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Knowing and Feeling the "China Dream": Logic and Rhetoric in the Political Language of Xi's China

Kerry Brown

Abstract

The Xi era can be characterised as an ambitious and nationalistic one. Aims such as rejuvenating the Chinese nation and fulfilling the country's historic mission to be a great, rich country are often referred to in elite leadership discourse and state produced propaganda. 'China Dream' is amongst the most important slogans used in this language. In terms of the context in which this phrase occurs and the actual deployment, it is one that carries broad connotations and implications about an era where, in ways similar to politics in the West, issues around identity are key, and the important thing is to feel, not just to believe. 'China Dream' is a form of language that speaks into the public's deeper instincts and sentiments.

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Keywords

China, politics, discourse, Xi Jinping

Introduction

Officials in the People's Republic of China (PRC) no longer speak in the cautious, restrained way they once did. In the era of Wolf Warrior Diplomacy from 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic, prominent figures in the government have been accused by some commentators of using language which indicates anger or scorn or indignation. This is particularly targeted at those in the outside world who are seen as criticising

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the legitimacy of its governance system. Phrases used by government representatives like Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Zhao Lijian are a good example (Zhao, 2022). His Twitter account since around 2018 has deployed increasingly colourful and strident language attacking those framed as enemies of the state he serves. Both the ways in which this communication is undertaken (on non-Chinese social media platforms) and the content (invective-laden, aggressive, and confrontational) mark a change that has merited close attention by analysts and commentators.

Is this a generic issue, showing that China is undergoing the same changes in public language and communication that other places have also experienced (such as the US or Europe) because of the widening of use of social media? Some analysts have argued that it is more than this and that the language and style of delivery from an official figure like Zhao are indicative of something more strategic and worthy of attention. In particular, it is seen as revealing an increasingly nationalistic, autocratic mindset, and one determined not just to tell its own citizens how to think, but also how they should feel. This language has been characterised as deliberately emotional and unreasonable (Brandy and Schafer, 2020; Gorman, 2021). It is, in essence, the evidence of a China that not only feels powerful, but wishes to act powerfully and manifest that through its language.

The argument in this essay focuses on the strategic use of emotion and how this relates to what language means in contemporary China. Far from being spontaneous, intemperate, and uncontrolled, the "wolf warrior" language and its ilk is the precise opposite – the result of a highly deliberative process where there is recognition that a key component of meaning is not just through intellectual or rational understanding of its content, but through feeling and evaluating its meaning. In this new situation, the carriers and generators of emotions such as narratives and the key phrases and terms conveying them are linked to an underpinning acceptance that it is no longer simply enough in Xi's China to know that the country is doing as well as the government says it is. It is also necessary to feel this too. Both must be understood to be part of an epistemological process where they involve thinking, albeit in different ways.

There is wide acknowledgement that feelings have been on the rise in recent decades in China. The country has grown increasingly nationalistic. A more emotionally loaded discourse is something that has grown clearer in Chinese language material. The patriotic education campaigns from the 1990s have inculcated in Chinese school children a narrative of modern history that builds on feelings of resentment and anger about the treatment of their country by outside powers in their modern history. This process has been well studied (Callahan, 2008; Wang, 2012). Vocabulary about "struggle" (斗争, *douzheng*, a term in use since the Maoist era), "heroic" (英雄, *yingxiong*), "great" (伟大, *weida*), along with the more negative notions such as "national humiliation" (国耻, *guochi*), "sacrifice" (牺牲, *xisheng*), and "pain" (痛苦, *tongku*) are key terms in this pedagogical discourse. These terms (and others) provide a palette on which dramatic word pictures can be produced of the country's "life and death struggle" (生死斗争, *shengsidouzheng*), which then arouses appropriate emotional responses in the audience. Emotions therefore are not something alien to Chinese political communication. The argument in this essay, however, is that far from there being two discreet strands of communication, one factual

and empirical and the other emotive and concerned with feeling, the two are part of one complex discursive strategy. To think is to feel, and to feel is to think in the discourse of the PRC under Xi. And while that may have been implicitly recognised in the past, now it is explicitly accepted.

The narratives of nationalism under Xi Jinping, leader since 2012, as the country progresses towards what he calls its great "rejuvenation" (复兴, *fuxing*) and "renaissance" (文艺复兴, *wenyi fuxing*) exemplifies how this works in practice. With a host of data both economic (China becoming the world's largest economy in gross terms perhaps by 2030), military (China having the world's largest navy in vessel terms), and social (the country eradicating what it defines as absolute poverty in 2020) the Chinese audience (and those listening in from the outside world) are both informed about empirical issues but also made to believe that only certain feelings should be appropriate responses and evaluations to them. As will be argued a little later, in this context, emotions are seen not as something outside of rationality and beyond language or intellectual evaluation, but as an integral and crucial part of human thinking. Xi's China therefore sees presenting the facts and the ways to feel about the facts as a coherent and legitimate communicative practice.

The "China Dream" (中国梦, *zhongguo meng*) and "dreaming" are important examples of this. They have played a core role in official language since their first appearance in late 2012. What is striking is that these specific terms have not appeared in this way before. They did not figure in the language of the Mao era, or in that of Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao periods, to refer to the four "core leaders" before Xi. These particular phrases about dreaming indicate something new. They show that politicians are now using a form of language which clearly is not just about instructing, or ordering, but about appealing to more complex motivations.

