

A Study on the Influence of Beaconism on Immigration Propensity among Youth and Middle-aged Chinese Individuals

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Abstract: In 21st-century China, the phenomenon of migration is becoming increasingly common. Some people migrate to improve their standard of living, while others are inspired by the call of “Beaconism” to go to other countries in search of an imagined “utopia.” This study investigates the spread of “Beaconism” on the Chinese internet and its influence on the immigration propensity of young and middle-aged Chinese individuals. Through literature analysis and case studies, the paper elucidates the connotation and characteristics of “Beaconism,” as well as its dissemination mechanism on platforms such as immigration intermediaries and social media. The findings indicate that “Beaconism” has a significant impact on the immigration motives, destination choices, and value systems of the young and middle-aged groups, characterized by a blind pursuit of Western civilization and a neglect of traditional culture. This research provides a new perspective for understanding the immigration phenomenon in China and offers prospects for future research.

Keywords: Ideology, Beaconism, Chinese immigrants, Case study.

1. Introduction

As China enters its mid-20s, its economy gains momentum and demonstrates strong resilience. In 2023, the country’s socioeconomic development rebounded significantly towards high-quality development [1]. However, high-speed economic development comes more pronounced shortcomings such as rampant bureaucratic corruption, unpopular social distribution mechanisms, imperfect legal construction, and a widening wealth gap, affecting public perception of China’s future prospects. From April to June 2023, youth unemployment reached an all-time high of over 20%, making joblessness the most pressing challenge for Chinese young people [2]. Overall, since the turn of the century, China has remained at the forefront of various aspects of development, advancing laws, society, and culture. Nevertheless, some still view China through a lens of Beaconism, perceiving it as backward and authoritarian while harboring delusions that Western influence will bring prosperity to their land. This mindset still influences generations of Chinese immigrants who aspire to achieve the "American Dream" in the United States. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), China has ranked fourth globally in terms of overseas migration since 2022, and first in terms of total migrants [3]. Most of these migrants choose Western developed countries as their destinations. Classic immigration theories hold that

seeking economic benefits is the primary motive for people to migrate overseas. However, it remains a fact that despite its strong economic growth, China struggles to retain many talented individuals, even when offering substantial remuneration. Therefore, this paper focuses on non-materialistic factors and a higher standard of living that influence people's views on migration, particularly examining the role of Beaconism in these factors and its impact on migration choices among middle-aged and younger generations in China. The aim of this paper is to provide a novel perspective for understanding the factors that influence people's decisions to migrate overseas.

2. Literature Review

"Beaconism" is not a specific political academic term, but a widely prevalent social and psychological state in China shortly after the end of the Cold War. It refers to the indigenous reflection of Chinese liberal intellectuals, who live in China and admire Western historical and cultural heritage, political systems, economic models, and ways of life, on concepts such as "American exceptionalism" and "Pax Americana." At that time, the West, victorious in the Cold War, was seen as invincible by many Chinese, who regarded the United States as an unshakable leader guiding the development of world civilization. In 1991, US President George Bush claimed in his State of the Union address that the US was the only country with "the moral standing" and means to assemble forces of peace, making it "the beacon of freedom" in the world [4].

Paul Hollander saw the reflection and criticism of Western leftist intellectuals on certain issues as a kind of political pilgrimage," which is a source of understanding for Beaconism [5]. Alexander Windt attempts to explain the illusions about another country using a cultural ontological approach, arguing that it is a reflection of one's own cultural needs, creating a "beacon" of political idolatry. For example, when dealing with an adversarial country, people tend to project their own undesirable traits onto them; while constructing an imagined "utopia" involves projecting their most desirable traits onto another country's system [6].

In his paper, Dr. Yao from Yale University divides this "beacon worship" into two categories: Political Beaconism and Civilizational Beaconism. Political beaconism involves the United States being viewed as "the main destination of imaginary pilgrimage," due to its status as a leader in the West and "the only 'worthy' comparison with China in an increasingly 'Chinamerican' world order." This type of beacon worship originates from rebellion against China under Communist Party rule and a struggle for anti-government political views. On the other hand, Civilizational beaconism is characterized by "unquestioning admiration and glorification" of Western civilization's presumed advancements, including "all of its political achievements and perfections." This type of beacon worship is often associated with Chinese Trumpists or "chuanfen" [7].

3. An Overview of Beaconism

3.1. Definition and Its Development

"Beaconism" is a social and psychological state or ideological trend mainly showing high admiration and imitation of certain Western countries' (especially the US) political, economic, and cultural models. It believes that these models possess universal value and are worth learning from and emulating for other countries. Proponents view such countries as ideal role models, considering their development paths as successful and correct, having a global leading and guiding role globally. It involves acknowledging Western superiority and may come with criticizing one's own country and selectively accepting and promoting Western models.

