
Mitja Sardoc


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Mitja Sardoc
Educational Research Institute, Ljubljana, Slovenia

**ABSTRACT**

This essay reviews Michael Peters’ book The Chinese Dream: Educating the Future (2020), an edited collection of his articles exploring the concept of the Chinese Dream. The essays starts with the analogy between dreams and their role in psychoanalysis and dreams as an ideal representation of a nation’s ethos. The introductory part illustrates this analogy with the example of the growing importance of the Chinese Dream. The central part of the essay examines the most important aspects of Peters’ book The Chinese Dream: Educating the Future. The concluding part raises the importance of education in the national dream narrative (including the Chinese Dream).

**KEYWORDS**
The Chinese Dream; Michael Peters; national dream narrative; education

In 1900, Sigmund Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams*, a book that would come to define psychoanalysis as the ‘science of the unconscious’. The interpretation of dreams, as Freud famously wrote in one of the most famous lines from this book, is ‘the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind’ (2010 [1900], p. 604). As the ‘most secure foundation of psychoanalysis’ (1957 [1909], p. 33), Freud later pointed out in *Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, dreams have had a transformative effect on psychoanalysis as their use in interpreting our psychic life has metamorphosed psychoanalysis from a therapeutic method to a general theory of the mind.

Interestingly enough, the analogy between Freud’s use of dreams in clinical practice [alongside jokes, slips of tongue and other forms of everyday ‘psychopathology’] with dreams as an ideal representation of a nation’s ethos could not have been more significant. For example, throughout the 20th century, the American Dream has represented a distilled version of basic American values and the single most important emancipatory ideal associated with the American ‘way of life’ (Truslow Adams, 2012 [1931]). In fact, both in the US and abroad, the American Dream has constituted a symbol of progress and has been synonymous with hope in general. Moreover, its progressive idealism has had a galvanizing influence on a number of emancipatory social projects, e.g., the Civil Rights movement. Furthermore, its promise of upward social mobility [firmly grounded in the merit-based idea of equal opportunity] encapsulated best the idea of non-discrimination and fairness that stood at the very center of social phenomena as diverse as racial desegregation, migration, ‘war for talent’ etc.

Yet, its ‘standard’ interpretation as a central element of American culture and an idealized ‘metaphor of basic American values’ is no longer straightforward, as the American Dream has also been associated with a wide range of ideas not everyone finds appealing. As an archetype of (material) success and consumerism in general, the American Dream has also been subjected to a number of objections leading to the criticism that its promise of equal opportunity and
material prosperity for all has not been fulfilled. Backed with indicators and other data on increasing economic inequality [compared to other democratic countries], some of the leading contemporary scholars (e.g., Putnam, 2015) and public intellectuals (e.g., Chomsky, 2017) have questioned its emancipatory potential as well as its basic promise of upward social mobility (e.g., Markovits, 2019; Peters, 2012). Furthermore, despite a wide range of approaches aiming to shed light on this complex [and controversial] social ideal, some of the recent interpretations over its alleged failure(s) have been disturbingly simplistic.

Over the last couple of decades, [at least] two alternative (national) dream narratives have been advanced on the global stage. On the one hand, the European Dream has become an important generator of European integration (Rifkin, 2004). On the other hand, from 2012 onwards, the Chinese Dream has emerged as a leading national ethos in a ‘post-American multipolar world’ (Peters, 2020, p. 110). The voluminous literature in disciplines and areas of research as diverse as political theory (Wang, 2014), international relations (Do, 2015), Asian studies (Gow, 2017), Sinology (Koptseva, 2016), travel and tourism research (Weaver et al., 2015), American studies (Pena, 2015), communication studies (Zhong & Zhang, 2016), policy analysis (Kalha, 2015), critical discourse analysis (Boc, 2015), ‘soft power’ (Servaes, 2016), education (Peters, 2017) etc. is a testament to the growing importance of the Chinese Dream.1

Michael Peters’ book *The Chinese Dream: Educating the Future*, an edited collection of his articles exploring the concept of the Chinese Dream, is likely to cause a seismic shift not only in discussions over the Chinese Dream but over national narratives in general. A quotation from the Postscript to this book offers an insightful elucidation of his philosophical approach to the examination of the national dream narrative. As he emphasizes,

[n]ational dreams are narratives, and their effectiveness depend upon the extent to which the dream is articulated in terms of the deep code – the relations among images, ideas and symbols that constitute a dynamic system. The deep code constitutes a set of rules for generating new utterances, ideas or expressive visions that artistically capture the past and project it into new meaningful constellations. They become the patterns that promote new thought and new behavior in a transformational setting that can be revolutionary but most often the cases are evolutionary, for they provide the continuity and also the integration of science, technology and philosophy. (2020, p. 109)

The ‘standard’ interpretation associated with the national dream narrative has been dominated by a central substantive question best epitomized in one of the most memorable scenes from the *Easy Rider* motion picture.2 In an iconic scene leading to the ‘we made it, we blew it’ argument, the two leading characters played by Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper disagree over the very definition of success, one of the main characteristics of the American national ethos [the ‘Easy Rider’ dilemma]. While instructive enough, this question of what best characterizes a national dream narrative [or a part of it] somehow ‘hits the target but misses the point’. In fact, the main substantive question ‘what is the American Dream’ emanated in a range of alternative interpretations together with a set of different interpretations [including alternative ones] about the ‘core meaning’ of the American Dream (Rank, Hirschl, & Kirk, 2016) or its ‘deep structure’ (Ghosh, 2013). Perhaps the central navigating question might not be not a substantive one, i.e., ‘What is the American, the European or the Chinese Dream’. Instead, the question to be asked is more likely a motivating one, i.e., ‘why is the American, the European or the Chinese Dream’ actually important? Michael Peters’ book heads into this direction.

