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## Dreaming as a critical discourse of national belonging: China Dream, American Dream and world dream

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### Abstract

This article explores the normative politics of national belonging through an analysis of the 'China Dream' and the 'American Dream'. It traces how politicians and public intellectuals employ such slogans to highlight how national dreams emerge in times of crisis, and involve a combination of aspirations and anxieties. It compares parallel rhetorical strategies—'patriotic worrying' in China and the American Jeremiad in the US—to examine how belonging to these two nations involves a nostalgic longing for the past as a model for the future. Debates about the meaning of these national dreams highlight the tension between freedom and equality in the US, between the individual and the collective in China, and between longing for the true nation, and belonging in the actual nation for both countries. It concludes that while this quest for redemption through past models limits opportunities for critical discourse in China, the American Dream still contains much 'promise'. The China Dream and the American Dream thus are, at the same time, 1) familiar expressions of nationalism and national belonging, and 2) ongoing self/Other coherence-producing performances that help us to question received notions of nationalism and national belonging.

Key words: China, America, dreaming, nostalgia, critical theory

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## **Dreaming as a Critical Discourse of National Belonging: China Dream, American Dream, and World Dream**

The rise of China has complicated the way we think about global politics. In 2015, Beijing challenged the Western-led world order first diplomatically through institution-building, and then militarily through island-building: Beijing launched the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank, a new multilateral institution that challenges the World Bank, and then built military bases on top of coral reefs in the South China Sea to challenge neighboring countries and the US (French 2015; Callahan 2016).

It is easy to understand institution-building and island-building in terms of materialist international relations theories: liberal institutionalism and offensive realism (Ikenberry 2012; Mearsheimer 2014). What is often missing from discussions of the rise of China is the ideational challenge posed by Beijing: how does the rise of nationalism, and identity politics more broadly, shape domestic and international politics in China? Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a shift from grand ideologies that universally apply to ‘humanity’—such as communism—to ideas and identities that are more local, national, and regional. Indeed, often we don’t talk about ‘liberal democracy’ as an ideology available to all, but analyze comparative and international politics in terms ‘Western democracy’ that may not apply to other regions. Huntington’s (1996) vision of world politics as a ‘clash of civilizations’ is an example of this trend, where identity takes shape in relation to ‘difference’. Following the critique of

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cosmopolitan universals seen in the epigraph of Knott's 'Introduction' to this section on 'Nationalism and Belonging'—'But of course not everyone belongs' (Spiro 2007: 3)—identity politics here defines the self against the Other in order to narrate the nation (see Connolly 1991: 64; Bhabha 1990). The rise of nationalism in China—against some negative idealization of the West/America—has been an important part of this oppositional trajectory of national belonging.

Hence most analyses frame the rise of China in terms of a challenge to the West, where Beijing replaces Washington as the capital of the world, and China's harmonious civilizational values replace Western democratic values (Jacques 2009; Kang 2007; Katzenstein 2012; Rozman 2013). This article takes a different track to compare parallel nationalist discourses in China and the United States: the China Dream and the American Dream. Following the 'Nationalism & Belonging' focus of ASEN's 2014 annual conference, this paper will examine how belonging in China and the US involves a nostalgic longing for the past as a model for the future. Rather than take identity and membership for granted as fixed or stable entities, the article examines how national belonging is the product of very active and ongoing political and moral debates among political leaders, popular culture, and public intellectuals. It will show how the national belonging evoked in these two national dreams can lead to the socialization of ideals, and thus to a belonging that is constrained by the nation. It also highlights how national dreams can invoke belonging beyond domestic space: both the China Dream and the American Dream have active constituencies far beyond their national territories—and not just among expatriate or diaspora communities.

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Rather than taking the 'nation' for granted as an essential identity or an actor in a rational calculus, it is helpful to see the nation as a set of unstable social relations that take on coherence through cultural governance (Shapiro 2004). Cultural governance here looks to Foucault's (1991) understanding of power as a productive force that is generated by social relationships, rather than as a set of juridical practices that restrict action. Shapiro (2004:34) argues that while for the early-modern state, sovereignty relied on 'military and fiscal initiatives', by the nineteenth century these 'coercive and economic aspects of control have been supplemented by a progressively intense cultural governance ... aimed at making territorial and national/cultural boundaries coextensive.' But Shapiro (2004:49) does not simply chart out the productive power of state-led cultural governance; his critical approach also shows how resistance to restrictive national identity can emerge through other modalities of expression—film, theater, television, novels and other counter-nationalist or alternative-nationalist narratives—that 'challenge the state's coherence-producing writing performances.'

Rather than enter into the grand debate about whether nationalism precedes nations (or not) (see Gellner 1982, Smith 1986a, Armstrong 1982), I would like to explore the contingencies of national belonging by employing a set of concepts, rather than arguing in terms of a set of ideologies. Here I follow Anderson (1991: 5), who suggests that it would 'make things easier if one treated [nationalism] as if it belonged with "kinship" and "religion," rather than with "liberalism" or "fascism".' But rather than looking to nationalism studies'

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established list of concepts—language, kinship, religion, and geography, for example (see Renan 1990)—I am interested to see how more modest concepts—the ‘American Jeremiad’ and ‘patriotic worrying’ [*youhuan yishi*]*—can help explain national belonging as a coherence-producing performance in the US and China (more below). This follows from interesting work done on the power of affect and emotion on national identity construction, especially the role of nostalgia in national belonging (see Muro 2005; Armstrong 1982; Smith 2015; Murphy 2009).*

