

# *A Comparative Study on the Chinese Dream and the American Dream*

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**Abstract**—The Chinese Dream of realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has been the common dream and wish of Chinese people in the history, whose connotation has been more and more deeply discovered since Chinese President Xi Jinping made a systematic statement on it in 2012. Based on the comparative study on the connotations and development histories of the Chinese Dream and the American Dream, this article tries to explore the embedded in-depth reasons for the differences between these two dreams, like the historical backgrounds and the different cultures and values. By learning the lessons from the American Dream, it aims to better realize the Chinese Dream at the personal, social and national levels.

**Keywords**—Chinese Dream; American Dream; connotation; development; enlightenment

## I. INTRODUCTION

The term “the American Dream” had been mentioned as early as in 1931 by James Truslow Adams in the *American Epic*. From then on, the American Dream as an idiom has become a catchword and the mainstream value of the American society.

On November 29, 2012, when visiting “The Road to Revival” exhibition, Chinese President Xi Jinping elaborated on the connotation of the Chinese Dream for the first time. He pointed out that to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream and long-cherished wish of the Chinese nation in modern times, which embodies the overall interests of Chinese nation and the Chinese people.[1] Ever since then, the Chinese Dream has gradually become the spiritual banner of the Chinese nation as a whole.

There are both similarities and differences between the two dreams. The great differences lie in the connotations, maternal cultures, values and approaches between the Chinese Dream and the American Dream. Briefly, the Chinese Dream aims at the country’s prosperity, the nation’s rejuvenation and people’s well-being. By contrast, the American Dream aims at the pursuit of freedom, democracy, and equality, success, wealth through personal efforts among individuals. The Chinese Dream more emphasizes collectivism, while the American Dream puts more stress on individualism.

## II. CONNOTATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHINESE DREAM AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

### A. Connotation of the Chinese Dream and the American Dream

The connotation of the Chinese Dream and the American Dream is quite different. Generally, there are three levels of connotation for the Chinese Dream, while there are two parts of connotation for the American Dream.

At the home level, the Chinese Dream includes people’s yearning and wish for a better life. As President Xi Jinping said, “Our people love life, they look forward to a better education, more stable jobs, more satisfying and reliable social security, higher level of health care services, more comfortable living conditions, more beautiful environments, and they also have a great wish, that is, their children can grow better, work better and live better.” [2] The Chinese Dream covers people’s needs in material and spiritual life. It also makes the Chinese people enjoy the opportunities to grow and to progress with the motherland and the times together.

At the country level, the Chinese Dream is a good desire to build a prosperous, democratic and harmonious socialist modern country and to realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. The Chinese history over the past centuries has taught us that the personal destiny of every Chinese is closely related to the fate of the nation. Only after the national prosperity and national rejuvenation are achieved, will people lead a happy life. To this end, the completion of the socialist modernization of the country and the realization of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has become the core of the Chinese Dream.

At the world level, the Chinese Dream is the dream to build a harmonious world with the rest of the countries. As Mr. Qian Mu said, “The ideal of the world is beyond the concept of the state, which often goes beyond the country to the world peace.”[3] The Chinese Dream sustains this traditional idea to benefit the world and to create prosperity and harmony with the rest of the world to make it better and better. As Xi Jinping said, “We want to realize the Chinese Dream, not only for the benefit of the Chinese people, but also for the benefit of all peoples in the world.” [4]

Comparatively, the American Dream is mainly composed of two parts, the spiritual dream and the material dream.

On the one hand, the pursuit of freedom, democracy and equality remains the core of the American dream. Although America is generally regarded as a melting pot, no matter the original puritans or the immigrants from different countries and regions, they all want to be treated equally, have a say in the society and enjoy desirable political rights, et., that is, to achieve freedom, democracy and equality on this land in the real sense.

On the other, to obtain wealth, social status or power through personal struggle is essential too. To many people, the American Dream is a dream of spiritual success. Any goal related to success inspires Americans to keep making progress, especially on the wealth, social status and power. The American Dream emphasizes individual talent and efforts and pays less attention to the family background of any individual. Due to this belief, the American Dream has produced a number of groups of pioneers and innovators. A lot of them were born poor, but they finally achieve success and become a legend by virtue of their personal struggles.

