Construction the Value Dimensions of “Chinese Dream”: Take the Film *American Dreams in China* as an Example*

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In recent years, the “China Dream” has become a popular topic in Mainland China. To tell the stories of the “Chinese Dream” from different aspect in the field of literary and artistic creation have emerged as a significant phenomenon. To some extent, these texts can be regarded as national allegory. This paper will take the film *American Dreams in China* as a case, to provide some thoughts on the value dimensions for the construction of the “Chinese Dreams”.

Keywords: Chinese Dream, National Allegory, Value Dimensions

Through recent years, the “Chinese Dreams” has become a popular topic in Mainland China and also a form of Chinese government’s self-awareness. To elaborate the theoretical connotation of the “Chinese Dreams” from the theoretical angel and to tell stories of it in the field of literary and artistic creation have emerged as a significant phenomenon both in China’s intellectual circles and its literary and artistic field. How does a traditional China create and nourish the present China? How should China see its future? The film *American Dreams in China* is an appropriate text on integrating the general public’s historical memories and the state ideology construction. Directed by Peter Chan, an accomplished Hong Kong director, the film was released in Mainland China in May, 2013. The box office returns reached 500 million within just one month, and it enjoyed near-unanimous backing from the critics. This article attempts to take the film as a case, to provide some thoughts on the value dimensions for the construction of the “Chinese Dreams”.

“Chinese Dream”: As a Text of National Allegory

When talking about the 3rd-world literature, Jameson said “All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories.”¹ As this opinion may sound too assertive and prejudiced, it still enjoys accuracy and effectiveness when interpreting many of today’s literary and artistic texts in China. The story of the film *American Dreams in China* took place in the

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¹ Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, Or, *The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, 1992.

1980s on Mainland China. Cheng Dongqing, born in a peasant family, finally entered Peking University after years of hard work. He, the highborn Meng Xiaojun and the free-spirited Wang Yang become close friends. Like many fellow students of that day, they also have a same “American Dream”. But only Meng Xiaojun got the visa to pursue further study in America. Cheng Dongqing became an English teacher at Peking University, but was then fired for being a part-time teacher in his spare time. After that, he started an English training class together with Wang Yang. Meanwhile, Meng Xiaojun found his life in America not as happy as he expected. His position was taken by a friend coming from China before he served as a waiter in a western restaurant. Meng Xiaojun’s American Dream was broken and faced with immense pressure. He came back to China and join Cheng Dongqing’s team. The three of them made a team and worked jointly and managed to develop their training class into the “New Dream” Education Group. Its stock also became the first listed education industry stock at New York Stock Exchange. They finally realized their dreams.

Based on the entrepreneurial stories of New Oriental Education Technology Group, this film is biographical; nevertheless, it is not an inspirational biography of a person or any particular group of people, nor is it an entrepreneurial biopic of an enterprise. Instead, it depicts the inspirational and struggling stories of the whole China’s generation during the thirty years since China’s reform and opening up and presents the realization process of entrepreneurial dreams of that era, which can be interpreted as a national allegory of contemporary China’s emergence. This film provides us with an overview of China’s social and economic development in a chronological order, including reform and opening up, craze for going abroad, frenzy of taking the entrepreneurial plunge, self-employment, joint-stock system reform, financing and listing of enterprises, etc., since the 1980s. Also, the shift of concept and emotion of Chinese people during the thirty years is demonstrated in this film. It shows poor rural areas, passionate youth, pure campus love, warm and touching friendship, hardship of pioneering work, twists and turns of development, sense of alienation and oppression under the ossified social system, worship of the western world, the publicizing of nationalism after disappointed in the United States and so on. At the end of this film, it made a presentation like a normal slide when it contrasts pictures of the most famous business elites in contemporary China. It compares the pictures that were taken at the very threshold of their careers with those taken after their successes. These business elites are Yu Minhong, Xu Xiaoping and Wang Qiang of New Oriental School, Liu Chuanzhi of Lenovo, Zhang Chaoyang of Sohu, Wang Shi of Vanke, Feng Lun of Vantone, Li Kaifu of Microsoft China, Yang Lan of the Sunshine Press, Ma Yun of Alibaba, the well-known brand Lao Gan Ma, etc.. It successfully fuses the youth with love, entrepreneurship with friendship, American with China, past with present, which endows the film with various ways of interpretation, summons up self-experience memory and emotional identification of audiences of different ages and levels, and resonates widely. Like what Peter Chan has stressed, “The film, *American Dreams in China*, is neither a propaganda film nor a biographical film of the New Oriental School, but about the thirty years that all Chinese people have experienced together.”² Taking the New Oriental School as a prototype, this film deduces the 30 years since China’s reform and opening up, and narrates a national allegory concerning dreams of Chinese people and the emergence of China.

