

CREATING THE CULT OF XI JINPING: THE CHINESE DREAM AS A LEADER SYMBOL

BRIAN HART¹

ABSTRACT

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party has used publicly displayed propaganda art as a means of maintaining power. During the early years of the PRC, propaganda posters played a large role in establishing a cult of personality around Mao Zedong. Today's propaganda art seeks primarily to garner popular support for President Xi Jinping's "China Dream" campaign. The China Dream, popularized by Xi in 2012, is a nebulous concept that shares many of the materialistic components of the "American Dream," but simultaneously—and more importantly—emphasizes the Chinese nation's rejuvenation to a position of wealth and power. China Dream art deviates significantly from Mao era posters and ideology by heavily incorporating ancient Confucian concepts and images. The art focuses not on communist values, but on moralistic ones drawn from the teachings of Confucius that emphasize hierarchy and filial piety. This paper argues that China Dream art is being used not only to create a new source of legitimacy for the Communist Party, but also to establish a cult of personality around President Xi Jinping. As a result, China is transforming into a leader state where the relationship between Xi Jinping and the people is becoming a relationship between ruler and ruled.

Propaganda art has long been an important means of political communication and expression in China. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has used publicly displayed propaganda art as a means of retaining its power and ideological legitimacy. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), propaganda art—mainly posters (*haibao* 海报)—played a key role in establishing a cult of personality around Mao Zedong. The legacy of propaganda poster art is still present in contemporary

¹Brian Hart is a Senior at Wake Forest University majoring in Politics and International Affairs with minors in History and Chinese Language and Culture.

China. Today's propaganda art seeks primarily to garner support for President Xi Jinping's "China Dream" (*zhongguo meng* 中国梦) campaign. The China Dream, popularized by Xi during a speech in 2012, is a nebulous concept that shares many of the materialistic components of the "American Dream," but simultaneously—and more importantly—emphasizes China's rejuvenation as a nation with wealth and power (*fuqiang* 富强). Since the fall of the Qing Empire in 1911, China's leaders have dreamed of restoring the Chinese nation to its former glory. The China Dream is Xi Jinping's contribution towards this goal. After Xi first proposed the concept of the China Dream in a speech in 2012, China Dream propaganda art began appearing in cities across China. In some of the largest cities, especially Beijing, the art effectively dominates many public spaces.

This paper uncovers the role that China Dream propaganda art plays in creating a cult of personality around President Xi Jinping. To do this, it first uses contemporary social and political evidence to show that a cult of personality is forming around Xi. It then interprets the proliferation of China Dream propaganda art both within the historical context of Mao era propaganda art and within the context of the contemporary Chinese political and social climate. It demonstrates that the propaganda art of the Mao era and today's China Dream art share two key aims: propagating Party ideology as a means of retaining legitimacy and creating a cult of personality around the top national leader. However, the implementation of the two exhibits key differences. First, China Dream propaganda art deviates significantly from that of the Mao era because it relies not on the communist values of that period, but on moralistic ones drawn from Confucian teachings emphasizing hierarchy and filial piety. This is because as China continues to liberalize its economy, and economic growth slows, it needs to find new sources of ideological legitimacy. Second, unlike the art of the Mao era, which depicted the figure of Mao on a vast number of posters, China Dream art typically contains no direct references or depictions of Xi Jinping. Because Xi's image is not typically directly invoked in China Dream art, demonstrating that the art helps to create Xi's personality cult requires a deeper level of analysis. Grounding its analysis in the theory of "leader symbols," this paper argues that China Dream art is a powerful and ambiguous leader symbol that continuously constructs and shapes Xi's personality cult. This paper is not the first to claim that Xi Jinping's immense power is tantamount to a cult of personality.² However, its argument is unique in its assess-

² "The Power of Xi Jinping," *The Economist*, September 2014, <http://www.economist.com/>

ment of the centrality that China Dream propaganda art plays in constructing Xi's personality cult. Lastly, this paper argues that Xi Jinping's massive accumulation of political power and the building up of his personality cult are creating a leader state in which the fundamental relationship between the Chinese state and its citizens is changing. The results of this process will have significant implications for both China and the world.

This research employs multiple sources and methodologies. Most importantly, it draws on primary photographic evidence of China Dream propaganda art that I collected during field research in China from May to August 2015. While in China, I traveled to five cities: Shenzhen, Shanghai, Nanjing, Beijing, and Qufu. These cities were specifically chosen for methodological purposes to account for variation in their historical, cultural, political, and economic characteristics. Shenzhen, located just across the mainland's border with Hong Kong, was China's first Special Economic Zone and one of its most successful ones. Known popularly as "China's Silicon Valley," Shenzhen's population has grown rapidly to about 11 million as migrants move to work in its massive manufacturing and technology industries.³ Shanghai was included because it is one of China's most populous and economically developed cities. It is one of China's most globalized cities, primarily due to its business activity and human capital.⁴ This puts it in stark contrast with China's less developed, more rural cities. Nanjing was chosen because it has a medium-sized population of around 7 million, and also has a notable history as one of the Four Great Ancient Capitals of China. Beijing was chosen for obvious reasons: it is China's second most populous city after Shanghai, and it is the capital city of China. Beijing is the seat of power from which the CCP governs. As such, I expected to find the greatest amount of China Dream propaganda here; indeed, the presence of China Dream posters in Beijing far exceeded that of any other city. Last, Qufu was selected because, in addition to being a very rural city with a small population, it is famous for being the hometown of Confucius. Given China Dream propaganda's emphasis on Confucianism, this offered the potential for interesting variance in its propa-

news/china/21618882-cult-personality-growing-around-chinas-president-what-will-he-do-his-political.

