

Between Reality and Illusion:

A Comparative Study of Eastern and Western Dream Theories

Cate Salditt

CHIN 4010

Professor Yanming An

June 16, 2024

The concept of dreaming has long eluded the understanding of Western psychologists and Eastern philosophers. Although there are a plethora of divergent theories according to the universal knowledge of dreams, it is predominantly agreed upon that "dreams typically involve elements from waking life, such as people or familiar locations, but they also often have a fantastical feel" ("Dreaming," n.d.). The cultural contexts underlying the Eastern and Western perspectives on the fantastical nature of dreaming have led to differing conceptions regarding the analysis of dreams. From a Western perspective, dream theories aim to describe dreams and how they occur and explain the processes and mechanisms in the brain that produce dreams. Although Western culture strives to define the ineffable nature of dreams from various perspectives from psychology, neuroscience, and evolutionary biology, Eastern cultures have explained dreams from a more philosophical and lyrical point of view. The Eastern viewpoint of dreams has roots in the Daoist tradition, which entails that life is nothing but an ongoing transformation of the Dao, where there is no apparent good or evil. This Eastern perspective, which transcends dualistic thinking, contrasts with Western culture's concrete and logistic interpretations of dreaming. The differences between Western and Eastern understandings of dreams also hint at the differences between both cultures' attitudes toward the nature of reality.

A clear picture of the Daoist perspective must first be cultivated to understand the cultural context behind the Chinese view of dreaming. Daoism emphasizes living in harmony with the Dao (道), the fundamental principle that is the source of all existence, an unchanging, indescribable force that flows through all life. In Daoism, "all that exists is regarded as constituting a single, integrated whole; there is no external realm or dimension in which supposedly higher truth can be sought" (*Sources of Chinese Tradition* 2000, 34).

Everything in existence is perfectly connected by The Dao, which is ineffable, eternal, and beyond human comprehension. Another crucial concept that aids in understanding Daoism is the complementary forces of Yin and Yang, which represent the dualities of the universe. The philosophy emphasizes the importance of balance and harmony between these two forces, recognizing that they are interconnected and interdependent. Lastly, the philosophical principle of detachment is also exceedingly apparent in Daoist teachings, emphasizing detachment from rigid beliefs, material possessions, and societal expectations. Foundational texts, such as The Zhuangzi, significantly contributed to the development of the Daoist tradition. The Zhuangzi consists of essays and parables that explore Daoist philosophy, often through humorous and paradoxical stories that attempt to emphasize the importance of transcending conventional thinking.

An essential concept of Dao is that it contains no beginning, end, limitations, or boundaries. Life is an ongoing transformation of the Dao, where there is no better or worse. In The Zhuangzi, it is said that "Way can be walked, but we do not see its shape; it has identity but no shape." (*Sources of Chinese Tradition* 2000, 99). Although unable to be described using language, the concept of Dao can be identified through natural phenomena, including dreaming. In seeing our lives as one whole, reflective of Dao, an individual can view the nature of dreaming to be encapsulated as one within their entire perspective of reality. This viewpoint blurs the line between reality and dreaming, a prominent theme in Zhuangzi's Butterfly Dream Parable. Zhuangzi "dreamed he was a butterfly... Awakening, he didn't know if he was Zhou having dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhou" (*Sources of Chinese Tradition* 2000, 103). Zhuangzi explains his butterfly dream of developing his confusion hypothesis, where he develops the idea that we do not know

whether we are dreaming or not; "not until we wake do we know that we were dreaming" (*Sources of Chinese Tradition* 2000, 102). Within the butterfly parable, the distinctive line separating reality from dreaming is blurred, signifying the perception of reality and dreaming as two sides of one whole perception of reality, which are interchangeable. From the Eastern perspective, the ambiguity of whether we are awake or dreaming reflects the principle of Dao. Through this parable, Zhuangzi emphasizes the relativity of human perceptions and the subjectivity of experiences. There is a constant flux between wakefulness and dreaming, where Zhuangzi is not identified with either perception. Furthermore, he encourages transcending dualistic thinking, recognizing the interconnectedness of all experiences, leading to a deeper understanding of the Dao.

The Eastern perspective on dreaming can be observed through various other pieces of literature from Chinese history. In Li Yu's "Gazing to the South," he describes the stark contrast between his current reality and his pleasant dream where his "soul last night was king again" (Birch 1994, 351). Li Yu regards that his soul was present in the dream, and a part of him also experienced his reality in wakefulness. When he wakes up, he describes his reality as "Immeasurable pain" when he wakes from his dream and is confronted with his current reality as a prisoner instead of the king he once was in the past. When he dreams, he can escape his pain and return to a time where his chariot glided "smoother than a summer stream... The trees were blossoming, and a faint wind softened the air of night" (Birch 1994, 351). In this sense, both the author's real-life situation and dream are perceived and validated as two different parts of the same whole of his conception of conscious experience. Although his reality is seemingly unpleasant, it is in balance with the pleasurable nature of his dreams. Lu Yu's dream contains the concept of subjective reality that was also apparent in Zhuangzi's

butterfly dream, which notes that what is real in a dream can feel as vivid as what is real in waking life.

