

## A Tale of Two Dreams<sup>1</sup>

Christopher Marquis (孟睿思)  
Associate Professor  
Harvard Business School  
[cmarquis@hbs.edu](mailto:cmarquis@hbs.edu)

Zoe Yang (杨一婧)  
Research Associate  
Harvard Business School  
[zyang@hbs.edu](mailto:zyang@hbs.edu)

“The great Chinese dream,” President Xi Jinping said during a speech at the National Museum’s “Road to Revival” exhibit on November 29<sup>th</sup>, two weeks after his appointment to General Secretary and Commander-in-Chief, “is the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.” No phrase in recent Chinese history has captured the imagination so quickly and completely; the phrase has gained significant momentum in recent months as state media launched a series of “Chinese Dream” campaigns, including essay contests, performances, and other Party-sanctioned Dream activities at schools and work units across the nation. Yet, there is also much debate as to what the Chinese Dream encompasses. Is it about the collective achievement of the Chinese nation, or rather, like the American Dream it evokes, a vision of individual achievement?

Perhaps such a tension should not be surprising, given the same questions surround the older American Dream. As generally understood, the American Dream is shorthand for the individual opportunity that exists in America, but if we delve deeper, there are more profound connotations. Founded on principles embedded in the Declaration of Independence, the American Dream also implies democracy, freedom, and individual rights. Thus, by evoking the American Dream, Mr. Xi may be inviting unintended comparisons.

How do the current perceptions of these national Dreams compare? Many scholars and journalists have interpreted Mr. Xi’s words to mean that the Chinese Dream is a collective vision, which contrasts with the American Dream as an individual one.<sup>2</sup> Our analysis of Sina Weibo posts from 11/1/2012 to 5/6/2013 using Crimson Hexagon text analysis software<sup>3</sup> suggests that both these interpretations are too simplistic. Both Dreams have collective and individualistic elements based on each nation’s unique circumstance. Understanding these commonalities helps shine light on important unmet needs in these societies. We find that while the Chinese Dream is truly a collective dream, for Chinese citizens, achieving the “great revival of the Chinese nation” is less about raising China’s stature on the global stage, but more

---

<sup>1</sup> Edited and translated version published as “中国梦？美国梦？” in the June 2013 issue of 《中国经济报告》 国务院发展研究中心, pages 100-104 (*China Economic Report of the State Council Research Center*). See [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_684450630101kg3r.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_684450630101kg3r.html) for the Chinese text.

<sup>2</sup> Xiaoying, Q. 2013. The Chinese Dream vs. The American Dream, *China US Focus.com*: <http://www.chinausfocus.com/political-social-development/the-chinese-dream-vs-the-american-dream/> : China-United States Exchange Foundation.

<sup>3</sup> Crimson Hexagon. 2013. ForSight™ Platform: <http://www.crimsonhexagon.com/forsight-platform/>.

about resolving contemporary collective concerns, including steep economic inequality, environmental degradation, and food safety issues.

### **National Dreams: For Whom?**

By definition, national dreams necessarily have a collective element, especially when used as a political tool. In contemporary interpretations, the American Dream implies that through individual achievement comes collective greatness. As articulated by President Barack Obama, "the history of the United States, the reason we became an economic superpower is because, not always perfectly, not always consistently, but better than any other country on Earth, we were able to give opportunity to everybody. That's what the American Dream was all about."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, even though American's current president often portrays himself as an individual example of the American Dream realized, he is careful to stress that the Dream is a collective enterprise. The American Dream is frequently articulated by politicians as a promise the government owes its people. For example, Obama's 2008 campaign platform was entitled, "Barack Obama's Plan to Reclaim the American Dream."<sup>5</sup>

But it wasn't always so. In a similar spirit, John F. Kennedy Jr. famously said in his inaugural address, "ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country," and cultivation of civic duty became one of the hallmarks of his presidency. Mr. Xi's Chinese Dream seems to fall more in line with this line of thinking. Though "the great revival of the Chinese nation" is itself vague, the state media-driven Chinese Dream campaigns have exhorted citizens to play their part in realizing the Chinese Dream. "Only when the country does well, and the nation does well, can everyone do well," ran an editorial in Qiushi Journal on May 1<sup>st</sup>, "The more the individual struggles to realize the common dream, the broader the space for the realization of individual dreams becomes."<sup>6</sup> Other mentions in official literature emphasize "socialism with Chinese characteristics," patriotism, innovation, hard work, and a strong military as requirements of the Chinese Dream. Thus, the Chinese Dream is not just a collective dream, but state-oriented: collective greatness comes from individual effort.

