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## **The China Dream: Between Personal Aspiration and State Authoritarianism?**

*By Benjamin Ho*

### **Synopsis**

*China's intransigence towards Hong Kong's democracy demands reflects a bigger problem of managing expectations of a more assertive public that makes increasingly stronger demands of the government. President Xi Jinping's exhortation for the pursuit of the Chinese Dream may haunt Beijing if the CCP is unable to make good on its promises to deliver materially.*

### **Commentary**

AS THOUSANDS of Hong Kong students stage pro-democracy protests against China over the past fortnight the issue of political reforms has resurfaced, with fears that that youths in Macau and the mainland would draw inspiration from the students' political activism in Hong Kong. What is at stake however, is not just access to democracy, but the conflict between personal ambition, reflected by greater individual rights, and state authoritarianism, which is seen to be curtailing the extent to which individual citizens can pursue their own dreams, including electing their own leaders.

In a recent book *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth and Faith in the New China* Evan Osnos, a staff writer at The New Yorker, noted that the Chinese people, as a result of China's rapid modernisation, had now gained access to fortune, truth, and faith – three things that were previously denied to them by politics and poverty. Since the opening up of China in the late 70s, more and more Chinese are having a life that compares favourably with that of the West.

### **Concerns of “subversive ideas”**

The creation of a Chinese middle-class, estimated by Mckinsey to number some 200 million, has resulted in significant shifts in the character of Chinese society: more and more Chinese have taken control of freedoms that used to be governed by others – decisions about where they work and travel and even whom they marry. Osnos' experiences in China led him to believe that the Chinese people have outpaced the political system that nurtured the rise. As he puts it, “the Communist Party commitment to control...contradicts the riot of life outside”.

In recent months the Chinese government has voiced concerns over what it views as “subversive

ideas” permeating China’s society-at-large. In a memo released by the Chinese Communist Party last year, it warned party members of “seven perils” that were taking root in the country, including “Western constitutional democracy”; “promoting universal values of human rights”; “Western-inspired notions of media independence and civil society”; “ardently pro-market neo-liberalism” and “nihilist” criticisms of the party’s traumatic past. Similar themes were also echoed in letters sent to top Chinese universities urging its professors to stay clear of these ideas and to avoid polluting the minds of Chinese students.

Notwithstanding the high-profile crackdown on former top Chinese leaders on corruption charges, it would seem that a bigger battle is emerging within Chinese political circles – that of ensuring stability, both within and outside the party. Factionalism, long a trait of Chinese politics, is accepted insofar as it does not upset the power base of President Xi Jinping and the top leaders.

According to Professor David Lampton of Johns Hopkins, the present Chinese polity is very different from the one Deng Xiaoping was in charge of in the following ways: China’s leaders have become progressively less dominant, weaker relative to each other and in relationship to society; the pluralisation of Chinese society and governing structures has become pronounced; and the leadership is confronting a society with ever more resources. These developments have put China in an entirely new political space, and its leaders are unsure of where China should go – beyond vague generalities of wanting China not to be like the West.

### **The China Dream: One too many?**

The term “Chinese Dream” (*zhongguomeng*) was brought to prominence by President Xi Jinping shortly after taking power last year. Unlike Hu Jintao’s “scientific-development outlook” or Jiang Zemin’s “Three Represents”, the Chinese Dream – as noted by *The Economist* – seeks to “inspire” the masses of Chinese towards the pursuit of greatness, and in doing so, to contribute to China’s rise, seen as inevitable given the problems in the West.

In a speech to mark the country’s Youth Day last year, President Xi urged the young to “dare to dream” and to work assiduously to contribute to the revitalisation of the Chinese nation. According to Professor William Callahan of the London School of Economics, the Chinese Dream has ignited spirited discussions, both in and outside China, concerning what it means to be Chinese, how to understand China and perhaps more importantly, what the future holds for China, and the rest of the world.

Yet, as such discussions permeate Chinese society, they have also generated alternative scenarios of what China could be, in the event the CCP loses power. This, for now, is unimaginable, as President Xi continues to shore up his power bases; yet this cannot be ruled out forever, especially if more and more Chinese feel that the greatest obstacle to the country’s future is the Party. A darker proposition is that the CCP would use such discussions to ultimately clamp down on its staunchest critics, not unlike what Chairman Mao did during his Hundred Flowers campaign.

In a 2013 *Financial Times* survey of more than 12,000 young people aged between 18 and 30 in 27 countries, youth in China were most optimistic about their future compared to their counterparts in other countries including North America, Europe and Japan. This optimism was reflected in their career outlook with two-thirds of Chinese thinking they will have the chance to become an entrepreneur (and get rich) compared to 48% in Japan and 56% in South Korea.

Such optimism has created a certain sense of entitlement, in which the Chinese are likely to make greater demands of their government, which the CCP may be hardpressed to deliver, especially if such demands only pertain to material provisions. Indeed, as the *New York Times*’ Thomas Friedman wryly puts it, “if Xi’s dream for China’s emerging middle class is just like the American Dream (a big car, a big house and Big Macs for all) then we need another planet.” More worrying for the CCP, such a dream could possibly spell a death knell for the party.

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