

CHINA TODAY, CHINA TOMORROW

‘China’s 3 Dreams’

[Film Review by Professor Kerry Brown](#)

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We’ve heard Chinese politicians in recent years wax lyrical about the ‘China Dream’. Indeed, since late 2012 it has been one of the signature slogans for Xi Jinping, something combining aspiration and abstraction, the sort of mix that gives leaders the public attention and engagement they seek without the entrapment of detail.

Looking harder at anyone’s dreams though is always unsettling. The social policy expert Gerard Lemos authored a book in 2012 simply entitled ‘The End of the Chinese Dream: Why Chinese People Fear the Future’ (Yale University Press).

Dreaming is not solely about hope. Sometimes, it is not about hope at all. It is an oddity of both the English and Mandarin Chinese languages that despite this on the whole the word ‘dream’ is largely a positive one – positive enough at least for

politicians to try to recruit it to their causes.

One of the main characters documented in 'China's 3 Dreams' comes out with the wonderful line that if you are going to cry, it is better to do so in a Mercedes car than on a bike. The wealthy may be miserable, but at least they are distracted. Ironically, Nick Torrens' film is set largely in Chongqing, the same place that was the focus of Lemos' book. Perhaps this is because Chongqing is so successful at putting up deceptive surfaces. At night, approaching the city from the airport, it looks a little like the grand lit-up skyline of Hong Kong, a place it clearly tries to emulate. And it has claimed to be, since breaking away from Sichuan province in 2000, the world's most populous city. But most would see it as a province of its own in all but name. And as the dramatic leadership of Bo Xilai from 2007 to 2012 in the city showed, Chongqing's brassy surfaces concealed corruption, violence and entrenched poverty underneath.

If anything the voices in director Nick Torrens' documentary show that even this complex view of the city is, in fact, an oversimplification. As China speeds as fast as it possibly can away from the past, events which must weight heavy on the minds of the current elite leadership in Beijing like the Cultural Revolution from 1966 seem to be buried in willful amnesia. But the last decade of Mao Zedong's leadership left a profound mark on China, and this is testified to in the work. It lurks in the locked graveyard of Red Guard rebels in the city which the filmed protagonists only finally manage to get into accompanied by an old man bragging about his past as a Red Guard executioner (a brag that happens before he breaks down in tears, admitting how much he still loves Mao), in the life stories of the older generation, and, in the way they try to frame the world they live in today. The great mission to reinvent China after 1978 sometimes looks all conquering. But the quiet stories conveyed through questioning looks and discrete conversations in this film show that observers accepting the new history and image of the country are getting the underlying nuances of contemporary China wrong.

The Chinese are afraid of history, states one of the interviewees. You can well understand why when looking at events like the wars up to 1949, and then the campaigns waged with rising savagery afterwards once Mao's leadership was well established. One figure mentioned in the film raised five children without their father present, because he had been shunted off as a counter-revolutionary element. Even vague association with him was detrimental. Now in his 90s, the former prisoner is asked by his inquisitive granddaughter what it had felt like to live through that time and why he had been treated the way he was. It is clear from the old man's face it is not a question he wants to answer, and after a few comments he is shown glaring at his disappointed interrogator, evidently furious he had his day of celebration marred in this way.

There are those recorded in the film who are willing to engage more deeply with the legacy of the Cultural Revolution, and their words are sobering. The event was, according to one, 'the destruction of spiritual and cultural life' more than of a physical world. It marked the attempt under Mao to create a new faith, but also saw its failure. It 'destroyed our basic morality'. **These searing comments, delivered frankly on camera, are ones that the current political authorities lack the vocabularies or intellectual framework to deal with.** To Xi Jinping, his words in the past suggest that the Cultural Revolution is best seen as a learning moment along the Party's march to becoming a more perfect, fitting governing force. One wonders however whether his own experiences over this time, as a sent down youth in rural Shanxi, might make him more inwardly conflicted on this than he would ever let on.

The appealing aspect of this film is that it allows big themes to drift into sight through observing simple daily living. In the past, the political biases either of those observing, or those observed, meant that manipulation was ever present. But much about this film seems unprompted and spontaneous. At least Chinese people don't have to act now, but have the space to admit their confusions. In the past, and particularly that dominated by Mao, even this liberty was denied them. This film is a testament therefore to confusion and change. There are no easy conclusions to draw from it. And attentive observers will probably wear the same slightly puzzled look as one the key people portrayed in the film as it ends.

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