artifact like *ADIC*. After all, the “Chinese Dream” discourse, as documented in William Callahan’s *China Dreams*, is a heterogeneous formation that involves a variety of actors whose voices can hardly be captured by the notion of “mainstream state ideology.” A more pertinent question, as a group of young cultural scholars in China convened in June 2013 to reflect upon, is how and why contemporary “popular cultural productions” like *ADIC* have come to mystify “an American imaginary.”<sup>xi</sup> Indeed, the presence of this imaginary, as several critics have noted, can be seen in two other hit films of the same year that also feature “America” quite prominently. One is *Finding Mr. Right*, whose Chinese title literally translates as *Beijing meets Seattle* (*Beijing yushang Xiyatu*, 《北京遇上西雅图》), paying explicit tribute to the 1993 Hollywood romantic classic, *Sleepless in Seattle*.<sup>xii</sup> The other is *So Young* (*Zhi Qingchun*, 《致青春》), in which the female lead has two consecutive boyfriends who have chosen America over their relationship, presumably in pursuit of their own American Dreams.<sup>xiii</sup> Compared to these and other previous productions,

*ADIC*'s motif appears to be more distinct in proffering the idea that "one can realize the American Dream on Chinese soil."<sup>xiv</sup> As Chan explains why he favors the English title: "People feel that 'American Dream' must belong to America, but America's economy is already saturated ... American Dream was what happened in America in the last century...but now this 'American Dream' is taking place in China everyday."<sup>xv</sup>

Indeed, I would argue that the film is best seen as participating in the state-promoted "Chinese Dream" discourse as part of an *ideological* state apparatus, in Louis Althusser's sense of the term. Its operation shares much in common with that of the post-2001 nation-branding campaign, "From Made in China to Created in China." Both privilege the subject position of "creative" entrepreneurs represented by figures like Michael Yu, the CEO of New Oriental whose story served as a major inspiration for *ADIC*. Not only was Yu the recipient of a "Created in China" award (presented by CCTV) back in 2009, the ending of the film also features a series of "then v. now" portraits of an ensemble of successful Chinese entrepreneurs - among them Yu and his New Oriental partners, as well as Jack Ma, a former English teacher who was soon to become the richest man in China when Alibaba, the e-commerce company he founded fifteen years ago, issued its IPO in a record-breaking fashion on the New York Stock Exchange on September 19, 2014. "Their story is perhaps also your story," says an intertitle that precedes this portrait sequence. While audience responses to this message have ranged from "warmly inspired" (by the entrepreneurial spirit) to "mildly disgusted" (by the unabashed celebration of wealth accumulation),<sup>xvi</sup> the glorified on-screen parade of these "Chinese partners" has no doubt underscored the possibility for the cinematic public to dream the "American Dream" in China.

I've argued in the concluding chapter of my book that the film can be read as a symptomatic text of WTO-era China's cultural dilemma; despite the attempts at offering alternative cultural visions for the nation (as may be discerned in the trailer shown), the film's climatic ending, with the "Chinese Partners" ostensibly defeating the Americans at a hearing table while declaring the issuing of its IPO in the New York Stock Exchange, points to the challenges faced by the postsocialist state in its negotiation of national difference in contemporary globalization. After all, as Callahan points out, even though the participants in the "China Dream" discourse are "involved in a raucous debate of the direction of China's future," many of these "dreamers" still hold the "main goal" to "surpass the United States economically, militarily, and politically."<sup>xvii</sup> In this sense, *ADIC* can be more usefully read as representing an *impossibility* for the nation to break away from a pre-occupation with "America" as a *telos* of progress.

### **Sameness and Difference?**

It is precisely this tension, between *difference* and *sameness*, that I've come to observe in a series of posters titled "Chinese Dream, My Dream," which can be found in many public spaces in numerous Chinese cities today. As you can see in these images, which I took during a research trip to Shenzhen, the Special Economic Zone of South China this January, the posters are often displayed in the surrounding areas of infrastructural construction sites for buildings, subways, and so forth. While many of these posters draw on stylistic traditions of folk art, some of which even evocative of propaganda posters of the Maoist era, their exhibition at the sites of urban development arguably captures the temporal dissonance between a constructed national past and an imagined national future. This