This is not to deny that the leadership of the PRC in previous eras have not tried to speak to the emotions of their core audience, the Chinese people, and sought to find forms of power and persuasion here. From 1949 to 1976, in the Maoist era, the use of hyperbole, stirring vocabulary, and narratives of victory by good over evil in leaders' speeches from Mao himself to Jiang Qing, Lin Biao, and Kang Sheng, radical leaders in the Cultural Revolution from 1966, was common. As one phrase from the time went, words were meant to "touch people's souls", rousing attitudes from anger and indignation to joy which assisted people in prosecuting revolution. In classic speech act fashion, to say in a certain, intense, powerful way in Mao's era was to do (Searle, 1969). For the politics of this time, acts of speech were as important as physical ones. Uttering while feeling the right way about what one was uttering was a core component of revolutionary behaviour, and a sign of fidelity and conviction to the party cause.

The difference between then and now, however, is that of context. The China of the Xi era, economically, socially, and geopolitically, differs dramatically from that of the Mao era. And while Chinese nationalism still prevails, along with the ideas of mission, struggle, rejuvenation, and greatness, the stage for these today when the country is so much stronger economically and geopolitically is vaster in scale. It therefore arouses far bolder thoughts and emotions. The nationalism of the

PRC in the twenty-first century has matured, grown, and transformed as the country has materially prospered. So while the principal idea of all Chinese people being part of a joint historic mission, through the guidance and leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and its leaders, to achieve renaissance and rejuvenation has remained dominant and unchanged, the reality is that today this is a far more exciting prospect than it was under Mao simply because so much more of it has been achieved. In the 1960s, many Chinese did not dare to dream. Today, not only is the government inviting them to, but it is also telling them they have to. That is the difference between these two eras.

Dialectic and Rhetoric – The Language of Thinking and the Language of Feelings

The distinction between these uses of language appealing to rational argument or by arousing emotional attitudes was recognised by Aristotle. He argued in his "Rhetoric" 2500 years ago that for persuasion, one firstly looked at the character of the speaker, secondly at "putting the audience into a certain frame of mind," and thirdly, "the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself." Of the second, Aristotle states that "persuasion may come through the hearers, when the speech stirs their emotions." This can be done through use of stirring symbols, or powerful kinds of language forms. Unlike logical persuasion, where the effect is achieved of influencing a listener through proving "a truth or an apparent truth by means of the persuasive arguments suitable to the case in question," rhetoric aimed at impacting on feeling follows a more complex pattern (Aristotle, 350BCE).

What is different today compared to the time of Aristotle is the deeper understanding of emotions and the ways in which these are entwined with all forms of thinking and persuasion, even the seemingly most logical ones. Logical and empirical thoughts are not neatly separated from emotional feelings. Rather, both are different intellectual processes of trying to evaluate and understand issues. The key difference is the ways in which they are prompted by different kinds of facts and situations.

In a recent study of the physiology and sociology of emotions, Leonard Mlodinow (2022) presented a framework where the fact that there are emotional responses, which are seen as right or wrong, shows that they have a logic. The American philosopher of emotions Richard Solomon (1977) in a similar vein argued that emotions are rational evaluations, albeit about issues different from, for instance, the kinds of assessments one might make when describing a physical fact like whether a cup of coffee is hot or cold. Emotional language and thinking involve a deeper and more complex interplay between the speaker and what was spoken about. In this play between subjective and objective, the act of evaluation came to the fore. In essence, to say "I am angry" means to say "I am an agent, and I am experiencing a situation or a set of facts which create in me the disposition where I need to be annoyed, dissatisfied and frustrated and consider doing something about that." Emotional responses on this model can be judged right or wrong. It would be strange for someone to have a negative act like being hit, or insulted by someone else, and evaluate the situation

as one in which they should respond happily or positively. To be angry in these circumstances would be regarded as rational and a correct evaluation. Solomon argued strongly against what he called the idea of "raw emotion", something akin to a pressure cooker simmering uncontrollably under the surface and then exploding unguided when prompted. He showed even the most powerful emotions were ones that could be articulated and defined in rational, intellectual categories to make sense. In essence, to feel anything, one has to verbalise, and that involves an immediate need to categorise and perform other rational actions. It was not that strong emotions such as hate or love had non-linguistic, non-rational raw material that then got clothed in language afterwards. These arose from a process of rational evaluation, or misevaluation, of situations in which the words are present from the start and constitute and to some degree are the feeling (Solomon, 1977: 139). The core insight here was that the structure of emotions, such as the structure of thinking, is a highly intellectual process.

