

# Alienation of the American Dream in the Context of Consumer Culture

## Taking Sister Carrie for Example

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**Abstract**—The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of consumer culture, under which context humanism and Puritan ethics embraced by tradition have been replaced by naturalism and hedonism. Dominating the American society, the ideology of naturalism is based on "the survival of the fittest" put forward by Darwin, while hedonism greatly emphasizes sensational relish and desire for current pleasure. *Sister Carrie*, a vivid portrayal of the early twentieth America, reveals profound influence of consumer culture over Theodore Dreiser and his naturalistic preference in both his objective narrative techniques and ideological proposition. In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser depicts the American dream of three social strata, i.e. the underclass, the upper-middle class and the class trapped between the above two. Classified into the respective parts of applicable objects, means to achieve the dream and its anticipated outcomes, the American dream went through a tripartite alienation procedure, thereby being alienated as a whole. This representative novel has thrown America into a waste land, a nihilistic world where everywhere permeates shattered dreams, demonized evaluation system and lost souls.

**Keywords**—*alienation; American dream; consumer culture; naturalism; identity*

### I. INTRODUCTION

With the development of capitalist economy in the United States, Americans' initial values of consumption have undergone an enormous transformation. In place of puritanism and humanitarianism, hedonism and naturalism have become the mainstream of American ideology. Progressively, consumer culture begins to dominate people's material options and even influences their spiritual pursuit as well as the American dream, the latter being one of the causes for alienation, a prevalent phenomenon throughout the American society.

Alienation, a term earliest put forward by Plato in his Republic, has been endowed with various definitions from different perspectives such as religion, law, politics and philosophy. From Greek tragedy to post-modern literature, alienation has always been an archetypal theme of many literary works, *Sister Carrie* being a representative of them.

Taking *Sister Carrie* for example, this paper attempts to answer the following questions through analyzing the

character, plot and environment of the novel: on one hand, how does consumer culture alienate American dream? On the other hand, how does the ubiquitous phenomenon in America affect China and how can both individuals and the government do to tackle those negative effects? This thesis begins with a brief introduction to key concepts such as alienation, American dream and consumer culture. It next elaborates on American dream and its alienation in the context of consumer culture based on detailed analyses of Dreiser's renowned novel, *Sister Carrie*. At last, some recommendations are submitted to cope with negative impacts that consumer culture and the occurrence of alienation have exerted on China.

### II. BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO CONCEPTS

This paper mainly involves three concepts, i.e. alienation, consumer culture and American dream, which will be successively illustrated in this chapter.

#### A. Alienation

Dating back to the era of ancient Greece, alienation first appeared in Plato's Republic as "alloiosis", which means "religious activities like praying" (Han, 2018). In the Enlightenment era, while many other great thinkers embraced liberty, equality and fraternity and focused on the construction of a reason-dominated world, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), with a sharp eye for social problems and changes, discovered that the more developed our civilization becomes, the more corrupted people's morality will be (Chen, 1994: 6). He additionally protested against the alienation of modern people as the consequence of a civilized society. Thanks to German classical philosophers, the term alienation was elevated to a philosophical and theoretical height. Hegel (1979: p51) clarified alienation as the dialectical development of negation, in which "der absolute geist" negates itself, sublates and ultimately reappears in an advanced form. Inheriting and innovating theories above, Marx (2000:81) closely connected alienation with private property and communism. In his view, it is private ownership that gives rise to the inverted relationship between manual worker and the product, but communism, as the thorough abolition of self-alienated private ownership (Chen, 1994: p8), can compensate this alienated situation of

human beings in the industrial era, prompting them to return to nature.

