

## Talking About “Chinese Dream” and “American Dream” From an Intercultural Communication Perspective

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### Abstract

*Dream is usually a beautiful or wonderful thing, and often begins from the pursuit of beautiful or wonderful thing and the desire for happiness from poverty or suffering. The Chinese Dream and the American Dream have their own different cultural connotations especially under the influence of their own cultural values. Therefore, the author tries to compare the Chinese Dream with the American Dream from an intercultural perspective, discusses the cultural connotations of the different two dreams and focuses on the comparative analysis on the different intercultural values of the different two dreams, so as to deeply understand the Chinese Dream and American Dream from its history, culture, and its cultural values.*

**Key words:** Chinese Dream, American Dream, intercultural communication

### 1. Introduction

Dream is usually a beautiful or wonderful thing, and often begins from the pursuit of beautiful or wonderful thing and the desire for happiness from poverty or suffering. In the word, different countries have various dreams during different development history, different people with different cultural backgrounds also have various dreams for their personal pursuit.

In November, 2013, some after the conclusion of the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China, General Secretary and President Xi Jinping put forward, for the first time, the idea of the Chinese Dream on a visit to “The Road towards Renewal” exhibition at the National Museum of China. And then in March this year, President Xi further elaborated on the Chinese Dream in his speech at the closing ceremony of the First Session of the 12<sup>th</sup> National People’s Congress. Since then, he has talked about the concept on a number of occasions.

President Xi Jinping’s overarching vision of the Chinese Dream has become a grand driver of China’s continuing reform and development. The Chinese Dream differs from the American Dream in that it expresses China’s collective aspirations - “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (in Xi’s words) – and it differs from the Chinese Dream in Chinese history by embracing the personal dream of individual Chinese people for attaining happy, healthy, abundant and productive lives. (Kahn, 2014)

At the present, the phrase “Chinese Dream” has become a hot topic of not only domestic, but also national society. However, certain Western media and some persons have misunderstood the real concept of the Chinese Dream, even if mixing with the American Dream. Therefore, the author tries to compare the Chinese Dream with the American Dream from an intercultural perspective, discusses the cultural connotations of the different two dreams and focuses on the comparative analysis on the different cultural values of the different two dreams, so as to deeply understand the Chinese Dream and American Dream from its history, culture, and its cultural values.

## **2. Cultural Connotations of Chinese Dream and American Dream**

Everyone knows that Chinese Dream and American Dream, the two dreams have its own history and culture for its own birth. If people want to know and understand the connotations of the two dreams, they must learn some fundamental knowledge about the two nations 'different historical development and cultural backgrounds. Thus, the author thinks that it is crucial and essential for us to discuss about cultural connotations of Chinese Dream and American Dream.

### **2.1 Features of the Chinese Historic Culture and the meaning of Chinese Dream**

China has a long history. It is a multi – ethnic nation with the world's largest population. Of the four oldest recorded civilization is the only one that has an uninterrupted history. For many centuries, her people have been farming and living on the vast land, creating and developing her unique culture. (Liao, 2008)

Chinese culture can be defined as a cultural system rich in distinct national style which took shape within the terrain of China. The culture includes the spiritual culture and behavioral culture as well as their materialized presentations. It is these cultural forms that signify the fundamental features of the Chinese culture. It belongs to the historical category, having undergone 5000 – year's development before it turns into today's splendid sight, both extensive and profound. (Fan, 2011)

Under the influence of the Chinese culture, the Chinese people's extreme cherishing of national greatness, but China used to be one of the leading powers in the world. However, 1840 marked the beginning of more than a century of humiliation of the country and suffering for the people. It was not until 1949 that China regained full national independence and Chinese citizens could once again stand up straight in the world. Those who are drowning cherish air national greatness is as valuable to the Chinese people. The nation's rejuvenation is also the pursuit of the Chinese people. (Zheng,2013)

Just as President Xi Jinping stressed that the Chinese Dream means the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. It embodies achieving prosperity for the country, renewal of the nation and happiness for the citizens. Only when the country is doing well, can the nation and people do well. Also, Xi emphasized that the Chinese Dream in essence means the dream of the people. The Chinese Dream is to let people enjoy better education, more stable employment, higher incomes, a greater degree of social security, better medical and health care, improved housing conditions and a better environment. It is to let our children grow up well, have satisfactory jobs and live better lives. (Cai, 2013)

Needless to say, China has made lasting contributions to human civilization, but its falling behind the West in the past centuries has cast a shadow over its national pride. The nation's renaissance is clearly defined as the goal of the whole nation as the people hope that their traditions and culture can gain global influence as before and the country can become a leading member of the family of nations again.