But there is not necessarily direct correspondence between what a politician means and what citizens interpret, especially when borrowing a concept already so laden with connotations. As one Weibo user put very succinctly, "Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream has nothing to do with our dreams."<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Horsley, S. 2012. Obama's Own Story Defines His American Dream, *american dreams: then and now*: <http://www.npr.org/2012/05/30/153994202/obamas-own-story-defines-his-american-dream> : NPR.

<sup>5</sup> Obama'08 Campaign. 2008. Barack Obama's Plan to Reclaim The American Dream: [http://obama.3cdn.net/c16add4876056665c7\\_i42mvyxby.pdf](http://obama.3cdn.net/c16add4876056665c7_i42mvyxby.pdf) : Obama or America.

<sup>6</sup> China Copyright and Media. 2013. The Chinese Dream Infuses Socialism with Chinese Characteristics with New Energy: <http://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2013/05/06/the-chinese-dream-infuses-socialism-with-chinese-characteristics-with-new-energy/>.

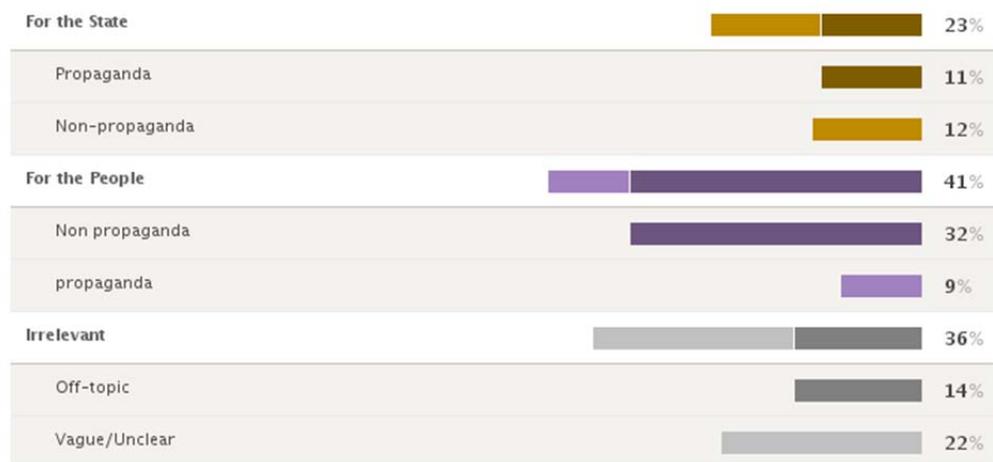
<sup>7</sup>"习近平的中国梦，和我们的梦没有任何关系。"2013年03月29日02:51

Prominent scholar and prolific Weibo user Yu Jianrong compares the Chinese Dream with the American Dream thusly:

The American Dream refers to the dream of the American people, of which the protection of individual rights is the basis; the Chinese Dream is the dream of the country, of which the strengthening of the country's rights is the premise.<sup>8</sup>

He reiterates the notion that Mr. Xi's Chinese Dream is not only a collective project, but more importantly, a project explicitly for China, the nation state. But although Chinese people may understand Mr. Xi's vision, do they accept it? Or do they claim the Chinese Dream for themselves, individually and en masse?

Using the Crimson Hexagon's ForSight social media listening tool to analyze Weibo posts, we grouped microblogs about the Chinese Dream as either associated with the nation-state or associated with the people.<sup>9</sup> We then split each group into propaganda-influenced posts<sup>10</sup> and non-propaganda-influenced posts to better discern "official" interpretations versus "independent" interpretations of the Chinese populace.



