

# LETTER FROM CHINA

Dispatches from Evan Osnos.



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## CAN CHINA DELIVER THE CHINA DREAM(S)?

POSTED BY EVAN OSNOS



I live next door to Jin Baozhu, a widow and mother of three grown sons. She spent her career as a worker in a factory that made glass for industrial products. She is seventy-six and lives on a pension of two thousand yuan a month, about three hundred and twenty dollars. Mrs. Jin frequently reminds me that she is slowing down, though she seems awfully energetic to me; she spends most of her day crisscrossing the neighborhood on foot, running errands, and leaning in to share gossip, or argue, with her neighbors, a mix of mostly retirees and working-class migrants from other parts of China. “Everyone who lives here now is truly ‘the people,’” she told me once. “Everyone with money already left. They went to new places. But we stayed.”

This morning, Mrs. Jin was on her way to the doctor—“the usual,” she said—but she stopped to chat, and told me that she has been studying China’s new President on the television. “My eyes are bad, but I can hear every word he says,” she told me, leaning in as if in possession of sensitive news. “Chairman Xi,” as she called him, in a throwback to the days of Mao, “has two big ideas. One of them I can’t remember, but the other is the China Dream.”

She is right. (The one she can’t remember is the “great revival of the Chinese nation,” but I’ll leave that for another day.) In the four months since Xi Jinping rose to the top job, his nation has mustered the full force of its political apparatus around the concept of the

China Dream, a slogan that is intended to serve simultaneously as a target, a standard, and a warning; the China analyst Bill Bishop summed it up well for the *New York Times* yesterday as a term that has come to encompass “national rejuvenation, improvement of people’s livelihoods, prosperity, construction of a better society and military strengthening as the common dream of the Chinese people that can be best achieved under one party, Socialist rule.”

As I’ve traveled around China over the past few weeks, I have been struck by the speed with which a political slogan, even in this age of digital noise and distraction, can still enter the bloodstream and filter down through layers of thought and expectation until it reaches Mrs. Jin.

“I grew up on the ground, in Tongxian. I didn’t go to school. When I was growing up, we saw blue sky and white clouds every day. And at night the sky was filled with stars,” she said. She didn’t need to mention what everyone in town has been discussing: China’s daytime sky isn’t blue very often lately; at night, it is a dome of yellow-purple haze. But Mrs. Jin had more pressing things on her mind. She brought up Chairman Xi again. “He is talking about the China Dream. What’s my China Dream? To live a few more years in my house.”

Mrs. Jin is embroiled in a lawsuit that might or might not let her stay in that house, a bare-walled two-story brick block. It’s an interesting story, and I just might write it up someday. But for now the more pressing point is this: Xi Jinping has sought to inspire his people by raising the flag of the China Dream, but they have interpreted it as *China Dreams*—plural. Talk to just about anyone these days and she can tell you what she wants, what is standing between her and her goals, and how she will define success in reaching it. And that—the proliferation of 1.3 billion China Dreams—will prove either the wisdom of the concept or the potential danger embedded it.

For the first thirty years after the founding of the People’s Republic, Chinese leaders told their people which dreams to pursue: first socialism, then the frantic rush to “get rich first.” In dedicating his people to pursue something more abstract and individualized, Xi has succeeded in capturing their attention. Now he faces the challenge of meeting their expectations.

*Above: Xi Jinping and his wife, Peng Liyuan, arrive in Moscow on March 22nd. Photograph by Alexander Nemenov/AFP/Getty.*