
Reviewed by Alexander Hsu (University of Notre Dame, The Rafat and Zoreen Ansari Institute for Global Engagement with Religion)

Published on H-Buddhism (January, 2022)

Commissioned by Jessica Zu (USC Dornsife, School of Religion)

Robert Ford Campany's sixth book, *The Chinese Dreamscape, 300 BCE–800 CE*, builds on materials, themes, and arguments that Campany has been exploring over his previous five in expanding our understanding of early medieval Chinese religious worlds. *Chinese Dreamscape* is just as generously spirited, combing through scholarship external to Sinology and religious studies for relevant comparative cases and methodological insights, and then devising novel frameworks for his readers to better elucidate phenomena in their own fields of study, Asian religious traditions or otherwise. It is always pleasurable to consume Campany's unique scholarly voice—at turns cautiously exhaustive, insistently clear, and playfully poetic—for the space of another book. And *Chinese Dreamscape* might also represent Campany at an especially self-reflexive moment, as the uncanny nature of dreams themselves continually challenge human attempts to render them sensible. We witness the author in the act of growing and reshuffling his theoretical repertoire to better capture the foreignness of the beings early Chinese people met when they were asleep.

The introductory chapter 1, “Mapping the Dreamscape,” rehearses Campany's methods for elucidating religion and culture before setting off to map new theoretical terrain, alleging that “it would be too easy ... to see dreams as just more manifestations of the culture of their time” (p. 15). Still, any dreamscape should be amenable to cultural analysis, and so Campany invokes “implicit patterning (*li* 理),” “code[s],” “paradigms,” “models,” “order,” “social memory,” “perform[ances],” and “repertoire[s]” that structure Chinese thinking and writing about dreams (pp. 3, 6, 5-7, 33, 23-24, 18, 6, 3). Cultures, religions, and traditions, as Campany has also often stressed, are never fixed, unitary entities: they could not possibly each articulate “only one system-like theory or account” of dreaming, and he adds that this is true of even us moderns, who do not uniformly regard dreams as “merely mental event[s] ... of little real signific-
ance” as our Myth of Disenchantment may have us believe (pp. 2, 12). Spurred by the Otherness not just of premodern Chinese written accounts but also of contemporary dream discourses and dream experiences themselves, Campany devises a new role for cultural analysis in this book: culture now serves as a grid for processing raw oneiric “alterity,” to “smooth over, semilogize, incorporate, and render meaningful and/or non-threatening the strangeness that is dreams” (p. 17). Campany then turns to anthropologists who work with American indigenous peoples for concepts to grasp better the extra-cultural Otherness of dreams: walking us through Philippe Descola, Nurit Bird-David, and Eduardo Kohn’s interrogations of the natural world and the problem of “animism,” Campany shares with us tantalizing new terms like “relational epistemology,” “emergent forms,” “affordances,” and Umwelten (worlds as experienced by particular human and non-human organisms) (pp. 22, 24-27). A dialogue arises, then, between late twentieth-century post-Eliade “Chicago school” interest in cultural taxonomy and social orders (the wavy net on the cover of the book) and this more recent “ontological turn” in cultural anthropology (the rogue butterfly that has broken through the net). I have long understood Campany to be on team net—the patterns he discerns through this book, as always, capture many beautiful bugs—but this book has us rooting for the butterfly as well.

Analogously, late classical and early medieval Chinese writing about dreaming alternates between structure and event, order and liminality, Jonathan Z. Smith’s “locative” and “utopian” modes (pp. 22-24). The subsequent four chapters explore five paradigms of how the Chinese dream: exorcistic, prospective, visitation, diagnostical, and spillover. The first, third, and fifth are described as “performative,” that is, the dream is “a real event in the world,” while the second and fourth paradigms, by contrast, frame dreams as “code” to be interpreted in and for the waking world (p. 5). As one can glean from the table of contents, chapters 3 and 4 (“Interpretations and Interpreters I” and “Interpretations and Interpreters II”) focus on codes and decoding, and the final chapter (“Visitations”) delves into the performative paradigm of face-to-face encounter with an Other. The exorcistic paradigm receives a few pages of coverage at the head of chapter 2, and the spillover paradigm looks to be explored at great length in Campany’s next book, Dreaming and Self-Cultivation in China, 300 BCE-800 CE (forthcoming). These paradigms are evidenced with explicitly early Chinese Buddhist materials, and I suspect they could be adapted for elsewhere and for a different time in the history of Buddhism, because even Buddhist denunciations of the reality of dreams (Campany alludes to the prevalence of this trope in Mahāyāna scriptures that love to wax on emptiness) take place in social worlds where dreams interrupt and are enlisted into programs of bodily healing, ethical cultivation, and state making.