We can gain further insights into this division between kinds of discourse from the thinking of philosopher Jerome Bruner. His work focused on differences between what he called argument and storytelling in narratives. Both, he stressed, were ways of thinking. But they showed thought undertaken in different ways. As he writes in "Actual Minds, Possible Worlds":

> There are two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought, each providing distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality. The two (though complementary) are irreducible to one another. Efforts to reduce one mode to the other or to ignore one at the expense of the other inevitably fail to capture the rich diversity of thought. Each of the ways of knowing, moreover, has operating principles of its own and its own criteria of well-formedness. They differ radically in their procedures for verification. A good story and a well-formed argument are different natural kinds. Both can be used as means for convincing another. Yet what they convince of is fundamentally different: arguments convince one of their truth, stories of their lifelikeness. The one verifies by eventual appeal to procedures for establishing formal and empirical proof. The other establishes not truth but verisimilitude. (Bruner, 1986: 11)

Bruner's distinction between "argument" and "storytelling" aligns well with the two Aristotelian categories of "dialectic" and "rhetoric." They also show kinds of mental processes where the role of emotions and feelings is more pronounced in one than in the other. And yet, through their mutual need for persuasion and well-formedness, both clearly are ways of thinking and both involve thought. To feel is to think, though in a different way and with different dynamics to that focused on what could be categorised as factual or rational argument.

The PRC since 1949 is a place where this division between what Aristotle called the "dialectic" rational register and the "rhetorical," and what Bruner calls "argument" and "storytelling" is strongly in evidence. For the former, we can see the language of technocratic instruction and report, found in documents like the various Five Year Economic Plans from 1953 and government work reports and statements. Against this sits the language of

angry attack or patriotic pride which figure as part of the "rhetoric" and "storytelling" function used by leaders such as Mao and Xi referred to above. These two sorts of discourses, as we will see later, can sound very different. They are clearly aimed at having a different kind of impact on the audience. This is not something that is unique to public political language in China. The existence of these two prime registers in discourse and the way they relate to each other is universal. This is something made powerfully clear by sociologist Manuel Castells (2010) who argues, in the post-modern era, how complex social, cultural, and economic global changes have brought about a situation where

> the relentless rationalist efforts of the last two centuries to proclaim the death of God and the disenchantment of the world mean we are in again – if we ever left – an enchanted world, where the way we feel determines what we believe and how we act (p. xviii).

The division between the discourse of argument and the discourse of feeling and how they relate to each other matters everywhere. It is just that in China, as ever, this has occurred with Chinese characteristics!

The use of "Dream" as a key term since 2012 by Xi is significant because it sits between the dialectical and the rhetorical, the argumentative and the storytelling. It is constructed partly on a set of recognised facts – the country's material and social transformation in the last half a century, its current status economically and geopolitically in the world, a host of separate economic data, all of which attest to China being a certain kind of success. "Dream" also, as will be argued later, acknowledges the profound process of individualisation that has been ongoing in Chinese society over this period. But it also permits a specific set of feelings – pride, confidence, hope, and expectation verging on excitement – which are clearly aimed for by the Xi leadership and regarded as critically useful for its overall nationalist political mission. To argue for the Chinese dream is therefore to not only recognise a set of empirical facts, but also recognise a story they are embedded in where it is not just permissible, but almost mandatory, to feel those sets of emotions listed above. Xi's China, therefore, has created its language where thinking and feeling can be melded together, and Castells's "feeling determining acting" can occur – but in ways, the party-state mandates, authorises, and (most important of all) controls.

Political Language in China Post-1949

That political language in China has a performative and propagandistic function has been conceptualised by a number of scholars since the 1960s. But the ways in which feeling relates to thinking have been less attended to. Much of the existing work has focused on the specific political vocabulary used in China after the communist victory in 1949 when an official state creed came into existence. The interest here were the ways in which this demonstrated ideological and intellectual control. Franz Schurmann (1966) wrote of the ways in which the adoption of Marxism–Leninism as the official ideology meant the importation of a series of new terms into the Chinese language to convey the key ideas of this new belief system (pp. 61–62). This, he claimed, was in order to

create a new way of thinking which accorded with the goals of the new leadership. Michael Schoenhals (1994), over two decades later, looked at how official editorials in the *People's Daily* were crafted and refined by key propagandists such as Hu Qiaomu in order to continue to promote core Maoist ideological beliefs and political programmes. The core aim here was to control the ways language conveyed ideological messages.

Since the use of Critical Discourse Theory in the 1980s, the relationship between language and power structures in China also received wide attention. Linda Tsung and Wei Wang (2015) produced an edited study of different aspects of this. The excellent China Media Project and in particular the work of Qian Gang, while not overtly theoretical, has also concentrated on keywords, and their links to specific strategies to exercise political influence – again through informing, conveying ideas, and communicating facts, rather than looking at any accompanying strategies to generate a parallel emotional narrative (China Media, 2022). The rise and fall of terms such as "harmonious society" for instance can be directly related to the replacement of one leader (in this case Hu Jintao) with another (Xi Jinping). Kerry Brown and Una Bērziņa-Čerenkova (2018) analysed the keywords of the Xi era conveying the core socialist values and the impact these are meant to have on people's conduct.

