William A. Callahan, Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics, presented on “Nationalism and Diplomacy,” examining in particular the “China dream” and its place in Chinese foreign policy and international politics. The China dream, according to CCP leader Xi Jinping, is a national dream emphasizing collective goals and national strength. It nevertheless has implications for the “American dream” and China’s “world dream.” Ultimately, Professor Callahan suggests that we must take these discourses seriously, as they may presage future developments in domestic and foreign politics.

After Xi Jinping mentioned the China dream in his November 2012 speech, it became China’s “hottest” new word for 2012. The propaganda department picked up the phrase and launched a campaign of “educational materials for deepening understanding of the China dream” that included funding for academic research projects, traditional propaganda booklets, and popular cultural events. This official version of the China dream emphasizes two different themes: the China dream as socialism with Chinese characteristics and the glory and value of Chinese civilization. Many individual Chinese also adopted the China dream discourse, although they talked about the China dream as an individual, rather than national, dream for self-actualization. By March 2013 Xi felt the need to reassert the China dream as a collective dream that emphasizes Chinese nationalism and the rise of China after 170 years of humiliation.

As a national dream, the China dream in many ways exists in tension with the American dream. According to many Chinese texts, the two visions of the self and world order are not different, but opposite. The China dream stresses national wealth and power while the American dream underlines personal freedom and happiness. The China dream thereby tells Chinese citizens not only what they can dream, but also what they can’t dream – the American dream. The China dream thus includes a moral component, suggesting that American values are distinct from Chinese values, and furthermore that they are dangerous and selfish.

While the China dream is focused mainly on domestic issues, it also has global implications for China’s “world dream.” In referencing the rise of China, commentators within China often speak of China’s “rejuvenation” – a moral narrative that connects current events with China’s “century of humiliation.” The China dream and China’s dream for a “harmonious world” thus are mutually supportive – what is good for China is seen as good for the world. China’s “world dream” is furthermore presented as an alternative to American hegemony; this different Chinese vision of the world order is directed no so much at western audiences but at the Global South. The idea of China at the center of the world is nothing new, of course – the “tianxia” (All-under-Heaven) discourse from pre-modern times likewise placed China at the center of its cosmology.

China’s vision for Asia – the Asia dream – is an essential first step towards fulfilling China’s world dream. In the recent past ASEAN has been very effective at setting the terms of Asian regionalism. Lately, however, China has been quite successful at making political and economic inroads in Southeast Asia. This is indicative of a shift from an ASEAN-led Asia to a China-led Asia. Xi Jinping’s two speeches which referenced the China dream, his China dream speech in November 2012 and regional foreign policy speech in October 2013, emphasize this regional spread of Chinese influence as a precursor to any global moves. In this vision of expanding Chinese political and economic influence in Asia, shared beliefs and norms of mutual cooperation, traditional Sino-centric ideals of governance, and parallel discourses of socialism and tradition are all emphasized.
Ultimately, how influential and successful the China dream concept has been remains in question. Beijing talks as if it is gaining discursive power, setting the terms for debate among regional and world leaders. It is unclear, however, how real this discursive power is – are people buying into China’s vision for the world order or simply telling China what it wants to hear? There is no doubt that socialization is occurring between China and the rest of the world, but the question is who is socializing whom. This question has important implications, as Beijing with its national, Asian and world dreams is presenting an alternative to the liberal world order.