Xi Jinping (b. 1953) became China’s new supreme leader in late 2012 at the First Plenum of the Eighteenth Party Congress. Since assuming the positions of president and Party general secretary, Xi has endeavored to promote the “China Dream” (Zhongguomeng) as a central ideological guideline for society. This has, theoretically and practically, become a hallmark maneuver of his administration. According to official narratives, the Dream is defined by its ultimate goal to rejuvenate the Chinese nation, which can be achieved through the efforts of each and every member of society to construct China as a wealthy and strong modern country and make the Chinese people happy and prosperous. China watchers in the West have offered different interpretations of the Dream. US-based China strategist Helen Wang (2010) characterizes it as a variant of the American dream now pursued by the vast population of China who aspire to live an American-style middle-class life. Reporter Evan Osnos (2013) notes the tensions between the pluralization of the Dream for ordinary Chinese under American influence and the Communist Party’s struggle to retain social control. Their journalistic emphasis on the Dream’s American roots is corroborated by political scientists such as Sujian Guo and Baogang Guo (2010).

These Western narratives constitute an intriguing contrast with the domestic hermeneutics of the China Dream. Populist opinions, particularly those from the groups of “angry youths” (fèngqing), insist on a militant interpretation of the Dream as a call for China’s rise to challenge America’s cultural and military hegemonies. The Party’s theoretical journal Qiushi, on the other hand, unwaveringly enframes the Dream within Chinese socialist thought and argues that the Dream “infuses Socialism with Chinese Characteristics with new energy” (2013). The discursive tensions between China and the West and between populism and statism in the exegeses of the Dream create a pressing need for further reflection on mass nationalism and Chinese history in the twenty-first century. How does the mass
aestheticization of the nation continue to delineate the collective agencies of postsocialist China? How do the aestheticized discourses, the public dynamics of national culture, and the collective tendency to inhabit the here and now transform history from an abstract, esoteric narrative hagiography into interactive processes of socialization and part of the lived experience of the nation-mass? Through what materials can we rediscover disseminated agencies and micro-mechanisms of power in a Chinese historical imagination so deeply embedded in anticolonialism, socialism, and developmentalism?

**AMERICAN DREAMS IN CHINA: FAREWELL TO LU XUN?**

Before I address these questions, let us first make an excursion to a recent blockbuster movie, *Zhongguo hehuoren* (*American dreams in China*, 2013; hereafter *HHR*), which was made around the same time when Xi rose to power and bears significance in understanding China in “the age of dreaming.” Amid China’s national study-abroad craze in 1985, three close buddies, Cheng, Wang, and Meng, lived their undergraduate life in Beijing and attempted to obtain student visas to go to America. Although Cheng and Wang did not manage to study there, the three reunited in 1990s China and succeeded in building a chain of English-language schools called “New Dream,” which nevertheless took a toll on their friendship. Based on the real-life experiences of Yu Minhong (b. 1962) and Li Yang (b. 1969), who have made their fortunes through English-language training in China notwithstanding, *HHR* strives to be more than a Chinese replica of *The social network*. Film critics in the West tend to dismiss this movie by Hong Kong director Peter Chan as a propaganda product to promote Xi’s China Dream, but even the most prejudiced of them cannot deny that the articulated love–hate sentiments of Chinese youths toward America reflect Chan’s own understanding of history and nations.

*HHR*’s significance to mass national imagination in Xi’s China is unabashedly brought to the fore by the motto of the New Dream schools, “to seek hope in despair” (*zaijuewangzhongxunzhaoxiwang*), which is a literal reuse of the motto of Yu Minhong’s New Oriental schools. The New Oriental schools have inspired millions of Chinese youths since the 1990s to learn English and study in America; I myself am one of them. As a literary major at Peking University, Yu must be very familiar with Lu Xun and his utopian imagination of history. Yu’s entrepreneurial appropriation of Lu Xun’s “hope in despair” in historical imagination (Lee 1987; Wang 2004) and Chan’s cinematic