By framing analysis in terms of a suspicion of grand narratives (i.e. nationalism as ideology), self/Other relations, and the contingent dynamic of cultural governance/resistance, this study employs a poststructuralist approach to the normative politics of national belonging. Rather than measuring ‘nationalism’ through public opinion survey research, it seeks to interpret identity politics through discourse analysis. It focuses on texts by political leaders not because they are ‘true’, but because they are influential. While as commander-in-chief the US president wields considerable hard power, presidential discourse is explored in this article because of the soft power value of the White House as a ‘bully pulpit’. The discursive power of the Chinese president is even stronger (see Brady 2008). Likewise, the article looks to popular culture—the China Idol singing contest, for example—not because it reflects true identity or opinion, but because it is wildly popular in terms of viewership and commentary. Chinese people are buying into the China Dream by consuming nationalism in particular ways (see Callahan 2010). Public intellectuals hence are interesting because they mediate

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between the official power of the state (i.e. presidential speeches) and the informal power of popular culture (i.e. television shows): in China, public intellectuals are important because they are close advisors to the party-state, while at the same time drumming up support for their ideas in online media and television talk shows (see Callahan 2013). Hence, this article chooses texts not according to their content (i.e. interesting ideas), but according to their popularity in official and popular arenas. In this way, what we might otherwise dismiss as ‘propaganda’, now becomes meaningful information that provides a sense of the debates that animate the normative politics of national belonging in China (Pieke 2009; Swaine 2012:1-2). This article thus shifts from an empiricist explanation that relies on a truthful representation of the facts, to a poststructuralist understanding that relies on persuasive interpretation (Shapiro 2013, pp. 29-30; Bryman 2012, pp. 26-32). Indeed, this interpretive approach is how Chinese scholars engage with official discourse: they look for patterns in order to add meaning to vague official declarations (see Xu and Du 2015).

Lastly, it might seem odd that I am employing methods developed to study Chinese discourse, which is often very vague, repetitious, and unwieldy, to analyze the American Dream as well. Since the discourse of ‘exceptionalism’ animates normative debates about national belonging in both China and the US (more below), it is common for Americanists and Sinologists to analyze their topics in isolation. This article deliberately juxtaposes two well-analyzed topics—nationalism in authoritarian China and democratic America—to trace out connections, similarities, and differences. But rather than starting out from the

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American case, and analyzing China in terms of liberal values and methods, I do the opposite: start from the Chinese case, to see what the debates that produced the China Dream can tell us about the normative politics of national belonging in the People's Republic of China (PRC), as well as in the US.

### **National Dreams**

The China Dream became very popular after November 2012 because Xi Jinping, China's new leader, invoked it as his defining slogan: the 'China dream' is for the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' (Zhonggong 2013:3). Right away there were many comparisons with the American Dream, which also has a presidential pedigree. Barak Obama's (2004; 2006) two books even have 'dream' in the title: *Dreams From My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. Indeed, Obama's life itself presents an example of the American Dream writ-small: an outsider who gains fame, fortune, and status through hard work.

Such national expressions of dreams characteristically posit an essential national identity, which is often dismissed as propaganda: the 'myth' of the American Dream (Hodgson 2009; Noble 2007; Owen 2002). Others look to the dark side of American history—slavery and militarism—to tell us that the American experience is better described as a nightmare (Bacevich 2009; Hodgson 2009; Murphy 2009: 136; Nobel 2007). Curiously, many of the critics of the American Dream also adopt an essentialized unitary view, where the American Dream is either completely true, or completely false; totally virtuous or



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totally sinful. Many English scholars, in particular, seek to prove that the American Dream is false—a myth that is a poor copy of ‘European’ values (Hodgson 2009; also see Bercovitch 2012: 9-10).

But such efforts to ‘disprove’ the American Dream miss the point. A myth is not simply a falsehood; as Aristotle told us, a myth is ‘made up of things to wonder at’ (cited in Madsen 1995: 227). The American Dream and the China Dream thus are not facts to be proven or disproven, but moral narratives that express a nation’s aspirations and anxieties in poly-vocal conversations about the good life, civilization, and progress (Madsen 1995: 209-10; Murphy 2009:135). Rather than denouncing or mocking such dreams, as do many scholars and public intellectuals, we should take them seriously as a way of thinking about how national belonging takes shape through debates about values. Attention to such dreams can help us see how nations are an ongoing coherence-producing performance that both includes and excludes various groups (see Butler 1993).

As suggested above, the issues here are both theoretical and empirical. They are empirical in the sense that we need to conduct a thick description of the China Dream (because it is quite recent), and of the American Dream (because it is so enduring). Rather than affirming essentialist singular national identities, I will argue that dream discourse grows out of vigorous normative debates about national belonging. These debates highlight the tension between freedom and equality in the US, and between the individual and the collective in China. More generally, they highlight the tension between longing for the true nation, and

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belonging in the actual nation. As we will see, such dreams erupt not merely in domestic space: they now are going global in the soft power politics of a rewarmed Cold War battle between the China Dream and the American Dream.

