

Narrating the Chinese Dream: A Cultural Interpretation of “Chinese Dream Series” in Urban Public Service Advertising

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Abstract: Although many scholars have approached the Chinese Dream from various perspectives, there have been few attempts to explore how Chinese government at different levels visualizes the Chinese Dream in order to transmit its concept including its grand mission of constructing a harmonious society. From the “Three Represents” to the “Harmonious Society,” Chinese cities have long been fond of clunky political slogans which eventually turn out attractive thematic public service advertising posters around the country. As the Chinese Dream is exclusively associated with what President Xi Jinping talks about China’s mission in the 21st century to rejuvenate the great Chinese nation, it is highly political and has been largely mediated in the expression of Chinese national culture. Chinese Dream posters in series titled “The Chinese Dream, My Dream” are now spreading urban China, trying to blend both China’s glorious tradition and its present achievements of reform and development. In so doing, the government can not only reclaim a linkage with traditional Chinese wisdom of political and ideological governance but seeks a kind of consensus in dream ideology as well so as to discipline the common masses. So politically and ideologically oriented, the dream posters are unexceptionally following the government’s efforts to seek solidarity and bureaucratic social management. Since China is huge and not easy to accommodate all from the satisfaction of basic requirements to more sophisticated needs, the evolving Chinese Dream is inevitably plural embodying a belief in values that are more spiritual, and sometimes to the extent of being utopian. It is argued that the greatest challenges China now faces are those of building a set of “national” values that can progressively be considered as “universal” rather than systematically trampling them to serve selfish interests. This paper will examine closely a cluster of these dream posters to analyze not only their visuality as a role player in transmitting the government’s dream ideology but also their far-fetched and unrealistic high sounding spiritual nourishment that may give rise to ideological issues for further consideration.

Key words: The Chinese Dream; ideology; cultural interpretation

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标题: “中国梦”公益广告的文化阐释

内容摘要: 虽然已有许多学者从各种不同视角阐释“中国梦”，但鲜有研究尝试探讨中国各级政府如何构想“中国梦”以便传播该概念及该概念所蕴含的构建和谐社会的意图。从“三个代表”到“和谐社会”，中国各城市长期以来喜用沉闷的政治口号。这些政治口号最终成了全国范围内极具吸引力的主题公益广告。习近平主席讲话指出，要在 21 世纪完成实现中华民族伟大复兴的任务。鉴于“中国梦”完全与他的这一讲话相关，因而该概念极富政治色彩，也在很大程度上影响了中国民族文化的表达方式。以“中国梦，我的梦”为主题的“中国梦”系列公益广告如今遍布中国的城镇，它们试图将中国的光荣传统与其当前改革发展所取得的成就相融合。如此，政府不仅可以恢复与中国政治及意识形态管理方面的传统智慧间的联系，而且寻找到了梦想所具有的意识形态性方面的某种共识，并以此管理普通群众。就此而言，无论从政治角度还是从意识形态角度看，中国梦的公益广告无一例外地体现了政府力图维持团结、保持行政化社会管理模式的努力。中国人口众多，无论是满足人民的基本需求，还是满足他们较为复杂的需要，中国政府都很难迎合所有人的不同诉求。不断演变的“中国梦”不可避免地要以复数的形式存在，它所代表的是对一些价值观念的信仰，这些价值观念更加精神化，有时甚至达到了乌托邦理想的程度。可以论证的是，中国当前面临的巨大挑战在于确立一套能逐渐被认为具有“普世性的”、“民族的”价值观念，而不是蓄意地践踏这些价值观念。本论文将细察一组中国梦的公益广告，分析其视觉性承担传播政府所倡导的中国梦中的意识形态作用，揭示其牵强、不切实际且夸大其词的精神食粮作用，并论证这种精神食粮作用会导致一些需要进一步思考的意识形态问题。

