The Chinese Dream: Xi Jinping thought on Socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era

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To cite this article: Michael A. Peters (2017) The Chinese Dream: Xi Jinping thought on Socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era, Educational Philosophy and Theory, 49:14, 1299-1304, DOI: 10.1080/00131857.2017.1407578

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1407578

Published online: 24 Nov 2017.

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EDITORIAL

The Chinese Dream: Xi Jinping thought on Socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era

The Chinese Dream is a desire for happiness, similar to the dreams of the people of other countries.

– From the speech to representatives attending the Seventh Conference of Friendship of Overseas Chinese Associations, June 6, 2014.

It is remarkable fact that Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era has been added to the Communist Party of China's (CPC) Constitution during the 19th Congress recently held in Beijing during the week-long meeting ending 24 October. It is remarkable for a number of reasons: first, it confirms Xi Jinping's second five-year term as General Secretary of the CPC and President of China; second, it represents Xi's rising symbolic significance to the Party's guiding ideology at a critical historical juncture in China's transition to a global superpower; and third, it frightens some commentators, both domestic and international, that Xi is becoming too powerful. Xi's thought thus sets the tone and direction not just for the next five years but importantly for the fifteen-year period following the establishment of ‘Xiaokang’—originally a Confucian term, meaning ‘moderately prosperous society’, used first by Hu Jintao (General Secretary, 2002–2012), to refer to economic policies designed to create a more equal distribution of wealth within China.1 The planning exercise itself is a great vision that looks forward to the mid-century and to China's unequalled position as the largest world economy and as a civilisation whose culture and military have regained Its place in the world as the leading power.

The CPC Constitution was unveiled and adopted at the Second Congress of the Party in 1922; Mao Zedong Thought was established as CPC's guiding ideology at the 7th Congress in 1945; and 'leftist mistakes' were corrected at the 12th Congress in 1982. Deng Xiaoping's theory of building socialism with Chinese characteristics was written into the constitution in 1992 at the 14th Congress and adopted as CPC's guiding theory at the 15th Congress in 1997. In 2002, the Scientific Outlook on Development was added into the Constitution and adopted as Party's guide for action at the 18th Congress in 2012.2 Since the predominance of Mao's thought, after collectivisation and the Cultural Revolution, there has been a greater political pragmatism following Deng's 'opening up' reforms that recognises the force and integration of world markets—a recognition sometimes referred to as 'post-socialism', 'market socialism' or 'state-capitalism'. The fact is that Xi and CPC theoreticians like Wang Huning understand that the Constitution must reflect the dynamism of historical change and guiding ideology must provide a road map that takes account of the evolution of human economy, culture and society. Of course, this evolution has to include the world development of capitalism itself and China's capital, enterprise and entrepreneurship as Chinese traders, companies and CEOs more deliberately expand the nature of their global enterprise.

The addition of Xi Jinping Thought is being compared to the addition of Deng's and Mao's thought, indicating, as Western media has made abundantly clear, that Xi is the strongest leader of CPC since Mao.3 The full text of the Resolution of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China on the Revised Constitution of the Communist Party of China adopted at the 19th National Congress of the CPC indicates that Xi thought has systematically addressed the 'major question of our times'—the form
and principles of socialism with Chinese characteristics for the new era. Xi Jinping Thought represents a pragmatic reading adapting Marxism to the Chinese context ushering in a new era of China's socialist modernisation and governance based on strengthening the Party. The thrust of Xi Thought is given in the resolution in the following terms:

The Congress holds that statements on our people-centred philosophy of development; on innovative, coordinated, green, and open development that is for everyone; on coordinated efforts to finish building a moderately prosperous society in all respects, comprehensively deepen reform, fully advance law-based governance, and strengthen Party self-governance in every respect; and on all-out efforts to build a great modern socialist country, represent the ultimate purpose, vision, overall strategy, and overarching goal of the Party in upholding and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics. (ibid.)

The emphasis also on the need to achieve better quality and more efficient, equitable and sustainable development, to improve and develop the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics, to modernise China's system and capacity for governance and to pursue reform in a more systematic, holistic and coordinated way.

These are the essentials of the new 'development philosophy' that also turns its gaze to structural market reforms as well as an enhanced governance with a system of socialist rule of law with Chinese characteristics based on 'consultative democracy' and the promotion of Chinese culture in both its traditional and revolutionary forms as a foundation for soft cultural power, socialist culture and Chinese identity. There is a continuance of the 18th Congress policies in strengthening and developing new approaches to social governance alongside holistic approach to the question of national security with an ultimate goal to build a community with a shared future for mankind.

