

INDIVIDUAL OBSERVATIONS

Are Lucid Dreams Universal? Two Unequivocal Cases of Lucid Dreaming Among Haw Chinese University Students In Beijing, 1985

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As one of us recently argued (Dentan, in press a, b), many phenomena in nonWestern societies resemble lucid dreaming, but the ethnographic literature includes relatively few specific cases of such phenomena which are unambiguously both lucid and dreams. Much of the ethnographic material comes from societies with elaborated “culture pattern dreams,” highly desired ASCs often involving a degree of conscious control (e.g., Harner, 1973; Noll, 1983). Accounts of lucidity in such culture pattern dreams may stem from informants’ recasting non—lucid ASCs into stereotyped local narrative formats whose conventions mimic lucidity. Conversely, bearing dream accounts in such formats may predispose listeners to lucid dreaming (see, e.g., Devereux, 1957).

In 1984-1985 we worked as professors in Beijing institutions of higher learning. Almost all our students were from the Han ethnic group, the dominant Chinese “nationality” (936 million people). Traditionally pragmatic, Han tend to regard dreams as trivial and unreliable, a ten— dancy reinforced since 1949 by programmatic Marxist materialism and isolation from Western intellectual trends (for a sampling of traditional Han responses to dreams, see Feng, 1981; Lai, 1970; Lai & Lin, 1978; Li, 1982; Minford, 1983; Pu, 1981; Sima, 1979; “Straits Times”, 1983; Yang, Yang & Hu, 1983; Yi & Xu, 1984; Zhong, 1983; for non—Han Chinese, see, e.g., Qui, 1983). To our students the notion of lucid dreams seemed to be completely alien and unfamiliar. In short, the lucid dreaming reported below seems uninfluenced by Western ideas or by Han values. The unprompted appearance of lucid dreaming in accounts collected from two separate classes during the collection of about 50 dream accounts from the same number of Han undergraduate and graduate students seems therefore worth reporting even before the main body of material is analyzed.

The two accounts are verbatim and una-bridged. Although “Chinglish” narratives may distort the experiences being described more than Chinese would have, they are probably more true to life than a foreigner’s English would be, and “polishing” might lose nuances “Chinglish” captures. The accounts are given in full to preserve narrative context and, e.g., so that readers can note that “A’s” specific dream accounts seem to belie his general description of his dreams. Dentan (1984, in press b) details the rationale for these editorial decisions. Our full report will describe the circum-stances in which the dreams were collected.

A. Man in his 20s; graduate student in physics.

I don't have colour dreams I think I have to say my dreams are black and white for it's hard for me to remember the colours of the dreams that I had had.

I don't think I sleeping deeply when I was dreaming because the dream that I was having were controlled by me. When it would lead some terrible results then I could stop the dream and if something happy would happen then I would let the dream go on.

Here are three of my dreams.

1. I took the mathematics exam of the university Entrance Exam one day. When I sat in the classroom, the questions, I found, were all about politics which were the most difficult for me. So I had nothing to do but to sigh. . . .Stop.

2. I had killed one of my best friends and I was tried to death. Stop.

3. I took part in the Second World War and when I had a gun fight with the Japanese, my gun didn't work but I couldn't be killed either by bullets of the enemies. Stop.

B. Man in his early 20s; science student.

I don't dream often even I really have a dream, I often cannot remember it when I wake up, though I know I dreamt. But its not always the case. Sometimes I can remember the dream clearly. What is more, I often dream the same dream. Although I can't tell it now, I know when I'm dream-ing that I once dreamt this dream before that I'm just dreaming. And I even know what's going to happen consequently.

Another interesting thing is that if I'm waken up while I'm dreaming, I can continue the same dream when I soon fall asleep again. In dream, I can never be killed no matter by a gun or a knife or anything else. When someone is chasing me, I can never run fast no matter how much energy I put in use. I'll be able to take off and fly as a bird when I'm nearly caught up.

On the eve of an event that I consider important to me, I always dream it's taking place and I always find something is wrong with me. For instance, when I'm going to take an examination I dream I'm taking it, and I will certainly fail it since I get so many problems not to know how to solve and I don't have enough times to do the problems though I'm in a hurry. Another one is that, when I was going home to go on holidays I dreamt I had missed my train, however, I somehow got on the train later, and I left behind so many things that I wanted to take with me.

The foregoing data are consonant with the speculation that lucid dreaming is a "universal," found in all societies, re-gardless of whether it is generally valued in a society. On the other hand, Han college students' lucidity may be a way of escaping the anxiety about striving and failing which seems to crop up in many of their dreams, including the two oases above. I culturally caused competitive stress predisposes people to lucid dreaming in this way, the question of whether lucid dreaming would spontaneously occur in less competi-tive societies (or less competitive sectors of Han

society) remains moot.

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