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# **Reconsidering Nationalism in 21<sup>st</sup> Century China**

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## Reconsidering Nationalism in 21<sup>st</sup> Century China

In Tony Bennett's (1992) theorization, culture is the object of government inasmuch as culture is the morals, manners, and ways of life of subordinate social strata; culture is the instrument of government insofar as culture in its most restricted sense—the domain of intellectual and artistic activities—supplies the means of a governmental intervention in and regulation of culture as the object of government. He argues that culture in general is more cogently conceived when thought of as a historically specific set of institutionally embedded relations of government in which the forms of thought and conduct of extended populations—that is, the Chinese “nation-mass” in my paper—are targeted for transformation in part via culture in its most restricted sense.

This theorization has reflected a significant methodological concern of many scholars who attempt to further historically informed and locally situated learnings of modern China through the critical notion of public culture. Most scholars agree on principle that Chinese nationalism—the general term for the various discourses centering on state building, national identification, and national culture—is based on some sort of publicity. The situation of the Chinese nation as an “imagined community” is, as Benedict Anderson may say, in nature private people find ways to relate to each other and develop consciousness of being part of a larger community through public communication. However, many have not paid attention to the non-elitist political consciousness articulated through sentimental and bodily individualities in such communication. This is quite understandable considering that the classical theories on the political functions of public space tend to exclude individual emotions and sentimental mass culture as legitimate forces for “authentic,” valuable public interactions.

With these questions in mind, I study a recent Chinese blockbuster movie, *Zhongguo hehuoren* (American dreams in China, 2013; hereafter HHR). 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.

### DREAMS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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. U.S.-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" (*fenqing*), 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).<sup>1</sup> 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 Chinese blockbuster movie, *Zhongguo hehuoren* (American dreams in China, 2013; hereafter HHR). 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 the 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 to learn English and study in America since the 1990s; 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 reappropriation of Yu's motto call for a new-millennium contemplation of Lu Xun's utopian impulse, which fundamentally shaped the historical consciousness of twentieth-century China. As Ban Wang (2004) describes, Lu Xun "upholds the autonomous individual as the protagonist of the modern narrative, the agent of history" who

<sup>1</sup> This 2013 *Qiushi* editorial applies a historical perspective to accentuate that "only Marxism-Leninism and socialism, as historical sunshine, illuminated China's stage, and illuminated the path for the Chinese people to advance." Available at <http://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2013/05/06/the-chinese-dream-infuses-socialism-with-chinese-characteristics-with-new-energy> (accessed May 1, 2014).

reorganizes the mass into a nation of free humans (45). The Lu Xun-style utopian consciousness to pursue progress and freedom is nonetheless interpellated by the history of the first decade of the twenty-first century, when China was integrated into the trend of globalization with America as the hegemonic but intimate reference. Both Xi Jinping and Peter Chan have to work with the same new situation in which the state-market-globe nexus has replaced Western imperialism as the overarching ontic backdrop against which the mass imagination of China and Chinese history is operated, and the operation has increasingly relied on different versions of “dreaming,” or, human reading bridging fantasy and reality.

In this context, I argue that HHR exemplifies the continuing decline of the Lu Xun-style historical consciousness, a postsocialist tendency I have endeavored to elucidate through the discursive matrices of mass nationalism elsewhere (2015). First of all, HHR’s hope to establish a new world from despair rejects the self-reflection upon painful history that constitutes the very core of Lu Xun’s historical consciousness. This is first illustrated by Cheng’s coming-of-age story. As the “Godfather of Overseas Study,” today’s Cheng tells in flashback his legendary experience of taking the college entrance exam three times as a teenage peasant. In 1980s China, going to college was one of the few opportunities for peasants to seek an occupation that usually brought better living conditions and upward social mobility. After failing the first two attempts, he knelt before his fellow villagers in silence while his mother begged for their support to finance his third try. The directorial subjectivity embodied through the kneeling Cheng constitutes a speechless but powerful contrast with Lu Xun’s rebellious, utopian historical consciousness. The “madman” in *The Madman’s Diary* (1918), one of the most prominent literary embodiments of Lu Xun’s historical consciousness, is perceived as mad for being hysterically verbal about his discovery of the cannibalistic nature of traditional Chinese society. His madness is nonetheless predicated on a mindset similar to that of a detective toward crime, “tracing the undersides and secrets of history” (Wang 2004, 74). Cheng, in contrast, kneels—literally and symbolically—before the collective hardship caused by the subalternization of Chinese peasantry as one consequence of socialist modernization. Instead of experiencing and criticizing collective pains inflicted on the individual body by history as the madman does, the director refuses to analyze the pains and humiliation by having Cheng engaging in a self-deceiving daydream in which he becomes a Chinese hero.