### **2.2 Features of the American historic culture and the meaning of American Dream**

The United States of America has a short history with more than three hundred years, and has often been called "a nation of immigrants". Of all the many different nationalities and ethnic groups which have gone into the making of America, some have quickly assimilated. They have largely lost or intentionally given up many of those specific markers which would make them much different from their neighbors. This process of

assimilation, or “Americanization”, has characterized the immigrant experience in U.S. history. (Wang,2013)

American society is composed of multi – ethnic groups with different cultural backgrounds. American culture is rich and complex. European cultures, especially British culture, have a great influence on the development of the American culture. And American culture is also rooted deeply in the process of its nation – building. The dominant American culture has grown out of America’s earliest history. Some people see America as a “melting pot” and people of various races and ethnic groups are combined into one culture. Others believe America is a “salad bowl” and people from different cultures maintain their own cultural traditions and the diverse American culture comes into being (Ren and Liao, 2010).

Meanwhile, America is remarkable now, as in the past, for its attachment to the principle of freedom of belief or disbelief. As the early Americans had escaped from religious persecution in their old countries, so they determined that there would be no religious oppression in the home they were building up (Zhu, 2001). Nevertheless, of all the religions in America, protestant faith has had the strongest influence on the forming of American culture. Some protestant principles such as hardworking, self – discipline, self – improvement, material success and humanitarianism are central values in American culture.

The American Dream is a national ethos of the united States, a set of ideals in which freedom includes the opportunity for prosperity and success, and an upward social mobility achieved though hard work. In the definition of the American Dream by James Truslow Adams in 1931, “life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” regardless of social class or circumstances of birth. (Library of Congress, 2014)

What then is the American Dream? Different people have different interpretations about it. It could mean a decent job with good pay; it could also mean ownership of a car and a house. Additionally, it can mean freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and a sense of aspiration. To be sure, other countries have their own success stories and their own dreams as well. What makes the American Dream unique is the coming together in one place of so many separate dreams: the search for liberty, the discovery of one’s own potential, and the exploration of new possibilities for happiness. (Wang, 2013,118p)

In one word, the American Dream is rooted in the American culture, and reveals the core value of the American culture. And the American Dream influences almost every American’ pursuit of their own happiness or hope.

### **3. Comparative Analysis**

From the above discussion about the cultural connotations of the Chinese Dream and the American Dream, people can easily find that the two dreams grow out of different histories and have their roots in different cultures and then they all reflect their own different cultural value orientations. That is, the Chinese Dream fully represents the core value of the Chinese culture – collectivism, and the American Dream wholly reveals its own core value of the American culture – individualism. These two different cultural values are being deeply influenced by their own cultures and histories. Now, it is necessary for us to comparatively analyze the two different dreams’ various cultural values from an intercultural communication perspective.

In China, Confucianism is part of the mainstream of Chinese traditional culture and Chinese culture is in the throes of prosperity, its influence growing in the world. Also, Confucianism is not a religion, but a tradition, a

way of life. It has played a spiritual role in China traditionally (Basu, 2012). For Confucius, a world of great harmony would be a society made up of many individuals acting rationally, organized around a series of societal orders. Therefore, the western scholars defined the Chinese culture as collectivistic culture. Triandis said: "It is important to note here that in collectivist cultures the incompatibility of personal and in – group goals or values is not related in conflict between the individual and a specific member of the in – group is like a person and pushes toward a direction away from his or her personal goals. Others are seen as representatives of the in – group rather than as individuals. Another said: "Members of collectivistic cultures are more willing to sacrifice personal interests, needs, and goals for the group's purpose. Collectivistic cultures value "interdependence, reciprocal obligation, and positive face need"(Ting – Toomey, 1988)

In collectivist cultures, decisions that juxtapose the benefits to the individual and benefits to the group are always based on what is best for the group, and the groups to which a person belongs are the most important social units. In turn, the group is expected to look out for and to take care of its individual members. Consequently, collectivist cultures believe in obligations to the group, dependence of the individual on organizations and institutions, a "we" consciousness, and an emphasis on belonging. (Cu, 2012) Needless to say, some maybe misunderstood the true meaning of the Chinese Dream. Actually, the Chinese Dream belongs to both the nation and the Chinese people – neither is separable from the other.