关键词: 中国梦；意识形态；文化阐释

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The Chinese Dream is closely associated with Chinese President Xi Jinping, who is also the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China. He began promoting the phrase as a slogan in a high-profile visit to the National Museum of China in November 2012 after taking the office of general secretary. Since then,

it has become a catchphrase widely spread in official announcements and has become routine party lexicon as the embodiment of the political ideology of the leadership under Xi Jinping, known as “national rejuvenation, improvement of people’s livelihoods, prosperity, construction of a better society and a strengthened military” (Xi 38) . Although many scholars have approached the Chinese Dream from various perspectives, there have been few attempts to explore how Chinese government at different levels narrates the Chinese Dream in order to transmit its concept including its grand mission of constructing a harmonious society. From the “Three Represents”¹ to the “Harmonious Society,”² Chinese cities have long been fond of clunky political slogans which eventually turn out attractive thematic public service advertising posters around the country. As Chinese Dream is exclusively associated with President Xi Jinping’s ideas on China’s mission in the 21st century to rejuvenate China as a nation, it is highly political and has been largely mediated in the expression of Chinese national culture. Chinese Dream posters in series titled “My Dream, The Chinese Dream” are now seen in urban China, trying to blend both China’s glorious tradition and its present achievements of reform and development. In so doing, the government can not only reclaim a linkage with traditional Chinese wisdom of political and ideological governance but also reach a kind of consensus in dream ideology so as to discipline the common masses. So politically and ideologically oriented, the dream posters unexceptionally follow the government’s efforts to seek solidarity in social management. As China is huge and not easy to accommodate all from the satisfaction of basic requirements to more sophisticated needs, the evolving Chinese Dream is inevitably plural

1 The “Three Represents” theory was first raised in 2000 by then General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPC, Jiang Zemin. He was calling for strengthening the Party in the face of new challenges and elaborated the theory fully in 2001, emphasizing the CPC that must always represent the requirements for developing China's advanced productive forces, the orientation of China's advanced culture and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the Chinese people. As the doctrine is built on previous socialist theories from Marxism to Deng Xiaoping’s Theory, and at the same time embodies the spirit of the time, “The Three Represents Theory” now implies the representatives of advanced social productive forces, the progressive course of China’s advanced culture and the fundamental interests of the majority. For further information, see China Today <<http://www.cctv.com/lm/124/31/86438.html>>.

2 In 2007, Chinese President Hu Jintao instructed the country’s leading officials and Party cadres to place “building a harmonious society” at the top of their agenda, which advocates an overall, coordinated and sustainable development concept, making the interests of different sectors balanced. For further detail, see Harmonious society <<http://en.people.cn/90002/92169/92211/6274603.html>>.

embodying a belief in values that are more spiritual, and sometimes to the extent of being utopian. It is argued that the greatest challenges China now faces are those of building a set of “national” values that can progressively be considered as “universal” rather than systematically trampling them to serve selfish interests. This paper will examine closely a cluster of these dream posters to analyze not only their visuality as a role player in transmitting the government’s dream ideology but also their far-fetched and unrealistic high sounding spiritual nourishment that may give rise to ideological issues for further consideration. Each poster attended in this paper narrates an aspect of ideology that directs our attention only at a memory of the past. Obviously, the designers have tried to fuse different narrative temporalities, superimposing the global on the local, and assimilating a wide range of source materials and intertextual content. Two broad responses might be discerned in respect to this particular aspect of these dream posters. The first points to modernization which China relies on to fulfill its mission of rejuvenation. The second affirms the Chinese traditional values. In each case, the central issue at stake is the relationship between the ethics of representation and the politics of remembrance.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, China extended its reach toward modernity and globalization. Technologies such as cell phones, internet, electric lighting, automobiles, cinema, and radio; industrial materials such as glass, steel, and cement; modern building styles, air travel, high speed railways and television were disseminated to a wider proportion of society than in the preceding century. These technologies enabled flows actual and imaginary between China and the outside and extensively shaped China’s cosmopolitanism. Today, China upholds the Silk Road spirit characterized by “peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning, mutual benefit and win-win results” (Xi 290-293). It is willing to combine the experience and foundations of its own development with the development will and comparative strengths of all countries, and use the Belt and Road as an important opportunity and a cooperation platform to promote a new future-oriented international cooperation., showcasing a positive vision that the Chinese Dream is interconnected with the world dream and all countries work together to build a human community of shared destiny. As in the culture of most industrialized societies, the country’s modernity was inflected by omnipresent remnants of its ancient history and by the realities of development. Hence representations of China anchored in the cultural legacies of its past coexisted with visions of the nation as already modern. The convergence of these imaginings engendered regional and nationalistic cosmopolitanisms filtered and