³ Shenzhen Municipal Government, "Overview," accessed January 29, 2016, <http://english.sz.gov.cn/gi/>.

⁴ Hales et al. *Global Cities 2015: The Race Accelerates* (Chicago: A.T. Kearney Inc, 2015), 4.

ganda art.

In addition to primary sources of China Dream art, this paper also relies on the informal conversations that I had with Chinese citizens. These conversations were not formal interviews and were not designed to account for variation among different people; they are simply used to provide context. I also reference scholarly and journalistic sources to provide additional evidence of Xi Jinping's growing political and social influence and the development of a personality cult. To ground the paper's theoretical claims, it builds on the theory of "leader symbols," which was developed by Jae-Cheon Lim. While Lim's work focuses on the personality cult of North Korean leaders, it provides a helpful theoretical lens through which to interpret and analyze propaganda art in China.

CULT OF PERSONALITY: CONTEXT AND THEORY

Since assuming power in 2012, Xi Jinping has amassed more centralized authority than any Chinese leader since Mao Zedong. He has taken on the traditional roles of "Paramount Leader": President of the PRC, General Secretary of the CCP Central Committee, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission. However, he has also become the head of two newly created bodies: the Central Leading Group for Comprehensively Deepening Reforms and the National Security Commission. In doing so he has gained direct control over the central state and Party apparatuses. Most notably, immediately after assuming office, Xi announced a major new campaign to root out corruption within the Party. In addition to being widely popular among the Chinese public, these anti-corruption reforms have also been used as a tactic for centralizing power under Xi so that he can pursue greater reforms in the future.⁵

Does Xi's immense power warrant the label of a personality cult? There is no greater example of a cult of personality than the cult of Mao Zedong, the founder of the People's Republic of China and long-time leader of the Communist Party. In his book *Mao Cult: Rhetoric and Rituals in China's Cultural Revolution*, Daniel Leese lists some of the characteristics of the Mao cult: "Daily reading of Mao's Little Red Book ..., confessions of possible thought crimes in front of Mao's

⁵ Wang Xiangwei, "Good Start but Drastic Reforms Unlikely," in *The China Renaissance: The Rise of Xi Jinping and the 18th Communist Party Congress*, ed. Jonathan Sharp (Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific Publishing Co., 2013).

portrait, and even physical performances such as the ‘loyalty dance.’”⁶ He later describes the role that the media played in creating Mao’s cult by referencing the fact that in 1968 at the height of the Cultural Revolution, the phrase “Loyal to Chairman Mao” (*zhongyu Mao zhuxi* 忠于毛主席) appeared in the state-run newspaper *People’s Daily* almost 1,500 times.⁷

Are these same phenomena, then, required for a Chinese leader to have a cult of personality? What would a post-Mao cult look like? If these characteristics are necessary, then Xi Jinping cannot be said to have a personality cult. However, even on the basis of these characteristics, he comes surprisingly close. There are no loyalty dances to Xi, but recently the ritual of self-confession (*jiantao* 检讨) has returned for the first time since the Mao era. However, the confessions do not take place in front of Xi’s image; they take place on public media.⁸ Today’s self-confessions are also different from those of the Mao era because they are now primarily confessions of corruption by Party officials or business leaders, not confessions of deviation from Maoist thought. Despite not being overtly related to Xi, today’s self-confessions are a direct reminder of the power that Xi and his anti-corruption campaign exert over individuals.

Additionally, while Xi’s appearance in the newspaper is still eclipsed by Mao’s, in his first 18 months as leader his name was mentioned nearly twice as much as any other leader since Mao.⁹ This shows that despite not reaching the full extent of Mao’s media presence, Xi’s media presence is significantly larger than that of any other previous Chinese leader, even Deng Xiaoping. This trend shows no sign of slowing. On December 4, 2015, *People’s Daily* mentioned Xi’s name in 11 different front-page headlines. In an article about this phenomenon, Felicia Sonmez of *the Wall Street Journal* wrote: “State media’s unswerving focus on Mr. Xi has set China’s leader apart from his recent predecessors and spurred much speculation among China watchers over whether the country is on the path toward another personality cult similar to the one that surrounded Mao

⁶ Daniel Leese, *Mao Cult: Rhetoric and Ritual in China’s Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 186

⁸ David Bandurski, “Fifty Shades of Xi,” *China Media Project*. Last modified March 30, 2015, <http://cmp.hku.hk/2015/03/30/38540/>.

⁹ 中国数字时代, “钱钢|语象报告:领导人姓名传播强度观察,” August 21, 2014, <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2014/07/钱钢-语象报告:领导人姓名传播强度观察/>.

Zedong in the 1960s and '70s.”¹⁰ She then went on to explain why this shift is so important. Since Mao’s death, the CCP has gone to great lengths to ensure that another personality cult does not arise within the Party leadership. The Party has typically played down the public presence of leaders; yet the fact that the *People’s Daily* focuses so much attention on Xi shows a marked shift from this pattern.¹¹

There is other evidence that suggests Xi is building up a cult of personality. In September 2015, China held a massive military parade through Tiananmen Square to commemorate the defeat of Japan in World War II. This event is what Lisa Wedeen refers to as a “spectacle”: a public symbol through which power is displayed and projected.¹² Of course, parades and events such as this have taken place under past leaders; however, Xi used this particularly important event to demonstrate his power. In a speech given at the parade, he announced that the Chinese military would demobilize 300,000 troops. Ironically, in demobilizing troops, Xi demonstrates the firm grasp he has over the military and the extent of his reform capabilities.¹³ Given the Chinese military’s rapid development in recent years, Xi’s demonstration of his firm grip over the military is an especially potent utilization of a “spectacle” to show his authority.