Chinese Dream - For the State or For the People? — Opinion Analysis from 11/29/12 to 5/13/13 🌸

We found that as hypothesized, netizens largely associate the Chinese Dream as a vision for the people, comprising over 41% of microblogs. Posts associating the Chinese Dream with the Chinese nation-state only accounted for 23% of total

<sup>8</sup>“美国梦是指美国人的梦，保障个人权利是基础；中国梦是国家的梦，强化国家权力是前提。”2012年12月07日 16:32

<sup>9</sup> We initially separated collective and individual associations, but there were not enough “individual” posts to run the tool

<sup>10</sup> Links and reblogs of state media articles and microblogs; links and reblogs of statements by CCP officials; reblogs and responses to Party-related handles; reblogs and responses to Chinese Dream campaign activities sponsored by local Party branches, work units, or schools

posts,<sup>11</sup> and interestingly, these were almost evenly divided between propaganda-related posts and non-propaganda related posts. Looking closer at the non-propaganda related posts, we found that many had to do with foreign affairs, particularly recent disputes with Japan. Relating to the outside world, it seems, is the major instance when Chinese people take a nationalistic view of the Chinese Dream.

For example, a popular post reblogged over 9,000 times reads:

The precise meaning of the Chinese Dream: 1. The UN relocates to Beijing; 2. Premier Li Keqiang inspects Taipei with the assistance of Provincial governor Ma Ying-jeou; 3. The Chinese National Football Team wins the FIFA World Cup and gains possession of the World Cup trophy for the first time ever; 4. Beijing accidentally bombs the Pentagon and expresses regret; 5. Aircraft carrier Liaoning returns to Hawaii to replenish supplies; 6. The stock index surpasses the million-point mark this week; 7. RMB becomes the sole international currency; 8. Increasing cases of Americans illegally immigrating to China in recent days!<sup>12</sup>

Though clearly jesting, this post, an excerpt from a longer list posted on Kaoder.com, sums up China's aspirations for political and economic dominance on the international stage – a dream of comeuppance voiced colloquially.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, posts that are explicitly related to propaganda activities voice more collective visions and involve personal responsibility – what one can do to help China realize the Chinese Dream. These include posts about rallying around victims of the Ya'an earthquake and Lei Feng, Communist Good Samaritan.

Many also call on Chinese youth to carry out the Chinese Dream. Yet even the most casual observation of Chinese youth will reveal that the majority of them are not politicized. Could it be that Weibo users pay lip service to official narratives while maintaining more independent dreams?

## **Dreams of the People, For the People**

“Realizing the ‘Chinese Dream:’” 1. Respect each individual's dreams and pursuits. The Chinese Dream encompasses national and individual dreams – one cannot simply use the term “Chinese Dream” as a replacement for each person's

---

<sup>11</sup> The vague/unclear category captured posts where it was difficult to discern a specific leaning. Most of these were propaganda-related posts promoting China Dream activities

<sup>12</sup>“中国梦的确切含义：1、联合国总部迁到北京；2、李克强总理在马英九省长陪同下视察台北；3、国足喜夺世界杯，首捧大力神；4、中方就误炸五角大楼向美方表示遗憾；5 辽宁舰返回夏威夷基地补给；6、沪指本周突破百万点大关；7、人民币成为唯一国际结算币种；8、近期发生多起美国公民偷渡中国事件！”2013年04月27日07:24

<sup>13</sup>【一乐】zhongguo 梦的含义: <http://www.kaoder.com/?m=thread&a=view&fid=11&tid=66520>

individual dreams. 2. Proactively seek the common ground between the “Chinese Dream” and each individual’s dreams and pursuits. The “American Dream” united all Americans, standing together through thick and thin. This is the model we need to learn from to realize the Chinese dream.<sup>14</sup>

What do people really dream about when they allow themselves to dream? We hypothesized that non-propaganda related Chinese Dream posts would reveal a different set of desires, but that they wouldn’t necessarily be the same as those promised by the American Dream. Having seen that netizens tend to frame the Chinese dream for Chinese people rather than the state, we further believed that most Chinese individuals still maintain collective dreams rather than personal ones. To test our hypothesis, we did a separate analysis that searched for “我的中国梦” (My Chinese Dream) on Weibo, excluded all propaganda-related posts, and grouped the rest into categories of Personal, Political/Economic, and Civic.