*The Chinese Dream: Educating the Future* is a landmark book in many respects. First, it addresses a topic that is of considerable interest not only for scholars gravitating towards education policy and philosophy of education or towards scholarship about the Chinese Dream itself but has important implications for a panoply of other disciplines and areas of research. Next, there are a number of readings available. For those familiar with Michael’s opus, this book could be approached as a [logical] continuation building on one of his previous books, *Obama and the End of the American Dream* (2012). Yet, that would certainly be both too reductionist and shortsighted as *The Chinese Dream: Educating the Future* is far more complex and multi-layered. If a
chapter by chapter exposition of this book provides an insight into the historical consciousness that forms a backdrop to the programmatic and the pragmatic aspect of the Chinese Dream, its conceptual dimension sets it apart from just another ‘Great Leap Forward’ interpretation. As he observes in his article ‘The Enlightenment and its Critics’,

It is noteworthy that both Voltaire and Leibniz both saw China as an ancient civilization that possessed the wisdom the West lacked. Bayle and Montesquieu on China suggests that Enlightenment thinkers attempted to reconcile ethical universalism and cultural diversity with limited success. Neo-Confucian thought was valued by Enlightenment thinkers to be the ideal deistic system and had an effect on secularism including the idea of civil service. Bettina Brandt (2016) argues ‘Over the course of the eighteenth century, European intellectuals shifted from admiring China as a utopian place of wonder to despising it as a backwards and despotic state.’ This reversal emerged from ‘Enlightenment conceptions of political identity and Europe’s own burgeoning global power’ and became the basis for German Orientalism and the origins of modern race theory. On the whole, however, China was viewed by Enlightenment historians as not possessing history because the perception was that it had not progressed rather it was seen as a certain timelessness and of not having a history reducible to rational understanding. These views became more pronounced in Kant and Hegel. Hegel, for instance, writes: ‘The History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History, Asia the Beginning’ (Hegel, 1837/1953). For Hegel, the history of Western modernity is intimately connected with the concept of the western state, and the history of Chinese government as the history of a despotic state. Chinese history was considered static and non-dialectical. The same ethnocentric and racist assumptions vitiated Enlightenment accounts of world history that extolled characteristics of European ‘progress’ as the apex of development and encouraged unfavourable comparisons with other part of the world. (Peters, 2019, p. 888)

In fact, the book’s main aim is neither a genealogy of the Chinese Dream sensu stricto nor an exegesis of Xi Jinping’s Thought for Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era where the idea of national rejuvenation holds a central place. Instead, The Chinese Dream: Educating the Future advances a philosophical approach to the Chinese Dream as a national dream narrative.

The Chinese Dream: Educating the Future therefore avoids the problem Alexis de Tocqueville poignantly observed in his Democracy in America. As he eloquently wrote in Book II, ‘[a]n abstract word is like a box with a false bottom: you can put in any ideas you please and take them out again without anyone being the wiser’ (de Tocqueville, 2000, p. 553). In particular, Peters’ critical examination of the Chinese Dream challenges the vagueness and deceptiveness associated with the various slogans, metaphors (‘Belt and Road’) and other thought-terminating clichés this and other national narratives are inextricably embroiled in. Ultimately, as Peters convincingly argues, making sense of the Chinese Dream requires to take into account not only of the ideologeme itself but also to critically examine the many concepts and ideas that are part of its gravitational orbit. Peters therefore successfully resists the challenge associated with other important concepts and ideas. As Isaiah Berlin emphasized in his essay ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’ in the case of liberty, ‘[l]ike happiness and goodness, like nature and reality, the meaning of this term is so porous that there is little interpretation that it seems able to resist’ (Berlin, 2002, p. 181).

Perhaps the most distinctive contribution of The Chinese Dream: Educating the Future is the strategic positioning of education as an emerging cultural and economic evolutionary development therefore making it a central pillar of the Chinese Dream. As Peters emphasizes, ‘[e]ducation is the means of culturally transmitting the Dream but it is also one of the main vehicles for extending and reimagining the Dream’ (2020, p. 109). It therefore provides an insight into the role of education not only in ‘retelling the stories of the nation and thus providing the ideological backing for current directions’ (p. 6) but also in the ‘education of the future’ linked with the challenges associated China’s rise to a leading global power.

Notes
1. Furthermore, the Chinese Dream has also found its place in academic publishing including a book series by a major academic publisher, e.g. Springer’s ‘Research Series on the Chinese Dream and China’s Development
Path. For a detailed presentation of this series and the main titles published in it, see https://www.springer.com/series/13571.

2. The central question associated with the ‘standard’ interpretation of the American Dream is best epitomized in Jennifer Hochschild’s introductory chapter to her book Facing up to the American Dream ['What is the American Dream'] (1995).

References