Very little, however, has been explicitly written about language and emotion as they relate to each other when used in political, power-related discourse, particular emanating from elite leaders. The studies that exist concentrate either on language and politics or on emotions, but never on both being part of the same reality. Works such as Elizabeth Perry in an essay, "Mobilizing the Masses" from 2002 which addresses the function of propaganda to rouse people's feelings, exemplify this. A piece mainly focused on the Mao era, it describes very well how core messages and ideas are promoted to a Chinese audience in order to get their compliance and acceptance by arousing and inciting them to feel anger and rage at enemies and class struggle targets. But it does not look more deeply at the ways in which feeling and thinking might be intimately and dynamically linked in this process, nor does it range more widely than highly inflammatory mass campaigns (Perry, 2002: 111–128). Perry Link (2013) comes a little closer to attending not just how Chinese political language tries to instruct but how it generates emotions and feelings as a matter of course. But his focus is on the role of metaphor and symbolism and the links between China's current political discourse and its relationship to other Chinese literary traditions. Neither of these two works look very deeply at ways in which rationalising and feeling through the same discourse might be understood. In essence, what they lack is any sense of epistemology where feelings are both acknowledged as a fundamental part of all knowledge, rather than an occasional phenomenon.

Sticking to the Facts: Technocratic Discourse from Deng to Hu

As argued above, in the Mao era, class struggle and dramatic mass mobilisation campaigns such as the Cultural Revolution or the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s was accompanied by plenty of languages which, in tone, content and delivery, was clearly highly

charged, and in many cases meant to incite and arouse people rather than just to inform them. From the late 1970s and the start of the Deng era, however, things changed. For Deng, Jiang, and Hu, a technocratic discourse was dominant, one driven more by ordering specific economic and social changes to carry through reform and opening up, and reporting on the success of this through specific empirical facts such as economic growth or tangible evidence of China's material development. This started with the Deng Xiaoping-led project in the late 1970s, when, as the work of Frederick Teiwes and Warren Sun (2007, 2016) has made clear, the whole operations of governance changed. This intermediary period can be called the consolidation era. Administrative performance became important, delivering specific targets such as gross domestic product (GDP) growth, rising import and export figures, and the implementation of policies that were meant to have a demonstrable impact on people's material living standards. Practice, as the popular slogan then puts it, became the sole criterion of truth. The aggressive, Utopian and often provocative language of the Mao era in this new discourse and governance was not just jettisoned – in some respects, it was held up as a model of failure.

We can seek an explanation for this once more in context. The Mao and Xi eras on either side of these periods can be categorised as ones in which the situation was amenable to high emotional charge and where the "storytelling" function was more of a priority – for the first, because it witnessed the struggle to find and stabilise the new country, with all the effort that involved, and emotions of pride, expectation and, initially at least, hope, this gave rise to; and for the second because it has framed itself as the "new era" in which national rejuvenation is at a particularly important moment and great nation status is imminent. For the Xi period, this is an era of fruition and realisation. The meaning of a phrase like "historic mission" for national renaissance which has been used since the 1990s is now far clearer, because the aim being aspired to is far more clearly within reach, and the excitement and hope arising from this therefore more intense and rational. It would have been hard to feel intense hope of China becoming the world's top economy in the Mao era. But under Xi, that aim is no longer fanciful. It is, in fact, very rational to expect (whether in fact it happens or not).

One can cite the greater acceptance of linking thinking to emotions through the work of China's chief ideologue Wang Huning. He is key to this process. Under Jiang in the mid-1990s, he started to construct a series of slogans and memes whereby the core ideas of Chinese people needing to be proud of their identity, their culture, and their unique intellectual and cultural assets are placed at the centre of the overall political communication strategy. In this, they were invited to not just know that they were Chinese and define this in a certain way (5000 years of history, Confucian heritage, etc.) but also to feel confident and proud about it. "China Dream" is the key term that has come from this development in the Xi era. To refer back to the Castells point earlier, in Xi's China it is clear that to feel is as important as to think or believe to such an extent they must almost be simultaneous, two aspects of one complex response. To intellectually recognise the country's great material progress therefore is not enough. One must have the appropriate emotional attitude – one of pride, happiness, and even joy. Far from

being simply about economic success, conveyed in technocratic, statistical language, and politics, politicians such as Xi have stressed the importance of having clear messages and answers on the thorny issues of what Chinese identity means, and how feeling in a certain way (particularly pride and happiness) plays a role in this identity. While this involves emotions of pride, confidence, or happiness, it is about more than this. It means having a sense of authenticity and conviction, where these are not just positive feelings, but the right feelings, the correct emotional responses (just like one has the correct rational response to "one plus one" when one replies that it equals two) to the situation the country says it is in. Identity is about not just facts (what makes you who you are in terms of your material and physical circumstances) but a far more complex evaluation of what those facts of your daily existence and circumstance mean – what is the larger context they are located in – and what are the right feelings a citizen needs to have about this. Wang Huning's contribution has been both to accept the need for this imperative to go beyond facts and to assert that there is a correct emotional response to these – one that the party-state under Xi must speak to and shape.