enhanced by the concept of Chinese Dream, but a close look at the “Chinese Dream Series” in urban public service advertising will reveal government-controlled vernacular cosmopolitanisms that have resulted in a far different dream narrative highly associated with China’s past.

In 2013 Chinese Dream came as a slogan widely spread in the Chinese media. Following Xi’s phrase, Chinese government at various levels has tried to interpret it and thematise the concept of Chinese Dream, hoping to relate it to common people’s life. Discussions, reports and interpretive essays have flooded newspapers, magazines and TV programs. The whole nation is bombarded with dream talking. The way people experience the city is nowadays affected by a complex, dense, and reactive information landscape marked by social and political media in advertising the Chinese Dream. Chinese Dream posters in series appear everywhere in urban China in public squares and on roadside walls. The posters create potent sensual images of the Chinese Dream, presenting a world in which Chinese Dream is omnipresent, invading not only cities but also bodies and feelings; a world in which dream images have penetrated human consciousness to such an extent as to become indistinguishable. Such ideologically manipulated model of national instruction obviously carries behind various elements of sociality. Bringing this model in conjunction with Emmanuel Levinas’s analysis of the face-to-face relationship with the Other — initially put forth in *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and later revisited in his conversation with Phillippe Nemo (1982) — allows me to ground my reading of the posters’ political content in a double register, emotional and ethical, based on the premise that politics, including the cultural politics of emotion, should always be “checked and criticized starting from the ethical” (Levinas 80). What is advocated in the dream posters exhibits a powerful potential for transforming consciousness by mobilizing the Chinese people in a direction of following the Party’s political ideology.

The following poster entitled “Flying the Chinese Dream” is an artistic expression of the Chinese Dream embodying Chinese wishes (pic.1). Again, the poster turns to traditional Chinese culture for spiritual nourishment. It entrusts hope by referring to ancient Chinese farming culture that featured seasonal changes such as sowing in spring and reaping in autumn. The posture of a sculptured young pioneer carrying a bird in hands displays her fantastic dreams. She wears a red scarf and assumedly acts as a successor of Communism in Chinese political discourse. To let go of the Chinese Dream may allow Chinese people old and young to pursue their own goals and achieve prosperity. The blending of agrarian notion of harvest and contemporary Chinese political ideology renders an optimistic vision of a

future generation. In her introduction to *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed highlights “one of the most common narratives” about asylum in the United Kingdom: the narrative of the “soft touch,” according to which one tries and gets into the nation because they can have a life with “easy comforts” (Ahmed 2) . The “soft touch” of narrative in the poster here lies in its metaphorical suggestion that one can get easily inspired to strive for what they dream about. The emotion and passion it arouses are thus no less than social and cultural practices. Also, there appears a type of discursive vertigo so intimately associated with the poster, for its narration through a red scarfed young pioneer acts as not only textual mediators, but also embodied subjects of experience in the present. Thus the dream implied in the poster becomes rather flat and dubious, for it undermines a realistic substance which Chinese should recognize today, namely a close linkage with modernization. In this stead, the poster merely voices a political biased attitude towards the Chinese Dream without creating a fair site of ethical engagement with past and present alike. What we have instead in the poster is its implicit claim that you cannot really know what the Chinese Dream is really like.



