



The Chinese Dream From Mao to Xi

By Zheng Wang



For any political party, it is vital to have a vision for the future that serves to provide compelling ethical or moral motivations to inspire people to participate in the party's cause. Lacking the procedural legitimacy of democratically selected leaders, it is even more important for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to create its own narratives and stories to bolster its legitimacy and to mobilize mass support. Even though Xi Jinping is probably the first Chinese leader to use the term "dream" in his new signature narrative, the CCP has a long tradition of providing its people with a rosy picture of the future.

This tradition began under Mao Zedong. Mao's dream was about the realization of socialism and communism.

Mao pictured an ideal society without oppression or inequality, and with plenty of food and material goods. This way the people could take what they wanted based on individual needs. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao produced another dream of China as the center of the global revolution.

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping enacted the "invigoration of China" (*zhenxing zhonghua*) slogan. In fact, the current "Chinese Dream" resembles Deng's campaign. Both concepts emphasize the need for China to grow more powerful and affluent. These concepts also stressed the need for the country to be a strong power while improving the individual standard of living in China.

After 1989, Jiang Zemin promoted the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," which to an extent resembled Deng's "invigoration of China" narrative. However, unlike his predecessor's campaign, Jiang's narrative focused on Western powers as the source of China's backwardness and suffering. Deng's "invigoration of China" downplayed foreign invasions and exploitation in favor of focusing the blame on the "Gang of Four" and the Cultural Revolution for China's backwardness.

Hu Jintao continued Jiang's rejuvenation narrative while launching an additional narrative. The narrative considered Hu's legacy is "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui*). The social tensions brought on by the socioeconomic transformations that followed China's reforming and opening up convinced Hu to look to the Confucian-based concept of harmony to promote harmonious relationships inside of China as well as between China and the world. Despite the propaganda campaign of a harmonious society, Hu's era witnessed a striking rise of tensions of all levels, including ethnic tensions between Han Chinese and minorities in Tibet and Xinjiang, and worsening relations with Asian neighbors over territorial disputes. This reality turned the harmonious society narrative into a joke.

Xi's Chinese Dream narrative is therefore like old wine in a new bottle with the dream's name supplanting Mao's realization of socialism and communism, Deng's invigoration of China, Jiang's national rejuvenation and Hu's harmonious society. With the rising complaints and unrest from the grassroots level about social inequity, Xi Jinping and the Party have also made special efforts to connect the Chinese Dream with the Chinese public. Instead of only emphasizing the Chinese Dream as the goal for the country and the government, Xi endeavored to convince the general public that the dream was also for each individual Chinese. And the realization of this dream for the country would be the catalyst for the realization of the dream for the individual, including housing, employment, public health, education and environment. Thus, the Chinese public could feel connected with the Chinese Dream narrative.

As we can see, Xi's Chinese Dream continues the CCP's tradition of providing the people a rosy and attractive future dream. The names and contents of the different narratives may differ, but the most important message of all these narratives from different periods remains the same: the Party wants the people to believe that only under the leadership of the CCP can the dream of a better life be realized. As Mao Zedong declared, "Only the CCP can save China!" Jiang Zemin stated, "Only the CCP can rejuvenate China!" And Xi Jinping recently said, "We 1.3 billion Chinese people should bear in mind the mission, unite as one." To make Chinese people believe this message is the dream that generations of the CCP leaders have dreamed.