Xi Thought has provided a long-term two-stage development plan: the first stage from 2020 to 2035 devoted to the realisation of socialist modernisation, including the achievement of the Belt and Road Initiative; and the second stage from 2035 to 2050 ‘to develop China into a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful.’

Throughout the text mentioning these historical stages, there is a firm commitment to ‘opening up’ with emphasis on competitive globalisation, market-based interest and exchange rates, and greater market access with the protection of foreign investors’ interests and rights. The other areas include the enhancement of law-based governance with an emphasis on compliance with the constitution, anti-corruption and the commitment to ecological management and protection of natural ecosystems. Clearly, also the plan to be achieved by mid-century includes a vision of global leadership through Chinese diplomacy and the globalisation of the Chinese socialist model.

Nobody can doubt the impressive, perhaps unequalled, development of the Chinese economy since 2012 that has grown at 7.2% annually adding over 13 million new urban jobs and commensurate increases in R&D spending (1.57 trillion yuan), global trade volume, environmental improvements, poverty elimination and growth of the service economy.

In 'The Thoughts of Chairman Xi,' BBC China Editor Carrie Gracie analyses the rise of Xi and how he came to embody the destiny of China and the CPC. The facts of his rapid rise to power are well known: Xi was born in 1953 in Fuping county, Shaanxi province, the son of Xi Zhongxun, a comrade of Mao's, and he grew up in the countryside after his father was purged during the Cultural Revolution. Xi at 15 worked as a labourer on an agricultural commune in Yan'an, the heart of the yellow earth of inland China. He joined the Party in 1974 and attended Tsinghua University to study chemical engineering. After graduation, he worked as a secretary to Party officials first in Beijing and then in Hebei province, becoming a Party committee member and deputy major of Xiamen in Fujian province. He became deputy provincial party secretary in 1995 and acting governor of Fujian in 1999, and later acting governor of Zhejiang and party secretary from 2003. In 2007, he took over as party secretary of Shanghai briefly before being elected to the standing committee of the CCP’s Politburo in the same year, being shortlisted as a possible heir to Hu Jintao. In March 2008, he was elected vice-president of China succeeding Hu as general secretary of the party in 2012.

Gracie’s (2017) analysis reveals the charmed life of a ‘red princeling’ who advanced in the Party never forgetting his roots. Xi said arriving in Liangjiahe village ‘When I arrived at 15, I was anxious
and confused. When I left at 22, my life goals were firm and I was filled with confidence.’ Gracie (2017)
quotes him as saying ‘I left my heart in Liangjiahe. Liangjiahe made me’. It is a characteristic attitude
of modesty in face of the people that has remained with him even if he is somewhat solemn, reserved
and vulnerable to criticism and ridicule. By all accounts, he is wedded to Confucian moral values and
unhappy at corruption and the kind of commercialisation of China that has led to the rise of nouveau
riche and the conspicuous consumption of the Chinese upper middle class.

Xi’s (2014) *The Governance of China* a collection of speeches, talks, interviews, correspondence and
photographs from 2012 to 2014, arranged in 18 chapters devoted to China’s history, social system and
culture, helps to clarify the principles of governance of the CPC, China’s path of development and the
new concept of the Chinese Dream (中国梦). It was compiled by the State Council Information Office
of China, the CCCPC Party Literature Research Office and China International Publishing Group and, as
the Publisher notes in the Introduction, published in response to ‘rising international interest’ and ‘to
enhance the rest of the world’s understanding of the Chinese government’s philosophy and its domestic
and foreign policies’. Most non-hagiographical commentary sees the book as a statement of intent about
China’s ‘peaceful development’ designed to alleviate Western fears of China’s rise to superpower status
and the implications for global stability and international order (see e.g. Swaine, 2015).

For some seasoned, China watchers compare Xi’s rise to power to Mao’s cult of personality. MacFarquhar
(2013) writing for *The New York Review of Books* in an article called ‘China: The Superpower of Mr. Xi’
speculates on why Xi was chosen, repeating the rumour that the elders were looking for a ‘red princeling’
who would reinforce the Party–someone who could maintain Party discipline and deal to problems
of corruption. He refers to Willy Wo-Lap Lam’s (2015) *Chinese Politics in the Era of Xi Jinping*, suggest-
ing that Xi has centralised power to an unprecedented extent in modern times creating the Central
National Security Commission that coordinates the police, army and national security agencies as well
as the Central Military Commission. The new Central Leading Group is seen as cutting across Premier Li
Keqiang’s powers. Further, possible competitor successors like Bo Xilai have been purged. MacFarquhar
(2013) mentions that Xi has his own crusade for moral purity within the Party yet, he argues,