The topic of alienation originates from Greek mythology and tragedy, in which literary figures alienated by powers from both nature and society continuously rebelled but were repeatedly punished due to their failure. Oedipus' tragedy demonstrates humans' destiny of being alienated. In response to the alienation that the religion brought to people, Dante criticized asceticism in Christianity and advocated humanity and subjectivity in his epic *Divina Commedia* (Jiang, 1994). Nevertheless, excessive individualism may induce estrangement and confusion, as Shakespeare revealed in *Othello*. With the development of Western capitalism, the cause of alienation takes varied forms. Whereas it turned out to be money in the liberal capitalist period, its forms kept expanding throughout the monopoly capitalist period. Ultimately, apart from the spiritual world, the whole material world has the capability to render modern people anguished and directionless. Struggling against alienation, literary figures either discover "a clean, well-lighted place", or go astray in the wasteland.

In western society, the phenomenon of alienation is mainly manifested in the relationship between the human and three objects: other people, himself or herself and the society. On the one hand, people incline to be either sadistic or masochistic in interpersonal communication. In twisted interpersonal relations, the authorities tend to manipulate people and claim that all measures aim to benefit the public, whereas people accept being ruled and even enjoy the magnificence and splendor that the strong power superficially gifts them. Craving for this symbiotic relationship derives from one's fear of loneliness in the wild capitalist forest (Fromm, 2013: p80). Tragically, in order to maintain this kind of correlation, everyone tears apart his or her well-integrated identity, thereby to some degree losing the genuine self.

On the other hand, people always mistake "what they are supposed to want" as "what they actually want" and therefore lose themselves without the slightest awareness. In consequence, people tend to be identical and conform to each other in modern society, just as innumerable robots work in a huge factory according to preset program or like myriad components mechanically operate within a piece of machinery. All of those abnormal relations above demonstrate the phenomenon of alienation in western society.

### *B. Consumer Culture*

In striking contrast with conventional consuming values which advocate thrift, reason and practicality, consumer culture emphasizes indulgence, deficit spending and symbolic consumption. In the early 20th century, the American society experienced the transition from traditional consuming tenets to consumer culture. The reasons can be summarized as below: Firstly, abundant materialistic goods stimulate Americans' desire for consumption. Secondly, the plummeting dollar resulting from inflation demotivates people to deposit money. Thirdly, the advance of science and technology provides people with adequate consumption

means like credit card, bank loan and paying by installments, making "buy now, pay later" no longer a mission impossible (Huang, 1989).

This transformation brought both pros and cons to the United States. Although advance consumption has made a significant contribution to the rapid economic development, it also resulted in excessive production and tight credit (Guo, 2010). All illusive glamour and prosperity cloaked potential danger, financial crisis and the alienation of Americans' inner world, of which American dream can be seen as the emblematic.

### *C. American Dream*

The definition of American dream can be divided into three aspects: applicable objects, means to achieve the dream and its anticipated outcomes.

First and foremost, every American citizen can have their dreams regardless of the social stratum. The upper class, the blue collar and the underprivileged are all given equal opportunities to better their lives. Furthermore, people are highly encouraged to accomplish American dream "through hard work, frugality and self-sacrifice", thereby being vehemently condemned for resorting to opportunist and immoral methods for the sake of success.

Under the context of consumer culture, "the pursuit of happiness" (1776, quoted from Armitage, 2007: 21) in The Declaration of Independence has been gradually concretized into "the pursuit of property". In reality, happiness should not be constrained within the materialistic spectrum and be drastically simplified as property. It is suggested that some explanations from the spiritual perspective be added into the comprehension of happiness such as "to know one better" and "to realize one's fullest potential".

## III. THE AMERICAN DREAM AND ITS ALIENATION

In the American society, different social classes have different dreams. Whether people in the lowest social stratum, youngsters coming from small towns, or the blue blooded, all of them should have spared no efforts to pursue their unique goal. Consumer culture, nevertheless, alienates their dreams to variable degrees.

### *A. Different American Dreams in Sister Carrie*

There are altogether three categories of American dream in *Sister Carrie*: the dream of lower social strata, of young dream seekers from small towns and of upper-middle classes, with the Hansons, Carrie and Hurstwood being the representative dreamer respectively.