Personal posts were explicitly individual; political/economic posts included mentions of political reforms such as democracy, legal, or economic reform, as well as nationalistic sentiments regarding foreign policy and the military. Finally, Civic captured mentions of inequality, food safety, environmental issues, education, and other social goods.

Excluding state media driven posts, which made up 47% of the total volume, the remaining posts support our hypothesis, with 61% of posts reflecting civil society concerns. Personal and political dreams each only accounted for around 20% of total Dream-related conversations. While some did express desires to be rich, other users, linking or quoting a Bloomberg Businessweek China Edition article from April 19<sup>th</sup> entitled “Chinese Dream Defeats American Dream” are actually scornful of the American Dream’s individual scope:<sup>15</sup>

Recently, the term “Chinese Dream” spread like wildfire in the streets, as if every intellectual conversation without mention of the term were carried out in vain. The commonplace manifestation of the “American Dream” is simple by comparison: having a house, a car, and two children. This small individual dream cannot compare with the final objective of the grandiose and world-shaking Chinese dream: to achieve the grand restoration of the Chinese nation.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> 【实现“中国梦”】 1、尊重个人的梦想和追求。“中国梦”涵盖了民族梦想和个人梦想，不能简单地用“中国梦”替代每个人的个人梦想。2、积极寻求“中国梦”和每个人的梦想和追求的结合点。“美国梦”把所有的美国人团结在一起，风雨同舟，荣辱与共。这是我们实现“中国梦”所需要借鉴的。2013年04月17日 18:30

<sup>15</sup> 撰文, 吴澧. 2013. 中国梦“完胜”美国梦. *Bloomberg Businessweek*: <http://read.bbwc.cn/NC8zNC86Njc1.html>

<sup>16</sup> “这一阵，中国梦火了大街。真真是开谈不说中国梦，读尽诗书也枉然。美国梦的常见表达相对简单：有房有车，两个孩子。这种个人小梦，显然“无可比拟”于气势磅礴、震天撼地的中国梦终极目标——在2049年之前，达成中华民族的伟大复兴。” 2013年04月17日 16:11



Chinese Dream – Personal or Political — Opinion Analysis from 11/29/12 to 5/14/13 

The most significant finding is that the most prevalent posts by far are those that express an interpretation of the Chinese Dream based firmly in bettering Chinese society as a whole: correcting inequality, ensuring free education for all, improving the quality of food, air, and water. In this sense, the Chinese Dream is truly both individual and collectivist.

“The commoner’s Chinese Dream:” 1. Education without tuition; 2. Employment without guanxi; 3. Doctors that don’t sell medicine; 4. Food without poison; 5. News without lies; 6. Professors with wisdom; 7. Government officials without bribery; 8. Police that do not abuse citizens; 9. Those who strip naked do not gain celebrity; 10. Those who brag do not become famous; 11. Homes that don’t get demolished; 12. The people don’t fear authority; 13. Environment without pollution; 14. Leadership without special treatment.<sup>17</sup>