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The poster above titled “Glittering Chinese Dream” is put on top of a roof so that people entering the building can see it from afar (pic.2). The purpose of such a placement reveals the government’s pervasive ideological reach. Interestingly, so high sounding a concept like Chinese Dream is brought close to the daily life of common Chinese. In this sense, the government’s propaganda succeeds in transmitting its ideas. Characteristic of such practices is their strategic mingling of a state policy or idea with individual needs of the common masses. The Chinese government is very good at associating its will with common people assuming a missionary role of taking care of them. But if perceived carefully, one can easily

find its inadequacies, for the poster only offers a scene of rural life, hovering over a romantic touch it describes as a detached and disembodied viewpoint that distends both time and space for the sake of observing general patterns rather than specific details. Instances of these patterns in the agrarian scene of the poster can be seen regularly in rural China with little particularly alluded to the traditional Chinese value or modernization. Thus it is not difficult to understand the following poster “My Dream, China’s Dream” in which the most empowered and reduced individual “I” becomes the foreground (pic.3. Take a close look at the mysterious facial expression of the child and her posture, unveiling both naivety and curiosity. Like most of Chinese children at her age, she is puzzled but hopeful, dreaming her wonderful dreams. Everyone in China should have a dream of fulfilling wishes and one’s individual aspiration should be likened to the whole nation’s rejuvenation. Thus “my dream is part of the Chinese Dream.” More interesting are the alluded boasting Kua Fu and Nv Wa who are both legendary figures in traditional Chinese culture associated with a type of dream or wish. The former runs after the sun hoping to chase it while the latter is imagined to patch up the sky. It is all dreaming and wishful thinking here when a child is seen running in fields of hope. One can hardly see the connection between the kid’s dress and hairstyle and the connotation of the Chinese Dream. The imposition of unrealistic distance through propaganda separates the poster’s narration from contemporary Chinese real experiences.



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What follows is a poster in which the Chinese Dream is associated with both luck and auspiciousness. In traditional Chinese culture, a rooster is a symbol of a lucky star, for it crows at dawn marking the beginning of a new day (pic. 4). Here in the poster is a rooster standing amid flowers clapping its wings. It assumes a very conspicuous posture by turning its head and crows a bright morning. The short

Chinese poem on the left above reads: “A stage dressed in flowers/ shining with colors and beauty at dawn. / Golden roosters sing songs of luck,/ And Chinese Dream spawns sea-like springs.” Implicitly, the nation is too emotionally seduced into assuming that claims for luck and auspiciousness are narratives of truth. Not only does the Chinese Dream become attributes of collectives, but such attributes are also ideologically focused, encouraging the common Chinese to pursue their dreams.

Luck and happiness are two important themes that most common Chinese would pursue in their life. It is very common for the Chinese to sacralize both animals and plants for auspiciousness, for example, “Jin ji bao xiao” (A rooster crows at daybreak) and “niannian you yu” (having more than sufficient every year). The former implies the end of darkness and the latter is typical of a homophonic expression in which “Yu” (余) corresponds with “fish”(鱼) in sound. The next poster carries a didactic notion of thrift which means those who know how to save what owned can have more than sufficient every year (pic. 5). By associating a virtue of thrift with the Chinese Dream, the Chinese government is actually making use of its political discourse to call on its people to be thrifty when they are striving for riches.



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What follows is titled “Our good days are of the Chinese Dream” (pic. 6), exhibiting a portrayal of a 3-generation traditional Chinese family in which every member is neatly and decently dressed, enjoying a harmonious family life. It challenges the orthodox ideology of family planning which advocates one couple one child. The couple in the image has two kids, not only uttering a wish that a happy family should have two kids instead of one, but also subverting the Chinese policy of family planning. It may imply that the one-child family policy won’t

generate good days nowadays. Again, it is a propaganda piece that exhibits a curious flatness reducing subtlety of the mission of the Chinese Dream.