#### *1) The Hansons' dream:*

To people living at the bottom of American society like Minnie and Sven Hanson, their dreams are more close to traditional American dream, the realization of which closely associates with moral principles (e.g. self-discipline, frugality, integrity, etc.) advocated by the Protestants. Money, for which Sven Hanson has been working long hours in the stockyards, was the bona fide root of the Hansons' disapproval of Carrie's pursuit of entertainments. Besides,

Hanson commented that Carrie's fantasizing way of life "isn't what we expected" (Dreiser, 2001: p28). Though humble and fatigued, the Hansons rely on their own efforts and support themselves without doing anything immoral. The hard graft may not render the underprivileged "healthy, wealthy and wise" as Benjamin Franklin depicted, but their way of achieving American dream is righteous and merits applause.

### 2) *Carrie's dream:*

Since Carrie represents the young coming from small towns to big cities, her dream stands for a certain type of American dream as well. "Her craving for pleasure was so strong that it was the one stay of her nature" (Dreiser, 2001: p27). Although Carrie "would speak for that when silent on all else" (Dreiser, 2001: p27), she reacts passively when encountering many situations. For instance, after losing her first low-paid job due to illness, Carrie does not seek a new one but agrees to live with Drouet even if that decision contradicts with her inherited morality. James Adams (1931, quoted from Roberts, 2013: p43), who added the phrase "American Dream" to the world's lexicon in *The Epic of America*, defined the term as "that dream of a land in which life should be better, richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement". Carrie's dream simply corresponds to part of American dream in that she desires for pleasure but prefers easy money rather than depending on "hard work, thrift and self-sacrifice" to fulfill her wishes.

Moreover, James Adams stated that American dream is "not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable" (Roberts, 2013: p43). In reality, however, Carrie is rejected recurrently by employers for having no experience, which demonstrates that the social order gives no opportunity for new-comers to develop in big cities like Chicago. Carrie has the capability of being an actress, but if there weren't Drouet's encouragement and Hurstwood's advertisement for the show among his friend, she would never have the chance to perform such a bravo melodrama.

The American dream of young people first coming to metropolises can be shortened as the desire for pleasure. Carrie's experience reflects that with almost no chance given to new comers, they find it difficult to make a living in big cities, let alone to bring out their latent capacity and to actualize their dreams.

### 3) *Hurstwood's dream:*

To some extent, it's rather easy to summarize Hurstwood's dream as well as the dream of the upper-middle class. Upper social strata yearn for luxurious material lives and thrive to keep up with the Joneses. In essence, by the frenzied chase for "life of goods" in place of "good life", they aim to make those expensive stuffs speak for their social status and by degrees assimilate them as one of the blue-blooded. For instance, the reasons Mrs. Hurstwood first asks her husband for a whole season ticket to the races are that she hates lagging behind her affluent neighbors, and aspires to exhibit Julia Hurstwood, her mature and gorgeous daughter, so that Julia may meet some men of means.

Not only are things utilized as instruments, but people are also relegated to objects. Take Hurstwood's love for Carrie as an example, Hurstwood has seen numerous sophisticated and fraudulent businesses so that Carrie, an appealing and graceful girl with a tingle of timidity and the charm of youth, rekindles his interest. To him, "Carrie's love represented only so much added pleasure" (Dreiser, 2001: 118), while Carrie takes their love on a much higher basis. His dream to possess Carrie is solely because he doesn't own her, exactly like his desire to possess any objects he doesn't have. Concealing his marriage from Carrie exactly reveals that Hurstwood views her as "a pleasure without responsibility" (Dreiser, 2001: 118). Moreover, the fact that Hurstwood takes Drouet's sickness as an excuse to deceive Carrie out of Chicago further exposes his thorough unscrupulousness. He can take advantage of anyone, even his close friend, for the sake of his "so-called" dream.

