

“Dreams, Illusions, Bubbles, Shadows”: Awareness of ‘Unreality’ While Dreaming Among Chinese College Students

Myrna Walters and Robert K. Dentan

*Branch School of Beijing Foreign Languages Institute
Beijing, China*

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 prevalent.

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 seems 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 whose accounts are reported here, are Han. 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. “Meng huàn pào yǐng” goes one four-character-aphorism (chéng yǔ), “dreams, illusions, bubbles, shadows.” 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 yǎo sǎo sí, Yè yǒu sǎo 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 interpretive principle that dreams predict the opposite of what is actually to happen (cf., Yi & Xu, 1984; p. 60). Although 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 particular kind. Thus there is no social reward for having the sort of dreams described below.

The first two 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. We have discussed the rationale of such a presentation in an earlier note (Walters & Dentan, 1985). The first narrative is by a man (*TC 21 in our files) from the city. The cross-

hatching (“/”) represents his crossings-out.

During my life, I have many, many dreams, but now, when I think them over, I can only remember two of them. One is that dream I often dream when I was a middle-school boy; the other is that dream I dreamed a few days ago.

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.

A few days ago, I had a very, very strange dream. The dream was just like a play showing on a stage. I dreamed that there were two heroes fighting against. The two were the best fighters in the world, like Beowolf (perhaps it was because that I read the epic Beowolf that I could have such a dream). One of the heroes was just himself whereas the other had a lot of fighters with him. The group of fighters caught the hero several time but he fled away every time. Once, the hero lost one of his shoes, so he had to stay in a room, and ~~that~~ the group of fighter knew this. The other hero came silently and all of a sudden, he locked the door and locked the hero in the room. The hero of the group laughed loudly and went away. The fighter in the room was very angry and tried to seek a way of going out. At this time, one of the “second class” fighter in that group came. The heroes pledged /pled?/ him to unlock the door. The fighter agreed without any hesitation but he have a condition. That is, the hero should fight with him, because the “second class” fighter thought he could win over the hero. The hero was confident that he could ~~fight~~ win over him and agreed. The fight unlocked the door and the hero came out, saying “I have no time to waste on you” and run away. The fighter was angry: “I thought you were a whole man, but you are not.” The hero, hearing this sentence, run back again, and both of them got ready to fight. At this time I woke up. As soon as I awoke, I had an interpretation of this dream. Those days, I had an eye ~~to~~-on a girl, but the only problem is was that I did tell ~~him~~ her. The single hero represented me and perhaps the other group of heroes represented her. I'm was full of confidence and I believed that I could get her. The scene that the hero was caught several time but he got away every time represented that I wanted to express my feeling to her but each time I gave up. The scene that the two prepared to fight meant that I ~~will~~ would tell this to her. At this ~~critical~~ crucial time, I woke up, and that showed that this matter had an uncertain future

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. However, 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 arms had been washed by sea water and had turned to be extremely pale. Then the scene changed. In a dark lane, there was a man fetching water from a well, but the thing he got out from the well was not water, but a black iron box, in which there were pieces of flesh cut from a human body.

That's all about the dream, for I was waken up by my mother, and fortunately couldn't continue. I really don't understand why I had such a dream. It's true that I used to like detective stories very much and have read something about a person being killed, cut into pieces and being thrown away in different places, but I haven't read such things for a long time. Why do I dream such a dream now? The only reason I can think of is that, the day before yesterday, I translated into Chinese a passage talking about a man in his death throes. The man dreamed that his soul was separated from his body and was watching the struggle of his body. However, if possible, I would like to know your interpretation of it.

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

DREAM

People were playing on the skating ring joyously. Miracle appeared suddenly. Someone 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 not 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 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 traveled in a curved trace to reach us and explode while we were withdrawing. My acquaintance had been wounded. Someone was shouting cheerfully that they had done an excellent experiment. "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. His 1985 dream he perceived as like a stage(d) "play" (see Footnote 1 below). Similarly, the obsessive dismemberments in his classmate's dream are part of a "movie;" the Chinese phrase for "movie," diàn yǐng, "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 he is dreaming, in order to wake himself up.

We suggest tentatively that, in these cases, the semi--consciousness or 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: pride or ambivalence about approaching a girl in *TC 21; violence (which Dentan, for reasons beyond the scope of this discussion, believes to be connected with sexual feelings) in the other two. American readers should remember that Chinese students are exposed to much less graphic violence than American mass media routinely purvey. Our method of eliciting dreams biased our sample towards emotion-laden dreams. Nevertheless, our impression of our as yet unanalyzed sample is that Chinese students' dreams are nasty oftener than we had expected. This impression is consonant with Walls' (1985) finding that Chinese students are significantly less likely to enjoy dreams or to agree that dreaming is good for you than American students are. 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 (see Footnote 2 below).

Footnotes

1. The possibility that this description is a waking elaboration of dreamed experience is methodologically imponderable. There is no way in any given case to distinguish dream narratives from dreams nor any reason to believe that people do not experience dreams as they report them (of. Dentan in press).

2. This suggestion is consistent with clinical evidence (Delaney, personal communication, 1983).

References

- Dentan, R.K. (in press). Ethnographic considerations in the cross cultural study of dreaming and lucidity. In .J.I. Gackenbach (Ed.). A sourcebook on sleep and dreams. New York: Garland.
- Purcell, S., Mullington, J., Pigeau, R., Hoffman, R., & Moffitt, A. (1985). Dream psychology: Operating in the dark. ASD Newsletter, 1(4), 1-4.
- Walls, .J. (1985). Dream content, experience and attitudes toward dreams in Chinese and American university students. ASD Newsletter, 1(4), 8-9.
- Walters, N. & Dentan, R.K. (1985). Are lucid dreams universal? Two unequivocal cases of lucid dreaming among Han Chinese university students in Beijing, 1985. Lucidity Letter, 4(1).
- Wu Zuguang. (1985; originally 1937). Sleep and dreams /Shuì yǔ mèng/. Chinese Literature, (Summer), 64-67.
- Yi Qiong and Xu Junhui. (1984). Elephant Trunk Hill: Tales from scenic Guilin. M.A. Bender and Shi K. (Trs.), Beijing: Foreign Language Press.

Original source: *Lucidity Letter* 4(2), December, 1985, p. 86.