Chinese Dream is also associated with traditional Chinese “Double Red Happiness” (pic. 7), a very auspicious sign of common Chinese life. It usually appears in Chinese weddings but in the poster here, there is an embodied message which implies that the Chinese Dream can brighten the Chinese who will live happily in sunshine. Obviously the title of the poster “Chinese Dream and Chinese Happiness” attempts to offer a view of Chinese who are aspiring for a better life. In a similar vein, the poster carries a narrative distance that superficially sings alongside propaganda and advocacy without touching on the deep side of the Chinese Dream. The values it suggests are not those that contemporary Chinese have to reclaim. We can discern here two narrative logics at odds with each other: the implied linearity and embodied basis of political history in China and the government’s intention to fulfill the Chinese Dream.



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Here are three posters that deal with a theme of labor and success. The first proposes hard-earned grain resulting from hard work and perspiration. It corresponds with the old saying “One Drop of Sweat Is One Crust of Bread” that is often used to teach children to eat up the food in a bowl (pic. 8). Nowadays, its notion has been expanded carrying an idea of respecting labor. In Chinese education, the saying emphasizes a cultivation of virtue and value. In a similar vein, the poster titled “Hard Work for a Bumper Harvest” also offers instruction on the significance of labor (pic. 9), reminding us of an old proverb “No pains no gains.” Only those who work hard can reap a bumper harvest. A young couple in the poster “Hard Workers Are More Auspicious” suggests various achievements of labor, including love (pic.10). The emotionally charged scene is quite romantic, but

unrealistic, reminding us of China's agrarian life in the past. The narrative elements in the poster imply more than what is visible in it.



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While transmitting the concept of Chinese Dream the government's propaganda workers have tried to secularize its high sounding ideology by turning to traditional Chinese culture and life philosophy and reinterpreting old sayings and proverbs. More often than not, they would rationalize their efforts even though they are actually imposing an idea on the people. In usual practice, they would draw close to rural life searching for an agrarian experience of peace and harmony. In doing so, they hope to connect their lofty ideals with common people's real life so that the latter would love to see and hear. What follows is again a case in point. The designer of the poster tries to highlight the continuity of Chinese civilization. Here we can see a large broken trunk and a man riding a horse towards it, both are symbolic (pic. 11). The trunk is deeply rooted at the top of a hill indicating its long tradition and culture, thick and solid. The twigs and branches growing out of the trunk imply a new life. The horse rider in the scene indicates a long journey ahead, promising and worth pursuing. It not only reminds us of China's glorious past but



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also warns us that this great civilization once suffered a lot and got ruined but has survived from devastation and is now thriving again. Once more, such an image is implying part of the Chinese Dream. Only realizing this, it contends, can we move ahead and fulfill our best wishes and regain glory. The trunk, emblematic of Chinese history, has survived its misery and is now putting forth new leaves.

Besides, great ancient Chinese philosophers are referred to as is indicated in the following poster which quotes from Mencius who maintains that those who love others are loved themselves (pic. 12). It decorates the word love with colorful flowers to aggrandize the notion of love, suggesting that Chinese Dream carries concerns of love.

Very natural then is the association between Chinese Dream and the so-called socialist essential views of value in 24 characters: “Wealth (Fu yu), democracy (min zhu), civilization (wen ming), harmony (he xie), liberty (zi you), equality (ping deng), fairness (gong zheng), legality (fa zhi), patriotism (ai guo), dedication (jing ye), credibility (cheng xin) and kindness (you shan).” Here are three of them (pic. 13, 14, 15). The left one is a miniature of pre-modern Chinese life in which we can see a few qualities that ancient Chinese merit highly. Listed in the poster are “hard work,” “reading books” (education), “credibility” and “orphanage care” (perhaps similar to philanthropy in Chinese culture). The vivid scenes exhibit a harmonious life that contemporary Chinese cherish of their ancestors in an agrarian society. Isn’t that nostalgic? In contrast to this is the right picture of modern Chinese life, another version of the Chinese socialist essential views of value. In it we see a touching scene in which two students are helping a granny to cross a street in rain. This is also a typical Chinese version of respecting the elderly. To respect the old will reap happiness, implies the poster. The right poster looks a bit odd in post modern China today. Unexceptionally, its designer turns to traditional Chinese



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culture of immortals for longevity, calling for a long and better life. This Taoist view of pursuing a long life is popular among common Chinese people.