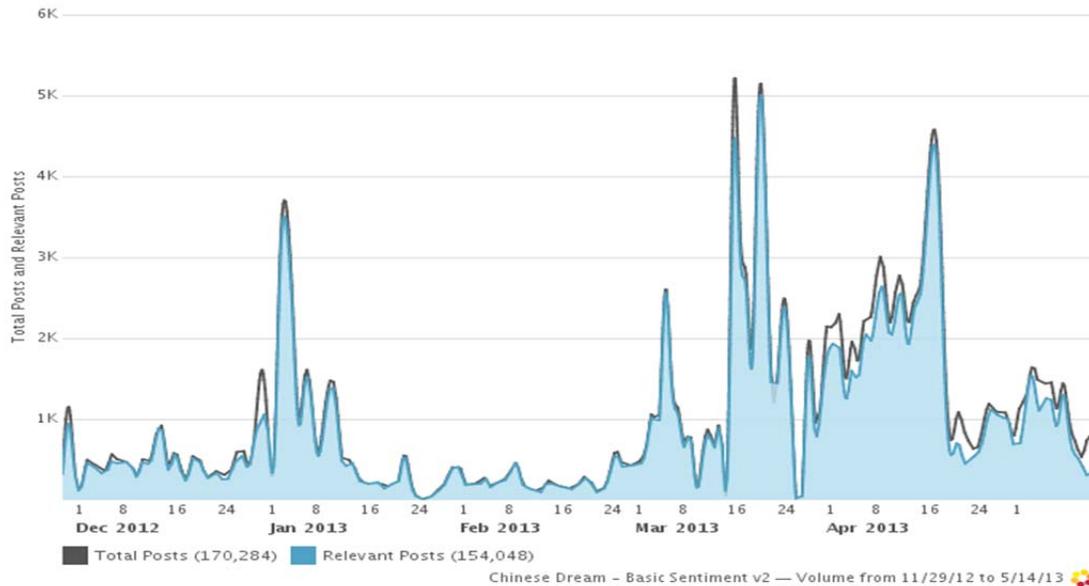
A 10-year-old’s Chinese Dream: 1. Wake up every morning to safe milk and crullers fried without drainage oil; 2. Go to school without needing to wear masks for filtering PM 2.5; 3. Parents do not force children to go to tutoring centers, sacrificing their childhoods to get into Beijing and Tsing-Hua Universities; 4. Teachers do not accept gifts, treating each student equally; 5. Streets do not have cars with special permission to run red lights; 6. Television shows that are not always about love triangles, with characters collapsing all over the place; 7. Being able to write the truth in essays without receiving 0s; 8. Grown-ups live lives as human beings and not beasts<sup>18</sup>

## Do National Dreams Lose their Luster Up Close?

<sup>17</sup>“【老百姓的中国梦】网传老帖：1、上学不收费；2、就业不求人；3、医生不卖药；4、食品不带毒；5、新闻不说谎；6、教授不白痴；7、当官不受贿；8、城管不打人；9、脱裤不走红；10、吹牛不出名；11、房子不强拆；12、百姓不畏权；13、环境不污染；14、领导不特权。”2013年04月19日22:28

<sup>18</sup>“10岁孩子的中国梦：1)每天早上喝到安全奶和吃没地沟油的油条；2)不用戴防PM2.5口罩上学；3)爹娘不逼着上补习班，玩命上北大清华；4)老师不收礼，公平对待每个同学；5)街头不再有特权车闯红灯；6)电视上别老搞三角恋，动不动跪倒一大片；7)作文说真话不被判零分；8)大人都活出人样不是人妖。”2013年05月11日17:57

Given this variety of interpretations of the Chinese Dream, we found that in our sample of posts about the Chinese Dream, only around 50% of Weibo users associated positive feelings with the phrase. Corresponding with the beginning of official “China Dream” campaigns in March and April, however, not only did the total volume of Dream-related posts increase, attitudes became more positive, reflecting the large number of Weibo posts that are propaganda-related or propaganda-driven.



Chinese Dream - Basic Sentiment v2 — Opinion Analysis from 11/29/12 to 5/14/13 🌸

With the American economy in recession, inequality worsening, and Congress locked into ever uglier political wrangling, many Americans are losing faith in the American Dream. According to various polls, like the Chinese, only about half of Americans now believe in the American Dream.<sup>19</sup> One recent poll conducted by the Pew Economic Mobility Project showed that only 39% of Americans who are NOT unemployed believe they will achieve the American Dream in their lifetimes.<sup>20</sup> These days, in America, the phrase is just as likely to be used in irony as in earnest.

<sup>19</sup> Karabell, Z. 2012. American Dream May Have Waned for Some, But Lives On for Many, *The Daily Beast*: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/07/03/american-dream-may-have-waned-for-some-but-lives-on-for-many.html> : The Newsweek/Daily Beast Company LLC.

