

DEFINING A NEW DREAM

Author Helen H. Wang says the country's growing middle class holds the key to deepening trust between the West and China and realizing the value of 'our global oneness.' **Chitralakha Basu** reports.



Our ability to live peacefully and harmoniously as global neighbors depends on our recognition of our interdependence."

HELEN H. WANG
AUTHOR OF *THE CHINESE DREAM: THE RISE OF THE WORLD'S LARGEST MIDDLE CLASS AND WHAT IT MEANS TO YOU*

LIU ZHE / CHINA DAILY

Helen H. Wang left her hometown of Hangzhou, Zhejiang province, in 1989, with the proverbial Great American Dream twinkling in her eyes. Like many other driven young people of her generation, she emigrated and made a life for herself. She enrolled as a graduate student at Stanford University, later became a consultant for Fortune 500 companies and, subsequently, an entrepreneur in Silicon Valley start-ups. She changed her name from Haiyan to Helen, married an American, acquired United States citizenship and now lives in a cosy home in Silicon Valley with her pet dog Frodo and parakeet Star, enjoying the occasional session of yoga and dancing.

It's an all-too-familiar story.

The turning point came in 2004, when Wang returned to China as a Reuters fellow, to help women entrepreneurs in remote and underprivileged communities access online markets through mobile phones.

Even as she traveled across the small towns of China, trying to develop the e-Mobilizer project, as she called it, Wang was moved by the pace and scale of development in the country she had left 15 years ago.

"At the same time, I found an increasing fear of China's spectacular growth in the West," she says.

Concerned by the gap in understanding between China and the West, which seems to widen with China's exponential industrial, economic and political growth, Wang felt obliged to tell the story, as it is.

The Chinese Dream: The Rise of the World's Largest Middle Class and What it Means to You is Wang's attempt to "bridge the gap" and clear the air of misunderstanding and mistrust between China and the West (primarily the United States).

Be it climate change or global trade, Wang argues in her book, what China or the US does affects the other. Therefore, "our ability to live peacefully and harmoniously as global neighbors depends on our recognition of our interdependence."

Her contention is that it's the Chinese middle class that will lead China toward understanding and realizing the value of "our global oneness."

The more than 300-million-strong community of urban professionals and entrepreneurs with college educations and an annual income of between \$10,000 and \$60,000, came into existence only about 15 years back, but is projected to cross the 612 million mark by 2025.

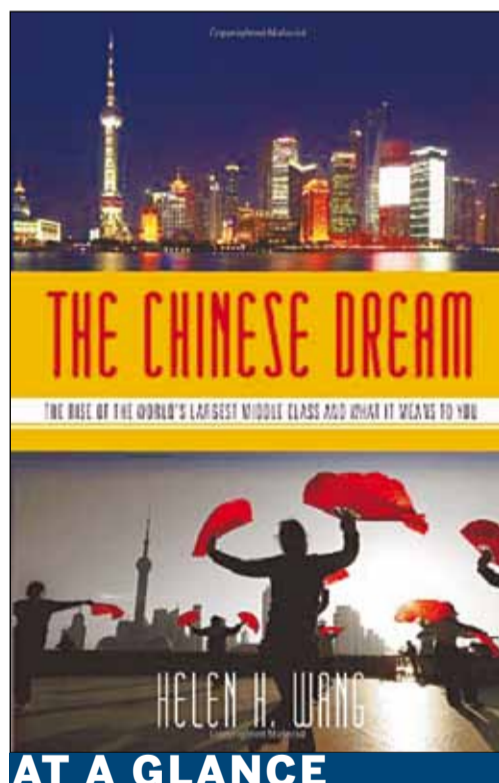
They are an emerging global force who, with time, will see that the middle class urban Western man is not that much different from his counterpart in China, that "they are connected by a common set of core values," Wang says.

And common interests as well. For example, as consumer culture catches on in China, its humongous consumer market, Wang contends, could be "an alternative growth engine for the global economy", in fact, "an answer to America's economic woes."

On the other hand, a full-on consumer boom in China will result in serious challenges to preserving the ecological balance.

In 2008, China replaced the US as the biggest emitter of greenhouse gases. This is where the US, with its experience in tackling environmental pollution, use of new technology and non-governmental initiatives, can come in.

"If the two countries work together in developing new clean energy technologies, such as solar power and electric vehicles, they can develop them on a large scale and achieve a major leap in clean



AT A GLANCE

The Chinese middle class is defined as: Urban professionals and entrepreneurs with a college education and an annual income between \$10,000 and \$60,000.

When they emerged: Took a noteworthy form only in the last 15 years, as a somewhat-delayed effect of the economic reforms of 1978

Average age: 35, one of the youngest middle-class age ranges in the world

Numbers at present: Over 300 million people, about 25 percent of the total Chinese population

Numbers in future: Expected to grow to 612 million (40 percent of total Chinese population) by 2025, according to McKinsey projections

Defining characteristics: According to Helen Wang, the Chinese middle class could be defined by the words, "optimism" and "anxiety". While many people are enjoying better lives than before, they are also extremely insecure.

Hopes and possibilities: By working at the micro/local level, expected to emerge as a major global force

energy that neither could make alone," she writes.