² Zhang Xi, “Peter Chan Argue with Yu Minhong: *American Dreams in China* is not biographical film of the New Oriental School”, *Chines News*, 2013,5, 23.

Value Deviation Resulted From Identity Anxiety

While obtaining a high box office and enjoying a good reputation with general audiences, *American Dreams in China* attracts fierce criticism from some intellectuals and cultural figures, focusing on the values delivered by this film. It is obvious that the film producers has expected that this film will neither enjoy a good reputation nor obtaining a high box office internationally, as a result they gave up the promotion of this film in Hong Kong and Macao. Therefore, this is a film made particularly for the market in mainland China. Like some critics, this article holds that this film narrates a deceptive inspirational story, and glosses over reality and anaesthetizes audiences with demagogic successology. This film promises a “Chinese dream”, in which the protagonists finally become rich and successful, live in big luxurious modern houses, drive luxury cars, and play for high stakes. They accept the worship of people, while get the spirit of counting money for little. They even force the infringed U.S. delegates to compromise with their huge market advantage. Therefore, it is easy to conclude that the purport of this film is to glorify successful people. However, only the positive side of them is demonstrated in this film; whereas their negative side is remain under cover. The dream expressed in *American Dreams in China* is still the one in Chinese traditional culture, which is to become the best people by hook or by crook. The success of becoming best people is strongly exclusive. This fierce competition culture, determining the winner by cruel competition, is the best reflection of the survival of the fittest. This is a game that only a few people can survive, and a philosophy of life that a general’s reputation is built upon sacrifices of tens of thousands of soldiers. Once this value becomes the mainstream, the cruel Wolf thought and the survival of the fittest—the law of jungle is very likely to become social consensus; whereas the so called youth, love and friendship can all be sacrificed for success. It is hypothetical that this film stresses that going abroad is no longer a dream, and there is no need for people to go to America. Although China’s political and economic status is rising today, it still has a long way to go before Chinese people get rid of the influence of the “American dreams,” for the reason that Chinese people are far from free themselves from the cultural psychology, taking the west as an identity reference, which is formed in the past hundreds of years.

The English name, *American Dreams in China*, precisely summarizes the theme of this film, that is, the shattering of “American dreams,” and the realization of “Chinese dreams.” The process of realizing “Chinese dreams” embodies Chinese people’s desire for success and the satisfaction not only from material pursuit, but also from the pursuit of recognition by others. The realization of “Chinese dreams” is not only due to the rapid material development, but also the recovery of national self-confidence and the improving international image. *American Dreams in China* is to some extent in accordance with the national identity under the ever strengthening comprehensive national strength. The desire for this identity is expressed by presenting the contrast between a rising and constantly updated China and a conservative, innocent and bumptious America. Accordingly, this film characterizes various ugly American figures, including Lucy, the American girl who regards love as games, the rigid cold visa officer, and the waitress who enjoys bullying the weak, the impersonal American professor, and the arrogant, impolite representatives of the American education service agency. All in all, this is a group of bullying Americans who know little about the ways of the world and treat Chinese people unfriendly, which shows that America is behindhand while China is dynamic all the time. What is extremely strange is that the success both of the “New Dream” Education Group in the movie and the “New Oriental

School” in reality is based on training English and selling “American dreams”; in other words, “American dreams” is realized individually by selling it in China. This film tells people, “American dreams” are shattered, but they can be realized in China, which is a fantasy out of nationalism. Although this film shows the failure of “American dreams,” their success is accomplished by selling “American dreams.” Besides, the behavior that they list their company in America shows by itself that what they have realized is still “American dreams.” Therefore, the value of this film is full of paradox.