<sup>20</sup> Pew Charitable Trusts. 2013. Pew’s Economic Mobility Project: <http://www.pewstates.org/projects/economic-mobility-project-328061>.

Perhaps the American Dream has gotten away from the politicians who use it as a unifying symbol of hope. In its founding days, the American Dream emphasized individual rights, but with the rise of *conspicuous* consumer culture in past decades, popular understanding has diverged from lofty ideals. As much as Mr. Obama may emphasize that the Dream is a collective promise of ensuring everyone has the same rights, his people are quicker to point to Wall Street and Hollywood. In other words, the American Dream has been transformed from individual rights into individual achievement (specifically, of wealth), to the near exclusion of collective opportunity. Even in its most modest iteration - “two cars, two kids, and a house” – today’s American Dream is too tangible, too consumption-oriented, and thus impossible for any politician to promise and all too easy to disappoint.

But it appears that national dreams only lose their luster up close. While both Chinese and Americans are split on their own countries National Dreams, perhaps reflecting a deep cynicism or disillusionment with each country’s current state, our analysis also showed that the Chinese people have overwhelmingly positive associations with the American Dream over the same span of time, though the number of mentions is far fewer.



American Dream - Basic Sentiment — Opinion Analysis from 11/29/12 to 5/14/13 🌸

Many posters even make explicit comparisons between the Chinese Dream and the American Dream to show how the American Dream is better (often using very cynical jokes).

The American Dream has 6 basic criteria: own a house, own a nice car, be college educated, have retirement security, have medical insurance and vacations. The Chinese Dream only has one criterion: become a Party official.<sup>21</sup>

American person: We Americans all have an American Dream.

Chinese person: What is the American Dream?

American: It is to live in a free, equal, and democratic country, using one’s own hard work, courage, creativity, and will to march towards prosperity, without relying on help from certain privileged classes.

Chinese: We also have a Chinese Dream.

---

<sup>21</sup>“美国梦有 6 个基本标准：有房、有一部好车、接受过大学教育、有退休保障、有医疗保险以及有休假时间。中国梦只有一个标准：当官。”2013 年 04 月 16 日 18:44

American: What is that?

Chinese: Use whatever means possible to cheat suckers out of their money, and then immigrate to the US.<sup>22</sup>

An interesting question is thus: why do Chinese people respond so positively to the American Dream despite Americans' own ambivalence? Our theory is that Chinese people derive a lot of their knowledge about America from Chinese immigrants, who tend to be more financially successful and happier with America than Americans in general. A study by Pew Research on Asian Americans supports this view, finding that Asian Americans, compared with all Americans, have the highest median income and are more likely to hold a bachelor's degree. They're also more likely to believe in the value of hard work, with 69% agreeing that "most people who want to get ahead can make it if they work hard," as opposed to 58% of the general American public.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps most tellingly, Asians cite "opportunity to get ahead" as the number one reason why life in the US is better than in their native countries.

In other words, Asians in America, of which Chinese make up the plurality at 23.2%, believe in the American Dream.

It makes sense, then, that Chinese-American success stories trickle back to China, where they take hold in the popular imagination. The American Dream, it seems, is still a beacon for immigrants.

Indeed, if we look at emigration statistics,<sup>24</sup> particularly among China's elite, we find that immigration from China to the US has only increased in recent years, even as China has undergone major economic growth and modernization. According to the 2012 China International Immigration Report, **of Chinese citizens with assets of over 100 million yuan, 27% had emigrated abroad and another 47% were considering doing so.**<sup>25</sup>

These elites, who have already achieved personal wealth and comfort, create an interesting puzzle: if wealth and comfort are not enough to keep people in China, then what is the Chinese Dream? What do people really want?

## Common Dreams of the People

---

<sup>22</sup>美国人：我们美国人都有一个美国梦。中国人：什么是美国梦？美国人：就是生活在一个自由、平等、民主的国家里，通过自己的勤奋工作，用勇气、创造和决心迈向繁荣，而非依赖于特定的社会阶级和他人的援助。中国人：我们也有中国梦。美国人：那是什么？中国人：用尽一切手段骗傻逼们的钱，然后移民美国。2013年05月13日23:30

<sup>23</sup> Pew Research Center. 2013. The Rise of Asian Americans: <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/06/19/the-rise-of-asian-americans/>; Pew Research Social & Demographic Trends.