Analyzing the normative politics of national belonging through an examination of national dreams is also a theoretical project. The dreams don't merely reflect the reality of a society—they are positioned as interventions to redirect debate as part of a critical practice. Rather than empirical measurements of truth or falsity, they involve intersubjective political judgments of normative values—which often then are repackaged as truth claims about the authentic nation (Murphy 2009:132-5). The article thus explores how the American Dream grows out of the particular rhetoric of the 'American Jeremiad', and how the China Dream grows out of the peculiar Chinese practice of 'patriotic worrying'.

'Jeremiad' comes from the Old Testament, and looks to the story where Jeremiah declares 'Return, O faithless people' (Jeremiah 3:22) to Jews who had abandoned the covenant sworn at Sinai. The American Jeremiad fuses the sacred with the secular to argue that the country has problems because it likewise has lost its way. To solve the problems America needs to reaffirm its covenant to American ideals, especially as outlined in the sacred texts of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The American Jeremiad thus combines a sacred covenant with a worldly mission, which through the American Dream has now become a mission to the world (Bercovitch 2012; 1978; Murphy 2009:126).

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In China, ‘patriotic worrying’ [*youhuan yishi*] presents a similar backward-looking discourse. This ‘patriotic worrying’ gives intellectuals the moral obligation to frame problems and solutions in terms of China’s national and civilizational perfection. Intellectuals feel that it is their job to ponder the fate of the nation, and to find the correct formula to solve China’s problems. Once the correct formula is discovered, then China will be rejuvenated and take its rightful place at the center of the world (Davies 2007; Bøckman 1998).

As we will see, neither the American Dream nor the China Dream are simply positive jingoistic celebrations of the nation. Alongside the celebration there is always a lamentation about missed opportunities and lost greatness (Bercovitch 1978; Murphy 2009). Part of belonging to these national communities thus involves an intense longing for past glory (see Muro 2005; Smith 2015). Indeed, in 2013 Chinese President Xi Jinping declared that his China Dream was for the ‘great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’, while Donald Trump’s 2016 president campaign slogan was ‘Make American Great Again’. National dreams thus are not just a celebration of success, but a response to a crisis: political crisis, economic crisis, and cultural crisis—which are all framed as a moral crisis.

The article’s conclusion thus will consider the limits of these two critical interventions: rather than Chinese and American Dreams looking forward to a pluralistic future, both the American Jeremiad and Chinese ‘patriotic worrying’ aim to get their nations back on the straight-and-narrow path that leads to national perfection. To put it another way, it will consider how ‘critical’ does not necessarily mean progressive. As we will see, values-talk in both China and the

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US is dominated by broadly conservative ideals: the family, the collective, and order. The goal of the national dream is national perfection rather than the universal emancipation of humanity. This, once again, shows how the normative politics of national belonging differs from cosmopolitan evocations of solidarity that prescribe universal belonging.

### **The China Dream**

On 29 November 2012, China's new leader Xi Jinping told us that his 'China dream' is for the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation'. He later explained that to 'fulfill the China Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, we must achieve a rich and powerful country, the revitalization of the nation, and the people's happiness' (Zhonggong 2013: 3, 5). Although it is easy to dismiss such slogans as propaganda, they are crucial in organizing thought and action in Chinese politics (Pieke 2009; Swaine 2012:1-2). Famous communist poet Ai Qing (1982: 302)—who is now better known as artist-activist Ai Weiwei's father—reflected this understanding of language and politics in a poem he wrote for Chairman Mao in 1941: 'The new slogan determines the new political direction'. Here we will examine Xi Jinping's official book about the China Dream (Zhonggong 2013) and his later book *The Governance of China* (Xi 2014a), and relate these speeches to how other policymakers and opinion-makers now invoke this phrase.

China Dream discourse is mostly about domestic politics; it asserts a certain vision of Chinese national identity, but it is more complex than that. It

promotes an unwieldy combination of individual dreams for the good life, and collective dreams for a wealthy and powerful nation: including the military dream of China overtaking the US as the next superpower (see Liu 2010; Callahan 2013). Figures 1 and 2, both of which come from Summer 2013, illustrate the parameters of China Dream discourse. Figure 1 shows a boy band of metrosexual youth singing at the ‘Voice of the China Dream’ television programme (which is modeled on ‘American Idol’). They are pursuing individual dreams of fame and fortune by hamming it up to the camera as individuals. Figure 2 shows seamen lined up on the deck of China’s first aircraft carrier to spell out ‘the China dream is a strong military dream’. These butch guys are not acting as individuals: we can’t even see their faces. Hence they exemplify the collective dream of national strength, especially when compared with the China Dream’s internationalist element: the boy-band singers are actually from South Korea.



Figure 1: ‘Voice of the China Dream’ contest



Figure 2: 'China Dream is Strong Military Dream' (CCTV 2013)

However, the two figures are not examples of cultural governance and resistance: both the 'Voice of the China Dream' singing contest and the naval operation are part of Beijing's official propaganda campaign (see Zhonggong Beijing 2013; Xinhua 2013). These examples show how the China Dream has been recruited into an on-going conversation about Chinese values, and about who belongs in the Chinese nation. But it's more than simply propaganda: when Xi introduced the China Dream concept in November 2012, he actually recognized that 'everyone has their own ideals and aspirations, and all have their own dream. Now, everyone is talking about the China Dream' (Zhonggong 2013: 3). Xi's China Dream thus is part of a broad and ongoing debate about the moral crisis that China faces after three decades of economic reform and opening. In other words, China's New Left, traditionalists, militarists and liberals are all worried about the 'values crisis' presented by what they call China's new 'money-worship' society (Hu 2011; Xu 2011; Liu 2010; Yan 2013). Intellectuals from across the political spectrum thus have a crisis mentality and engage in what Davies (2007:1) describes as 'patriotic worrying':

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Worrying about the problems that prevent China from attaining perfection, not only as a nation but also as an enduring civilization, is the kind of patriotic sentiment that one commonly encounters in the essays of Chinese intellectuals.