Taken together, this evidence suggests that a cult of personality is forming around Xi Jinping, but it does not explain how the cult came to exist. The core argument this paper makes is that the China Dream and its propaganda art play a key role in creating this personality cult. But how exactly does propaganda art help to bring about a cult of personality? Looking at other cases of personality cults helps to explain how they come to be. One does not have to look far from China to find a robust, modern cult of personality; North Korea’s Kim dynasty provides a prototypical example of what a personality cult and a “leader state” look like. Jae-Cheon Lim argues: “North Korea can be systematically considered a ‘leader

¹⁰ Felicia Sonmez, “China’s People’s Daily Runs 11 Xi Jinping Headlines on its Front Page,” *The Wall Street Journal, China Real Time*, December 4, 2015, <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2015/12/04/chinas-peoples-daily-runs-11-xi-jinping-headlines-on-its-front-page/>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 21–22.

¹³ Chris Buckley, “Military Parade in China Gives Xi Jinping a Platform to Show Grip on Power,” *The New York Times*, September 3, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/04/world/asia/china-military-parade-xi-jinping.html?_r=0.

state' whose legitimacy is based solely on the leaders' personal legitimacy and is maintained mainly by the indoctrination of people with leader symbols and the enactment of leadership cults in daily life."¹⁴ He says that the prevalence of leader symbols and the routine, everyday encounters with leader symbols bring about the indoctrination of people into a cult of personality and the creation of the "leader state."¹⁵

Before applying this theory to the China Dream, the issue of the China Dream's ubiquity as a symbol must first be established, because leader symbols must be present in all areas of life, both public and private, to be effective at indoctrinating people into a personality cult. This paper does not argue that China Dream art is as prevalent as leader symbols in North Korea. The extent to which the Kim dynasty has consolidated a personality cult is without match, even in comparison to the Mao cult. Yet China Dream art is still a ubiquitous symbol that incorporates practices of cult rituals. However, this is only true in certain areas. For instance, Beijing's public spaces are heavily covered in China Dream art. At various locations throughout the city, building walls alongside roads are covered with posters, often for a hundred meters or more (see Figure 1). For those who walk these streets every day, it is impossible not to notice them. One potential weakness of this paper's argument is that the presence of these posters is not as prominent in other cities. In the small, rural village of Qufu, for example, I saw very little presence of China Dream posters in comparison to Beijing. But this does not discount my theory for two reasons. First, rural Chinese towns and villages such as Qufu are significantly less important politically than massive cities like Beijing. As stated previously, Beijing is the seat of power of the Party and the government. In the hierarchy of Chinese cities, Beijing is at the very top. Second, Xi Jinping has only been in power for about three years. Thus, the China Dream is a young, developing leader symbol. The Kim dynasty has had decades to create and build its leader symbols. For these reasons, the smaller presence of posters in more rural areas should not discount the overall effect that posters have in shaping Xi's cult.

Second, China Dream art has entered into citizens' private lives, giving it more indoctrinating power. For example, in China, giving calendars during the

¹⁴ Jae-Cheon Lim, *Leader Symbols and Personality Cult in North Korea: The Leader State* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 4.

¹⁵ Ibid.

New Year—China’s most important holiday—is an old tradition. In January 2015, the most popular New Year calendars depicted Xi and his wife underneath the Chinese characters for “China Dream.”¹⁶ This is important for two reasons. First, these calendars are typically cherished gifts that people share with each other, and they are brought into the home for decoration. This shows the incorporation of the leader symbol into the private, intimate space of the home. Second, these calendars are particularly important because they directly associate the image of Xi Jinping with the China Dream, which the publicly displayed posters did not. These calendars not only incorporate the leader symbol into the private space of the home, but also into a ritualized custom of sharing gifts during the annual Chinese New Year season. This shows the increasing presence that China Dream art plays as a ubiquitous leader symbol helping to create a personality cult around Xi Jinping.



*Figure 1*¹⁷

¹⁶ Calum MacLeod, “Chinese Calendars’ Days Are Numbered,” *USA Today*, February 15, 2015, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/02/15/beijing-china-calendars-lunar-new-year/23122395/>.

¹⁷ “Series of China Dream Posters,” South side of Chengfu Rd, Beijing, China, photographed by

COMPARING THE CULTS OF MAO AND XI

In applying Lim's theory of leader symbols to Xi Jinping and China, this paper focuses specifically on the use of leader symbols as a means of developing and maintaining Xi's cult. Lim lays out six specific functions of leader symbols: communication, relationship objectification, meaning condensation, integration, legitimacy promotion, and mass mobilization.¹⁸ On the basis of Lim's theory, if a symbol is ubiquitously incorporated into everyday life and successfully serves these six important functions, this suggests that such a symbol is in fact a leader symbol being used to create a cult of personality and transform the state into a leader state. As discussed earlier, Mao Zedong built one of the most robust personality cults in history. This section systematically shows how Mao used propaganda art as a successfully functioning leader symbol to create his cult of personality. Then, it shows how Xi Jinping is also successfully doing so in ways that are both similar and different from Mao.