Chapter 2, “The Elusive Nature of Dreaming,” describes the various things that Chinese writers took dreaming to be, juxtaposing Campany’s taxonomy of seven models with the taxonomies of the Zhou Rites, of Wang Fu’s 王符 (ca. 90-165 CE) Discourses of a Recluse, and Buddhist scholastic commentaries translated into Chinese. The majority of writings Campany analyzes in this chapter are not explicitly Buddhist: he begins with a few unearthed manuscripts on exorcising dream assailants, continues through Warring States masters and Daoist traditions, and keeps returning to mine marvelous tales from Buddhist and non-Buddhist collections. He concludes that a few thematic threads lie beneath disparate, conflicting, and often under-elaborated models across the religious traditions, which sometimes reach out to include the thought of the dissenting disenchanted Wang Chong 王充 (27-97 CE), for whom dreams were simply simulacra and had nothing to do with visiting spirits or wandering souls: dreams connect dreamers to cosmic processes, other worlds, and other beings; dreams are primarily caused by
external agents; and dream talk was overwhelm-
ingly practical and therapeutic in its purpose, if only, as for Wang Chong, to rationalize their weirdness.

Chapter 3 examines dreambooks—lists of dreams and their meanings, often presented without instructions for their use—and chapter 4 explores narratives of dream interpretation in anecdote collections and official histories. Both chapters emphasize the sociality of dream interpretation—lists, anecdotes, and interpretations were to be shared, affirmed, and contested—and both emphasize dream interpretation as a divinatory exercise in “managing anxiety” about a future that has not yet come to pass (p. 69). Finally, the two chapters emphasize how the textual artifacts under analysis both reflect and are conscripted into worlds of practice. Translations of dreambook entries and dialogues between famous oneiro-
mancers and their clients offer us many views of these worlds where the meanings of ambiguous dream signs can become resolved. Scholars of the Sinosphere will enjoy these chapters’ unpacking of the affordances of the Chinese written language and divinatory traditions like the renowned Classic of Changes for dream interpretation. A short section exploring the Buddhist dreambook Pusa shuomeng jing 菩薩說夢經 (incorporated into the Da baoji jing 大寶積經, T 310) teases Campany’s further analysis in the next volume: in this volume, Campany tells us that 108 dream signs explain where the dreamer is on the ten-stage bodhisattva path, allowing them to diagnose their karmic blockages and prescribe remedies for their removal. Altogether, Campany offers plenty of material for preparing arguments over what, if anything, is Buddhist or Chinese or simply human about various styles of dream interpretation.

The final chapter traverses an “ontological turn” through a generous handful of relevant anomaly tales from Campany’s favorite collections. The chapter kicks off with a man’s dream encounter with the King of Ants, whom he saves from drowning and who saves him from unfair execution in turn; Campany reads this story with Eduardo Kohn, who argues that “significance ... is not the exclusive province of humans” and that mountains, forests, and animals make and read signs too (p. 134). Scholars of religion who wish to join conversations in environmental and animal studies, whether they have taken the “ontological turn” or not, may wish to skip ahead to this chapter to learn Campany’s moves. For the Chinese, Campany argues, dreams afford “contacts, communications, relationships and exchanges” between living humans and other beings, and our archive of anecdotal tales can offer us precious glimpses of other worlds—what it might have been like to be an ant king, a divine stone, or a spirit fox in their respective Umwelt (p. 141).

Campany concludes with some utopian tales from Zhuangzi that work to dissolve our confidence in the solidity of the conscious selves we inhabit and to defuse the “locative rage for order” contemporary academics might share with early medieval dreambooks and the authors of Buddhist śāstra-s—in the end the rug is pulled out from under us and the butterfly breaks free (p. 163). Chinese Dreamscape opens up portals not just to the past, where dreams met texts in early China, but to future research as well: Buddhologists may return to their scriptures, artifacts, and field sites in order to have the next word on how dreams mean and what dreams do. Buddhist traditions would seem to coalesce around a founder figure who woke up once and for all: in which ways do Buddhists seek to tame, discipline, or give new life to their dreams? What nonhuman, non-Buddhist Others do they communicate with on their journeys? On theories of dreaming, which Buddhist voices could dialogue productively with indigenous hunter-gatherers, Wang Chong, Sigmund Freud, or the man who dreamt of the King of Ants?