Neither the ‘Chinese dream’ nor ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ has the intellectual plausibility of Marxism-
Leninism, and certainly does not arouse the mass fervor of Mao Zedong Thought at its height

MacFarquhar might be underestimating the genuine need to maintain social governance and related
policies that aim at reconstituting a moral self that speaks to Confucius, to Mao while taking account of
the growth of late consumer markets where Western values are enshrined in quality brands. Ultimately,
the Chinese Dream cannot simply be an empty neoliberal consumer materialism willingly put into
practice by the population, as these are not long-term civilisational values that are culturally and eco-
logically sustaining or socially fulfilling. Of course, the Chinese middle class now are better educated
and informed than under Mao. They are also well-travelled and less susceptible to ideologies that run
against the experience of history. Individual market freedoms breed consumers who after a certain level
of consumer satisfaction want other personal freedoms and lifestyle choices. The consumer market
teaches a certain level of psychological resistance to cheap ideas. Xi understands the new sophistication
of urban living and is pragmatic enough to believe that people can be responsible citizen-consumers,
even if they need some direction. The real difficulty is that with the growth of purchasing power of
the 400 million Chinese middle class market demands stretch from high quality clothes and shoes to
information and entertainment products of all kinds. There is great store put on social information
goods that hold significant symbolic power, easily created and dispensed, and quickly marshalled and
politically coordinated.

The difficulty with plans that look beyond the five-year period is that it is now almost impossible to
predict the impact of technological disruption, trends towards world integration or backlash globali-
sation; or, that matter, new biology, AI and deep learning, impact of new media. Political innovations
also grow out of social media in terms of the co-creation and production of collective citizen symbolic
goods. The problem is that the Chinese Dream, like the American Dream, has narrative threads that
can point in opposite directions (Peters, 2011). When Trump succeeded Obama, he made a matter of
principle to reverse as many of Obama’s domestic policies as he could. Trump also fiercely repudiated Obama's foreign policy based on a form of liberal internationalism, splitting the country as he trumpeted ‘Make American Great Again’. National dreams are elastic narrative resources that permit conflicting interpretations (Peters, 2017). They need careful maintenance and to draw on rhetorical traditions and recall the principles and values of national institutions and culture. As the American philosopher Richard Rorty (1998) argues:

You have to describe your country in terms of what you passionately hope it will become, as well as in terms of what you know it to be now. You have to be loyal to a dream country rather than to the one you wake up to every morning. Unless such loyalty exists, the ideal has no chance of becoming actual.

Rorty writes ‘National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement’ (p. 3). Chastising the cultural Left, he provides a narrative re-crafting of the dream in pre-Vietnam America by reference to Walt Whitman and John Dewey in a progressive pragmatist spirit that recalls the secular dream of America based on the notion of exceptionalism without reference to the divine—a society where all Americans would become mobilised as political agents in the cause of democracy.

Drawing on Whitman and Dewey, he argues that the conjunction of the concepts ‘America’ and ‘democracy’ is an essential part of a new description of what it is to be human—perhaps a stretch too far but his success as a philosopher is related to his ability to tell a new story about America and the American Dream, to re-describe the past using a different vocabulary and to highlight how a new philosophical history can make us feel differently about who we are and who we might become. He offers Americans a ‘philosophy of hope’, a philosophy based on the narrative of cultural invention, self-discovery and national self-creation.

In Obama and the End of the American Dream I noted the inauspicious beginnings in the work of James Truslow Adams.

[Adams] was the historian who first coined the term ‘American Dream’ in The Epic of America published in 1931, significantly at a time when America was suffering the early years of the Great Depression. He chose his title well. The term ‘epic’ is a long narrative poem detailing the heroic deeds and events significant to a culture, tribe or nation. In archaic Greek style these poems followed a certain format, exhibiting set literary conventions that described a heroic quest, normally beginning with an invocation to the muse, where genealogies are given and the values of a civilization are heralded….