In brief, the phenomenon of objectification prevails among the upper stratum of American society. Things become the symbol of high living standards and even human beings are indifferently objectified into means to reach one's purpose.

## B. *Alienation of the American dream in the Context of Consumer Culture*

### 1) *Social background:*

With the industrialization, urbanization and the development of American capitalist economy, consumer culture has become the mainstream of American society, in which premature consumption and undue enjoyment have replaced rational consumption and frugality, becoming the dominant consuming pattern. The market occupied with abundant products provides people with the shelter where they can choose whatever they want, thereby liberating them from the shatter of insipid routine and mechanical work in an industrialized era, which partly contributes to the expansion of consumer culture. Another reason why consumer culture triumphs over puritan conventions to be the context of the United States, according to Gary Cross (2000: 2), is that it better gratifies Americans' demand for "personal identity and social participation" than traditional mores primarily comprising thrift and self-discipline does.

Transforming from producers to consumers, Americans no longer attach great importance to the use value of goods and consider them as the necessity of life. Instead, they think highly of products' symbolic implications including social ranking, vogue, living standards, etc. Gradually, with the conventional puritan creed fading away from Americans' mind, they become accustomed to the brand new way of living and relish the current pleasure it brings to them.

### 2) *Theoretical background:*

In the early 20th century, the American society became a wild forest where people competitively and compulsively hunted for wealth and fame regardless of traditional moral maxims. As a representative of traditional mores, humanitarianism is the belief popular with the Protestants, in which, according to historian Norman Fiering (1976), "the doctrine of irresistible compassion has played a large part".

In opposition to humanitarianism, naturalism, on the basis of Darwinian philosophy — "the survival of the fittest", was also defined as "pessimistic determinism" (Omar, 2016), thereby catering to the demand of the jungle of capitalist society. Human's blind fate is ultimately determined by heredity and social environment, while the individual is solely "an inconspicuous drop in an ocean". Stephen Crane (2019) vividly portrayed human's triviality in his poem "A Man Said to the Universe":

A man said to the universe:

"Sir, I exist!"

"However," replied the universe,

"The fact has not created in me

A sense of obligation."

It is the soil of consumer culture that cultivates naturalism and Darwinism because it favors anything that proves lucrative. In other words, whether virtuous or vicious, all pragmatically meaningful behavior can be accepted by this context. That's exactly what naturalism and Darwinism suggest: the fittest rather than the fairest triumphs in the capitalist arena. Therefore, traditional moral traits such as modesty, sympathy and humanitarianism being dissented, Americans merely value whether a person succeeds but neglect how he becomes successful. Success becomes the sole criterion of morality and righteousness, even if it is attained by hook or by crook. To sum up the above, both this context and its mainstream theories severely distort people's personality.

Another theoretical transformation from puritanism to hedonism also contributes to the alienation of American dream. Whereas puritanism emphasizes "austerity of life and killjoy way of life" (Chang, 2008), hedonism demonstrates an utterly contrary perspective. Jeremy Bentham (1789: p13) categorized pain and pleasure as two sovereign masters who "point out what we ought to do and determine what we shall do." Compelled by innate desires to seek pleasure, Americans, especially upper classes, indulge in luxurious lives and squander myriad hours on extravagant parties and excessive alcohol. In striking contrast with Benjamin Franklin's life of severe self-discipline, which, he described as "Reading was the only amusement I allow'd myself ...; and my industry in my business continu'd as indefatigable as it was necessary" (Franklin & Conn & Gutmann, 2005: p74), the lifestyle under the context of consumer culture exhibits not a slightest sign of rational analysis. Blindly following the vogue of consumerism and hedonism, people have neither contemplated their individual identity nor wondered if their perception and the social understanding of happiness still indicated the same as what The Declaration of Independence asserted: "All men are created equal by their creator with certain unalienable rights, among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness." (1776, quoted from Armitage, 2007: p21)

In conclusion, these two major theoretical transformations prove that the context of consumer culture

and the ideology it propagates twist the identity of human beings and alienate their American dreams.