Preparing for the Dream: Elite Leaders Speak at Party Anniversaries

"China Dream" is where both the language of fact and feeling elide. This can be illustrated by many different kinds of events and examples from the Xi era after 2012. One of the most striking was the celebration by the Communist Party of China of its 100th anniversary on 1 July 2021. On that day, Xi spoke of the CPC with a tone of confidence and assertiveness, and of it leading a country that had delivered modernity on its own terms. The CPC was now able to face the world as at least an equal, and perhaps even a superior. This was an achievement that clearly needed not just intellectual acknowledgement, but an appropriate emotional response too (Xi, 2021). On this anniversary, Xi was addressing a national Chinese audience where most listeners may not have bothered much about the formal ideology of the party and its specific doctrines and technical ideas, but where they were predominantly invited to respond to the increasing evidence that nationalistic feelings were a valid emotional response to the situation the entity the CPC represented – the nation China – was in. This "rejuvenated nation" spoken of that day, rather than the CPC itself, could arouse people's pride and affection because it was a worthy object of admiration and love through the size of its economy, the geopolitical impact it was having, the size of its military, and the physical transformation of its modernised landscape, along with its lauded cultural attributes. These were inevitably all things that Xi spoke of that day.

This specific performance showed where the Xi era and earlier Chinese times differed. Elite leaders in the past did not have this array of assets that Xi could deploy to trigger the happy, proud, nationalistic feelings of the public they spoke to, in order to "sell" its core message to them. For Mao, speaking at the very genesis of the PRC over seven decades before of its newness as a nation, the sources of happiness and the cultivation of love

towards this new country were clearly things his language encouraged but more in terms of hope than current reality:

> We are proclaiming the founding of the People's Republic of China. From now on our nation will belong to the community of the peace-loving and freedom-loving nations of the world and work courageously and industriously to foster its own civilization and well-being and at the same time to promote world peace and freedom. Ours will no longer be a nation subject to insult and humiliation. We have stood up. Our revolution has won the sympathy and acclaim of the people of all countries. We have friends all over the world. (Mao, 1949b)

The language here is about the future, of what "will" happen, and of how China "will no longer" be a certain thing. China may have "stood up" and won sympathy, but the onus is on how things will happen going forward, and how the "insult and humiliation" of the recent past will now be consigned to history.

In the far more institutionalised context of half a century later, Mao's successor but one as core leader, Jiang Zemin, could speak in stirring ways as Party Secretary and President in 2001. His confidence could come from the fact that the eighty-year-old party, having enjoyed half a century in power, had tangible evidence of its successes and contributions to draw on. While he had used this occasion to promote the main ideology associated with his era – the Three Represents (where private business entrepreneurs were eventually allowed to become CPC members) – he did so in language which was also aspirational and future-orientated, like Mao's:

> In the new century, the great historical tasks for our Party are to continue the modernization drive, accomplish the great cause of the reunification of our motherland, safeguard world peace and promote common development. Facing the profound changes in the domestic and international situations, our Party should follow closely the progressive trends of the world and unite and lead people of all ethnic groups throughout the country in seizing the opportunities and taking up challenges to accomplish the three major historical tasks successfully. To this end, we must unswervingly fulfil the requirements of the "Three Represents." (Jiang, 2021)

This is the language of a great project, a work in progress. It is pragmatic, realistic, and almost humble in its tone. And here is the moment that Hu Jintao, ten years later, marking his own ideological innovation, Scientific Development, in his speech celebrating the ninetieth anniversary of the CPC, tied everything to the hope and desire for national rebirth:

> In contemporary China, only development counts, and this calls for pursuing scientific development. We should take scientific development as the goal and give priority to accelerating the shift of model of economic development…We will promote fairness and justice; long-term, steady and rapid economic development; and social harmony and stability. We will continue to make new and greater achievements in pursuing civilized development that

> leads to increased production, better lives for the people, and a sound ecosystem, and thus lay a more solid foundation for building a moderately prosperous society in all respects and realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. (Hu, 2011)

In all of these, the sense of aspiration, of bringing something about in terms of China's recreation, are clear – whether they be conveyed through Mao and the sense of victimisation and China standing up, or by Jiang's notion of historic tasks, reunification and modernisation, or by Hu and the construction of a rejuvenated, better society. Each of the elite leaders spoke as much about the hopes for the future as they did about the present reality the country was in. Each was implicitly saying those good things that their listeners should like and feel happy about were going to happen because of changes in the current situation. Hope and desire are fundamental emotions. They contain evaluations of one of the most complex and unknowable things – the future. What none of these leaders did, however, was to deploy one of the most frequent terms used about thinking, and feeling, about the future – the word "dream."

Dreaming Together or Dreaming Alone

One of the reasons for this can be found in the ways "dreaming" links to the notion of an individual and a person. One can imagine even for an idealistic and Utopian such as Mao, using a word like "dream" would have raised uncomfortable echoes of the ultimate capitalist idea – "the American dream." Dreaming was something private, self-centred, and indulgent. The collectivist ethos underpinning Mao, Jiang, and Hu's statements is powerfully present. Their recognition, for instance, in each of the statements above that they were speaking in a moment when all Chinese people had worked together, committed to a common enterprise, either of national foundation or national reconstruction or national economic reopening. Emotions are clearly stirred in this language, and through the ambitions alluded to, but more on the social rather than the individual level.

Despite the underlying similarities in terms of encouragement of key positive public emotions, built on a shared concentration on China the great nation and a shared narrative and understanding about its modern history, the context in which each of these statements was delivered was always changing and evolving. This essentially created the quandary for Xi when he became the core of the "fifth generation of leaders" in 2012. The Maoist society dominated by collectivist social organisation, mass campaigns, and strict enforcement of CPC norms and economic behaviour had dramatically changed after 1978. Economic liberalisation alone led to a transformed society, where, as Arthur Kleiman et al. (2011) recognised, by the end of the Hu era there was often rampant individualism, some of it verging on almost pathological hedonism.

