

Jul 07, 2017 by **Di Wu**

When the “Sleeping Dragon” Dreams ^[1]

Since Mr. Xi Jinping was elected as the General Secretary of the Communist Party and the Head of the Military Commission, the world has been musing about the possibilities of Chinese reform under his presidency. Some people speculated on connections of his visit to Iowa in 1985 and his fondness of Hollywood films to his possible liberal stance; while others, who understand the inner workings of Chinese politics, suspected no huge transformation would take place in the foreseeable future as President Xi himself is not the only decision maker.

President Xi announced that his first slogan will be “Chinese dream.” Every Chinese leader has one or two slogans that serve as a representation of his policies and a guideline for the public. The former President Hu Jintao had his famous “harmonious society” as a slogan, and Deng Xiaoping used “reform and opening up” to lead Chinese economic reform since late 1970s. President Xi first mentioned the “Chinese dream” during a speech at the National Museum in November 2012. The speech was given for the exhibition called “Road to Revival.” As with previous slogans put forward by Mr. Xi’s predecessors, this term is widely “studied” throughout the nation. For example, Chinese performing arts tailor shows, materials, activities, and education in schools to fit the dream. But what is this dream about?

As an article published on May 4, 2013 by the Economist pointed out, the “Chinese dream” is an opaque term compared to previous slogans. It is unique because it “seems designed to inspire rather than inform.” At first, using the word “dream” as a national guideline seems a bit sentimental. After all, Chinese do not need to be emotionally motivated for voting purposes. However, if you take the recent challenges in air pollution, food security, and corruption in China into consideration, it is quite obvious that re-boosting the confidence among the Chinese public in the Communist Party is a matter of great urgency. A sensational slogan might do the trick. Internationally, this slogan pictures a dichotomous relationship between China and the United States, not militarily, but ideologically.

The “Chinese dream” parallels with the “American dream,” which is defined by James Truslow Adams as “[a society where] life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement.” It visions the ultimate establishment of “a modern socialist state with Chinese characteristics.” Besides aiming at the completion of building a Xiaokang society (the well-off society), the Chinese version underlines the uniqueness of China characterized by her humiliating history and solidarity of the people, according to President Xi. By injecting the touch of humanity and softness into Chinese anticipations of the future, the “Chinese dream” tries to deliver a message that we (including Chinese, Americans, and others) are similar dream seekers. But the Chinese obviously have a different dream than the U.S. with its Western values. The American dream is about valuing individual dreams, while the Chinese dream is about building the nation.

We are the same yet we are different. How does this message translate into Chinese nation

branding and public diplomacy? It may not be the intention of the Chinese government to communicate their dream to the international community, but it will eventually become one of the pillars defining Chinese public diplomacy activities overseas since it guides the domestic agenda. Moreover, it is indeed the most “borderless” slogan when comparing it to ones given by previous Chinese political leaders. For example, former President Jiang Zemin’s “Three Represents” was arcane without knowing the Chinese political background; former President Hu Jintao’s “scientific-development outlook” was basically concerned with domestic development. This time, the “Chinese dream” can be viewed as an overarching theme for communication purposes, both internally and externally.

Is it a good slogan for Chinese nation branding? The answer is mixed. On the one hand, foreign publics may not need extra knowledge to understand that China is looking forward. On the other hand, the “Chinese dream” represents a determination that China will eventually become a strong nation again. This is at least the backdrop of it, if not the core message it tries to deliver. The Chinese revival is easily seen as a threat to China’s neighbors, though many explanations were given externally to clarify that the “Chinese dream” does not mean to going back to the “tributary system.” The question of whether China has the intention or capability to place threats to other countries is not a consideration here, but misconceptions followed by the slogan should be addressed. If the slogan needs additional annotations so that other countries do not miscomprehend China, then it is at least not a self-explanatory vehicle carrying China’s image. Former President Hu’s slogan “harmonious society” is a comparatively better one for external communication as it contains a straightforward message and is inspired by Confucius thinking. The task for the new leadership is to twist the connection between strength and threat to common prosperity.

Additionally, the “Chinese dream” is an attempt to break the dominance of universal values. According to Dr. Wang Yiwei, the “Chinese dream” is not China’s dream. It emphasizes the Chinese people. This is highly questionable because in articles and public speeches from officials, the “Chinese dream” has always been about Chinese as a nation not as individuals. President Xi mentioned the Chinese dream with the revival of Chinese civilization, which is composed of Chinese people and the entire nation. In this sense, no matter if its “China’s dream” or “Chinese dream,” the slogan is exclusive. “Harmonious world,” on the other hand, has a global horizon and cuts to the point.

It is also not a good idea to echo the “American dream” since it has already taken roots in people’s minds. The “American dream” is an immigration dream about acceptance and freedom. The Chinese version obviously has a totally different story. In terms of nation branding, isn’t it better to create one unique term that better represents the Chinese nation?

“Chinese dream” provides neither a clear branding externally nor an efficient guide internally. Domestically, Chinese people have been given freedom to define their individual dreams following this big theme of “Chinese dream.” Academics like Dr. Wang have been writing to explain misunderstandings of the “Chinese dream,” but the Chinese people need information more specific than that. Unlike previous slogans mainly pointing out the direction of material productions, the “Chinese dream” still lacks definition. The vagueness of this slogan can only be read as a calling for patriotism, although the underlying message is calling for confidence in the Party.

The effectiveness of this internal propaganda remains to be seen. It may fulfill the need of the Chinese people who have lost ideological faith in the Party. It may also completely disconnect

with reality and become an irony. The outlook all depends on how the new leadership defines this dream. Its broadness can do both good and bad. It can be wide enough to include any individual vision. It can also be too spread out and lack focus. Externally, the core meaning of national revival attached to the “Chinese dream” may still be considered as a threat, although the human element of it can create opportunities to build a bridge between people.

While potentially effective for mobilizing the Chinese public, this slogan is not efficient for Chinese nation branding. The slogan may hold the nation together for a common goal—revival of Chinese nation, but when its impacts spills over to the international arena, a “Chinese dream” may not be what people would expect from China. How can you define a nebulous dream when everyone has his/her interpretations? President Xi and his team need to either make more efforts to clarify the dream’s contents or replace the slogan with a new one.