Communication Function

The first function, communication, is simply the ability to employ a leader symbol—in this case, propaganda art—to persuade the people to serve the aims of the leader.¹⁹ Communication was, perhaps, one of the most important functions of the propaganda posters during the Mao years, especially during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. The CCP constantly put out posters promulgating Mao's policy ideas. One example of this is the posters calling for all Chinese people to carry out Mao's Four Pests Campaign, which asked everyone to do all they could to kill rats, flies, mosquitos, and sparrows. The poster shown in Figure 2 shows a Four Pests Campaign poster that says, “人人动手消灭四害” (“Everybody get to work to destroy the Four Pests”).²⁰ Unfortunately, Mao's calls to kill the Four Pests and the corresponding propaganda campaign were highly successful. They resulted in the destabilization of China's ecological system, which, among other factors, contributed to terrible famine and the deaths of tens of millions of Chinese people.

Brian Hart, July 31, 2015.

¹⁸ Lim, *Leader Symbols*, 6-8.

¹⁹ Lim, *Leader Symbols*, 6.

²⁰ “Great Leap Forward (1956-1960),” *Chinese Posters*, last modified November 16, 2014, <http://chineseposters.net/gallery/e16-358.php>.



Figure 2²¹

Xi's China Dream art certainly serves the communication function in many aspects. A common theme among many of the posters in every city is the emphasis on natural landscapes and environmental conservation. An example of this can be seen in Figure 3, which shows a massive wall poster located on the north side of Picai Hutong, just a few blocks west of the Forbidden City. At this location, there was a long stretch of giant posters stretching for hundreds of feet. This particular poster contains a classical mountain painting scene along with the phrase “人心敬畏天地，才有水美山青，” which loosely translates to “until the will of the people reveres heaven and earth, there will not be beautiful waters and green mountains.” This directly communicates that in order for the China Dream to be attained, there must be a clean environment. It is a call for people to respect the environment and recognize the importance of environmental protection, even as China develops. Given Xi's announcement during his 2015 state visit to the U.S. that China will implement an aggressive cap and trade program to curb greenhouse gas emissions, this poster is a call for the Chinese people to support and follow these new regulations—a difficult request in a developing economy such as China's. The existence of such China Dream posters suggests that this propaganda art is effectively fulfilling the “communication function” of leader symbols.

²¹ “Great Leap Forward (1956-1960)”



Figure 3²²



Figure 4²³

²² “Until the Will of the People Reveres Heaven and Earth, There Will Not Be Beautiful Waters and Green Mountains,” Poster located on the north side of Picai Hutong Rd, Beijing, China, photographed by Brian Hart, July 31, 2015.

²³ “Great teacher, Great leader...”

Relationship Objectification Function

The second leader symbol function, relationship objectification, is actually more readily demonstrated by the Xi cult than the Mao cult. During the time of Chairman Mao's leadership, many posters showed images of him and referred to him as the Great Leader. For example, the poster in Figure 4 calls Mao “伟大的导师 伟大的领袖 伟大的统帅 伟大的舵手,” meaning “Great Teacher, Great Leader, Great Commander, Great Helmsman.”²⁴ While these epithets convey a relationship of power over the people, they do not convey a sense of closeness and familiarity. President Xi, on the other hand, is commonly referred to as 习大大 (*Xi Dada*), which literally means “Xi big big,” but translates colloquially to Uncle or Father Xi.²⁵ While this has the effect of familiarizing Xi and making him seem like part of one's family, it also has a very significant meaning within Confucian notions of order, which emphasize filial piety. The relationship between father and children is extremely important—it is one of the five fundamental relationships of Confucian social order.²⁶ Thus, when people refer to Xi as Xi Dada, they are equating him with a father figure and making him into China's father figure. This is very important, because as Tatlow says, quoting Daniel K. Gardner: “By embracing the nickname ‘Xi Dada,’ Xi Jinping is allowing himself to be likened to an imperial ruler who governs by dint of wisdom, compassion and deep familial affection for the people, a ruler who is responsible for doing right by his subjects and guiding them.”²⁷

China Dream art represents this as well. As previously noted, one thing that makes China Dream propaganda so different from Mao era propaganda is that it draws from Confucian concepts and images, not Communist ones. The poster that best demonstrates this is shown in Figure 5. This poster, located near Longhua Temple in Shanghai, is very common in both Beijing and Shanghai. It depicts a little girl trying to feed her paternal grandfather (爷爷) saying: “爷爷吃!” or “Grandpa, eat!” The text says, “孝道, 中国人的血脉,” which translates

²⁴ “Great Teacher, Great Leader, Great Commander, Great Helmsman—Long Live Chairman Mao,” *Chinese Posters*, last modified October 23, 2013. <http://chineseposters.net/posters/pc-1967-018.php>.

²⁵ Didi Kristen Tatlow, “Confucian, Stubborn and Macho: China's Leader is ‘Xi Bigbig,’” *The New York Times*, October 22, 2014, <http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/10/22/confucian-stubborn-and-macho-chinas-leader-is-xi-bigbig/>.

²⁶ The five major relationships in Confucian thought are: ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, oldest son and younger brothers, and elders and juniors.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

to “filial piety, the Chinese people’s blood lineage.” This poster is not only important because it invokes Confucianism, but also because it specifically invokes filial piety. Because Xi is known colloquially as “Father Xi,” when China Dream art summons concepts of filial piety, it does two things. First, it incorporates Confucian values into the China Dream. Second, because Xi popularized and operationalized the China Dream, it is indirectly associated with him, and therefore he is also associated with filial piety and notions of Confucian hierarchy.