dissonance can also be discerned in a song performed by the popular star Huang Bo (the equivalent of Seth Rogen) at the CCTV Spring Festival Extravaganza (see video with English sub-titles). In addition to the very interesting lyrics - which includes such lines as “This is my Chinese Dream; it is very small and ordinary; I didn’t expect to be a dragon or phoenix; I only want to live in happiness” - I would direct your attention to the visual rendition of the performance, which shows Huang and his dancers “walking” toward the audience as various scenes of fields, hills and (real as well as animated) cityscapes fall behind them. Considering that the lyrics also invokes numerous “hot-button” issues that concern the rising Chinese middle class, from food safety to mortgage payments, I’ve found this composition to be layered with meanings. Again, what may be discerned is an attempt at negotiating a sort of difference vis-à-vis the globally recognizable “American Dream,” in the sense that what is proposed is a much more modest dream than the kind that Thomas Friedman had in mind – “it is not hung high in the sky” but “can be reached when we tiptoe up.” At the same time, the speeding up of the pace toward the end of the song, set in the background of the animated cityscape, seems to also suggest a relentless momentum of “marching forward,” something that appears impossible for the “common folks” to keep up. May this be read as another manifestation of the discordance between the development frenzy on the part of the state in dreaming the nation’s future (as the next “No. 1”) and the “small and ordinary dreams” of its “people,” the kinds of aspirations to which the state must also respond? I’d be very much interested in hearing your thoughts.

**Notes:**

---

<sup>i</sup> Xudong Zhang, “Zhang Xudong tan Zhongguomeng: zhongyu daole keyi tan mengxiang de shike (Zhang Xudong on the Chinese Dream: finally it is time to talk of dreams),” *Shehui guancha (Social Outlook)*, 2013, [http://www.guancha.cn/zhang-xudong/2013\\_07\\_11\\_156654.shtml](http://www.guancha.cn/zhang-xudong/2013_07_11_156654.shtml).

<sup>ii</sup> Briefing, “Xi Jinping’s vision: Chasing the Chinese dream,” *The Economist*, May 4, 2013, <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21577063-chinas-new-leader-has-been-quick-consolidate-his-power-what-does-he-now-want-his>.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, “China Needs Its Own Dream,” *The New York Times*, October 2, 2012, sec. Opinion, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/03/opinion/friedman-china-needs-its-own-dream.html>.

<sup>v</sup> J. M., “The Chinese dream: The role of Thomas Friedman,” *Analects - The Economist*, May 6, 2013, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/analects/2013/05/chinese-dream-0>.

<sup>vi</sup> Briefing, “Xi Jinping’s vision: Chasing the Chinese dream.”

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid. The phrase “China Dream,” however, can still be found in English publications. See, for example, William A. Callahan, *China Dreams: 20 Visions of the Future* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>viii</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, 1st MIT Press ed. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1987).

<sup>ix</sup> “‘Hehuoren’ shangying 10 tian po 3 yi, yi chaoxi ‘Shejiao Wangluo’ (‘Partners’ gained over 300 million within 10 days, suspected of copying ‘Social Network’),” *Zhongguo wang (China Net)*, May 27, 2013, [http://www.china.com.cn/info/2013-05/27/content\\_28945564.htm](http://www.china.com.cn/info/2013-05/27/content_28945564.htm).

---

<sup>x</sup> See, for example, Qing Hu and Baotao Wei, “Cong yishixingtai chuanbo de jiaodu kan dianying Zhongguo Hehuoren dui ‘Zhongguomeng’ de jiangou (The construction of the ‘Chinese Dream’ in American Dreams in China from the perspective of ideological diffusion),” *Wenxue pinglun (Literary Review)* (n.d.).

<sup>xi</sup> Huiyu Zhang, ed., “Dangdai dazhong wenhua zhong de Meiguo xiangxiang (The ‘American’ imaginary in contemporary popular culture),” *Wenyi lilun yu piping (Literary Theory and Criticism)* 5 (2013): 43.

<sup>xii</sup> Despite having a different English name, *Finding Mr. Right*, it is almost entirely based in Seattle, where two people from Beijing fall in love.

<sup>xiii</sup> Huiyu Zhang, ed., “Zai fansi ‘Meiguomeng’ zhong renshi Zhongguo (Understanding China by reflecting on the “American Dream”),” *Hongqi Wengao (Red Flag Manuscript)* 17 (2013): 8.

<sup>xiv</sup> Zhang, “Zai fansi ‘Meiguomeng’ zhong renshi Zhongguo (Understanding China by reflecting on the “American Dream’).”

<sup>xv</sup> De Luo, “Zhongguo Hehuoren: Tujin de Shidai yu Fengkuang de Ziji (American Dreams in China: the advancing times and the crazy self),” *Dongfang dianying (Screen)*, 2013.

<sup>xvi</sup> “‘Hehuoren’ shangying 10 tian po 3 yi, yi chaoxi ‘Shejiao Wangluo’ (‘Partners’ gained over 300 million within 10 days, suspected of copying ‘Social Network’).”

<sup>xvii</sup> Callahan, *China Dreams*, 58.