The rise of these new forms of individualism can be found in the radical changes in the country's material circumstances. From 1980 onwards, economic policies started to have impact. Specific results of these could be witnessed, measured, spoken about, and offered as evidence of success. These had tangibility. This is not to say that in the Mao era there were no material improvements in people's lives. But these material developments had

also occurred in a complex situation where there were crises, from the famines of the early 1960s to the widespread social instability from 1966 onwards. Under Deng, commitment was made to simplifying the party and its elite leaders' key message, and their main mission – to make China materially wealthy while preserving the one-party system. Dense deployment of economic data became a key means of getting this message across, embodying the changes happening in people's lives, and conveying success. The dialectic/argument function dominated. People needed to be persuaded to engage in this practical process of national material enrichment, rather than aroused to feel in a certain way about larger, longer-term abstract national goals. The audience for elite leaders were ones that did not have to principally feel happy, angry, indignant, or bitter – but to simply produce. Language such as that produced by Hu Jintao in 2003 epitomises this, showing that statistics have taken control:

> I know you are all interested in China's current economic situation and future trends of development…. From 1978 to 2002, China registered an average annual GDP growth rate of 9.4%. In 2002, when world economy experienced a growth slowdown, Chinese economy grew by 8%. In the first half of this year, China's GDP went up by 8.2% despite the interruption by SARS. At present, China's economy remains in good shape with a strong momentum for expansion. The 7% increase target set for this year is well within reach. (Hu, 2003)

This is the message of the prudent accountant, not the leader of a party historically committed to revolutionary change. But it does display a communication strategy, where the audience is offered empirical evidence which can speak for itself, about how the country is progressing and growing. This is indeed the discourse of "seeking truth from facts" where there is an unproblematic relationship between what is described and what conclusions intellectually can be drawn from this.

What linked Hu's language to that of Jiang and Mao was the sharing of a historic narrative of positive progressive development and the commitment to stimulating excitement about the future. The latter was where the most emotional energy was generated from – a sense of expectation and direction. In the "Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism" Daniel Bell (1976) had spoken of how capitalist societies were frequently infected by a constant fetishisation of the future. The future would always be better, things would be faster, easier, and more luxurious. This offers a common point with socialism with Chinese characteristics – a hunger for tomorrow not only being better but showing this in its results – the ever-climbing figure of GDP for example that always went up, never into recession. In the Mao foundational stage, there was a tomorrow at all in view of the horrific death and destruction that had preceded this during the Civil War and the Sino-Japanese War was, in itself, a positive and unifying message to give. It will, as Mao said in 1949, "lead the people of the whole country in surmounting all difficulties and undertaking large-scale construction in the economic and cultural spheres to eliminate the poverty and ignorance inherited from the old China" (Mao, 1949a), the place that everyone was fleeing from. As the PRC proceeded though, expectations also changed. It was no longer about simply

surviving, though that remained important through many of the hardest Mao years, but eventually, after 1978, about prospering. Indeed, by the time of Hu, it started to be about even more than that – about thriving, and somehow dealing with the excesses of wealth and material goods that had been created.

Xi Jinping: Dreaming About Feeling Together

Clearly between the Hu and Xi eras there was a rethink of how the party was managing its public messaging. The dense and impersonal Hu era style was no longer adequate. There needed to be recognition that while promoting strong collective narratives and accepted facts and interpretation of the party's achievements was important, this was happening in a context where individualism in China was an unchangeable new reality. The party therefore had to create at least some kind of register where despite this profound change it could still mobilise and motivate people and create a language which did not just instruct but inspired and engaged not just on the public, collective level, but down to the individual. The era of the rhetoric/storytelling function had returned.

In 2012, Xi deployed a different kind of language, using reference to his own life story, something Hu, Jiang, and Deng had never done and conveying the China story in a more concrete, less technocratic language. Speaking in Seattle during a visit to the US in 2015, he stated:

> Towards the end of the 1960s when I was in my teens, I was sent from Beijing to work as a farmer in a small village of Liangjiahe near Yan'an of Shaanxi Province, where I spent seven years. At that time, the villagers and I lived in "earth caves" and slept on "earth beds". Life was very hard. There was no meat in our diet for months. I knew what the villagers wanted the most. Later I became the village's party secretary and began to lead the villagers production. I understood their needs. One thing I wished most at the time was to make it possible for the villagers to have meat and have it often. But it was very difficult for such a wish to come true in those years. At the Spring Festival early this year, I returned to the village. I saw blacktop roads. Now living in houses with bricks and tiles, the villagers had Internet access. Elderly folks had basic old-age care and all villagers had medical care coverage. Children were in school. Of course, meat was readily available. This made me keenly aware that the Chinese dream is after all a dream of the people. We can fulfill the Chinese dream only when we link it with our people's yearning for a better life. (Xi, 2015)

The statistics of the Hu era largely disappeared. Not just storytelling, but one in which Xi figures as an individual have come to the fore – albeit an individual with a strongly representative and symbolic function. Alongside this, more complex issues have been recognised, such as the need for cleaner governance within the party itself, the desire to address inequality through the common prosperity language from 2021, and the notion that China was seeking greater autonomy through its "dual circulation" policy from 2020. Nationalistic pride, however, was growing stronger, simply because

through economic growth and geopolitical developments, the country had more to feel proud about. The political challenge for Xi and his colleagues was how to find the best language to encourage, and exploit, this pride, and to allow Chinese people to feel rather than just know about their country's achievements.