To describe America as an epic is to make appeal to noble sentiments and Adams was aware of this especially in the context of the 1930s he wanted to high-light and romanticize the ethic of equality and in particular, equality of opportunity and equality before the law. He also wanted to use these ideals and principles to describe a country based on the conscious development of a secular social order that found its origins in the Declaration of Independence … (Peters, 2011, p. 90)

Rorty’s take is not too dissimilar to Xi Jinping’s re-crafting of the Chinese Dream, a concept he is responsible for introducing into the political domain as Wang (2014) make clear:

Since Xi Jinping took office in November 2012, he has promoted the concept, ‘the Chinese Dream.’ From the National People's Congress, annual meeting to his international trips, Xi has stressed it as a main theme in the majority of his public speeches. In addition, the Chinese Communist Party’s propaganda machine has used its various resources to promote the narrative. In a recent article from the People’s Daily, Liu Qibao, the head of the CCP’s Publicity Department, defines the importance of the Chinese Dream for the Party and the country. Liu refers to the Chinese Dream as the new leadership’s ‘mission statement’ and ‘political manifesto’ for the Party and the country’s future; and it is ‘a major strategic thought’ for developing socialism with Chinese characteristics. Judging from the CCP’s propaganda efforts, the Chinese Dream has become the signature ideology for Xi’s term. Without a doubt, understanding the concept of the Chinese Dream is essential to understanding Xi Jinping’s administration and China’s future policy orientation. (p. 1, footnotes removed from original)

Wang (2014) explains not only that the ‘Chinese Dream’ is here to stay but also that it is based, as Xi indicates in a variety of sources, on the rejuvenation (fuxing) of the modern Chinese nation, a rhetorical theme utilised by many Chinese leaders in the past. Xi’s use of the narrative, building on rapid modernisation and economic success, is designed to hark back to and move on a century of hardship and humiliation, utilising the master narrative of Chinese nationalism to harness Chinese identity and
nation building. Like Rorty, and the construction of the American Dream, the accent is on the transcendental force of ‘choseness’ that elevates the dream to talk in the name of humanity itself. The difference between Xi and Rorty is that where Xi turns to the historical trace of humiliation as a spur to future nation building, Rorty returns to a narrative strategy of ‘national pride’, democracy and pragmatic self-improvement. Both enjoy the resources of ‘rejuvenation’of past glories. I should also mention Obama in this context, as his deft utilisation of the American Dream including the handy slogan ‘Yes we can!’ galvanised the centre ground and turned the tables on the Bush dynasty that threatened the dark forces of the Project for the American Century, a narrative construction based on the neoconservative think tank to promote American global leadership.

Wang’s (2014, p. 6) analysis is somewhat premature and limited in understanding the function of legitimating master narratives. He writes:

the Chinese Dream is a continuation of the rejuvenation narrative. Lacking the procedural legitimacy of democratically elected officials while simultaneously facing the collapse of communist ideology, the CCP has no choice but to fall back on using China’s history, culture and patriotism as its ‘societal glue’. Therefore, Xi chose to continue working on the same path of Jiang and Hu.

In the light of Xi Thought and the Belt and Road initiative the analysis, with the benefit of hindsight, might be too harsh and limiting. Xi understands the importance of strengthening Party discipline and promoting social governance both inside and outside the Party. He is also aware that the grand narrative of the Chinese Dream has an international audience beyond peaceful and open globalisation based on trade. As a ‘signature ideology’ (Wang, 2014) no doubt the Chinese Dream will continue to evolve.

The Chinese Dream has huge narrative and cultural resources to draw on including the discourse of Chinese cosmopolitanism that has experienced an explosion of publications recently that emphasises past empires (Hansen, 2012; Hu & Elverskog, 2016; Lewis, 2009; Xu, 2014) as well as future orientations (Callahan, 2013) and contemporary relations with the US (Kuan-Chou, 2017). Narrative and narratological approaches to the study of narrative depend on the weaving of all the elements of a culture into new semiotic forms in a wide variety of media that can reach the people and help them interpret their experience. It is not just a political PR exercise but an activity that understands that narrative is a vehicle for organising human experience and a tool for constructing models of historical reality, allowing us to come to terms with the temporality of our existence. Narratives can create and transmit cultural traditions, and build the values and beliefs that define our cultural identities. While narrative is an instrument of self-creation, at the same time narrative can be a vehicle of dominant ideologies and an instrument of power.

Notes
1. See the other members making up the CPC politburo—Li Keqiang, Li Zhanshu, Wang Yang, Wang Huning, Zhao Leji, and Han Zheng (all men over 60)—at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/19cpcnc/index.htm
2. These are the major additions to the CPC’s Constitution, see http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/24/c_136702366.htm
7. The 13 parts of Xi’s report to 19th CPC National Congress can be found at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/19/c_136691759.htm
8. See the infographics at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/17/c_136684588.htm
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