In contrast, individualism is very much a characteristic of American culture. And this individualism is closely related to the concept of the American Dream. The dream of individual success has been cherished by early settlers since "a New World" was discovered by Europeans in the American continent. Early immigrants like Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur highly praised the freedom and opportunity to be found in this new land. His descriptions of a classless society where anyone could attain success through hard work and honesty inspired many Europeans and drew more and more poor immigrants from Europe and stimulated continuous national expansion into the new territories.

According to Hofstede (1980), the American culture is individual-oriented, and the Chinese culture is collective-oriented. Individualistic cultures show a tendency for members to be more concerned with the consequences of one's behaviors to one's own interests, needs, and goals (Hui & Triandis, 1986). Individualistic cultures consider "I" identity the prime focus, and emphasize "individual goals over group goals, individualistic concerns over group concerns, and individual rights and needs over collective responsibilities and obligations (Ting – Toomey, 1988).

Ever since the beginning, most Americans expected the government created by the Constitution to leave them alone to pursue their individual goals. There is, however, a price to be paid for this individual freedom: self – reliance. Individuals must learn to rely on themselves or risk losing freedom. It means that Americans believe they should take care of themselves, solve their own problems and stand on their own feet. They must be self – reliant in order to keep their freedom.

This strong belief in self – reliance continues today as a basic American value. The "American dream" is clearly a representation of this belief. It is the Americans' hope for a better quality of life and a higher standard of living than their parents'. This belief is that anyone, regardless of their status, can "pull up their boot straps" and raise themselves from poverty. From the earliest days of colonial exploration to the setting of the Wild West, to the present day, individualism has been a strong part of American culture. Americans glorify the myth of individualism in their literature, television and movies. The earliest authors wrote about the success of the pioneers. To this day, action heroes on television and in movies perpetuate the myth of individualism. (Jin, 2011)

After comparative analysis on the Chinese Dream and the American, we can clearly see that Chinese culture differs from American culture. The Chinese culture is more collectivistic, and the American culture is more individualistic. That's why the Chinese dream has the extra latitude to include the collective dream of the nation and the people, while the American Dream extremely focuses on individual success.

However, the United States' development history since winning independence convinced Americans that they could live a better life if they tenaciously struggle. The Chinese dream and the beautiful dreams of other peoples contain the positive forces inspiring people all over the world to pursue happiness. The Chinese Dream and the American Dream are not conflicting, nor mutually exclusive, they are connected. Both people of the two nations want prosperity, love and well being, meanwhile, Both of them are inspired by dreams and are prepared to work hard to realize them. Thus, both sides can seek common ground while reserving differences. Peaceful development and win – win cooperation is the direction of the Chinese people in pursuit of their dream, which is in line with the common interests and desire of the peoples of the world. China and the United States should make their efforts to move in this direction for the sake of lasting peace and common prosperity in pursuit of their dreams.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Due to the different historical development and cultural backgrounds, the Chinese Dream and the American Dream have their own different cultural connotations especially under the influence of their own cultural values. The Chinese Dream is more collectivistic, and the American Dream is more individualistic from an intercultural communication perspective.

In fact, the Chinese Dream is not only the national desire to realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, but also immensely popular and inspiring among the Chinese people to look forward to a beautiful and successful life. Conversely, the American Dream as individualistic, focuses on individual success. But there is no denying that both dreams emphasize the importance of people's welfare and national prosperity. Both the dreams are in line with people's interests, which is also the key to their realization.

It is these common factors that make it possible for China and the United States to strengthen intercultural communication on their dreams in order to ease tension and avoid misunderstandings because of different cultural influence. Thus, though the Chinese Dream and the American Dream are not necessarily the same, peoples from the two nations should know and understand the differences of the two dreams, and seek the common ground. In this way, the best thing for China and the United States and the rest of the world would be for the two countries to realize their dreams peacefully, and finally the two dreams would really benefit to the development of the world.

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