This question of audience is a key one for any communication practice and strategy. It is striking that, for all the changes in people's daily lives in the country, and the rise of this individualism and social differentiation within society, both Mao and Xi talked of their serving and speaking directly to their core audience – the very generic notion of "the People." This term has remained remarkably static, despite all the changes going on around it. On 15 November 2012, when Xi emerged on the stage of the Great Hall of the People as the key leader, while setting out a number of core proposals for his new administration, he stated that "It is the people who create history." The party's task, he went on, was to "maintain close ties with the people" (BBC, 2012). This echoed the celebrated speech of September 1944, "Serve the People," when Mao had talked of "the common revolutionary objective" – to lift the suffering of the Chinese people (Mao, 1944).

That they both said they were talking to this group is one thing. But what did they signify by this term? Surely conceptualisation of it had not remained unchanged over the decades? Of all the terms in Modern Chinese political discourse, in fact, few can be more contentious than that of "people" (人民, *renmin*). The contemporary Chinese writer Yu Hua wrote that these characters "*renmin*" were both "remote, but …so familiar too" (Yu, 2012: 3). But he offered an excellent insight into something fundamental that had changed about what this term referred to, and why Xi's use of it was so different to Mao's. Once upon a time, Yu stated, during the Cultural Revolution, the definition of "the people" could not have been simpler, namely "workers, peasants, soldiers, scholars, merchants." But after that, "new vocabulary started sprouting up everywhere – netizens, stock traders, fund holders, celebrity fans, laid-off workers, migrant labourers and so on – slicing into smaller pieces the already faded concept that was 'the people'" (Yu, 2012: 6). The "people" had become atomised, complex and diverse.

For Mao, there were clear and elemental moral distinctions between the "good" and the "bad" people, and that was all. You were an enemy or a friend. For Xi, the "people," the audience he spoke to might have still been figured as though they were one great collective. But his tone of almost self-deprecation and respect to this great mass, and the fact that Chinese people were clearly socially, culturally, and economically more diverse than ever before, marked a massive difference. "During the long process of history, by relying on our own diligence, courage and wisdom, Chinese people have opened up a good and beautiful home where all ethnic groups live in harmony and fostered an excellent culture that never fades," Xi stated. The use of "we" is rhetorically crucial here. Xi was speaking as one of those he was addressing. He was on the podium, for sure. But he was also asserting he was in the crowd listening too (BBC, 2012).

Moving these people while recognising the vast complexity contained within them, trying despite this to speak directly to them, as one of them, recruiting them into a

narrative carrying clear evaluations that will lead to emotional responses – these have clearly been major objectives of the Xi era. But as the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the CPC, made clear, when Xi spoke once more to his audience he used a crucial new term – the party, he stated, at a 100 years old, was not just in the business of thinking, or planning, or doing, but also dreaming – and doing so with confidence:

> To realize national rejuvenation, the party has united and led the Chinese people in pursuing a great struggle, a great project, a great cause, and a great dream through a spirit of self-confidence, self-reliance, and innovation, achieving great success for socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era. We Chinese are a people who uphold justice and are not intimidated by threats of force. As a nation, we have a strong sense of pride and confidence. We have never bullied, oppressed, or subjugated the people of any other country, and we never will. By the same token, we will never allow any foreign force to bully, oppress, or subjugate us. Anyone who would attempt to do so will find themselves on a collision course with a great wall of steel forged by over 1.4 billion Chinese people. (Xi, 2021).

"Dream" is a profoundly significant term here. This issue of Chinese people being invited by their leaders to dream is a new development. It says something important about the evolution of the role of aspiration in contemporary China, and the space now being granted to it by political leaders – something that has grown from the language of previous elite leaders but which is now located in a very different context and with a different kind of content and usage. It also marks a deeper acceptance of the individualism of the people being spoken to, and of there needed to be acknowledgement of their having the agency to take this offer to "dream" and shape it to their own unique circumstances.

The act of dreaming itself as it occurs in Chinese literary and historic traditions is a well-attested one, and something that the contemporary discourse of a national and personal dream calls on. In his excellent book on the China Dreamscape during the era from 300 BCE to 800 CE, Robert Ford Campany (2020) writes of the huge importance given through divination and a complex set of interpretative tools by Chinese writers and thinkers over this period to dreams. But looking at this history today one thing is certain: dreams have always been regarded as carrying meaning. "Questions about dreaming were inextricable bound up with questions about how best to live," Campany (2020: 67) writes.