### 3) *Impact of consumer culture on American dream:*

Since it is the commodity that constructs the capitalist market, people view the quantity and the quality of goods as the representative of living standard and social stratum. Everything they desire could be considered as commodities. As a result, commodification becomes one of the predominant impacts of consumer culture on American dream. In essence, nevertheless, commodification could be viewed as a clear manifestation of objectification, a social phenomenon characterized by revival of libido, "decline in subjectivity and objectified subjects dominated by the unconscious rather than reason and free will" (Shen, 2018).

In *Sister Carrie*, not only do men objectify the ladies to be "the most fascinating of all the pleasures" (Dreiser, 2001: 42), but women also superficially evaluate men from their "putting worth" (35) and leave "all the unlovely qualities and those beneath notice in overalls and jumper" (35), which makes the assessment of a person equal to selection of lifeless goods. No regard for humanity and morality further elucidates the tragedy of mankind's degradation to beasts.

In addition, the context of consumer culture narrows down the implication of American dream to possession and property (Zhang, 2014). The more material wealth a person accumulates, the higher social stratum he represents. To accomplish the newly-defined success, individuals mistake the tool as the goal. They should have treated material wealth as the prerequisite for a better life, yet they equal it to be the happiness of their innermost being and even define it as the ultimate purpose of their existence.

### 4) *Alienation of the American dream in Sister Carrie:*

In this thesis, the alienation of American dream primarily occurred in three social groups: the bottom rung, those of upper-middle classes and dream seekers striking for class upgrade, with the Hansons, Carrie and Hurstwood as representatives respectively. American dream of Minnie and Hanson, who represent people from bottom rungs of the social ladder, closely corresponds with the traditional American dream defined as anyone who works hard and embraces the creed of frugality and self-sacrifice can finally achieve success, the core of which lies in financial independence. The Hansons' assiduous work, perseverant efforts and unswerving faith in thrift and self-discipline exactly accord with the prerequisite for accomplishing American dream. However, an atmosphere of gloom and insipidity pervades their humble flat, standing in stark contrast to the hustle and bustle of Chicago, which convincingly demonstrates that the Hansons, to be more generalized, the lower social stratum remains unsuccessful despite their diligent labor. Under the context of consumer culture, American society doesn't give lower orders the chance to attain their fullest stature as the American dream initially promised. On the contrary, theories such as naturalism, Darwinism and hedonism prevalent in consumer society hinder believers in traditional virtues from achieving their dreams. This phenomenon and ossified social strata it induces alienate the American dream of lower classes.

Carrie's movement from a small town in California to Chicago, a prosperous metropolis symbolizes America's revolution from a less industrialized region to a flourishing capitalist country. On the one hand, Carrie stands for youngsters inclining to go astray in big cities. They are, in Dreiser's description, both acutely observant of pleasures and fresh entertainments around them and uninterested in books and knowledge. Instinctive crudity makes self-absorption their predominant characteristic (Dreiser, 2001: p3). Big cities are bustling with innumerable temptations, each of them waving the magic wand to capture the curiosity and interest of youngsters in an instant. The bona fide reason why a young girl can easily sink into the mire of vanity and lavishness among big cities (Dreiser, 2001: p29) is that modern people, especially beautiful naïve American youngsters, according to Rollo May, are just a collection of mirrors, merely reflecting others' expectations and being only able to respond rather than to choose. Being directed solely by other forces, they have no effective center of their own (2001, quoted from May, 2013: p7).