Americans have a strong longing for good, happy and rich life. So, the dream begins with the pursuit of a better life. People pursue different goals in different times, but the longing for good, happy and rich life has stayed unchanged. As Adams said, nothing new, this dream or hope already exists from the beginning of human beings. After World War II, as the US economy showed unprecedented prosperity and people's living standards increased significantly, the middle class reached the highest in terms of wealth in history. [5]

#### *B. Development of the Chinese Dream and the American Dream*

The first stage of the Chinese Dream is from the May Fourth Movement in 1919 to the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Over the past 30 years, three major events took place in China, which have infused important meaning for China's revival, the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, the first time for China in the modern history to give up the "concession" principle, the victory of the Anti-Japanese War and the victory of the liberation war in 1949.

The second stage is from the founding of the New China in 1949 to the Third Plenary Session of the 11<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the Chinese Party in 1978. After nearly 30 years of struggle, China has achieved a historic transformation from neo-democracy to socialism, established the basic system of socialism, and developed an independent and complete industrial system and national economic system which have provided material and technical basis for realizing the Chinese Dream.

The third stage is from the Third Plenary Session of the 11<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the Chinese Party in 1978 to today. After 40 years of hard exploration, China has transformed from a highly centralized planned economic system to a vibrant socialist market economic system. The formation of socialism with Chinese characteristics has created the economic glory, and provided a guarantee for achieving the

great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. The Chinese Communist Party and the people continue to promote the development of the Chinese Dream. The goal of building a well-off society in a comprehensive manner had been put forward in the report of the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress.

### III. REASONS FOR THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE CHINESE DREAM AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

#### *A. Different Backgrounds*

From the historical backgrounds, the American Dream is the product of American immigration, while the Chinese Dream is the product of both Chinese glory and suffering in history. They have different demands at different stages of development. Initially, the American Dream originated from the strong desire of the European immigrants for freedom and wealth, and they believed that they could realize their spiritual and material dreams in the New World as long as they spared no efforts to work and pursue. The desire to succeed has made immigrants around the world come together to contribute their own strength for the formation and development of the United States as an independent country. On the contrary, China for quite a long time in history has been the center of the world. Once, the glorious China suddenly awakened from the heavenly country in the late Qing Dynasty. At that time, the Chinese faced an unprecedentedly serious disaster and threat. The long-cherished wish of achieving the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation then has become a permanent theme since the modern times.

#### *B. Different Cultures and Values*

The difference between the Chinese Dream and the American Dream is also mainly reflected in their cultures and values.

The Chinese Dream is nourished by the Chinese culture and Marxism, while the American Dream inherits the essence of Western culture in the context of capitalist development. The Chinese culture is deeply rooted in the continental agricultural civilization, based on the self-sufficiency of the natural economy. China regards the traditional Confucianism as the core value to promote "the whole world into one community". The Western culture, based on the marine business civilization and the spirit of adventure, emphasizes personal strength, pursuit of success and wealth.

As for values, the Chinese Dream lays a stress on collectivism, while the American Dream attaches great importance to individualism. Since the ancient times, the Chinese people propose that "The rise and fall of the country is responsibility of any single man". History has told the Chinese people that personal destiny is closely related to the national development. Without the prosperity of the country and the nation, the happiness of the commons is almost impossible. Therefore, the core of the Chinese Dream is to realize the collective value. In contrast, the American dream regards individualism as the ideological basis and soul, which emphasizes the supremacy of individual rights, the sacred inviolability of personal property. In this sense, the main purpose of the government is to protect the individual rights

and interests and individual freedom. As an immigrant country with only two or three hundred years of history, the United States emphasizes more on the spirit of personal struggles, pioneering spirit and courage to compete. As early as the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Tocqueville had said, individualism made compatriots isolated, relatives and friends alienated. Therefore, when each citizen has established their own small societies, they would ignore the social development. It can be seen that the concept of individualism is deeply embedded in the American society.

