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Introduction: China’s Many Dreams

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Since the change at the top level of the Chinese leadership in 2012–13 the idea of a China Dream (Zhongguo Meng) has been strongly promoted in the media, policy and academic commentaries, and in public areas across China in what has become a major ideological campaign.\(^1\) Understanding the China Dream, its components, motivations and consequences has particular importance, of course, because of the relationship between China change and international change – the Dream is not only about the change experienced by Chinese people but the world’s experience of a changing China.\(^2\) The China Dream idea is not entirely new but the way it has been defined and advanced by the new leadership, headed by General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Xi Jinping, suggests it is more than the desire of an incoming administration to have a strong narrative for its period in office but also a new phase in China’s modernization and internationalization. Since Xi is seen as the principal architect of the official version of the Dream it is worth considering his understanding of the term. On 28 November 2012 Xi and the other members of the standing committee of the Politburo of the CCP visited the Road to Revival exhibition in Beijing. Xinhua reported Xi’s comments during the visit as follows:

The Road to Revival exhibition reviews the Chinese nation of yesterday, reveals the Chinese nation of today, and announces the Chinese nation of tomorrow, providing profound education and enlightenment. The Chinese nation of yesterday can be likened to “it should not be said the guarded pass is as solid as iron”. Before modern times the Chinese nation faced heavy suffering and paid many sacrifices, rarely seen in all the world’s history. But the Chinese people never yielded, at long last mastered their own destiny, and began to build
their country's great progress, amply displaying that patriotism was the core of the great national spirit. Today's Chinese nation may rightly be likened to “the correct path in the world has many turns”. After reform and opening we refined historical experience and continued difficult exploration, and at long last found the correct path to realise the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, which has achieved worldwide attention. This path is that of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Tomorrow's Chinese nation can be likened to “one day a great wind will break the waves”. After 170 years of continuous struggle since the Opium Wars, the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation displays bright prospects. Now in comparison with any period of time in our history we are closer to the objective of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, and confidence is greater than at any time in history that we have the capacity to realise this objective.3

And he added to ‘realise the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream of the Chinese people in modern times’ (shixian Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing, jiu shi Zhonghua minzu jindai yilai zui weida de mengxiang).

It is clear then that much of the significance of the dream lies in the historical, developmental and political logic that surrounds the idea.4 Xi presents China as being in a struggle with history and with forces in history that did not want China to be successful. Today, through sacrifices and hard experience the Chinese nation has learned to be successful once again: national rejuvenation is very close. The core lessons the Chinese people should take from history are about patriotism and socialism – the national spirit of patriotism and socialism with Chinese characteristics have together placed the Chinese nation on the path to rejuvenation. Xi’s language is redolent with symbols and appeals to ideas and emotions, but there remain several layers of meaning to the terms he uses. The notion of the China Dream itself is a clever negotiation between collective identity and individual aspirations. It is rather like a large body of water – the dream reveals the Chinese people as having a collective will and identity shaped by a difficult history but at the same time if individuals and communities look closely into the dream they should be able to see their own reflection in it. The China Dream is also about facing the future with confidence – about patriotic optimism. However, it is clear that the idea of the Dream by itself is not very political – it is symbolic, emotive and psychological but does not have clear political definition. The true politics of the Dream are located in its