To conclude, Chinese government knows well how to express Chinese culture and its ethos. The image of China and its expression is used to explain Chinese Dream. Each carries some didactic features and renders an interpretation of dream objectives. We can read an expression of Chinese spirit and culture including its traumatic history, and images of China intended by the Chinese government. Here we also get at least partially a view of the Chinese Dream that is oriented to promote civilization and set up new ethos, to cultivate Chinese society, upgrade Chinese social behaviors to meet the needs of globalization. While we are fully dedicated to the dream fulfilling campaign, we may pause to ponder what to do next. Can we say that China's successes mean Xi's "China dream" has been achieved? The whole story is, in fact, a process, and Xi and the party face several additional dilemmas that have their roots in both the deep past and the immediate present. Think of them, Chinese style, as China's "Four Basic Questions." How the current group of leaders answers them will not be the end of the story, but may give us an indication of where China today is headed: (1) How to rule a large country with a large population from a single place; (2) How to make China great again; (3) How to transform China; (4) How to deal with the outside world.

Observed from such a perspective, these posters seem to be quite narrow-minded, for they only focus on a one-sided intention to transmit a government's propaganda ideology without attending a much more complicated and diversified context. What goes behind these posters merely follows half of Chairman Mao's principle of constructing a socialist culture: "make foreign things serve China and make the past serve the present." But none of them examine how to make foreign things serve China. Talking about Chinese Dream in the context of globalization, one cannot ignore the tendencies of rising interaction among nations. How can China rejuvenate itself alone today? What possible foreign things can contribute to the Chinese Dream should be considered. Also, China's development relies on an environment of world peace and support of other nations in both material and spiritual ways. Thus China should share its dream with the rest of the world, as it is the time-honored consensus among its 1.3 billion people that "the interests to be considered should be the interest of all, and the fame to be sought should be the kind that could go down in history." At a recent speech in Moscow, President Xi said the Chinese Dream "will not only benefit the Chinese people but will benefit the people of the whole world."

Also, amazingly naïve for the poster designers as indicated in these

propaganda ads, few of them are actually addressing contemporary Chinese activities. Perhaps they are deeply immersed in the Chinese past or emphasize too much Chairman Mao's principle of "making the past serve the present." But how can we only draw references from the past and decontextualize China's traditional rural life when we are talking about Chinese Dream at an age of hi-tech and globalization in the 21st century? It is even a bit farcical to see these images so largely dehistoricized. China has a long history of agrarian civilization but it does not mean it is perfect and contemporary Chinese have to copy when they are trying to realize their dream. There has been a huge discrepancy between an image in the poster ads and what is going on in reality in China. In reality today, China is undergoing swift urbanization but none of them have ever implied it. Isn't it an eyesore to catch sight of these remote and archaic images at roadside walls or in public squares in contemporary urban China? Obviously, the government uses poster images to explicate its dream ideology creating different dream narratives drawing on traditional Chinese culture. Thus posters serve as agents of diffusion for Chinese Dream. The underlying idea of these posters is to view the Chinese Dream as tied to the Chinese cultural tradition without referring to urban experience, generating a huge discrepancy between Chinese reality and imaginary objectives pertaining to the concept of Chinese Dream. Given the social stratification that reigns in today's China, these dream images are not emphasizing China's ongoing rapid social and economic development in process. Instead, they are too idealistic and far fetched both idealizing their agrarian tradition and hoping to turn to the past for spiritual nourishment. Unavoidably, they are blind to social realities offering a highly distorted picture of what is of actuality in contemporary China. How to face reality and capture important aspects of China today is still a more demanding task than pure description rooted in mere imagination. Although China never became an independent industrial producer, it is strongly integrated in the global marketplace in large part through contemporary technologies that facilitate actual and virtual journeys. Nowadays, air travel, urban subway system, high speed railways, automobiles, satellite dishes, television, telephones, mobile phones, and the Internet are actively performing in daily life, but disappear in the dream posters.

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