#### IV. ENLIGHTENMENT OF THE AMERICAN DREAM ON THE CHINESE DREAM

##### A. *Enlightenment at the Personal Level*

###### 1) *Improving the Environment to Be Equal and Innovative*

Firstly, the individual opportunities should be kept equal. The United States provides the opportunity for all those who have dreams, regardless of their skin colors, classes and cultures. Secondly, ideological emancipation, reform and innovation are a focus. The innovative thinking is a major feature of the American Dream, which makes countless dreamers from extreme poverty to prosperity, and then brings unlimited development for the country and the world. As the former Chinese President Jiang Zemin pointed out, innovation is the soul for national progress and an inexhaustible driving force for the national development. Therefore, China needs to emancipate the mind, reform and innovate to spur her people to achieve their personal and national dreams. [6]

###### 2) *Adhering to the "People-oriented" Value*

As we all know, the American Dream places enough emphasis on individualism, respects personal values, and promotes personal development. By paying due attention to collectivism, the Chinese Dream should also respect individual dreams and pursuits. Therefore, to achieve the Chinese Dream, we must adhere to the people-oriented value, i.e., love for the people, the right for the people and the interests for the people. [7] The Chinese government should regard people as the main subject, work hard to meet people's growing material and cultural needs, realize their expectation of a better life, and ultimately guarantee a free and sound development of each person. [8]

##### B. *Enlightenment at the Social Level*

###### 1) *Creating a Fair and Harmonious Social Environment*

Fairness and justice is the common ideal of mankind and the cornerstone of social harmony and stability. Today, the American Dream is still attracting tens of thousands of immigrants from all over the world because they believe that the United States can provide a fair social environment for them to pursue their personal dreams. With the development of Chinese economy and society, people's demands for fairness and justice are increased day by day. Fairness and justice have become an inherent requirement for China. In the political aspect, the government should actively promote the construction of democracy and legislation, and guarantee equal rights and equal opportunity among all the classes. In the social field, the government should ensure everyone the same opportunity to receive education and join competition for

employment fairly. Only by creating a fair social environment will the society be more harmonious and stable, and then the Chinese Dream will come true.

###### 2) *Promoting the Construction of Social Security System*

The US social security system has a far-reaching impact on the US socio-economic and civil life. From president Roosevelt signed a social security law in the Great Depression to the implementation of a national health care plan by president Obama administration, a progressive social security system has been set to promote the development of the American Dream. Similarly, the realization of the Chinese Dream needs to continue to promote the construction of Chinese social security system. Firstly, to achieve basic social security coverage of urban and rural residents, we should speed up the promotion of all types of social security groups to be insured. Secondly, the social security should achieve institutional equity, regional equity, urban and rural equity, and strive to achieve the long-term stable development of social security.

##### C. *Enlightenment at the National Level*

###### 1) *Following the Road of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics*

How to achieve each country's dream is based on their national conditions, for they all have their own development paths. The market economy takes a leading role in the U.S., and individualism and liberalism serves as the basis for the American Dream. America takes the road of Western capitalism expansion, which encourages free competition and wealth accumulation. Although this road is constantly stimulating immigrants from all over the world to pursue dreams, it is not suitable for China. History and reality have proved that we can only achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation by unswervingly taking the road of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Xi Jinping stressed that choosing the road of socialism is not easy at all, which is based on the great practice of reform and opening up for more than 40 years. So, we must be confident in the road, theory and system of China, and insist on combining the basic the principles of Marxism with the characteristics of China and the times.

###### 2) *Coordinating the National Hard Power and Soft Power*

A famous Chinese scholar once said, "The development of a country can have two main lines: one is practical and superficial, like science and technology, economy, military force, etc., which is called 'hardware'; the other includes spirit, thought, historical tradition, values, beliefs and customs, more internal and abstract, which is called the 'software'". [9] Compared with the dream of the United States we can find that the United States has both a strong hard power and soft power of global influence, which provides double protections for its fulfillment. Therefore, the realization of the Chinese Dream should also well coordinate with the national hard power and soft power. First of all, great efforts should be made to promote the Chinese culture to go global by providing cultural goods and services with Chinese characteristics to the world. Secondly, we should communicate in a skilled way the Chinese harmony idea so that China and the world will interact with each other more smoothly and fruitfully.

To conclude, both the Chinese Dream and the American Dream are the product of the traditions, cultures, histories and values of China and the United States of America. There are similarities, but there are more striking differences between the Chinese Dream and the American Dream, like the connotation, development history and path, etc.. Through an in-depth comparative study, we hope more lessons learned from the development of the American Dream can be applied to promote the development of the Chinese Dream so that the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will be practiced in a more sound way.

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