Figure 5²⁸

This is an archetypical example of the relationship objectification function of leader symbols. It is the same thing that Kim Jong Il did when carrying out a transition of power from his father to himself. The North Korean leader drew on Confucian notions of loyalty, respect, virtue, benevolence, and filial piety to invoke a hierarchical and ordered Confucian version of the state, which emphasized the role of Kim Jong Il as ruler within the relationship between him and his people.²⁹ In pre-modern Korea, filial piety was a defining attribute of relationships within the family, but as the concept of the “great family” came to exist, it also became a characteristic of the relationship between Kim and the people.³⁰ Just as Kim Jong Il used Confucianism to cement his dominance over

²⁸ “Filial Piety, A Chinese Person’s Blood Lineage,” a wall near Longhua Temple, Shanghai, China, photographed by Brian Hart, May 29, 2015.

²⁹ Lim, *Leader Symbols*, 84.

³⁰ Ibid.

the rest of society, Xi Jinping and the CCP are relying on modernized notions of Confucianism to retain their ideological legitimacy. Shufang Wu sums it up well: “The government’s overall strategy is to repackage Confucianism, institutionalize it, and integrate it into the current ideology. The aim is to provide further justifications for the CCP’s political strategies and policies, make them acceptable to society, legitimate the party’s rule, and consolidate its leadership.”³¹ This paper argues that the use of Confucianism is more powerful than any other potential source of ideological legitimacy because it is, at its very core, Chinese. Chairman Mao’s legitimizing ideology, known as Mao Zedong Thought, while still highly influential, was a form of communism very similar to Marxist-Leninist thought borrowed from Russia. Communism is not a Chinese creation. Confucianism, however, was the governing ideology in China for hundreds of years and was created and cultivated in China. As a result, Confucianism brings with it a stronger sense of national pride and unity than any other ideology might provide. In short, the China Dream’s inclusion of Confucian values, especially filial piety, make it particularly effective in its relationship objectification function, in much the same way as in North Korea.

Meaning Condensation Function

The third function, meaning condensation, is the ambiguous quality of a leader symbol that allows people to experience and internalize it differently at different moments.³² For example, Lim notes that peoples’ reactions to seeing images of Kim Il Sung laughing in the media can bring about emotions of longing or disgust, depending on which side of the Korean War one was. Similarly, posters of Mao Zedong can have the exact same effects, depending on which side one supported during the Chinese Civil War. Any of the many Mao posters, which directly sought to create his personality cult, could be said to be ambiguously positive or negative in this way. However, the China Dream campaign is so ambiguous that it is hard to have a negative reaction to it. That is because there is no strict definition of the China Dream. One particular message, found in posters, online, and even in a television commercial, is perhaps the most famous China Dream message: “中国梦，我的梦，” which means “The China Dream, My Dream.” The famous poster

³¹ Wu Shufang, “‘Modernizing’ Confucianism in China: A Repackaging of Institutionalization to Consolidate Party Leadership,” *Asian Perspectives* 39, no. 2 (2015), 319.

³² Lim, *Leader Symbols*, 7.

bearing this message, which I saw in Shenzhen, Shanghai, Nanjing, and Beijing, can be seen in Figure 6. The particular photo shown in Figure 6 was taken at a station on Line 1 of the Nanjing Subway system. On that particular line, every station I visited had multiple China Dream posters, usually including the “China Dream, My Dream” poster found in Figure 6.



Figure 6³³

Why is this China Dream message the most prolifically displayed? Since the message being sent is that the China Dream is intentionally ambiguous, it is up to people to decide for themselves what their China Dream looks like. This not only enables personal connection with the government’s propaganda campaign, it also gives individuals some sense of agency in pursuing their version of the China Dream. In my conversations with Chinese citizens, I heard many different definitions of what the China Dream means for them. In Shenzhen, I talked to a worker at a police training school in his late twenties, who worked

³³ “China Dream, My Dream,” a station on Line 1 of the Nanjing Metro System, photographed by Brian Hart, June 4, 2015.

under the mother of the family hosting me. He talked openly about the China Dream and said that because he likes to travel, for him, the China Dream means a passport that will let him travel anywhere in the world. The father of my host family, who is a very wealthy CEO of a Chinese company, told me that his China Dream meant being able to come up from poverty to own a large house, and especially to have his own garden. Both he and his wife constantly showed me the vegetables that they were growing in their garden, and they seemed more proud of the garden than their massive house. In a large, crowded city such as Shenzhen, owning a house with the space to grow a garden is a symbol of wealth and privilege.

The differences in these two narratives of the China Dream show the extent to which Chinese people interpret it individualistically. This paper argues that the ambiguity of the China Dream as a leader symbol is one of the characteristics that makes it so powerful as a tool for propaganda and especially for creating a cult around Xi. Previous propaganda campaigns in contemporary China, such as Hu Jintao's "Harmonious Society," did not allow for the openness of interpretation that the China Dream does. This ostensible inclusivity and granting of agency allows people of vastly differing backgrounds and views to still support Xi Jinping and his goal of attaining the collective China dream. This gives Xi a chance to shape and use the China Dream to shore up support for himself, and build up his own cult, while still allowing the Chinese people to feel a sense of agency. This reality is expressed by Professor Steve Tsang, director of the Chinese Policy Institute at the University of Nottingham: "The Chinese Dream is not the dream of the people of China freely articulated by them. It is the 'Chinese Dream' to be articulated on their behalf by Xi and the Communist Party."³⁴ Thus, in appearance the China Dream leaves open all sorts of interpretation, which in turn serves to support Xi and his policies; but in reality, it is Xi and the CCP articulating the dream. In this way, the China Dream remains an ostensibly inclusive leader symbol that is actually shaped solely by Xi. This is one of the things that makes the China Dream such a uniquely powerful leader symbol.