America is both the rival of China in its course of modernization and the one that China desires to win its recognition. The rising China is eager to get recognition of the world; however, how can she win the world’s recognition? This film provides the mode of revenge of the Colonial period and the ultimate solution of the era of Huo Yuanjia, Ye Wen and Huang Feihong, that is, to get fight with foreigners and overcome them to get an illusory sense of satisfaction. The climax of this film is about the negotiation between the three protagonists and the American ETS representatives concerning infringement of knowledge. The three protagonists first act shamelessly and insult American representatives; after they realize these representatives hold their ground without hesitation, they turn down the admission of infringement and artfully argue that the American representatives should not question Chinese students’ ability. In this way, the three protagonists present their indignation vehemently. In this unreal challenge, the audiences also see Uncle Sam beaten in Manhattan and even the Wall Street, immerse in China’s victory over the United States, and appreciate the hard-won self-esteem and national dignity and pride. with the loud Internationale as the background music, they “planted our national flags in the the whole land of the United States.” The self-evident offenders become national heroes winning honor for our country, which strangely contains a sense of nationalism.

However, the illusory national identity realized together by the audiences and the characters in this film reflects the pride and arrogant cultural mentality due to successes. At the end of the film, the three protagonists drive luxury cars through the streets of New York in the United States, and the pressure suppressed for a long time was finally released. The indecent gesture that Meng Xiaojun raises his middle finger of the left hand in the car conveys his indifferent feeling towards the United States. This gesture reflects the unhealthy mentality of the economic power when heading to the world, which is not conducive to the establishment of China’s image and the output of the Chinese culture.

Reflection on the Value Dimensions of “Chinese Dreams”

When talking about “Chinese dreams,” Xi Jinping points out, “‘Chinese dreams’ is not only national dreams, but also the dreams of every Chinese people. ‘Chinese dreams’ in the final analysis is the dreams of Chinese people; therefore, the realization of the dreams must firmly rely on the people, and continuously benefit the people.”³ What is the core value of “Chinese dreams”? This film has not given a direct answer, nor to explore further. Then, since today’s China is facing problem of reconstruction of values, what is the core value of our society? It is inevitable for us to investigate the theoretical connotation and the value dimensions of “Chinese dreams”. For China, the last thirty years has witnessed great changes, as if she has shifted from agricultural society into an industrial one overnight. While people admire the China’s achievement in the past thirty years

³ Xi Jinping, “A Talking in the Exhibition of The Road to Rejuvenation of Chinese Nation”, *People’s Daily*, 2012, 12, 30.

which has taken the western world thirty years, our spirit home and values has not completely shifted from traditional to modern ones, and the core values and position of contemporary China remains to establish. It is still a continuation of the “westernization movement” if we see the material development of “Chinese dreams”, without thinking about the construction of the spiritual connotation of “Chinese dreams”. In fact, I believe that China has already arrived at the point to surpass the “westernization movement”. When standing at today’s starting point to look forward to the future, we should explore new values and spiritual guidance.

Hegel said, “Only by sublating its counterpart can self-consciousness assure its own existence.” The construction of subjects needs to be done by identifying the other; the ego is established through the antithetic interaction with others. The construction of the value of “Chinese dreams” can be considered from “the other” relating to time and space as well. How to reborn the “old self” into a “new one” in respect of time? Spatially speaking, how can the self establish himself under the influence of the other? What value core should contemporary China relies on when sublating the old self? This film reflects the common life-experiences in the past and today’s Chinese society; however, given that we have the memories of past and our own identity, what spirit of memory should be awakened is directly related to the way towards the future, that is to say, what cultural values should be based on to look forward and construct the future which is closely related to the past.