Beaconism in China has undergone a dynamic evolution, reflecting the country's changing attitudes towards Western models.

In the late Qing Dynasty, countless talented and patriotic individuals sought ways to strengthen and enrich their nation amidst the national crisis, particularly admiring the United States. Sun Yat-sen once described America as "the most progressive, the most great, and the most prosperous nation" [8]. Due to concerns about the country's decline, there was a prevalent mindset among China's early elite known as "Beaconism," which regarded developed countries as models to emulate and learn from [9].

After the establishment of People's Republic of China (PRC) a strategy of complete alignment with the Eastern camp was adopted. The pursuit of a Soviet-style life and future communism became paramount, with the Soviet Union serving as the first "beacon". However, continuous political movements emerged following the establishment of the communist regime, leading to dissatisfaction among many individuals, especially intellectuals. In light of China's isolation from the West during the Cold War and subsequent deterioration in relations with the Soviet Union, this "beacon" faded away, leaving Chinese people feeling isolated under intellectual leadership. With normalized China-US relations and ushering in an era of reform and openness, Western civilization completely overturned Chinese perceptions at that time regarding advanced affluence. This transformation was accompanied by deep distrust towards China itself and a sense of humility which established another beacon illuminated by Western civilization.

As the 1980s and 1990s progressed, China embraced Western market economics, management techniques, and technology through reform and opening-up. This marked the initial influence of beaconism in China as it sought to learn from and adapt Western practices for its own economic development. China's engagement with Western ideas extended beyond economics to politics, law, and education. A growing number of intellectuals and reformists advocated for adopting Western democratic principles and the rule of law in this phase, which saw a deeper integration of Western concepts into Chinese society while also initiating critical examination. In the 21st century, China continues to prioritize economic growth while fostering cultural and institutional self-confidence. The focus has shifted towards developing "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," moving away from blindly imitating Western models. While still valuing Western technological expertise and management practices as sources of learning, China has matured in its understanding of how to integrate foreign influences with its own unique historical and cultural context. This ultimately leads to a more autonomous and innovative path of development.

3.2. Connotation and Characteristics

As a social and psychological state or ideological tendency, it is characterized by several key aspects. Firstly, the core traits of beaconism are imitation and idealization. Its proponents see Western countries, especially the US, as ideal role models, believing their political, economic, and cultural models hold universal value and are worthy of emulation by other nations. Secondly, unidirectionality is evident in the excessive admiration for the Western development path, often overlooking the uniqueness and value of other countries and cultures. Furthermore, the universality of beaconism is reflected in the belief that Western models and values are universally applicable to other countries, particularly developing nations. It also criticizes one's own country by comparing it to the superiority of Western nations, indicating deficiencies and improvement directions.

The dynamic nature of beaconism means its content and influence change with the international and domestic situations. Selectivity is manifested when Beaconists selectively emphasize the positive aspects of Western countries and ignore their problems. In terms of influence, it affects individuals, society, and national policies in areas like education, culture, and politics. Its controversiality lies in being seen both as a force for reform and progress and as a sign of cultural inferiority or blind admiration for foreign cultures.

Finally, the plurality of beaconism suggests that despite its inclination to mimic Western countries, its manifestation and focus can vary among individuals and social groups. These characteristics collectively reveal the complexity and diversity of beaconism as a social and psychological phenomenon, as well as its dynamic changes within different cultural and political contexts.

3.3. The Mechanism of the Spread of Beaconism: Platforms and Methods of Dissemination

3.3.1. Information Dissemination Mechanism

In the era of the internet, the spread of Beaconism ideology has become diversified. As most Beaconists are intellectuals, they not only utilize the online platforms of traditional print media to disseminate their values but also extensively employ digital media platforms such as WeChat public accounts, Weibo, blogs, and Douyin (Tik-tok) to form self-media. Through these self-media, they establish shared communities to critique social phenomena in China and mount organized counterattacks against speech and news unfavorable to the United States and other Western countries. Additionally, they engage in knowledge-sharing communities like Zhihu (the Chinese version of Quora) and Xiaohongshu, which target individuals with higher levels of education and a certain financial background, to achieve knowledge sharing and thereby attract popularity. Chinese Beaconism ideologues attach great importance to the content of overseas media. On international social media platforms such as X and Instagram, they often rely on mass sharing of news unfavorable to China to attract a group of dissenting individuals within China.