³⁴ Cary Huang, "Xi's Chinese Dream," In *The China Renaissance: The Rise of Xi Jinping and the 18th Communist Party Congress*, ed. Jonathan Sharp (Hackensack, NJ: World Scientific Publishing Co., 2013), 36

Integration Function

The fourth function of leader symbols, the integration function, can be seen widely in Mao era leader symbols. The integration function helps to stabilize society by constantly forcing new institutions to integrate into the system dominated by leader symbols. If these symbols are then removed from the institutions of society, the institutions would be inherently different. One notable example of the integration function during the Mao era was the practice of reading Mao Zedong's *Little Red Book* daily. For members of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in particular, this repetitive practice became a fundamental part of the institution of the PLA and constantly shaped the lives of soldiers as well as the Chinese people as a whole. Without this extremely powerful leader symbol and the important integration function it served, institutions were changed fundamentally. This is one of the reasons there was such a power vacuum after Mao's death.

While the *Little Red Book* was a physical leader symbol that became regularized and integrated into state institutions and practices of everyday life, the same cannot yet be said for Xi Jinping's China Dream. The reason is that Xi has only been the leader of China for 3 years. Because the integration function takes place through a process of repetitive institutionalization, the leader symbols of Xi Jinping have not had an adequate amount of time to fully permeate existing institutions, such as the military and the education system, which played important roles in creating the cult of Mao. However, the extent to which Beijing's public spaces are dominated by China Dream art does show the potential for strong integration. In Beijing, valuable advertisement space on public walls, "jumbo-trons," billboards, and buildings is increasingly taken up by China Dream art. Some private companies are even incorporating the China Dream into their advertisements, further permeating public spaces and bridging the public-private divide. For example, a massive electronic billboard on the corner of Zhongguancun North Avenue and Beishuan West Road (on the southeast corner of Peking University) regularly showed an advertisement for a brand of *baijiu* (a type of liquor) called 梦之蓝 (*mengzhilan* "Blue Dream"). The advertisement, shown in Figure 7, says "中国梦 - 梦之蓝" ("China Dream - Blue Dream"). It is significant that a private company is incorporating the China Dream into its advertising, because it suggests that the term "China Dream" is no longer an empty phrase; it is now part of a widely recognizable brand created by Xi Jinping.

In addition to private advertisements, the China Dream has been incorporated into schools and the Chinese education system in different forms. At some schools and universities, students are encouraged to write their China Dreams on “dream walls” on campus. There were even student singing competitions that eventually resulted in a “chart-topping folk song” based on the China Dream.³⁵ Similarly, throughout July 2015 at Peking University, there were multiple signs advertising the event “Writing the Chinese Dream: China Youth Calligraphy Competition for Charity” (“书写中国梦：中华青少年书法公益比赛”). These examples show the increasing incorporation of China Dream leader symbols into China’s education system, which, in addition to China Dream art’s incorporation into commercial spaces, fulfills the integration function of leader symbols.



Figure 7³⁶

³⁵ “What Does Xi Jinping’s China Dream Mean?,” *BBC*, June 6, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-22726375>.

³⁶ “China Dream–Blue Dream,” at the corner of Zhongguancun North Avenue and Beishuan West Road, Beijing, China, photographed by Brian Hart, June 26, 2015.

Legitimacy Promotion Function

The fifth leader symbol function, legitimacy promotion, is perhaps the most important but also the most elusive for leaders to obtain. This paper has shown how leader symbols served to legitimize both Mao and Xi. For Mao's cult, leadership symbols such as the daily ritual of reading the *Little Red Book*, confessing in front of Mao's image, and of course propaganda art all served to build and sustain Mao's legitimacy. Similarly, practices such as calling Xi Jinping "Xi Dada," making public confessions of guilt, and the China Dream's emphasis on Confucian values and filial piety have all sought to bolster his public image and legitimacy. Yet neither Mao nor Xi has achieved legitimacy promotion on the scale of the Kim dynasty in North Korea. In North Korea, legitimacy promotion through leader symbols has been so strong that the legitimacy of the initial leader, Kim Il-sung was passed onto his son Kim Jong-il, and in 2011 passed onto his son, Kim Jong-un. In the North Korean leader state, the level of adoration for its leaders has surpassed a mere cult of personality. North Korean leaders are deified and worshipped to such an extent that their legitimacy has transgressed time and generations.³⁷ North Korea is unique in the modern world for the extent to which the popular legitimacy of its leaders has been so thoroughly established. Neither the cults of Mao or Xi can claim to have been so successful in establishing legitimacy. After his death, Deng Xiaoping, one of China's greatest leaders, weakened Mao's legitimacy and cult by officially acknowledging that Mao's policies were 70 percent good and 30 percent bad.³⁸ So even Mao's legitimacy does not stand up to that of the Kim dynasty. However, this does not mean that the legitimacy of Mao and Xi is insufficient to warrant them possessing cults of personality; as has been shown, their legitimacy too is deeply institutionalized and publicly shown.

Mass Mobilization Function

The sixth and final function of leader symbols is mass mobilization. This function is very similar to the first function of communication, in that it involves the leader's ability to utilize leader symbols to achieve massive public mobilization

³⁷ Lim, *Leader Symbols*, 8.