Competing voices in civil society thus invoke the China Dream to respond to this values crisis in many different ways (see Callahan 2013; Liu 2010).

Xi's invocation of the China Dream in 2012 was his intervention into this debate in civil society. This new slogan is meant to determine China's new political direction, and to provide the correct formula that will generate a sense of national belonging in China, and will lead to China's perfection as a nation and as a global civilization.

'The China Dream, The Dream of Constitutionalism', the 2013 New Year's editorial of the Southern Weekend newspaper (Nanfang Zhoumo), challenged Xi's narrow vision of China's future in interesting ways. It used the same 'China Dream' slogan to call for legal limits on the power of the party-state. It argued that the quest for human dignity 'cannot possibly end with national strength alone; it must include self-respect for every person. ... We will continue to dream until every person, whether high official or peddler on the street, can live in dignity'. The editorial thus concluded that 'the real "China Dream" is a dream for freedom and constitutional government' (Dai 2013). Unfortunately, this editorial was censored, and then rewritten by the provincial propaganda chief to endorse a national dream of strong state power.

But in another way this invocation of China Dream discourse was an effective act of resistance; this state censorship generated considerable protest from journalists in China. It then sparked a lively debate in the wider public about the rule of law in the PRC, which continued into 2016. Indeed, it provoked China's leadership to make the rule of law the main theme at the annual meeting of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in October 2014. This then is a prime example of how the cultural governance of the China Dream can provoke resistance by making debates veer off into unpredictable directions. While not leading directly to political reform, this constitutional debate certainly made the party-state feel the need to publicly defend what it means by the 'rule of law' and what it means by the 'China Dream'.

Xi's invocation of the China Dream thus is responding to a 'crisis' in state power that runs parallel to the values crisis in civil society: a crisis of political legitimacy in the rapidly changing social situation that is the result of China's rapidly growing economy. Although from the outside China may look confident, internally many of its leaders are *uneasy*, as it fulfills its grand aspirations, China simultaneously encounters nagging political, social, and economic uncertainties. According to both officials and public intellectuals, China is in an 'era of strategic opportunity'. The stakes are high—if Beijing misses this great opportunity to fulfill the China Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, then many feel that the PRC risks total failure: 'If China in the twenty-first century cannot become



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world number one, cannot become the top power, then inevitably it will become a straggler that is cast aside' (Liu 2010: 9).

Xi thus promotes the China Dream as a 'composite ideology' to address a wide array of opportunities and risks (Smith 1986b:83ff). It is full of contradictions, but that is not necessarily a weakness. As a composite ideology, the China Dream it is able to encompass both individual dreams of happiness and collective dreams of national strength. Rather than point to socialism as a universal ideology that promises liberation, the China Dream looks to what Frank Pieke calls 'neo-socialism'. Since the CCP shifted from being a revolutionary party to a ruling party in 2000, there has been much ideological work to legitimate continued party rule. As Pieke (2009:11) explains,

under neo-socialist rule, the communist utopia has been replaced by a technocratic objective of a strong, peaceful and modern China that is almost synonymous with strong, effective and forward-looking government. ... Socialist ideology is no longer the end served by the Communist Party rule, but the mere means by which party rule is perpetuated.

In this way progressive universal ideologies can be nationalized—as did Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s with 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics'. Xi's China Dream thus looks to China's unique national identity: the China Dream mobilizes the Chinese Spirit to follow the Chinese Path (Zhonggong 2013).

Xi Jinping's China Dream has coopted the language and arguments of many public intellectuals in the military and the New Left. China's liberals,

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however, are largely excluded from this new coalition. Individual dreams of an economic and social 'good life' are encouraged—but as we saw with the debate over constitutionalism, dreams of individual political rights and liberties that challenge the party-state are discouraged. Belonging in the Chinese nation is likewise hierarchical: people who challenge the collective path to the China Dream are less favored than those who follow it.

### **Chinese views of the American Dream**

Many discussions of the China Dream in the PRC actually start with the American Dream (Zhou 2011: 2; Liu Yazhou in Liu 2010: 1; Zhao 2006; Brady 2008: 5; Wang 2013a; Hu 2013a; Shi 2013), which should not be surprising since the American Dream is a global discourse. One scholar even stated that only great powers like China and the United States 'dare to have national dreams' (Shi 2013). But the China Dream is usually discussed as a challenge to the American Dream. For example, just before Xi Jinping went to the US to meet Barak Obama in June 2013, the CCP's official newspaper the *People's Daily* explained the 'Seven Major Differences between the China Dream and the American Dream' in terms of China's collective dream of national wealth and power, and Americans' dreams of personal freedom and happiness (Shi 2013). China here is defined as a nation united in its virtuous pursuit of global power, while America is portrayed as a collection of individuals bent on their own selfish schemes.

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Xi Jinping reinforced the Cold War geopolitical framing of the China Dream at the 'Beijing Forum on Art and Literature' in 2014 when he praised a young blogger, Zhou Xiaoping, for spreading 'positive energy'. Zhou (2013) is most famous for his discussion of the China Dream as a rich alternative to what he calls the 'Broken American Dream'. Official commentators thus can conclude that the American Dream as a whole is a 'failure' because not every single American has been able to achieve their individual dream (Xu 2013:127).