What is success for individuals? Besides success, what is the significance and value in one’s life? We need reconsider it. The mode of success reflected in this film is the common experience of Chinese people in the last thirty years, which is universal. It is the important reason why this film resonates in China and becomes rather successful. We must realize, however, this mode of success is the outcome of a special social transitional period, which should never be admired, promoted and followed. Instead, we should provide a new kind of values. “Chinese dreams” should not deliver the view that if one cannot be successful and rich, he will become a failure trampled underfoot like a worm. “Chinese dreams” does not represent wealth, but stability, the peaceful relationship between people, and the freedom and tolerance towards culture. It also represents that every intelligent and industrious people can live a decent life, and the dignity and value of individual should be respected and promoted. We should lay down the advocacy of success, abandon the make-or-break idea, and deliver a view that in our ordinary life, even an unsuccessful life can lead to a value beyond success itself. The meaning of life is not simply to be successful, thus, the future society should be more humanistic, noble and elegant to ordinary people. To win the respect of others, there is no need for ordinary people to count on money and material success; rather, they need to earn respect even as an equal ordinary person. As at the end of the film, when running into his former girlfriend, Su Mei, Cheng Dongqing expects that she will appreciate his success. To his surprise, she does not mention a word about it, but only says, “What matters is not to succeed, but not to lose your dignity as a human being.” She tries to remind us that dignity is more important than success, and no matter the “American dreams” in China or the “Chinese dreams” in China, the most important thing is not what dreams we have, but how to fulfill ourselves with dignity. It seems that the director intends to return to the individuals’ life demand through the dreams, and transfer the pure pursuit of material progress in life to the spiritual belief of admitting self-worth. No doubt this is a reminder that we need to introspect and consider deeply about the moral and spiritual crisis in contemporary China.

In the dimension of the other considering the spatial distance, the construction of the value of “Chinese dream” should surpass the logic of binary opposition of colonialism and the emotional value of revenge for

failure. “Lagging behind leaves one vulnerable to attacks,” the tragic nationalist sentiment is China’s emotional foundation towards modernization and great-power status. The strong nationalist sentiment in today’s era of globalization is still a continuation of the anxiety of the unfinished modernization to a great extent. Nationalism is inherently rational in the past, but inflated nationalism will cover a lot of realistic problems, and may even trigger the mindset of imperialism. Therefore, it is necessary to be reflective and vigilant about the negative side of nationalism. In today’s post-colonial period, we should not embrace the revenge mentality of the colonial period, but to deliver the image that China should be in front of the world. The rise of great powers, especially the emergence of China, naturally meets the emotional needs of nationalism. But in today’s post-colonial society, how will nationalism find its road? When constructing “Chinese dreams”, we provide a new value and emotion.

Under the background of economic globalization and multicultural context, not only the West but also China needs to introspect the strong-weak binary oppositional mode of thinking and values of colonial period. In the era of globalization, neither the west nor China is heterogeneous. They are embracing each other and will either in a win-win state or sink together no matter in economy, technology or culture. “Chinese dreams” should go beyond the thought pattern of pendulum, swinging from one extreme to the other, and seek a new interactive relationship. The contemporary “Chinese dreams” needs a new vision of the world, new values and a new standpoint, whose basis should be the emphasis on a different kind of political and economic order and roads under the economic globalization. We need to have a new image of China, the reflection on Chinese history of the past 200 years, and the world view towards the future, thus to conduct the creation of new political and economic order. “Chinese dreams” need to construct a new system and new culture to fundamentally surpass the thinking mode of binary opposition. In the past, it is the trauma left over by history that hinders us to look forward and construct our own real dreams in a relatively peaceful mind. In this film, the hatred and envy at the United States and humiliation and defeat brought by it make them more eager to prove themselves, and win recognition of its society, in order to make up for their lack of confidence. While China is rising up, we cannot become boastful, nor can we ignore that the dignity both of an individual and a country is not totally represented by money; instead, we should earn respect by contributing new wisdom and outputting new values.