# China Dreamin'

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MICHAEL BARR, DEC 8 2014

Every Chinese leader since Mao has attempted to separate themselves from their predecessor by articulating a new overarching praxis. For Xi Jingping this grand idea is the 'China Dream' – that is, a call for 'national rejuvenation' which improves people's livelihoods, strengthens the military, and restores China's status as a great power. The 'dream' has come with an official propaganda blitz – everything from TV shows and educational campaigns, to Party School courses and academic funding streams to research the 'dream'.

Officially, one of the core elements of China's national rejuvenation is a return to Confucian values. This may seem surprising given that for much of the 20th century 'smash Confucianism' was a government sanctioned practice, put into effect – quite literally – during the Cultural Revolution. Today, however, the Chinese leadership calls for Confucius and other forms of Chinese traditional culture to help provide a benign social order and encourage loyalty to the state.

In recent years we have seen the popularity of Confucian inspired schools and books skyrocket. Similarly, government measures to address issues of environmental degradation, intergenerational justice, and relations with developing nations all have a Confucian hue to them.

Although the point is often lost on threat theorists, the China Dream is less about expansionism than a return to the glory days when China had – or is perceived to have had – a strong, unified culture and identity. Many feel these traits have been seriously weakened under the forces of industrialization and modernization. Seen in this way, the China Dream offers not so much a path to modernity but rather a cure for modernity.

Given that more than a quarter of China's population will be over 65 by 2050, it will come as no surprise that one of the traditional values the government has tried to promote is filial piety. In 2012, the government attempted to update a series of 14th century folk tales make them more relevant for today's families. The revised version included calls for children to purchase health insurance for their parents and to teach them how to use the Internet. Confucian inspired laws on elderly protection lay out the duties of children and their obligation to tend to the spiritual needs of the elderly. The elderly are legally protected in virtually every aspect of life, from entitlement to basic provisions and family maintenance, to freedom from discrimination and to marry without interference from their children. Children are even instructed to go home often to visit their parents and to send occasional greetings.

There are a number of curious points about these efforts. First, the law does not apply to children who have gone overseas – leaving the awkward situation where those who have run furthest away from their parents in order to 'live the dream' are immune from the law's effects. Second, and more importantly, filial piety, traditionally about demonstrative gratitude, has in seemingly evolved into a legal contract. This begs the question: can one legislate a virtue?

What do the China Dream and the return of Confucius tell us about China today? In one sense, these trends are not hard to understand as principles of respect for authority and equality of opportunity for rich and poor are obviously attractive to China's leaders who struggle to hold the country together amid unprecedented social and economic change. In another sense, the China Dream and the revival of traditional culture both point to much deeper question which vexes the entire country: what does it mean to be Chinese today? Until there is a more articulate answer to this

question, China's initiatives will continue to lack definition and its leaders will have no choice but to appeal to a halcyon era in search of positive visions. How do we fill the moral void that seems to pervade society? How do we achieve social justice in light of the legacies of colonialism and imperialism? What is the best form of political representation? How are we to understand our relationships – to each other and to nature? And how can the Chinese leadership save themselves from destruction? The answers, it seems, lie in the dreams of past glory.

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