The point of China Dream policy thus is not only to tell people what they can dream, but more importantly, what they cannot dream: many individual dreams, the constitutional dream, and the American Dream (Wang 2013b). Although he does not point directly at the American Dream, Xi Jinping told journalists from BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) that China 'can't follow other countries' development models' (Zhonggong 2013: 27). A scholar fleshed out this point in the *Global Times*: 'We do not dream the dreams of other countries, especially not the American Dream. The American model causes great harm', and thus is a bad example for China (Wang 2013a).

This coherence-producing performance of national belonging aims to convince people that Chinese values are not only different from American values, but are the opposite: Chinese values are good, while American values are evil (Tian 2013). Many commentators, including liberal intellectuals like Hu Shuli, argue that China and the United States are involved in a Cold War-style contest of the American Dream versus the China dream (Hu Shuli 2013; Hu 2013a; also see Yan 2013). The military agrees: 'Silent Contest', a documentary film from

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China's National Defense University, sees American values as the main existential threat to the PRC (*Jiaoliang wusheng* 2013; Perez 2013). China's new National Security Commission likewise sees 'Western values' as the major 'unconventional threat' faced by the PRC (Hayashi 2014).

Actually, there are many of examples in China and the United States where the two dreams overlap. As the 'Voice of the China Dream' contest and the 'Constitutional Dream' editorial both show, there are many dreams of individual success and individual rights in China. There are also many dreams of collective freedom and equality in the United States: most famously, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' speech outlined the American Dream of racial and class equality. Even so, Hu Shuli (2013) follows the general trend in the PRC to argue that once Beijing has clarified its China Dream, then 'Chinese diplomacy will have found a new lease on life', and be able to beat America on the global stage.

### **American Dream and American Exceptionalism**

The American Dream certainly is widely invoked as a celebration of unique national values. In *Dreams from My Father*, Obama (2004: 11) tells the story of how his Kenyan father charmed a racist by smiling and 'lectur[ing] him on the folly of bigotry, the promise of the American Dream, and the universal rights of man.' The man actually apologized and bought Obama's father a drink. In *The Audacity of Hope* (2006: 260-1), Obama's staff kid him about how he formulaically uses the 'American Dream' in speeches to new immigrants:

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Section 1: 'I am your friend',

Section 2: '[Fill in home country] has been a cradle of civilization',

Section 3: 'You embody the American dream.'

But generally, among American intellectuals the dream is discussed as a problem to be solved: *The Audacity of Hope's* subtitle is 'Reclaiming the American Dream' (also see Hochschild 1998).

The American Dream seems simple—the crass materialism of fame and fortune—but it actually is quite complex. In his book-length treatment of the American Dream, Jim Cullen (2003) explores six interrelated archetypes: religious freedom, political freedom, upward mobility, equality, home ownership, and fame and fortune. Although people like to trace the American Dream back to the Pilgrims, the first citation for it as a guiding theme is quite recent—in 1931, James Truslow Adams coined the phrase in his popular history, *The Epic of America*. His century-old description is quite familiar: 'The *American Dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement' (Adams 1931:416). A critical view of the American dream is important because, as Richard Hofstadter famously stated, 'It has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies, but to be one' (cited in Lipset 1996: 18). The American dream thus is part of the ideology of Americanism, the American creed, which Abraham Lincoln called the 'political religion of the nation' (cited in Cullen 2003: 80; also see Rorty 1998).

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This national dream also grows out of a crisis situation. The American Dream was first mooted not at a time of national prosperity, but at the depths of the Great Depression. Like with the China Dream, it is a mixture of aspirations and anxieties. It celebrates success, but at the same time is haunted by ‘a sense of dissatisfaction, a belief that the nation we inhabit isn’t quite right—but *could* be’ (Cullen 2003:40). Hence it is always a discussion of values: James Truslow Adams (1931:416) asks ‘What is better and what is richer?’ He answers: ‘It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable....’

In such discussions of political, economic and cultural values, there is a tension between individual freedom and collective equality. Rather than simply celebrating the American Dream as a success, Adams’ book shows that from the very beginning, it was about ‘reclaiming’ the American Dream. Donald Trump thus follows the trend in his formulation of the American Dream: ‘The American Dream is dead. But I’m gonna make it bigger and better and stronger than ever before. We are going to make America great again’ (cited in Vorhees 2016).

Although it characteristically informs conservative movements, the American Dream can support progressive politics: Richard Rorty (1998:101) appealed to the power of dreams for progressive social change when he wrote:

You have to describe the country in terms of what you passionately want it to become, as well as what you know it to be now. You have to be loyal to a dream country rather than to the one to which you wake

up every morning. Unless such loyalty exists, the ideal has no chance of becoming actual.

According to the liberal narrative of expanding freedom and equality, the American Dream informed the civil rights struggles of the 1960s and 1970s that led to greater rights and freedoms regardless of race, class, gender and sexuality (Murphy 2009:132ff). The Supreme Court's 2015 decision to celebrate same-sex marriage thus is seen by such liberal reformers as the latest victory in this ongoing struggle to achieve the American Dream.