Despite this, Mao himself seldom if ever mentioned dreams to address this issue of capturing aspirations, hopes, and desires about the future. He certainly did not convey any of his more significant statements or slogans by referring to dreams. For much of the post-reform era, in many ways beyond standard patriotic language party elite leaders have almost withdrawn from speaking in an emotional register, but simply kept to the business of informing, ordering, and quantifying. Using the language of dreams therefore bespeaks an important shift – an acknowledgement that the party once more needs to get back into the business of arousing and inspiring emotions and using these as part of its political strategy.

Deploying the language of dreams certainly opens up interesting new spaces for political discourse in contemporary China. It does go some way towards solving the conundrum of how to accept the rise of individualism in society, and also the need to have language that can arouse people's feelings but do so in a way which is controllable by the party-state and hitched to its own goals. Appealing to dreams allows plenty of space for different sorts of evaluations of different kinds of reality – it is a very open and vague term. In the way the word is used by Xi, the one thing which is certain is that these qualities of being individual, varied and almost worldly are regarded as positive things. The party knows unlike in the Mao era it cannot command so easily but needs to carry at least some elements of persuasion. Inviting to dream is an uncontentious thing to do, especially as it does not need to say what the dream might specifically be about beyond better living standards, and a great, powerful, strong country. The main thing is to ensure that the dream itself can be a shared one. This is the way in which Xi spoke when he first deployed the term in 2013: "Everyone has an ideal, ambition and dream," he said. But then he went on, in an act of party appropriation: "In my opinion, achieving the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has been the greatest dream of the Chinese people since the advent of modern times." This is not just a thing shared by people at a particular time: "This dream embodies the long-cherished hope of several generations of the Chinese people, gives expression to the overall interests of the Chinese nation and the Chinese people, and represents the shared aspirations of all the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation" (Xi, 2014: 38).

This elision of language from past eras about the aspirations the party's elite leaders expressed then, along with their accompanying emotions, and the context of a China that, after four decades of economic and material enrichment could now allow itself the luxury to dream, and to stand a chance of seeing those dreams come to reality, creates the peculiar sub-discourse within Xi speak for this term. In May 2013, he declared that "the Chinese dream pertains to the past and the present, but also the future." This idea of dreaming about the past belongs more to the traditional use of the term – much as people often dream in their sleep about what has happened to them. But the second definition of dreaming, which is closer to the sense of hoping, aspiring, and wishing for, is also important here – nodding to the future. So is the sense of tangibility:

> The Chinese dream is the dream of the country and the nation but also of every ordinary Chinese. One can only do well when one's country and nation do well…. The great renewal of the Chinese nation will eventually become a reality in the course of the successive efforts of youth. (Xi, 2014: 53)

The situation of China today is, for Xi, best seen as also a dream fulfilled. We often hear that people of the Maoist era who survived into the current one feel that they would never have dreamed of China being in the position it is today, with the levels of development it has. But for a politician sitting at the top of the communist party, this is a complex story to gather into one phrase that can then generate positive emotions to go beyond simple intellectual acknowledgement. To compound the challenge, the status of the party, the diversity of the audience, and the complexity coming from

different technological platforms all mean that it is very hard to say one thing that will reach and speak to everyone and make them feel the way the party wants them to. Dreaming is one of the very few – a state of emotional receptivity, but without any overt emotions necessarily linked with it. One could dream and be happy, fulfilled, ecstatic, pleasantly confused, satiated, and thrilled – the choice is yours. The main thing is just to dream. The feelings start flowing after that.

Conclusion

Language both to communicate instructions, interpretations and facts, but also to promote a set of emotional responses has been an essential part of political life in contemporary China – as it has in any community. The Communist Party of China's five core elite leaders since 1949 have all used a mixture of language in their main communications which instructs, commands, and informs, but also aims to inspire, mobilise people listening emotionally, and create emotions ranging from love to hate, and fear to pride. This does not mean these kinds of languages are utterly distinct from each other. As Solomon's work argues, emotions are evaluations of situations and circumstances, albeit complex ones, and ones with a logic of their own.

The CPC's leadership, through its language used at core public occasions such as celebrations of party anniversaries, illustrates the evolution of the relationship between language to inform, and language to inspire and talk to people's emotions, over the last eighty years. While Mao certainly did deploy terms laden with reference to victimisation, Chinese standing up, and the need for a new sense of pride and hope, for Deng, Jiang and Hu, the commitment to a more prosaic politics of building better material lifestyles meant that while a sense of nationalism was present in their language, the principal aim was to direct, report tangible economic success, and show evidence that China was indeed modernising and growing stronger.

These political and social changes have ended up with a society which is very different from that in the Maoist era, and where there are far higher levels of individualism and self-expression. Even so, under Xi Jinping, the party elite leadership language has used "dream" as a term that can at least address the strong feelings of satisfaction and love of the strong Chinese nation that have resulted from the economic and material changes in the country since the 1980s. "Dreaming" is a key part of the Xi era discourse, revealing how important not just actions, information, and presentation by the party of what it wants to have accepted as facts are, but also how key feelings are, arising from the evaluation of these other facts. Just as there are clearly right and wrong ways to regard policy and political options in contemporary China, so there are also right and wrong ways to feel about these things. This shows the ambition of the Xi era – that it is willing not just to assert its own reality, but its own account of whether to feel happy or sad about that reality.

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