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The American Dream is Still Real

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The American Dream Is Still Real

I grew up in Beijing, China. I was the only child, due to the “One Child Policy.” When I was a child, China was still mostly under its Socialism Planned Economy, which meant the government planned everything: agricultural products, industrial products, businesses, entertainments, even people’s careers. Both my parents worked full time, yet they could barely afford food and clothing. We lived in a government owned one bedroom apartment. It had a separate small kitchen which was shared with a few neighbors. There was a public restroom (without a shower or water pipes) for the entire building. A small black and white TV was the most valuable item my family had. Most families were just like us. Under such living conditions, we were not considered poor people because at least we had a place to live and food to eat. Occasionally we could even go to the theatre to watch a movie. There were many poorer people than us. Based on my own childhood experiences, I would say that the United States of America is a country with plenty of opportunities, even though such opportunities might not look particularly good to many Americans.

Even the hourly wage jobs that many Americans complain about pay sufficiently for people to survive. Compared to what my family experienced in China, even working at a minimum wage job in America, one still can afford a decent standard of living. Take myself as an example: when I first came to U.S. back in 2003 with limited English, I got my first job as a cashier at Macy’s. My hourly pay was just \$7.25. My husband was a Ph.D student and lived on a student loan of \$8,000 per year. Together, we could afford to rent a one-bedroom apartment with a fully equipped kitchen and a bathroom in a high-cost of living city in Virginia. We also

owned a used car and a pet dog. Sure, we could not go to the restaurants whenever we wanted or buy fancy clothes, but our lives were so much better compared to my childhood.

When Americans talk about the poor, they often do not have the concept of what the average living conditions of the world's collective population is. The Census Bureau reports that about 37.9 million Americans lived in poverty in 2021, but this is "poverty" only compared to the standards of a wealthy modern society. Robert Rector and Jamie Bryan Hall, researcher fellows for the Heritage Foundation, explained most people who are identified as "poor" in America own lots of material goods, including cars, televisions, computers, smartphones, and other basics; hunger is quite rare here. Rector and Hall point out that a single mother with two children working full time at federal minimum wage, "after taxes, has only \$13,853 in annual earnings" (which is below the Federal Poverty Guidelines of one person household annual income \$14,580). But with government welfare and Medicaid coverage, her combined income from earnings and benefits would be around \$36,500. Jack Flynn, a freelance writer for Zippia, reported that "the average global personal income is \$9,733 per year; the average global household income is \$12,235 per year; the median per-capita household income is only \$2,920 per year." These numbers mean if you work a full-time minimum wage job in America, your annual income is above the average global personal income by more than one-third, not even including the government benefits for people living in poverty. Compared to the rest of the world, "the poor" in America are in fact not that poor.

I acknowledge that the minimum wage jobs are exhausting, dull, and unstable. Nobody really likes or enjoys their minimum wage job. When I worked at Macy's as a cashier, my main responsibility was to put the clothes from the fitting rooms back on the shelves where they

belong. I repeatedly hung clothes at least hundreds of times during my shift every day. When it was the holiday season, the fitting rooms were filled with so many clothes that I had to work at night after the store closed to put all of them back. By the end of the day, I was so exhausted. Next day, I would be doing the same tasks over and over. Most minimum wage jobs are like this: cashiers, janitors, waiters, etc. We do the simple repetitive manual labor day after day, month after month, year after year. No wonder most Americans cannot imagine doing such jobs for their entire life. Katherine Newman, a professor of urban studies at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, described such jobs a few decades ago as “the ones that pay the minimum wage, try the strength and patience of anyone who has ever tried to hold them, and subject their incumbents to a lingering stigma.” Today, tens of millions of workers in America are doing those boring, low-paid tasks that few people think of as good careers.

However, many people who work at these low-wage jobs come from places where they have even worse working conditions. In China, it is common for people work 9-9-6, meaning work from 9am to 9pm each day, 6 days a week. Even so, their incomes are not nearly as much as the U.S. minimum wages. The average annual per capita disposable income of households in China in 2022 was approximately 36,883 yuan (around \$5,269). Compared to the working conditions and the incomes in China, minimum wage jobs in U.S., even as boring and exhausting as they are, are still better.

With strong values and priorities, people can thrive in America. Lots of immigrants end up advancing in ways that American-born low-wage workers often do not. They are grateful for the jobs they have gotten in America. They strongly believe in traditional values, such as working hard, saving up rather than spending, persisting in pursuing dreams. They especially

value education. Many of them work longer hours or even two jobs in order to provide the best education opportunities for their kids, so their kids will live better lives than they had. When I worked at Macy's, I had a co-worker who was from Vietnam. She was over fifty at that time. She worked as a school bus supervisor in the morning and early afternoon; then she came to Macy's and worked as a cashier until the store closed. She had two kids, both of whom were in college. When her kids graduate from college, they will have much better jobs and lives than their parents. They will appreciate their mom's efforts to support their education. And they will do the same for their children, passing down the same values they learned from their parents.

The U.S. not only has plenty of job opportunities, but also provides many other options for people who want to improve their lives, such as education. There are countless continuing education programs, English as Second Language courses for immigrants, and professional training or workshops at reasonable prices. It does not matter where you come from, what skin color you have, what language you speak, or how old you are—everyone has access to opportunities. Back in my earlier days in America, I was not satisfied with my Macy's cashier job. I wanted to get a better job. The only way to achieve that goal was to improve my English first. I used all the resources I could find—I went to local churches where they offered free English conversation classes for foreigners; I checked out books from the local library to practice reading in English; I also took English speaking and writing classes at a school for adults with my spare time. My English gradually improved over time. Eventually, I was able to get a full-time office job at a non-profit organization as the Contract and Grant Assistant. I continued to study and work hard. I got a promotion within one year. Both my working environment and income were much better than what I had with my cashier job. Even now at age forty-five, after being a stay-home

mom for over ten years, I decided to go back to school to pursue the dream I had when I was in my twenties—becoming a veterinary technician. Parkland College and many other community colleges provide learning opportunities for people like me.

People come to the U.S. from all over the world. They grow up with diverse backgrounds and may have various levels of education. They may have different goals and face different challenges in their lives. No matter what, as long as one keeps working hard, never gives up, and believes in oneself, America always has plenty of opportunities for people to make their dreams come true.

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