Like Chinese intellectuals, American writers worry that their treasured values are at risk. While the Chinese deal with this existential threat through 'patriotic worrying', Americans do it through 'jeremiads', the bitter political sermons that criticize the moral corruption of society and lament the nation's imminent decline:

We Americans, the jeremiad proclaims, have failed to live up to our founding principles, betrayed our sacred covenant as history's (or God's) chosen nation, and must rededicate ourselves to our ideals, reclaim our founding promise (Stephenson 2010).

This moral tale thus looks to the past for solutions to the problems of the present and future.

The Jeremiad's fusion of sacred and secular is a favourite vehicle of the religious right in the US. They trace the decline of America to the crisis of family values in 1960s, and argue that to reclaim the American Dream the country needs to return to its Protestant values and an idealized version of social life from

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the 1950s (Murphy 2009: 128-30). Although Obama aimed to be post-partisan and rise above such Culture Wars, he is well-known for his inspiring rhetoric that lays out America's problems and provides a pathway to reclaim the American Dream (see, for example, Obama 2013). This is an example of what Andrew Murphy (2009: 132ff) calls a 'progressive Jeremiad' that looks to a more open and diverse society. Much like Rorty and his dream country, Obama (2006: 233) argues that to understand the future we have to view the US through a 'split screen' in order 'to maintain in our sights the kind of America that we want while looking squarely at America as it is, to acknowledge the sins of our past and the challenges of the present without becoming trapped in cynicism or despair'.

The American Dream has always been part of a global discourse. It was a reaction to what are called the 'Old World' values of European class society (Bercovitch 2012: 6; Murphy 2009; Rorty 1998: 24). The United States here is figured as the world's first new nation, a new utopia: John Winthrop's (1630) sermon 'A Model of Christian Charity', which was invoked in key speeches of both John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan, preached that America is 'a city upon a hill' that would be judged not just by God, but also by the world because 'the eyes of all people are upon us.' Abraham Lincoln's American dream is not just for Americans, because it gives 'liberty not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that *all* should have an equal chance.' Lincoln thus concludes that America is 'the last, best hope of earth' (cited in Cullen 2003, 94, 96). James Truslow Adams agrees:



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'The American dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank which is the greatest contribution we have as yet made to the thought and welfare of the world' (Adams 1931: viii). Numerous other writers have made similar arguments, right up until the present (see Rorty 1998; Gingrich 2011; Rubio 2013).

This global American Dream leads us to American exceptionalism, which is a very similar discourse to the American Dream where writers commonly use the same events, texts, and people to argue for it (see Callahan 2013: 150-6). While the American Dream states that the US is unique and superior, American Exceptionalism goes further to state that the nation is uniquely superior and the best in the world: the chosen nation (Bercovitch 1978; Murphy 2009). Obama tried to make American exceptionalism less exclusive during the 2012 presidential election campaign: 'I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism' (Schlesinger 2011). But this statement just fired up America's right wing to defend America as a uniquely moral nation, with a mission to fight for freedom around the world (see Gingrich 2011; Romney 2011).

Although this discourse flowered during the Cold War, it still continues in some quarters. For example, in response to Obama and Xi's California summit in 2013, US Senator Marco Rubio used a Cold War-style figuration to talk about US-China relations in terms of the American Dream vs. the China Dream. In a typical jeremiad, Rubio (2013) tells us that America has lost its way under Obama, and needs to 'return to the right course, get our economy in order, and

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resume the global leadership required to ensure that the rise of China ... occurs peacefully'. Rubio assures us that '[i]f America does these things', it will ensure that 'the American Dream continues to be what people everywhere aspire to, for decades to come.'

### **China's Exceptionalist World Dream**

As noted above, many Chinese commentators argue that the American Dream is not just different from the China dream, but is the opposite: China Dream is good and the American Dream is evil. After criticizing the American Dream, commentators often talk about how China's national rejuvenation is part of a World Dream. As Ma Zhengang (2013), former ambassador to the UK, declared, 'China's Dream is the world's dream' (also see Tian 2013; Ren 2013; Zhongguo meng 2013; Hu Angang 2013a; 2013b; Zhou 2014). Xi Jinping said similar things to foreign audiences, especially in Africa, Asia and Latin America (Zhonggong 2013: 63-74; Xi 2014a: 315-93). Xi Jinping thus explained that the China dream 'not only enriches the Chinese people, but also benefits the people of the world' (Zhonggong 2013: 70, 71). As he elaborates: 'We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's message to the world' in order to 'highlight the global significance of the China dream' (Xi 2014c). Realizing the China Dream, thus 'will lead to the World Dream' (Wang 2015: 40).

This World Dream is an extension of Chinese exceptionalism, a discourse that has emerged in the past fifteen years. Traditionally, Chinese identity was

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defined according to cultural vectors: civilization vs. barbarism. Lien-sheng Yang (1968:20) explains that the Sinocentric hierarchy is predicated on 'China being internal, large, and high and barbarians being external, small and low.' Chinese civilization thus was seen as uniquely superior to everything else, and China as the natural center of Asia, if not the world.

The idea of exceptionalism reemerged in neo-socialist China as part of the values crisis (Kang 2003; Tatlow 2014). While American exceptionalism grows out of the idea that the United States is the world's first new nation, Chinese exceptionalism looks to 5,000 years of uniquely continuous civilization to see China as the world's first ancient civilization (Zhang 2011). While American exceptionalists see the United States as a beacon of freedom and democracy, Chinese exceptionalists see their country as a peaceful and harmonious alternative to American 'hegemony'. Although historians have provided a nuanced analysis of China's violent imperial history, Chinese intellectuals still take for granted the exceptionalist argument of China's civilization as 'inherently peaceful' (Zhang 2013; Wang 2011; Zhang 2011; Zhang 2014; Fu 2002).