And this cooperation could start at the micro level, with everyone remembering to sort out the trash and putting it in separate bins for recycling.

A culture of fraternizing among nations is already beginning to emerge, Wang says.

"China is picking up ideas and learning like crazy from the West, while Eastern culture and philosophy is so hot in the United States. The

differences between these two cultures are there, but people, especially those from the academic and business communities, are more aware of these than before.

"My book is a small contribution to this convergence of interests and tendencies from both cultures," Wang adds.

The Chinese Dream has an obvious resonance with the idea of The Great American Dream. American historian James Truslow Adams defined the concept as "life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement regardless of social class or circumstances of birth."

It also brings to mind Martin Luther King Jr.'s now-mythical public address at a civil rights march in Washington DC in 1963, making an impassioned case for racial equality. The latter, along with Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, inspired Wang to leave Chinese shores and seek a life in the US in the late 1980s.

"They seemed to breathe fresh air in my life and my thinking," she recalls. "I was young, I wanted to experience something radically different."

Years later, while interviewing some 100-odd people for her book, Wang found most of them were far too rooted in reality to indulge in the luxury of dreaming. They told her as much, in unequivocal terms.

Barring a few exceptions.

Yi Fan started as an unskilled migrant laborer in a plastic factory. By sheer grit, hard work and perseverance he rose through the ranks to become the general manager of a flourishing restaurant, earning a decent salary. But it was taking up the distributorship of a mobile phone brand that changed his life. In less than two years he had made 3 million yuan (\$463,800). He was only 25.

Seven years later, Wang met Yi Fan again. He was the owner and chief instructor of an English-language teaching institute, dedicated to the cause of ensuring better lives and opportunities for non-English-enabled people as he himself once was.

"I found him inspiring," Wang says. "I think he stands out for his energy, optimism and ultimately the choice he made. That gave me hope, the fact that people valued selfless service in this cynical, materialistic world."

"Unlike in the US there is no core Chinese dream," Wang admits. But she is hopeful that as the Chinese middle class evolves, they too will "acquire a vision and start dreaming about it."

"I think it's important to encourage the Chinese to dream, no matter how impossible it seems to achieve." She believes the Chinese dream, at the end of the day, would have similarities with its American counterpart.

It's going to be about making a good life in a world in which "different nations interact harmoniously as if they were part of one body."

Heed perils of growth led by consumption, writer warns

By YANG GUANG
CHINA DAILY

It took Malaysian Chandran Nair a long time to gain the confidence to start his first book, though the idea was incubated for 20 years.

Consumptionism — Asia's Role in Reshaping Capitalism and Saving the Planet, published in January, 2011, is about the re-emergence of Asia as an economic power, and the dilemma this poses to itself and the world.

Nair, founder and CEO of the Global Institute for Tomorrow, an independent think tank advancing the understanding of key issues and challenges related to globalization in Asia, says many Asians are too shy to express their opinions, in the wake of nearly 200 years of colonial intellectual subservience.

"Usually the narrative is shaped by Western thinkers, but my view is that a lot of them have a complete lack of understanding of this part of the world," the 55-year-old says. "They are too steeped in their own ideology."

For years, consumption has been considered the driving force of global economy. The recent financial crisis has seen Western economists and policymakers urge Asia to consume more to help rescue the global economy.

Nair argues that if Asians were to achieve consumption levels taken for granted in the West, the result would be environmentally disastrous. It would also have significant geopolitical impacts as countries scramble for depleting resources.

The central message he conveys is that we cannot, as a global society, believe that there is going to be a market-driven solution to the crisis of resource constraints. Instead, the solution will entail making sensitive political choices and adopting certain forms of governance to effect a fundamental change of direction.

"Resource policy must be at the center of all policy-making, and for that, we need strong governments," he says.

The book brings out critical issues for readers to reconsider: the consumption of resources, the way we measure economic wealth and social health, the changing balance of power between the East and West, and the future of human society at large.

It is a call for people to abandon the goal of realizing consumption-driven capitalism in Asia and replace it with a different one — of maintaining an environment that can be passed on to future generations, one with biodiversity and adequate resources.

Born to Indian parents, Nair grew up in Malaysia. He went to Britain to study chemical engineering and then volunteered to help build water and sanitation systems in South Africa.

For 30 years, he has worked and lived in Asia, Europe, Africa, the United States and Australia. His work and interests revolve around environmental protection and social development.

Nair says the book is the result of a dinner conversation with his publisher, who suggested that Nair expand and write down what he said, after hearing his speech on the conundrum consumption-led growth poses for Asia, in Bali, in 2009. Then it took him a whole year to finally squeeze his grand ideas into this thin book.

Nair avoids giving country-specific examples in the book. But in his interview with China Daily, he points out food security and urban issues, such as the car ownership issue, in China.

In late April, he went on a five-day visit to Northwest China's Gansu province, where he visited ancient monasteries and stayed with ethnic groups.

"What impressed me was how everyone tried to live together — the Muslims, the Tibetan Buddhists, and the Chinese Han," he says. "Different beliefs, but all coexist."



Chandran Nair, Malaysian author.