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The Lucid Dreamscapes of Jorge Luis Borges and Can Xue

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Sharing a Dream

- The Lucid Dreamscapes of Jorge Luis Borges and Can Xue

The power of dreams, as well as the function of dreaming, has played important roles in many ancient cultures. In Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt, dreams were conceived of as messages from the gods and often interpreted by professionals, while dream books with lists of imagery and standard interpretations were also widely used. An interesting technique for understanding complicated dreams was to ask a professional dream-interpreter to share and subsequently explain one's dream.¹ In ancient Greece, dreams had several functions: They could be message-dreams from divinities, prophetic dreams foretelling the future, medical dreams diagnosing or healing the sufferer or tele-sensory dreams helping the dreamer communicate with the dead or observe far off events.² In Greek literature the prophetic dream was prevalent, here however, the protagonist seldom managed to interpret his or her dream correctly until immediately before the event prophesied. Thus it functioned as a preview for the reader building up suspense and a sense of the inevitability of fate so central to Greek drama.³

In the Chinese text *Zuo zhuan* published in the late 4th century BCE, dreams were perceived either as signs that could be read prophetically or as sources of moral guidance. Temporally then, the dreams dealt with judgement of past deeds as well as with foretelling future events and guiding future actions. In the *Zuo zhuan*, as in Mesopotamian texts, co-dreaming is described and furthermore used as an argument for the objective validity of dream-signs.⁴ In China, as in Greece, dreams were used for diagnostic purposes and dream books with set interpretations circulated. Dreaming was widely used in Buddhist texts as a metaphor for the illusory nature of reality, but also as a means of foretelling things to come. In Daoist scripture, dreams provided a space of transcendence in which the adept could meet with celestial beings or observe his own inner spiritual landscape.⁵ In folklore, dreams represented portals to the spiritual realm, which allowed the dreamer to travel in spirit to a different plane of reality.⁶

¹ Hughes, Donald J. (2000): 'Dream Interpretation in Ancient Civilizations.' *Dreaming*, Vol. 10, No. 1: 8.

² Hughes (2000): 11; Akitopoulou, Helen (2015): 'Sleep and Dreams: From Myth to Medicine in Ancient Greece.' *Journal of Anesthesia History*, Vol. 1: 74.

³ Hughes (2000): 12

⁴ Li, Way-yee (1999): 'Dreams of Interpretation in Early Chinese Historical and Philosophical Writings.' In Shulman, David & Stroumsa, Guy G. (Eds.): *Dream Cultures: Explorations in the Comparative History of Dreaming*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 19.

⁵ Strickman, Michael (1988): 'Dreamwork of Psycho-Sinologists: Doctors, Taoists, Monks.' In Brown, Carolyn T. (Ed.): *Psycho-Sinology – The Universe of Dreams in Chinese Culture*. Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars: 25-47.

⁶ Giskin, Howard (2004): 'Dreaming the Seven-Colored Flower.' *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 63: 80-

Acknowledging the long tradition in ancient cultures across the globe of interpreting dreams as vehicles for crossing spiritual, temporal and spatial boundaries, this paper examines literary dreams from a comparative perspective, with a special focus on the kind of narrative space created by a dream sequence within a literary work. In particular, I look at how traces of Zhuangzi's butterfly dream appear in the oneiric fictions of Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges, and how, in turn, Borges' dream-worlds have inspired Chinese author Can Xue to create a new kind of literary dreamscape. The Chinese dream under inspection here is a literary dream that travels and is re-dreamt and re-written in different texts, times and places. Like the co-dreaming priests of Mesopotamia and ancient China, this literary dream is shared, not only by author and reader, but by several authors who double as readers. The question, so famously raised by Zhuangzi,⁷ of who is dreaming and who is being dreamt of, thus arises on the meta-textual as well as the diegetic level of the works.

In the short stories of Borges and Can Xue, the dream motif creates its own intimate space, a space of what Gaston Bachelard in his book *The Poetics of Space* calls poetic *reverberation*, that is a space, which not only resonates with the reader, but which she can inhabit as her own: "In the resonance we hear the poem, in the reverberations we speak it, it is our own,"⁸ Bachelard writes. This space of reverberation momentarily fuses the positions of reader and writer, as the reader speaks the text as her own. In the works of Zhuangzi, Borges and Can Xue this complex relation between reader and writer is repeated on the diegetic level in the relations between dreamer and dreamed.⁹

By comparing these literary experiments involving the dreams and dreaming, I hope to shed light on the limits and possibilities of the literary dream motif, not only as a metaphor but as constructing a special kind of narrative space. Tracing the travelling dream of Zhuangzi through modern South American fiction and further on to avant-garde Chinese fiction, we can get an idea of the cross cultural potential for *reverberation* which the dream motif seems to possess.

⁷ Though, according to Hans-Georg Möller, not necessarily so to be so understood in a Daoist context: Möller, Hans-Georg (1999): 'Zhuangzi's "Dream of the Butterfly" - A Daoist Interpretation.' *Philosophy East & West*, Vol. 49, No. 4.

⁸ Bachelard, Gaston (1994): *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press: 7.

⁹ Wolfson, Elliot R. (2014): 'In the Mirror of the Dream: Borges and the Poetics of Kabbalah.' *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. summer; Yao, Zhihua: "'I Have Lost Me": Zhuangzi's Butterfly Dream.' *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. 40, No. 3-4; Cheng, Kai-Yuan (2014): 'Self and the Dream of the Butterfly in the Zhuangzi.' *Philosophy East & West*, Vol. 64, No. 3.