3.3.2. Social Psychological Mechanism

Since the formal collision between China and the West in 1840, Chinese intellectuals' attitudes towards Western civilization can be roughly divided into six types: worship, love, flattery, fear, hatred, and jealousy [10]. Among them, worship and flattery are the most prevalent social attitudes. After the 1990s, with the failure of the socialist camp in the Cold War, Western bourgeois civilization had an extremely strong impact on Chinese society. The three generations born between the 1960s and 1990s grew up in the honeymoon atmosphere of American popcorn movies, Coca-Cola, jeans, and popular rock culture in the United States and were full of yearning for the powerful Western material civilization. However, they also experienced historical colonialism and aggression against their own civilization, and there was a regression from the emphasis on strengthening the progressiveness of this civilization's integration into world civilization in the "backwardness must be beaten" reflection to the self-depreciation and self-debasement of the "backwardness deserves to be beaten" reflection. For example, the influential "River Elegy School" in the 1980s praised that "Americans live between two oceans; European nations live around the Mediterranean," and such a superior geographical environment brought them excellent "blue ocean civilization." In contrast, Chinese people, because of their love for and attachment to the mainland, have never been able to completely surpass the boundaries of land and move towards the blue sea [11]. This is the fundamental reason for China's decline and decline. This nihilistic reflection pervades society and lays an important social- psychological foundation for the spread of Beaconism.

4. Case Study: The Influence of Beaconism from a Pair of Distinct Middle-aged and Young Immigrants

4.1. Case 1: A Middle-aged Intellectual Who Failed in Immigration Named “*Jiaoshi*”

In early 2024, a 50-year-old doctor named *Jiaoshi* unexpectedly gained modest popularity on the Chinese Internet. Despite never having visited any Western country, he garnered attention for his unwavering admiration of Western civilization since resigning from a university in 2021 and starting his own official account. Although his rhetoric may appear amusing to some, it is worth noting that he encountered comical reasons for being rejected twice when applying for a visa at the British Embassy. According to an article published on his personal official account, he believes that the visa officer failed to understand his admiration for the civilization and history of the United Kingdom. Furthermore, in nearly two pages of self-introduction written in English, *Jiaoshi* introduced himself to the British people by highlighting various aspects such as obtaining a doctorate degree ten years ago and traveling extensively during winter and summer vacations over the past decade. He emphasized writing from an enlightenment standpoint which has earned him many readership while Expressing readiness both psychologically and financially to embark on a new life journey at this critical point in his life at age 50. Determined to break free from work constraints and explore the world, *Jiaoshi* views this as an opportune moment granted by fate itself; thus encouraging embracing this new starting point with courage. He stressed, "Please scan the QR code attached to you, and you can read all my articles... If you read some of the articles I wrote in the past four years, you will definitely believe that I am a sincere tourist" [12]. However, to the visa officer, his explanations give the impression that he is akin to smugglers seeking "political asylum" in order to sneak into the United Kingdom. In fact, both visa rejections were due to the same reason: his failure to thoroughly review the required visa information. Overconfident in his English proficiency and harboring an illusion that his deep admiration for British civilization would naturally be reciprocated by its civilized people, he completely disregarded ensuring completeness of his visa documentation. For individuals like him, traveling to Western countries represents more than just material pursuit or a simple tourist destination; it becomes a pilgrimage towards an ideological "Beacon."

4.2. Case 2: A Young Homeless Influencer Immigrants Known as “*Golden Lecturer Dingpangzi*”

Dingpangzi, a renowned self-media influencer surnamed Lei Hailing from Luzhou, Sichuan Province, is recognized as an influential figure in the field. *Dingpangzi* Square, a famous gathering area for Chinese illegal immigrants in Los Angeles, serves as his namesake and origin. Following imprisonment for theft in China, he faced unemployment and resorted to illegal means to smuggle into the United States. Initially influenced by the ideology of "Beaconism," which portrays America as a "beacon of human civilization" where one can achieve success in life, Lei embarked on this perilous journey like many others who abandoned their lives in China. However, upon arrival in the US, Lei found himself working illegally at Chinese restaurants due to limited employment opportunities for those without legal status; often relying on support from fellow Chinese immigrants. Throughout his experience working at six different Chinese restaurants, he encountered unscrupulous employers that shattered his illusion of America as the "beacon" portrayed by the local Chinese community. Frustrated with these circumstances, Lei chose to report these restaurant owners to the authorities, resulting in ostracization from the Chinese community and loss of access to potential job markets. Left with no other options, Lei was compelled to live on the streets and beg for survival.