The failure Cheng preaches as the foundation of a new world also materializes hope, through which the director shuns the responsibility of warning the masses about the deprivation of imagination, particularly the imagination of the causal relations between pain and history, by power, as Lu Xun expects of his agent of history. A fantastic public speaker, Cheng eloquently explicates for Chinese youths that the hope—or the “New Dream” of his schools—of establishing a new world is to seek victory in failure. He materializes failure into the statistical probability of his young audiences failing in their everyday competitions in education and career. Shying away from being Lu Xun’s madman who acts like a dream buster, with himself as a walking testimony to the madness of history—“a trail of time replete with atrocities and violence” (Wang 2004, 74)—Cheng trumpets a dream in which hope is the other side of the same coin as the materialized failure and therefore denotes materialistic success. The weight of the madman as an unavoidable failure compelling the individual to reflect upon the violent forces of history is co-opted by the power of Cheng’s glorious identity as the living success, whereby history is reduced to reified ideology without subjective intervention that is necessary for disclosing the deprivation of mass historical imagination by the dominance of “philosophy of success.”

HHR's *New Dream* exemplifies too unimaginative a hope, hand in hand with too limited a portrayal of despair, which delivers a historical consciousness that uncritically takes the three decades of postsocialist Chinese history at face value. The mass aestheticization of the nation in postsocialist China wrestles with history to define a new world different from both socialist China and the advanced capitalist West. The disparate articulations, from socialism to global mafiarism and from cosmopolitan capitalism to revolutionary heroism, nevertheless embody a gradual but steady trend in which psychologized pain and suffering grow unpopular as a force to enable historical thinking. The de-interiorizing and performative trend of dealing with painful history can be genealogically traced back to Lu Xun, whose historical consciousness is decisively flattened out in HHR to suppress, instead of recovering, the existential questions of the nation-mass in Xi's China.

Second, HHR's metonymic aesthetics, as embodied in the clash between Cheng's Chinese dream and Meng's American dream, denies the symbolic possibility of a free-will individual who operationalizes the tragic vision of Lu Xun's historical consciousness. A central plot that propels HHR's narrative is the conflicts between Cheng and Meng in terms of life goals, business strategies, and, ultimately, cultural identities associated with China and America respectively. An "earthy turtle" (*tubie*) of peasant roots, Cheng demonstrates buzzard's guts in not letting anything outside change his way of thinking. Meng, having a family history of American education and always an elite student, relentlessly pursues his dream to change the world and be on the cover of *Time* Magazine. HHR's aesthetic collectivization of the two friends' clash in national terms, with a sentimental closure of the question of whether they have changed either China or America, manifests Peter Chan's effort to reimagine history with a light heart. It also contradicts the aesthetic vision of tragic historical consciousness in Lu Xun, who criticizes the producers of Chinese culture who beautifies history and turns a system of calamities into opportunities for self-comforting aesthetic pleasure.<sup>2</sup>

Meng's heartbreaking failure to realize his American dream is not a real tragedy in the sense of Lu Xun's aestheticized historical consciousness, insofar as HHR's emotional anesthesia of friendship denies Meng an opportunity to struggle with various possibilities forced upon him by history. Compared with the "earthier" Cheng, Meng has had diverse and cosmopolitan experiences that put him in a better position to critically reflect upon his own American dream in relation to his generation and to postsocialist Chinese history. However, each time his life crisis presents an opportunity to ruminate and critique history, Cheng and Meng's friendship comes right in time to save him from actually going through the process. There are two such crisis-opportunity scenarios in HHR. The first is when Meng loses his job of feeding lab rats at Columbia University. Instead of thinking over whether such a job means the realization of American dream in any realistic sense or how a humanities student from China like him can actually make an influence on history, Meng chooses to go back to Beijing, where the heartwarming friendship of Cheng and Wang awaits him. The second is when Meng gets into an argument with a Beijing policeman who ignores his basic civil rights. Cheng and Wang talk him out of his "naive" idea to defend his rights through law and persuade him to just "chill out" (*hun*) with them. Lu Xun dictates that the free-will individual as the protagonist of the critical historical narrative must obtain his tragic vision through understanding "how the social and cultural environment impacts, shocks, and brutalizes the individual" (Wang 2004, 73). While Peter Chan visualizes Meng's sufferings as an illusion of the Lu Xun-style tragedy, he also disarms such a tragic vision with the sentimental narrative of the three's friendship, which suggests that to return to China and to cope with state power—in other words, throwing the self into collectivity—are always viable options. If Lu Xun's free-will individual must speak with the force of history through a tragic vision, HHR's emotionally gratifying but critically numbing narration of friendship only denies such a vision by concentrating on an idealized "collectivity" (*jiti*), which satisfies the self-deceptive popular inclination to exclude historical violence and stark reality. HHR's

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Wang (2004, 72-76).