³⁸ Nicholas D. Kristof, "Legacy of Mao Called 'Great Disaster,'" *New York Times*, February 7, 1989, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/02/07/world/legacy-of-mao-called-great-disaster.html>.

to achieve the leader's aims. However, it differs slightly from the communication function because rather than asking the people to support a specific policy, the process of massive public mobilization itself serves to bolster the leader's legitimacy and leader status. Lim says that this most often takes the form of a "tour" by the leader.³⁹ There are many examples of Mao carrying out acts of mass mobilization, including in the form of "tours." One such example is Mao's famous swimming of the Yangtze River on July 16, 1966. Mao's swim was widely publicized in the media to show that Mao was still fit to lead China and the Party, despite his advancing age. A year later, Mao embarked on his "Inspection Tour of the Three Regions," between July and September 1967. The inspection tour included several key provinces and cities in the North, Mid-South, and East of China. Over the course of the inspection tour, the media followed Mao to publicize his support of the Cultural Revolution and his call to end the factional violence that was going on between warring Red Guard factions.⁴⁰ Mao's swim in the Yangtze helped to revitalize Mao's cult after the disastrous years of the Great Leap Forward, and the inspection tour consolidated his leadership status because it demonstrated that he had enough influence to quell the turmoil of Red Guard fighting. Thus, both events represent successful examples of the mass mobilization function.

President Xi has also achieved mass mobilization in the form of tours similar to those of his predecessor Deng Xiaoping. In December 2012, soon after assuming the office of Party General Secretary, Xi Jinping went on his first official trip outside of Beijing. Like Deng Xiaoping, Xi traveled to the city of Shenzhen in Guangdong Province. Because of Shenzhen's status as a Special Economic Zone, the symbolic nature of this trip suggested that Xi will, like Deng, pursue economic reforms to promote China's economic growth. According to some observers, Xi played down the pomp of his official visit in order to focus on the issues; as a result, he gained a lot of public support for his actions.⁴¹ Another interesting "tour" was Xi's visit in 2013 to Qufu, the hometown of Confucius. He was the first Chinese leader to visit Qufu in two decades, and many noted the significance of the trip. An *Economist* article even referenced that it signified the union of the cult of Con-

³⁹ Lim, *Leader Symbols*, 8.

⁴⁰ Jian, Guo, Yongyi Song, and Yuan Zhou, *Historical Dictionary of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, Second Edition (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 210.

⁴¹ Chen Zhuang, "The Symbolism of Xi Jinping's Trip South," *BBC*, December 10, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-20662947>.

fucius with the cult of Xi.⁴² The southern tour to Guangdong represented a call for mass mobilization in achieving economic reforms. The Qufu trip represented a call for bringing back the morals and values of Confucius; it sought to legitimize Xi and the CCP by uniting them with one of the oldest cults in China, the cult of Confucius.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE CULT

This paper does not claim that the cult of Xi exists on the same scale as the Mao cult or the Kim dynasty. Cults of personality exist on a spectrum. Mao's cult never reached the extent of the Kims' cult, but it is still widely considered a cult of personality.⁴³ Similarly, the Xi cult has not consolidated to the point that the Mao cult did; nor does this study predict that it will. Nevertheless, this paper argues that it is developing and consolidating into a functioning cult of personality. What, then, are the domestic and foreign implications? Within China, the most significant impact has been the changing nature of the relationship between Chinese citizens and the state. As Xi consolidates power over state institutions and begins to reshape China's society into a Confucian order, the relationship between Chinese citizens and Xi has transformed into a relationship of ruler and ruled. For viewers in liberal democracies, this shift towards a personality cult and stricter authoritarian rule is worrying. As A. T. Nuyen argues, Confucianism's emphasis on hierarchy and communitarianism make it incompatible with liberal conceptions of citizenship.⁴⁴ However, Nuyen suggests that Confucianism might provide constructive critiques of liberalism by emphasizing the role of citizenship as constructed through the community, and by reshaping the concept of equality through citizens' roles in the community. Nuyen continues by saying that the claim that Confucianism is incompatible with democracy and equality needs to be reevaluated by applying a "thick" conception of citizenship rather

⁴² "Confucius Says, Xi Does: The Communist Party Turns to Ancient Philosophy for Support," *The Economist*, July 25, 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/china/21659753-communist-party-turns-ancient-philosophy-support-confucius-says-xi-does>.

⁴³ Daniel Leese, *Mao Cult: Rhetoric and Ritual in China's Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁴⁴ A. T. Nuyen, "Confucianism and the Idea of Citizenship," *Asian Philosophy* 12, no. 2 (2002): 132.

than a “thin” one, like that of liberalism.⁴⁵ However, Xi and the CCP do not seem to share this non-hierarchical conception of citizenship. China Dream propaganda art’s particular emphasis on the Confucian value of filial piety suggests that, in the view of Xi and the CCP leadership, Confucianism’s inherently hierarchical nature is useful for establishing a more stable order—with Xi and the Party at the top.

Some have argued that there is sizable opposition to Xi within China, particularly among China’s online “netizens.” Chin-fu Hung argues that in the age of cyberspace and the internet, propaganda such as the China Dream campaign constantly runs up against “alternate discourses” that fight for ownership of discourse rights, both within physical spaces and especially on the Internet.⁴⁶ Critics like Hung hold that, because of technologies like the internet, a cult of personality is not possible in contemporary China. Yet, at the same time, there is tremendous domestic support for President Xi. In fact, according to recent polls analyzed by Anthony Saich, Xi’s public approval ratings make him the most popular leader in the world. His domestic approval, as previously stated, comes largely from support for his anti-corruption campaign and his social influence.⁴⁷ The fact that he maintains overwhelming support domestically shows that, despite potential opposition from a small portion of society, his cult is well and strong.

