

Comment

Understanding the Chinese dream

THE NATIONAL APPROACH IS BOTH COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL, AND POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY CAN FACILITATE BOTH

While the Chinese dream has captured world-wide attention, there is widespread speculation as to what it really means. Meeting with US President Barack Obama in California on June 8, Chinese President Xi Jinping stated: "By the Chinese dream, we seek to have economic prosperity, national renewal and people's well-being. The Chinese dream is about cooperation, development, peace and win-win, and it is connected to the American dream

and the beautiful dreams people in other countries may have."

Kaiping Peng, a cross-cultural psychologist, welcomes Xi's clarification. "After all, Chinese culture differs from American culture, but they are connected,"



Robert Lawrence Kuhn

Peng said. "American culture is more individualistic, while Chinese culture is more collectivistic. That's why the American dream focuses on individual well-being, while the Chinese dream has the extra latitude to include the collective dream of the nation. However, both people want prosperity, love and well-being. Both are inspired by dreams and are prepared to work hard to realize them."

Peng himself exemplifies how the American dream and the Chinese dream can intersect. A Chinese native, he went to the US, when he was 27, to pursue a PhD in psychology at the University of Michigan. Becoming a tenured professor at Berkeley, he bought a house near the campus, lived there comfortably with his wife and two children, both born in the US. Like millions of other first-generation immigrants, he realized his American dream through passion, learning, and commitment.

Peng did not, however, forget his Chinese dream. In 2008, he founded the psychology department at Tsinghua University, with support from Berkeley, and has served as its chair since. "My Chinese dream is to use psychology to help other Chinese to realize their dreams," Peng said. "Psychology ought to step outside the ivory tower and help ordinary people."

How can psychology contribute to the Chinese dream? The answer is "positive psychology", a new branch of psychology launched under the leadership of Martin Seligman (University of Pennsylvania) in 1998. Positive psychology uses science-based intervention to build thriving individuals, families, and communities. As such, positive psychology aligns with the Chinese dream.

Seligman argues that positive psychology stresses well-being, the content of people's dreams, and the methods that can help them to real-

ize their dreams. In his book *Flourish*, Seligman outlined five pillars of well-being: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishments.

Importantly, well-being is broader than happiness, though both ideas correspond to the same Chinese word *xingfu*. A person with higher well-being also has higher engagement, accomplishments, meaning and relationships, which contribute to achievements, innovation, spirituality, and harmony.

Consider the positive emotion of optimism. Optimism not only prevents depression, but also makes people more successful. Seligman and colleagues rated the optimism scale of new Metropolitan Life insurance agents. The more optimistic half performed 20 percent better than the less optimistic half, and the most optimistic quarter performed 50 percent better than the least optimistic quarter. Since optimism is so important, Seligman's team developed methods to teach people optimism.

In education, Seligman's team showed that a positive psychology curriculum could improve learning strengths by about 40 percent in 18 months, boost social skills and cooperation at home, reduce behavioral problems, and improve academic achievements.

Even the military benefits from positive psychology. In 2009, the US Army launched a program to teach positive psychology to its 1.1 million soldiers and their families. The program was found to improve the resilience and psychological health of the soldiers, lower the incidence of depression, anxiety, post-trauma stress disorder, and substance abuse.

"Positive psychology can provide

powerful instruments for the realization of the Chinese dream." Seligman says. "For example, engagement and accomplishments contribute to prosperity directly and to positive emotion indirectly. Meaning and relationships facilitate national revival. All five fields of positive psychology enhance people's well-being."

"This is not self-help or inspirational pop psychology," Seligman stresses. "Our interventions are evidence-based and proven to work, including in China."

The Chinese dream resonates with positive psychology. Speaking on the Chinese Youth Day, President Xi urged young people to be "brave to have dreams, courageous to realize dreams, and diligent to pursue dreams". That's the psychology of hope.

Charles Snyder at the University of Kansas identified three key elements of hope: goals, pathways, and motivation. In his theory, hope is defined as "the perceived ability to produce pathways to achieve desired goals and to motivate oneself to use those pathways". The Chinese dream inspires energizing hopes because it provides strong goals, pathways and motivation.

The goals are clear: a prosperous country, national revival, and people's well-being. Snyder distinguished "approach goals" from "avoidance goals". The former are achieved by getting what you want, and the latter by avoiding what you don't want. Approach goals are linked to positive emotions like interest, pride and inspiration. When working towards approach goals, people can experience more engagement and meaning. Avoidance goals are driven by negative emotions like anxiety, stress and fear. When you

achieve avoidance goals, you usually feel more relieved than fulfilled. The Chinese dream sets approach goals for the Chinese people, focusing on positive human functioning.

After 150 years of invasion and oppression, Chinese people crave for the revival of their nation, and dramatic economic growth has made prosperity the top priority. But when people become richer, they start to pursue goals beyond material needs, such as meaning, relationships and engagement. They want life with higher well-being.

The Chinese dream doesn't collide with the American dream. Chinese people pursue their dreams by improving their own well-being, not by diminishing the well-being of others. This positive pathway is paved not with confrontation, aggression and zero-sum games, but with "cooperation, development, peace and win-win". These are the key positive elements by which human communities and civilizations thrive.

Achieving the Chinese dream takes work. President Xi knows that the Chinese dream consists not only of inspirational goals and powerful motivation, but also of commitment and determination to work hard. That's what psychologists call "grit".

Angela Duckworth at the Positive Psychology Center of the University of Pennsylvania, a Chinese-American, studies the relationship between grit and achievement. Surveying diverse groups such as college students, West Point cadets, adults, and Spelling Bee competition participants, she found that grit predicts success better than does IQ, especially in challenging settings. In achieving the Chinese dream, positive psychology supports Xi's emphasis on grit.

The Chinese dream is both collective and individual. Collectively, the Chinese dream is described as achieving the "Two 100s":

- The material goal of China becoming a "moderately well-off society" by about 2020, around the 100th anniversary of the Communist Party of China;

- The modernization goal of China becoming a fully developed nation by about 2050, around the 100th anniversary of the People's Republic of China.

The collective Chinese dream has four parts: strong China (economically, politically, diplomatically, scientifically, militarily); civilized China (equity and fairness, rich culture, high morals); harmonious China (amity among diverse classes and social segments); beautiful China (healthy environment, low pollution, attractive cities, innovative arts).

Individually, the Chinese dream consists of positive goals, positive motivation and positive pathways. It resonates with the fundamental elements and findings of positive psychology, the science that studies positive sides of human functioning, especially well-being. The Chinese dream, with its positive orientation, inspirational goals, and down-to-earth grit, will have a major influence in China.

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