Due to TikTok's overwhelming popularity, Lei began recording videos to share his experience of living on the streets. He traversed through government shelters, charitable organizations, food banks, and other places, showcasing his survival methods in the US. This unique way of living captured the attention of numerous internet users and sparked discussions about the underprivileged life in American society. Lei also launched live broadcasts on short video platforms, teaching newcomers to the US skills like how to report unscrupulous bosses and survive in the country. Although his live content is controversial, it has attracted a vast audience and followers. The interactions between him and his viewers have further intensified the popularity and discussions surrounding these topics. It is reported that through tips and donations received during his livestream begging sessions, he can earn up to 0.2 million yuan per month. On the internet, he has become a sort of entertainment phenomenon and a new type of digital pet, earning titles such as the "Founder of American-style Begging," "Governor of California Prefecture," and "Prefect of Los Angeles."

His rise to fame on the internet reflects a cultural reflection among those who once dreamed of success but had their dreams shattered in America. For instance, every time he goes to collect relief food or beg for items at charities, he would say, "The Empress Dowager has already footed the bill for us." On one hand, personally, his remarks serve as a rationalization for his begging behavior. On the other hand, his words have sparked heated debates among Chinese internet users. Some believe he is exploiting nationalism to gain popularity, while others argue that these remarks signify that young Chinese people no longer view Western civilization as a "beacon" but rather a relic of colonialism. Lei's live broadcasts of American-style begging have exposed the darkness beneath the so-called "beacon."

4.3. Analysis of Both of Cases

A comparative analysis of Case 1 and Case 2 reveals how Beaconism, the ideology portraying Western civilization as a beacon of success and enlightenment, has significantly influenced the protagonists' lives and aspirations.

In Case 1, the middle-aged intellectual *Jiaoshi* exemplifies a zealous admirer of Western civilization, particularly that of the United Kingdom and the broader West. His unwavering praise and admiration for Western ideals, albeit from afar, motivated him to apply for a British visa despite never having visited a Western country. However, his naivety and overconfidence in his understanding of Western culture, coupled with inadequate visa preparation, led to his visa rejections. *Jiaoshi's* experience underscores the disconnect between idealized notions of Western civilization and the realities of visa applications. Beaconism, in this context, fueled his aspirations but failed to bridge the gap between admiration and actual access.

In contrast, Case 2 features *Golden Lecturer Dingpangzi*, a young homeless influencer who embarked on a perilous journey to the United States, driven by the allure of Beaconism. Upon arrival, he found himself struggling to survive illegally, dispelling his initial illusions of American success and prosperity. Lei's subsequent exploitation of social media platforms to share his struggles and earn a living highlights a transformation from a passive victim of failed dreams to an active commentator on the harsh realities of American society. His rise as an internet sensation exposes the underbelly of the "beacon," challenging the myth of American exceptionalism and prompting cultural reflections among Chinese netizens.

In both cases, Beaconism initially acted as a magnet, drawing the protagonists towards Western civilization. However, their experiences underscore the limitations of such idealization. *Jiaoshi's* visa rejections exposed the practical hurdles of navigating the complexities of international migration, while Lei's transformation from dreamer to critic illustrates the harsh realities that often clash with the alluring narratives of Western success. Ultimately, these cases demonstrate how

Beaconism can both inspire and disillusion, shaping individual narratives of hope, struggle, and sometimes disappointment.

5. Conclusion

The conclusion of this study underscores the profound impact of Beaconism on the immigration aspirations and experiences of young and middle-aged Chinese individuals. Beaconism, as an ideological tendency that idealizes Western civilization and its models of development, has driven many to seek a perceived utopia abroad. Through the comparative case studies of *Jiaoshi* and *Golden Lecturer Dingpangzi*, this research demonstrates the complexities of Beaconism's influence.

However, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Firstly, the analysis relies primarily on individual case studies, limiting the generalization of findings to broader populations. Future research should consider larger-scale surveys or interviews to capture a more comprehensive view. Additionally, the study focuses primarily on Chinese individuals, excluding potential cross-cultural comparisons that could further enrich our understanding of Beaconism's global reach.

Looking ahead, further research should delve into the mechanisms underpinning Beaconism's dissemination and its evolving manifestations in the digital age. As social media platforms increasingly shape public discourse, understanding how Beaconism is propagated and received online holds significant implications for policy-making and cultural exchange. Moreover, investigating the long-term consequences of Beaconism on individual well-being, social cohesion, and national policies could provide valuable insights for addressing the challenges posed by globalization and cultural homogenization.

In summary, while this study contributes to the understanding of Beaconism's influence on immigration, there remains much to be explored. By addressing its limitations and expanding our research horizons, we can better grasp the intricacies of this complex ideological phenomenon and its implications for individuals and societies worldwide.

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