DVD cover declares, “the world has unlimited possibilities as long as we have dreams, feelings, and friends.”

The development of Meng’s individual consciousness against the New Dream is also deliberately disrupted by the intrusive narrative of the 1999 U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, through which the individual with an emerging tragic vision is rashly assimilated into a nationalist fellowship of the three friends. Meng prides himself in incubating the foundational spirit of the New Dream schools—to go to America and realize the individual’s value as a Chinese—but encounters increasing resistance from the nativist Cheng in executing his plan. Their conflicts propel Meng to realize, at least for a brief period, that the New Dream is a heart-wrenching failure of repeating history, “to see him [Cheng] build the glorious mansion, to see him entertain the guests, and to see the mansion collapse in the end.” This famous verse from Qing dramatist Kong Shangren (1648-1718) expounds Lu Xun’s understanding that “tragedy is to show the destruction of valuable things to viewers,” a recurring theme in modern Chinese literature.<sup>3</sup> However, Peter Chen forestalls the continuous development of Meng’s tragic consciousness by inserting sequences of a mass protest of the U.S. bombing right in the middle of a face-to-face confrontation between Meng and Cheng. The rest of the movie is a quite unimaginative nationalistic story in which the three friends refortify their fellowship and succeed in defeating American negotiators in a copyright infringement lawsuit against the New Dream schools.

In fact, HHR’s nationalist turn depends on a performative narrative of cultural memories to prevent the transformation of Meng’s individual sufferings into a tragic vision with historical imaginativeness. The first one-third of HHR concentrates on the three friends’ undergraduate life in Beijing, to which the movie’s later narrative returns time and again in the form of their remembrance of earlier happy memories. The movie’s theme song, *Guangyin de gushi* (The story of time), originally created by Taiwanese singer Luo Dayou in 1981, also instigated an online wave of mass nostalgia for the 1980s. HHR’s nostalgic narrative is mesmerizing and imagination-depriving to the extent that it easily persuades Meng and actual Chinese audiences to exchange a seemingly illusory opportunity to go beyond the here and now for a solid, intoxicating experience of saving and loving today’s China—even just for old times’ sake—by having a symbolic fight with America. If, as in Ban Wang’s (2004) observation, the cultural memories of earlier happiness in Lu Xun’s works such as “My Old Home” empower the nation-mass to not give up imagining a history of different, most likely better possibilities (51-57), HHR’s nostalgic return to the three’s undergraduate memories is performative in reverse, as it turns Lu Xun’s imagination of the not-yet-realized possibility of a better world to the complete absence of such a possibility. HHR’s final ruling on “American dreams in China” is loud and clear vis-à-vis the old-timer Lu Xun: the “I” is “us,” the “American dream” becomes the “Chinese dream,” and “us against America” shall be the end of history.

HHR’s circumvention of history sheds light on a critical transition of modern Chinese cultural narration from a focus on history and memory to a focus on performance. As I have described elsewhere (Shen 2015), the various cultural processes of mass nationalism lay bare the increasing contingencies of the narration of the nation upon the macroscopic and capillary powers of postsocialist China. The aesthetic articulation and public dissemination of the Chinese nation increasingly hinge on the performativity of cultural memories in negotiation with ad hoc power institutions, moving away from the twentieth-century mainstream predicated on a dialectical relationship between historical imagination and individual memories in resistance against reality. Similarly, HHR embodies a cultural performance of nonstate national subjects to supplement the “at once promised and refused” (Derrida 1976, 141) Chinese nation through its cooperative “unimaginativeness”—with the actually existing Party-state as the fundamental reference and

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Eileen Chang’s *Love in a Fallen City* (1944) and Wang Anyi’s *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (1995).

ultimate regulator for the collective imagination. In this sense, postsocialist Chinese mass nationalism is another kind of political practice, as opposed to the Lu Xun-style one seeking justice and progress through history, and marks an unimaginative turn of Chinese history toward further uncertainty of direction.