Like a mechanism driven by desire, Carrie unintentionally takes advantage of every single opportunity that could offer her a better life. Firstly, she meets Drouet, an experienced drummer, whose "shiny tan shoes, smart new suit (Dreiser, 2001: p6)" and elegant manner appeals Carrie at the first glance. She moves in with Drouet after losing her low-paid job and depends on him to satisfy her aspiration to live an extravagant life. Nevertheless, the encounter with Hurstwood diminishes her admiration for Drouet in that compared with the latter, Hurstwood is "more clever in a hundred way" (Dreiser, 2001: p87), unquestionably representing a higher social stratum. Every time Carrie scents the faintest whisper of a better life in the materialistic sense, she deserts all in the past almost without regard for others. That's exactly the reason why she begins to feel discontented with being an ordinary housewife in New York: Mrs. Vance's fine manners and lavish taste appeals Carrie so much that she aspires to imitate her luxurious lifestyle.

It seems that Minnie's dream portrays Carrie's pursuit of happiness and beauty. Answering the call of endless desire, Carrie approaches increasingly close to an infinite hole. "The shadow had swallowed her completely" (Dreiser, 2001: p73) and ultimately, "the strange waters were blurring everything (Dreiser, 2001: p74)". The metaphor in Minnie's dream shares some essential similarities with Erich Fromm's renowned quotes: "Greed is a bottomless pit which exhausts the person in an endless effort to satisfy the need without ever reaching satisfaction" (Fromm, 2013: 113). It is not Carrie's wish for a superior standard of living that we should criticize. What we need to be vigilant about is that in search of happiness, sensory instead of reason dominates Carrie's behavioral pattern. Similar to Carrie, Drouet's friends frequent extravagant places "because they craved, without, perhaps, consciously analyzing it" (Dreiser, 2001: p41). The crowds above are exactly what T. S. Eliot (1925: p101) depicted in his prophetic poem "The Hollow Men":

We are the hollow men

We are the stuffed men

Leaning together

Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!

Carrie merely claims her yearning for happiness, but under no circumstances does she give happiness a precise definition different from others to distinguish her own criteria of good life from others'. She would never sense a tingle of gratification no matter how much wealth and fame she possesses and "have any clear idea of what she feels" (May, 2013: p4), since she knows nothing about her heart. The genuine happiness, however, only derives from one's inner world. Superficially a comic figure at the end of the story, she's in essence a thorough tragedy as Dreiser (Dreiser, 2001: p462) pictured in the last chapter of his work, "Know, then that for you is neither surfeit nor content. In your rocking chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long alone. In your rocking chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel."

On the other hand, "Carrie was a fair example of the middle American class — two generations removed from the emigrant" (Dreiser, 2001: p3). Trapped between the underprivileged and the upper class, Carrie finds her conventional moral principles in constant conflict with new environment. For example, though fascinated by Hurstwood's charisma, Carrie is still restrained by inherited morality. Honestly affected by a feeling of shame, she said: "I don't seem to do anything right." (Dreiser, 2001: p108) Ironically, the instinct and desire always defeat her self-discipline, seducing her to get easy money for feasting and revelry, which demonstrates another "intermediate stage" in which Carrie, even human beings are wavering. As Dreiser (Dreiser, 2001: p68) pointed out, our civilization is still in a middle stage, scarcely beast, in that it is no longer wholly guided by instinct; scarcely human, in that it is not yet wholly guided by reason.... He is even as a wisp in the wind, moved by every breath of passion, acting now by his will and now by his instincts, erring with one, only to rise by the other — a creature of incalculable variability.

Not only are American dreams of lower orders and young dream seekers who belong to the middle class alienated, but upper-middle social strata's dreams become alienated in the context of consumer culture as well. People in this social class are within the mainstream of American society, in which they depend on sophisticated interpersonal relationships to enjoy their current lives. They strive to maintain their social status throughout their life span yet find it rather difficult to realize further class upgrade. Hurstwood exactly represents this social group and exemplifies the alienation of American dream with his experiences. Deprived of property, fame and high social stratum, Hurstwood finds himself nothing but "a fugitive from the law, a creature driven by instinct and fantasy" (Balling & Frederick, 2019). Hurstwood's ultimate failure can't be attributed to his loss of managerial position and fortune. Instead, it is his excessive addiction to those outside materialistic stuff that results in his tragic end. He "becomes oblivious to what he really feels, likes, rejects, believes in short to what he really is" (Horney, 1946: p64). Accordingly, he loses his identity when leaving Chicago in that departing

there not only means loss of wealth and prominence, but more importantly, indicates that he has to desert his old Chicago self and to reconstruct a brand new self in accordance with the standard of New York, which is both frustrating and challenging to him. According to Erich Fromm (2013: p207), Hurstwood is owned by his creations, and has lost ownership of himself. Without creations to fulfill his outer form, Hurstwood is doomed to death due to the sense of nihilism.