Zhuangzi's Butterfly Dream and Li Yu's "Gazing into the South" explore the fluidity and interchangeability of dream and waking states. These lyrical interpretations of dreaming reflect the significance of Daoism in Eastern culture and perspective on life. While Eastern culture tends to attempt to explain dreaming from a philosophical point of view, Western culture uses a more psychological explanation of this elaborate phenomenon. Western dream theories, such as the psychoanalytic or cognitive theory, explain dreaming as a byproduct of our wakeful life rather than a separate alternative reality.

Similar to most Western dream theories, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory is a widely accepted theory that tries to explain the meanings or themes behind events in a dream. The motive of his theory serves to give dreams meaning or define dreams in terms of our wakeful life. For example, Freud's statement that "the dream is the disguised fulfillment of a repressed wish" defines the dream's content to be valid in terms of an individual's reality in wakefulness (Freud 1927, n.d.). From this perspective, dreams are viewed analytically to determine their psychological function. Freud's psychoanalytic theory became widely adopted by many early 20th-century psychologists and therapists; since then, his findings have become a dominant force in Western psychology, consequently shaping modern psychology's culture. Freud's ideas continue to influence fields including literature and the arts, since his theories are often used to interpret texts, artworks, and cultural phenomena. In this sense, dreaming is seen as a topic to be analyzed rather than a separate reality to experience and understand fully.

To further explore the Western understanding of dreams, the cognitive dream theory proposed by Calvin S. Hall suggests that dreams are a continuation of waking thought processes. As a behavioral psychologist, Hall concluded that dreams directly reflect our thoughts, noting that dreams are "concrete embodiments of the dreamer's thoughts" (Hall 1959, n.d.). While Freud's dream hypothesis was focused on dreams serving as a byproduct of the unconscious mind and repressed desires, Hall's theory describes dreams as a cognitive process that is continuous with waking life. Although these theories are different in their psychological nature, both acknowledge that personal experiences and waking life influence the content and nature of dreams. Both theories also emphasize the psychological and scientific explanations of individual unconscious desires and cognitive processes.

The widely accepted Western theories of Freud and Hall are juxtaposed by the conceptual understandings imposed by Chinese writers. Eastern dream theories focus on collective and cultural insights, which are interpreted on a more holistic level. While the Western theories are proposed to explain the concrete reason for their existence, Eastern theories view dreaming experiences as a method to understand the interconnectedness of life. Western culture places a significant emphasis on reason and formal logic, whereas Eastern culture is rooted in understanding the unified nature of life. From the Western perspective, "reasoning is the true essence of a man rather than a feature" (Budriunaite 2014, 142); however, Eastern culture classifies reasoning as a feature of life. The focus on reason has profoundly contributed to the West's advancements in knowledge, governance, and societal progress. On the other hand, Eastern culture has created a perspective on reality that values balance, interconnectedness, and the cyclical nature of life. While both culture's methods of

understanding dreams reflect diversities in their values, they both propose valuable insights into the complex nature of dreaming.

The Daoist elements of Eastern culture contribute to the focus on self-awareness and inner experience rather than focusing on external experience. This is a crucial difference between how dreams are interpreted between the two cultures. Chinese culture strives to shape the understanding of reality as something to be experienced and understood internally rather than externally. Both Zhuangzi's "Butterfly Dream" passage and Li Yu's "Gazing to the South" demonstrate how abstract Eastern perceptions contrast the dichotomous perceptions prominent within Western culture and methods of understanding our reality.

References

- Birch, Cyril, ed. 1994. *Anthology of Chinese Literature*. Vol. 1. N.p.: Grove Press.
- Budriunaite, Agne. 2014. "The Tension Between Illusion and Reality in Zhuangzi's 'Dream of the Butterfly.' Philosophical Analysis of Western Reception." *The Polish Journal of Aesthetics* 32.
- "Dreaming." n.d. Psychology Today. Accessed June 15, 2024.
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/dreaming>.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1927. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. N.p.: The Macmillan Company.
- Hall, Calvin S. 1959. *The Meaning of Dreams*. N.p.: Dell.
- Sources of Chinese Tradition*. 2000. Compiled by WM. T. De Bary and Richard Lufrano. 2nd ed. Vol. 2. N.p.: Columbia University Press.