## WHENCE DOES NEW NATIONALISM COME?

At the end of HHR, the three friends persuade American negotiators to settle the lawsuit by preaching to them that China has a changed culture that is fully ready to embrace a future of globalization. Whether it is in the New Dream or in the China Dream, culture seems to still hold on to a central position in the imagination of and identification with China in the twenty-first century. HHR's emphasis on English-language education as the key to China's globalized future constitutes a seminal comparison with the Party-state's promotion of Chinese-language education in the West through the Confucius Institutes. Many political and social controversies associated with the Institutes notwithstanding, the comparison suggests that enunciation, articulation, and narration through language are still an indispensable part of the cultural imagination of history and social identification with a nation. The innate dynamics of the language-culture nexus may be a common ground for mass and state conceptualizations of history in the foreseeable future.

This book suggests that mass nationalism as modern cultural signification fashions postsocialist Chinese subjectivities, simultaneously suggesting and subverting the state project of modernization. To some extent, the situation of simultaneously suggesting and subverting addresses the linguistic ambivalences of modern cultural signification described by Jacques Derrida (1976) as "supplement." First, the postsocialist discourses of the Chinese nation affect people's minds and emotions through "affects"—conscious manifestations of sentiment. Such manifestations are supplementary in that they suggest "affecting oneself by another presence" so that "one corrupts oneself [makes oneself other] by oneself" (153). Second, postsocialist Chinese nationalism negotiates with social power through its publicized, incessant processes of representation and reception, pointing precisely to the mediarized and socially regulating characteristics of the linguistic nation as part of a larger (con)text in which the nation per se "always supplements as well as being supplemented" (Royle 2003, 48). Third, the Chinese nation as the "at once promised and refused" (Derrida 1976, 141) ethical presence renders the relevant public space not so much rational or liberatory to the participatory subjects, as classical theories of the public sphere would suggest. Instead, participation is "dangerous" (ibid.) and bespeaks ambiguities and perplexities of history à la language. The postsocialist subjects appropriate nationalism to enter the state project of modernization against the backdrop of global capitalism, only to find that this process is as much self-transforming as socially disrupting because of the Derridean attribute of public signification—thanks to the "primordially" of premodern China, the traumas of modernity and modernization, the postcolonial anxiety of gender, class, and race, and the perpetual complexity of power and desire caught in the ongoing history of globalization.

More can be said about China's love-hate complex toward America through the case of HHR. Wang, the handsome dandy among the three, has an aborted relationship with an American girl, Lucy, who eventually decides to go home without him. Cheng also parts with his Chinese girlfriend when she leaves Beijing for America. Romantic love is not a central concern of HHR, but it nevertheless puts a note on a recent talk by Chinese Vice Premier Wang Yang (b. 1955) in which he compares the relationship between China and America to one between husband and wife. Wang's metaphor is historically significant inasmuch as romantic love, which held the ultimate hope of emancipation—or, the hope of rescuing history from the nation—for twentieth-century individuals, is now part of the cultural performances to forge a universalized vision of history as embodied in the "marriage" of Chinese postsocialism and American capitalism. Romantic love is once again appropriated, albeit



with very different historical connotations, in the new millennium by Chinese people at both the state and mass levels. However, the Chinese anger over the relationship that was so loudly trumpeted in the 1990s is nowhere to be found in either HHR or Wang Yang's talk. Although whether this signals a true turning point remains unclear, it seems pretty certain that the relationship between the two countries will continue to shape China's national sentiments in the twenty-first century.

The coincidence, or lack thereof, of the promotion of the China Dream and the screening of HHR does not seem to corroborate the official proposal that the Dream is a new development of Chinese socialism. Nevertheless, in a 2013 *Qiushi* editorial, although Party theorists still use the clichés of revolutionary success and postsocialist development to justify the Party's leadership and the superiority of socialism, they are right that "history cannot be rashly denied." Harking back to Lu Xun's voice a century ago, history cannot be rashly denied not because the Party holds on to any ultimate historical truth, but because it is always necessary to be reminded that having hope in history does not equal conforming to unjust reality, and imagining a future within a nondemocratic nation-state does not mean automatically succumbing to dictatorship and state manipulation. In today's world, without a proper path for human beings in history, it is crucial to stay interested in the historicity of Chinese mass nationalism as it walks between the lines of Western democracy and Chinese populism.

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