#### IV. INFLUENCES ON CHINA AND SUGGESTIONS

As the impact of globalization becomes ever more profound, the American phenomenon that augmented consumption is out of proportion to life gratification has also spread to other countries (Roberts, 2011: p81). China, unfortunately, is no exception. The Gallup Organization surveyed 15,000 Chinese people, intending to find out the relationship between material growth and happiness. Nonetheless, it turned out that people's gratification quotient remained static although the decade from 1994 to 2005 witnessed unprecedented economic development. Additionally, the research conducted by Hilke Brockman and colleagues at Jacobs University in Bremen, Germany, proposed that despite the economic growth from 1990 to 2000, only 12 percent of Chinese people considered their lives satisfying compared to a higher percentage, twenty eight per hundred a decade ago (2008, quoted from Roberts, 2011: p84). Statistics above illustrates that individuals' spiritual development doesn't synchronize with the escalation in material well-being. Many Chinese people, especially the young generation, immerse themselves in ephemeral pleasures and trivial pursuits. For instance, the feverish groupies skive off only for a glimpse of their idol that may abuse drugs, be addicted to alcohol or commit domestic violence behind all the glamour and fortune. The flood of consumer culture has been streaming into China, making the so-called vogue governed by the entertainment circle, media and advertisements, rather than reason and rational analysis, dominate people's judgment and preference. Similar to Hurstwood, people shape their fake self in accordance with the fashion and others' expectation regardless of their true yearning. Instead of pursuing excellence and self-perfection, Chinese people, youngsters in particular, would rather become an inconspicuous drop and "be absorbed in group" (May, 2013: p8). Most pathetically, they just let others tell them who they are rather than define their own identity. As the consequence of the endeavor to keep their identity compliant with the ever-changing materialistic world, they inevitably end up with frustration, confusion and displeasure.

To resolve this predicament, on the one hand, individuals are encouraged to value the cultivation of innermost being, to develop their spiritual life by expanding both the comprehensiveness and profundity of their reading resources and not to set the material as the single benchmark of happiness. Furthermore, it is important for individuals to realize that in the same country, different social strata have relatively independent culture, so to duplicate another cultural code is impossible. Even within a certain social class, individual pursuit differs from one another, and that is

exactly the charm of humanity, just as what Ralph Waldo Emerson (1990: p141) advocated in his essay "Self-reliance": "Be yourself; no base imitator of another, but your best self. Do the things at which you are great, not what you were never made for."

On the other hand, it is suggested that the government persist in strengthening cultural consciousness, cultural confidence and ethical advancement, "enriching the intellectual and cultural life of people and carrying out a broad range of public activities" (Xin, 2019: p18). While establishing cross-cultural communication with foreign countries, Chinese government is recommended to disseminate Chinese civilization abroad, take the essence and discard the dregs of foreign values and avoid comprehensive Westernization. Only if we maintain our cultural identity, can we actually enhance China's soft power and achieve full-fledged national rejuvenation.

#### V. CONCLUSION

This paper focuses on the alienation of American dream in the context of consumer culture. Through a detailed analysis of Sister Carrie, the paper illustrates different classes' dreams and in particular, the alienated American dreams of the Hansons, Carrie, Hurstwood and of the social group they respectively stand for. In order to deal with some negative impacts of consumer culture on China, it is suggested that some measures be taken by both individuals and the government.

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