

" Dreams, Illusions, Bubbles, Shadows": Awareness of "Unreality" While Dreaming Among Chinese College Students

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Editor's Note: In this somewhat abbreviated version of the original paper, we focus on three dreams from mainland China which are even closer to the minimalist definition of dream lucidity (awareness of dreaming while dreaming) than those published in Walters' and Dentan's (1985) article, "Are Lucid Dreams Universal? Two Unequivocal Cases. . . ." In the 1985 article, the authors point out that "the foregoing data are consonant with the speculation that lucid dreaming is a 'universal,' found in all societies regardless of whether it is valued in a society." Although the authors call the dreams presented here "quasi lucid" (and Charles Tart might call them "dreaming-awareness" dreams), the authors' quasi lucid definition is the same as the minimalist definition of lucidity used for most laboratory or survey work. The first dream, especially, fits minimalist standards because of the phrase, "I knew I was having a dream."

The recent literature on lucid dreaming (e.g., Purcell et al., 1985) includes some discussion of how to categorize "quasi lucid" states of consciousness, in which dreamers are aware of dreaming but do not control the content of their dreams. Without venturing into the theoretical questions involved, we offer some Chinese data which fall into this category and which suggest a plausible interpretation of such states of consciousness. These data may prove useful to researchers for two reasons. First, nonWestern data of this sort are difficult to locate in the ethnographic literature (cf. Walters & Dentan, 1985), a situation which, among other things, exacerbates the difficulty of disentangling biological determinants of dreaming from cultural ones. Second, the process which we propose to interpret the sort of "quasi lucidity" in these Chinese dreams may be more generally relevant.

The accounts below are from a corpus ($n = 67$) of dream narratives collected from Chinese college students in Beijing in April and May, 1985. This population seemed homogeneous in terms of age (mostly early 20s), past experience (mostly growing up in the Beijing area) and academic achievement (high). Almost all, including the narrators of the following accounts, are Han. The Han are the dominant ethnic group in China (93.3%) and indeed the largest ethnic group in the world (936,700,000 people). Most Han traditionally regard dreams as insubstantial and illusory. "Mèng huàn pào ying," goes one four-character aphorism (chéng yu), "Dreams, illusions,

bubbles, shadows."6

Although we asked our students to interpret their dreams for us if they felt they could, few could explain their own dreams. Those who tried mostly referred to a two-line aphorism, "Rì you suo si, Yè you suo mèng," "Day is the locus of yearning, Night is the locus of dreaming," i.e., one dreams at night about things on one's mind during the day (cf. Wu Zuguang, 1985, p. 65). A few students offered the interpretative principle that dreams predict the opposite of what is actually to happen (cf. Yi & Xu, 1984, p. 60).

We were surprised at how interested many of the students were in reporting their dreams. Programmatic Marxist-Leninist materialism has reinforced traditional dismissive attitudes about dreams to the extent that there seems to be little cultural pressure to have dreams of any kind. Thus there is no social reward for having the sort of dreams described below.

The first two of the three accounts below are word-for-word as written by two twenty-year-old students in the English department of a small Beijing teachers' college in May, 1985. The first narrative is by a man (#TC 21 in our files) from the city. The crossed-out words (e.g., [high]) are as they appear in his original manuscript.

. . . When I was a middle-school (high school) boy, I often had a peculiar dream. I flied in mid-air, with all my classmates and people I ken knew standing on the group, looking up to me. I flied on and on, high getting higher and higher. However, Moreover, whenever I had such a circumstance, I knew I was having a dream. I didn't know what it meant to me, at that time, but I think I know the answer now. At that time, I was a top student in a key school (elite school; see Wu Ming, 1985), and I was very, very proud, too proud, perhaps, to find a friend. Being told by teachers and parents that being proud was a bad thing, I tried to hide this feeling deep in my heart. Then, when night came, this idea came out and became a dream like that. I haven't had this dream for four or five years. . . .

The second teachers' college narrative (#TC 26) is by a woman who had been quarrelling with her father, who wanted her to read serious economic journals instead of the murder mysteries and science fiction which she preferred.

Yesterday, I had a horrible dream, which I think you may be interested in. Here it is.

In the evening, I went out of the school with a stool in my hand. I seemed to have decided to go to my uncle's home, which is not very far from our school

by bus. How-ever, I hadn't brought any money with me, so I decided to walk there. On my way, I met one of my classmates, who gave me a film ticket and asked me to go to the movie with her. I didn't refuse. We went into a cinema which had a lot of columns in it, and settled down in our seats. The movie started. The first scene was a beautiful lady holding a bloody woman's head in her hands. There was a voice explaining that the head had been found on a country road in the suburb. I was so frightened by the scene that I began to cry. My classmate comforted me. The movie went on without showing a title. On the screen, I could see a beautiful seashore with many cheerful people on it. Many of them were wearing swimming suits. Suddenly, I heard a boy crying, "Oh! God! Look! What are these?" I saw on the screen people begin to gather around him, and not far from the place the boy stood, there were two female arms lying on the sand. . . .

The third narrative (D8) is by a 23-year-old single male architecture student taking an English course preparatory to going abroad for postgraduate study.

People were playing in the skating ring joyously. Miracle appeared suddenly. Some-one were riding bicycles on the surface of melted ice water and didn't sink! They were moving forward in an incredibly fast speed. One by one, the bicycle driving seemed to be ridiculous. Under the cliff there was the ice surface and on the top of the cliff there was a closet. I was changing my clothes with a man I know well but did know his name in the closet. With a great sound, a bomb exploded in the middle of the cliff. I was just about to look what was happening, another explosion frightened me. I was trying to make myself to believe I was dreaming. It was so horrible. Wake up! It didn't work. A bomb exploded inside the closet. Fortunately enough, the bomb was one for teaching, and was not very destructive. No one was hurt. Several bombs just travelled in a curved trace to reach us and explode while we were withdrawing. My acquaintance had been wounded. Someone were shouting cheerfully that they had done an excellent experi-ment. You must be terrified, mightn't you?" one of my former classmates asked me. I didn't know where he came from. "No." I replied, "But my elder brother did." The dream was copied in Dec. 13, 1982. I am sorry to have chosen such a damned unlucky date to dream it.

Summary and Conclusions

In the foregoing dream narratives the dreamer experiences events in the dream as different from mundane reality. The first dreamer "knew" he "was having a dream" when, in his early teens, he repeatedly dreamed of flying. Similarly, the obsessive dismemberments in his classmate's dream are part of a "movie"; the Chinese phrase for

"movie," diàn ying ("electric shadows"), echoes the phrase "dreams, illusions, bubbles, shadows." In both cases, the illusory nature of the dream seems manifest in the dream itself. Finally, the architect consciously tries in his dream to convince himself that he is dreaming, in order to wake himself up.

We suggest tentatively that, in these cases, the semiconsciousness of the quasi lucidity of the dreamer serves to open psychological distance between the dreamer and the dream content. In all three cases the dream seems to refer to feelings with which the dreamer is uncomfortable. American readers should remember that Chinese students are exposed to much less graphic violence than American mass media routinely purvey. Against this background, the notion that the sort of quasi lucidity under discussion is a kind of ego defense mechanism against unpleasant feelings seems plausible. Rather than being a way of dealing with problems, in other words, such quasi lucidity may serve to push them away ("dissociate" them), perhaps as a prelude to waking into a state of consciousness in which they are minimized or denied. This suggestion is consistent with clinical evidence (Delaney, personal communication, 1983).

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