Moreover, as Lisa Wedeen points out, it does not even matter whether everyone legitimizes Xi or buys into his leader symbol of the China Dream; what is important is that they comply.⁴⁸ In her view, in maintaining a personality cult, it is more important for a leader to force compliance rather than expend resources trying to maintain his or her legitimacy. This line of thinking fits with Xi’s response to netizens and online opposition. Beginning in early 2015, the Chinese government increased its already oppressive control over the internet by limiting the use of many popular VPNs, which people in China use to access sites blocked inside China. It also limited the use of Gmail through third party clients, making

⁴⁵ Ibid., 137.

⁴⁶ Hung Chin-fu, in “Chapter 5: The ‘China Dream’ in the Xi-Li Administration in the Information Age: Shared Dreams, or Same Bed, Different Dreams?,” in *China Dreams: China’s New Leadership and Future Impacts*, ed. Chih-Shian Liou and Arthur S. Ding, 111-143 (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2015), 143.

⁴⁷ Simon Denyer, “Why a Communist Dictator May Be the World’s Most Popular Leader—At Home and Abroad,” *Washington Post*, December 18, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/12/18/why-a-communist-dictator-may-be-the-worlds-most-popular-leader-at-home-and-abroad/>.

⁴⁸ Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, 6.

communication with people outside of the country even harder for many.⁴⁹ The great lengths to which Xi and the Party are going to limit Internet freedoms, despite public frustration, proves that in some cases they are more concerned about compliance than legitimacy-building tactics.

Outside of China, the China Dream's newfound incorporation of Confucianism significantly impacts the way that China sees itself in the international system, and also the ways that it behaves. This is because Confucianism subscribes to a Sinocentric worldview. The literal meaning of the term 'China' is "The Middle Kingdom" (*zhongguo* 中国). In imperial China, "The Emperor was conceived as mankind's supreme sovereign – the Emperor of Humanity, standing atop a world political hierarchy that mirrored China's hierarchical Confucian social structure. Chinese protocol insisted on recognizing his overlordship via the kowtow."⁵⁰ Particularly in East Asia, China saw itself at the top of a Confucian hierarchy with neighboring states like Korea and Vietnam separated from China not so much by political and territorial boundaries, but by cultural ones.⁵¹ Given that Xi's China Dream seeks the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, might that rejuvenation also entail a reestablishment of a hierarchical order in East Asia, with China at the top? This brings into question whether China can indeed rise peacefully.

President Xi's consolidation and use of state power in the region is concerning. Nowhere is this truer than in the South China Sea, where in recent years China has been pursuing an aggressive, and arguably illegal, campaign of island building. The region has become a flashpoint for potential conflicts, with multiple states claiming conflicting ownership of various reefs and islands. Because China's economy and military have grown rapidly in recent years, despite pledged future reductions in personnel, China is now at a point where, besides the U.S., it is by far the strongest naval power in the region. Because of China's rapid military modernization, Xi is in the unique position of not only being strong domestically but also internationally.⁵² He is the first leader of modern

⁴⁹ Andrew Jacobs, "China Further Tightens Grip on the Internet," *The New York Times*, January 29, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/30/world/asia/china-clamps-down-still-harder-on-internet-access.html>.

⁵⁰ Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), 15.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵² "The Dragon's New Teeth," *The Economist*, April 7, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/node/21552193>.

China to have a military capable of dictating terms in the region. Because China still has not forgotten the “century of shame” of the late 1800s and early 1900s, during which it was invaded and colonized by Japan and Western imperial powers, the significance of possessing and being able to use China’s strong military cannot be overstated. Part of the China Dream is the notion of national strength and prosperity (*fuqiang* 富强), to which a strong military is essential. It can therefore be expected that Xi will continue to employ a heavy hand in the South China Sea. Within the U.S., some fear that China has global ambitions to replace the U.S. as the leading hegemon in the international system. Given the increasing tensions between China and the U.S. in the South China Sea, as well as recent, massive Chinese cyber attacks against the U.S. government, it is easy to see why some people outside of China are becoming more nervous about China’s increasingly assertive role in the international system, and particularly Xi’s strong grip over the military and state institutions.⁵³

The claim that Xi Jinping is developing a cult of personality through the use of China Dream art is a provocative one, but not one without evidence. His widespread centralization of state power, unique social stature, and intentional use of the China Dream campaign as a leader symbol all point to Xi’s desire and ability to create a personality cult. As said before, such a cult does not, and probably will not, look like that of Mao, or like that of the Kim dynasty cult in North Korea. Nevertheless, it is still a cult. The leadership symbol functions of the Xi cult match and in some cases even exceed the effectiveness of those of the Mao cult – most notably with regard to Confucianism outperforming communism in the relationship objectification function. The China Dream campaign’s utilization of Confucianism as a means to solidify the power and legitimacy of both the CCP and Xi reflects not just a desire to maintain power, but to fundamentally restructure the nature of Chinese citizenship. Xi is not necessarily building up his cult for selfish purposes, but rather so that he can more quickly and effectively carry out the important structural, political, and economic reforms necessary to keep China on the track towards modernization under Party rule. People have for years claimed that the CCP and the Chinese state is on the verge of crumbling down. Yet the Communist Party has shown an enormous capacity to adjust and adapt for over 60

⁵³ Ellen Nakashima, “Chinese Breach Data of 4 Million Federal Workers,” *The Washington Post*, June 4, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/chinese-hackers-breach-federal-governments-personnel-office/2015/06/04/889c0e52-0af7-11e5-95fd-d580f1c5d44e_story.html.

years, despite the fact that the People's Republic of China has experienced great trauma and chaos during that time. Xi's growing personality cult may be a function of that. The best that can be hoped for is that Xi will use his personality cult and his power at home and abroad to pursue peace and prosperity, not conflict and personal gain.

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