This Sinocentric world order is an example of 'patriotic worrying' because it locates the correct formula for Asia's future in China's imperial past. Among Chinese public intellectuals there is much talk about the 'Under-Heaven' system (*Tianxia*) as the model for the twenty-first century (Zhao 2011). This switches from the UN model of an international system of legally equal nation-states to a hierarchical tributary system that is centered on Beijing. The goal of the China Dream is to restore China's 'natural position' at the center of the world—as it was

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before the Industrial Revolution. This new interpretation of Confucianism's hierarchical system values order over freedom, ethics over law, and elite governance over democracy and human rights (see Zhao 2011).

Public intellectuals in China are developing this idea to propose a post-Western version of the China Dream/World Dream, which has China lead the rise of the Global South against the West. New Left economist Hu Angang, who is influential both as an advisor to the party-state and as a public intellectual, predicts a 'great reversal' of world order: where the Global South replaces the West. In addition to promoting socialist internationalism, Hu likes China's traditional values. For him the World Dream of the twenty-first century is for Great Peace for All-under-Heaven (*taiping tianxia*) and the World of Great Harmony (*shijie datong*) (Hu 2013a; Hu 2013b; Hua 2013). These are very common utopian slogans; but they are also highly political, sketching out a world order that is hierarchical and Sinocentric (Zhao 2011; Hu 2013b).

This combination of socialist internationalism and Confucian ideals may sound far-fetched, but it fits in with how Xi Jinping (2014a:325-29) described China's new 'peripheral diplomacy' policy in October 2013. The new policy mixes economic cooperation with joint military exercises; it stresses that Beijing seeks to 'socialize' regional countries by developing shared beliefs and norms that will support the 'community of shared destiny' of the Sinocentric regional order. Here China sees its rejuvenation as a moral mission to improve the world by spreading its ideas, aspirations and norms—starting in Southeast Asia (see Xi 2014a: 325-29, 389-93; Zhou 2014; Wang 2015).

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Xi Jinping (2014b) himself expanded on the China Dream strategy when he spoke of the Asia-Pacific Dream at the APEC meeting in 2014. This dream is not like the 'Pacific Century' rhetoric of the 1990s, which used the globalization logic to describe the transnational economic and social exchanges that knit together nonstate actors along the Pacific Rim (Cumings 1998). Xi's Asia-Pacific Dream is more continental, state-centric and Sinocentric. The Asia-Pacific Dream promises to integrate the Eurasian-Pacific region around Beijing through the Belt and Road Initiative, the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the Silk Road Fund (see Xi 2014a: 389-93; Fallon 2015).

The zero-sum security implications of the China Dream/Asia-Pacific Dream strategy became apparent in Xi's speech at the meeting of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia. Xi (2014a:392) criticized Asia's current security architecture, which is grounded in alliances with the US, to state that security problems in Asia should be solved by Asians themselves. This was widely understood to be an 'Asia-for-Asians' strategy that excludes the US (see Tiezzi 2014). It complements Xi's domestic China Dream campaigns against 'Western values': democracy, civil society, constitutionalism, and so on.

The way that the China Dream has been expanded into the Asia-Pacific Dream and the World Dream shows that the battle over values in the PRC is being won by those who promote an exceptionalist view of a 'China'. The normative politics of national belonging here does not simply invoke a nativistic version of the Chinese nation; it also looks to belonging to an Asia, and perhaps a world, that is informed by a globalization of China's national values.

### **Conclusion: The Limits of National Dreams**

This article argues that we need to take the China Dream and the American Dream seriously not simply as reflections of stable national values (that have gone global), but as critical interventions into normative debates about national belonging in each country. While it is common to dismiss the American Dream as crass materialism, we have seen that it has always been concerned with the social values of democracy, freedom and equality. Likewise, the China Dream is much more than a propaganda campaign that promotes a singular vision of the PRC as a strong state. It also includes many individual and collective dreams that look to spiritual values and materialist goals beyond the state. To argue that these two dreams of national belonging can be critical interventions, I have used the concepts of 'patriotic worrying' for China and the 'American Jeremiad' for the US. These concepts highlight how the normative politics of national belonging emerge in times of crisis; national dreams thus involve a combination of celebration and lamentation that mixes aspirations and anxieties (see Bercovitch 1978; Davies 2007).

While both concepts describe how public intellectuals can and do join national debates, it is important to note that both concepts have been criticized for limiting the possibility of critical discourse. Sacvan Bercovitch (1978, 2012) is famous for describing the American Jeremiad as a curious process of dissent that actually produces assent. He criticizes it for limiting American public discourse to issues of reclaiming past national values rather than generating new

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universal utopia. He argues that the end result of the Jeremiad's harsh critique has been the growth and spread of American capitalism. Even progressive appeals for greater freedom and equality, like Martin Luther King's iconic 'I have a dream' speech, have to reference sacred texts from the past—the Declaration of Independence, for example—in order to gain political legitimacy. The American Dream for Bercovitch thus has domesticated dissent, and has produced an intellectual terrain that lacks diversity. Indeed, at times Bercovitch (2012: 11) employs Jeremiah-esque hyperbole: 'the United States developed into a country with less diversity ... than any other nation of the West, or perhaps the world.' Here the liberal logic of inclusiveness forecloses radical possibilities. The American Jeremiad for Bercovitch is a process of containment, where the future is limited by the past in the quest for perfection.