<sup>24</sup> Huang, H. 2013. Allure of United States Remains for Emigrating Chinese, *The Atlantic*: <http://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/04/allure-of-united-states-remains-for-emigrating-chinese/275180/>; Atlantic Media.

<sup>25</sup>王辉耀。2013。《中国国际移民报告2012》综述。*FT 中文网*: <http://www.ftchinese.com/story/001048547>

A key commonality between the Chinese Dream and the American Dream is that both are used by citizens to justify outrage at inequality and lack of social mobility. In China, the anger and cynicism on display in Weibo posts indicate that people firmly place the responsibility of realizing the Chinese Dream in the government's hands, and the fact that such social ills exist already indicate failure. Indeed, some citizens reject the very notion of a Chinese Dream as laughable, given certain realities.

Get rid of “black prisons” before discussing the “Chinese Dream!”<sup>26</sup>

A country that can't even guarantee safe milk formula for the next generation should not be talking about some “Chinese Dream.”<sup>27</sup>

In America, an economically developed, democratic country with the rule of law, the American Dream takes many things for granted. The American Dream isn't about political freedom, free public education, or clean air and safe food, because those things already exist. Americans have the luxury of dreaming for themselves. While there certainly are people on Weibo calling for democratic freedoms, our findings show that most Chinese Dreams inhabit a middle ground, where individual comforts are made possible by less controversial political and legal reform. This middle ground is the development of civil society.

Surveys of Chinese immigrants support our findings: when asked for their primary reasons for investing and emigrating overseas, respondents frequently cited better education opportunities, better social welfare, and better living conditions.<sup>28</sup> It appears that for those Chinese who have realized the American Dream in China have found that they're still eating the same tainted food and breathing the same polluted air as everyone else. If Mr. Xi wants to keep wealth and talent from leaving the country, he must articulate a Chinese Dream that makes people want to stay in China.

Furthermore, his Chinese Dream must be appealing in way that is distinctly different from the American Dream. That Chinese people seem to want more than riches is a great thing – America has already shown how easily the national dream can be used to justify greed and selfish consumption to disastrous ends. Some Chinese already see the danger of following America down this path:

The Chinese have been exposed to the Americans and their freedom, and learned to max out their credit cards. Facing a financial black hole, they

---

<sup>26</sup>“扫除黑监狱，再谈中国梦！”2013年05月14日10:15

<sup>27</sup>“一个国家，连下一代的安全奶粉都搞不定，还谈什么中国梦”

<sup>28</sup> Huang, H. 2013. Chinese Emigrants: China Still Land of Opportunity, But Life Better in U.S., *TeaLeafNation*: <http://www.tealeafnation.com/2013/04/chinese-emigrants-china-still-land-of-opportunity-but-life-better-in-u-s/> : Tea Leaf Media, LLC.

borrowed from the whole world without repayment, dreaming a Chinese version of the American dream, or is it the American version of the Chinese dream? We have forgotten how to even dream, so now we can only dream everyone else's dreams?<sup>29</sup>

If the endgame of the American Dream is financial collapse, this user asks, what should the Chinese Dream be? Without a true guiding vision, are the Chinese people simply left to dream in the dark? The Chinese people deeply desire a collective Chinese Dream, but that dream cannot afford to be just another empty political slogan, nor can it afford to be just an imitation of the American Dream. Unless the government meets their needs for a civil society encompassing environmental protection, food safety, quality education, and other shared rights, the Chinese Dream may slip from their grasp, just as it's slipping away from Americans.

---

<sup>29</sup>“中国人尝过美国人和自由，然后像他们那样刷爆信用卡，面对金融黑洞，向全世界借债不还，做一个中国式的美国梦，或美国式的中国梦？我们连怎么做梦都忘了，只能做人人做的梦？”2012-11-10 21:08