Gloria Davies has an even more biting critique of contemporary critical discourse in China. 'Patriotic worrying' here gives Chinese intellectuals the moral obligation to frame problems and solutions in terms of China's national and civilizational perfection. Although different thinkers take different approaches, they are all united in the deeply normative project of perfecting China. The idea is that when worrying intellectuals find the correct theory and method for understanding the world's logic of development, then all of China's problems will be solved, once and for all. Thus critical inquiry in China is both normative and positivistic, with a certitude that the Truth is Out There. The moral obligation of intellectuals is to discover this Truth, save China from its imperfections, and thus reestablish China as the moral center of the world.

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Theoretically this is problematic: Chinese intellectuals say they are employing poststructural and postcolonial approaches that are suspicious of metanarratives, but they are actually using a positivist method to find the True China in a world of essentialized identities. Davies (2007: 23, 7) points out that patriotic worrying's sharp focus on 'China' as the problem means that intellectuals rarely frame their considerations in terms of the wider issues of humanity. The World Dream thus is just the China Dream writ-large. So like the American Jeremiad, patriotic worrying serves to reaffirm backward-looking national ideals rather than engage in transnational critique.

Yet for some political theorists, the American Dream still has some mileage. Andrew Murphy (2009) has an interesting analysis of the American Jeremiad that acknowledges the political limits of the American Dream, while also suggesting more hopeful possibilities. He agrees with Bercovitch that traditional Jeremiads are quite formulaic in their appeal to the past as a model for the future, and thus serve to constrain political ideals from radical alternatives. In the Tea Party movement we can see how people use sacred documents—the Bible, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution—as 'a sort of empirical checklist to hold up in order to assess the propriety of certain features of contemporary life' (Murphy 2009: 131).

But Murphy argues that there is another strand of the American Jeremiad that employs 'a more capacious use of the past' to offer a more open and pluralistic understanding of America and its future. He suggests that we shift from empirical judgments to political ones, and from American values as a 'model' to



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the 'promise' of American ideals. Murphy analyzes historical and contemporary examples of this progressive Jeremiad. Like Jürgen Habermas (1981) who argues that modernity is an incomplete project, Murphy (2009: 134) still has 'confidence in the emancipatory potential of American ideals'.

This shift from 'model' to 'promise' is necessary for social as well as theoretical reasons: the traditional Jeremiad is based on what Bercovitch calls the 'white Protestant consensus' (Bercovitch 1978: 200). But Bercovitch's personal experience is an example of how the 'white Protestant consensus' is no longer hegemonic in the US. As he repeatedly reminds us, Bercovitch is not an American, but a Jew from Canada whose parents were Communists. Even so, Bercovitch's own career as an influential outsider who is accepted into the mainstream is an example of the American Dream. He was able to get a Chair at Harvard not in spite of his radical spirit that is critical of America, but because of it: 'indeed, [my radical spirit] sharpened and expanded even as I thrived (only in America!) by making that outlook a mainstay of my academic career' (2012: 11). While Bercovitch focuses on the limits of Americanism, Murphy (2009: 134) argues that since the normative politics of national belonging in the US has expanded to include non-white and non-Protestant groups, many in this new multicultural mainstream still see the 'promise' of the American Dream. 'Hamilton', the wildly popular Broadway musical, celebrates such an open-ended, multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial American Dream (see Als 2015; Gopnik 2016).

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The China Dream, on the other hand, seems caught in 'model' paradigm (see Davies 2007; Bøckman 1998); political leaders and public intellectuals are transfixed with the task of probing the PRC's twin traditions of neo-socialism and Chinese civilization, hoping to discover the correct model that will lead to national perfection (Zhonggong 2013; Tatlow 2014). Discursive politics is also quite different in the PRC, where the authoritarian state exercises broad powers of censorship that encourage self-censorship among public intellectuals (Davies 2007: 2-7). Before it became official in late 2012, the China dream was invoked as a critical tool in debates about the normative politics of national belonging, which included a wide variety of critical interventions from both nativists and internationalists. But after Xi made the China Dream his official slogan in November 2012, it has been primarily employed by the party-state to mobilize support for the Xi's narrow vision of national belonging in the PRC.

National dreams thus are exemplary sites of the normative politics of national belonging. As this article has shown, belonging to the nation, in both China and the US, involves a nostalgic longing for the past as a model for the future. But it also seeks to avoid the meta-Jeremiad that apocalyptically denounces Americanism (and Chinese civilization) as dead-end discourses. Indeed, we need to take them seriously because both dreams can be used as discursive tools to critically evaluate the nation and the world. By using a poststructural approach to highlight the contingent nature of the normative politics of national belonging, the article follows Knott's 'Introduction' to broaden our understanding of nationalism beyond issues of (often fixed notions of) of

identity and membership. It also follows the 'Introduction' to explore how self/Other performances of national dreams actually evoke normative discourse beyond the nation, which is still neither universalistic nor cosmopolitan: both national dreams have gone global. The China Dream and the American Dream thus are, at the same time, 1) familiar expressions of nationalism and national belonging, and 2) ongoing self/Other coherence-producing performances that help us to question received notions of nationalism and national belonging.

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