
Reviewed by Brigid Vance (Lawrence University)

Published on H-Buddhism (April, 2024)

Commissioned by Stuart H. Young (Bucknell University)

Robert Ford Campany’s 2023 monograph focuses on the roles that dreams and dreaming played in the varied practices of self-cultivation in China from roughly 300 BCE through 800 CE. For Campany, self-cultivation refers to a communally sanctioned practice, program, or prescription for improvement of status or condition promised in associated texts. Instead of exploring one argument, Campany instead weaves a tapestry of intersecting dreaming paradigms. Rather than disentangle the role of dreams and dreaming from the so-called “isms”—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—Campany instead adopts an analytical approach in which he reads what was done or made of dreams based on a shifting “latticework of ideas and practices” (p. 18). Campany addresses the internal logic of a wide range of self-cultivation texts without attributing these texts to particular traditions, maintaining that these traditions were not necessarily coherent wholes, especially when viewed over vast geographical and temporal spaces. Campany notes that although we cannot know if the ideals in these texts were indeed put into practice, they were at least copied, circulated, and engaged with in textual form (pp. 14-15). As in his 2020 monograph on the Chinese dreamscape, Campany here too offers a close examination of paradigms that he sees in the ideas and practices of dreams and dreaming in connection with self-cultivation. These paradigms, to which Campany devotes a chapter each, include purifying, diagnosing, and spillover. In the final chapter, Campany turns to the implications of not dreaming and not awakening for practitioners of self-cultivation. Additionally, Campany includes an epilogue with closing thoughts plus three appendices in which he offers a close analysis, translation, and translation comparison of several seminal texts cited in the preceding chapters.

Chapter 1 investigates the purification paradigm. In this paradigm, dreams were considered incursions and a threat to the self-cultivat-
or. First, Campany carefully unpacks the terminology and issues surrounding the translation of *emeng* 悪夢, maintaining that in the context of the self-cultivation ideas and practices he studies, the term is best understood as a foul or polluting dream, not morally dichotomized as evil (p. 33). Although some of these dreams were indeed conceived as evil, not all were. Campany explores the ways in which polluting dreams were understood, responded to, and prevented in the first place. To this end, Campany details exorcistic ritual techniques and incantations, noting temporal similarities and differences, as well as delving into the relationship between dreamer and exorcistic authority.

In chapter 2, Campany considers the diagnostic paradigm in which dreams offered coded messages requiring intervention and interpretation. As evidenced by the attention paid to diagnosing, practitioners of self-cultivation wanted to understand and mark their progress, as well as identify and remove potential obstacles. Dreams provided clues, and associated texts were concerned with listing these clues, along with their varied meanings. Texts supply diagnoses, prescriptions, and sometimes even etiologies. These indicate to the dreamer the karmic hindrances or obstructions with which they are dealing. As Campany also points out, it was possible to employ both meditative visions and dreams to determine the as-yet-unknown cause of a particular illness. For instance, one text correlates states of bodily *qi* with specific dream signs. Another text connects dreams of intercourse with ghosts and demons with *qi* depletion. Finally, Campany notes that some texts encouraged readers to seek out diagnosing dreams through dream incubation practices.

Next, Campany focuses on the spillover paradigm in which dreams were considered a continuation of the dreamer’s waking self-cultivational activities. The texts Campany studies recommend, promise, or portray the extension of self-cultivational practice during sleep through means of dreaming. Although some dreams were considered polluting and problematic for practitioners, it must have been an attractive relief to understand that dreams offered the opportunity for continued practice. In addition, dreaming offered other realms and even audiences for performing self-cultivation practices. Thus, dreams were interactive and offered direct encounters with spirits, gods, and ancestors, all with consequences for waking life.

In the fourth chapter, Campany considers the import of the absence of dreams. The previous chapters address four shared features of the paradigms Campany lays out: the significance of dreams, the ways in which dreams set practitioners into relationship with something other than themselves, and the boundaries between dreams and waking life. Many sources clearly stated that dreaming reflects the dreamer’s anxiety; not dreaming, by extension, implies a lack of attachment. Sages and humans who lived during earlier, less chaotic times, did not dream. Here Campany also explores the ways in which attitudes toward awakening reflected self-cultivational progress.

The rich and fascinating sources that Campany examines invite us to understand self-cultivation on its own terms, in a space in which we can leave behind our trappings of tradition or culture with which we have become too accustomed. Campany likens the texts he explores to Zhuangzi’s fish traps and rabbit snares; the traps and snares are clues or remnants that offer concrete examples of what self-cultivating practitioners from distant times and places sought to capture. Campany focuses on the ideas and practices within which dreams were deemed meaningful by those who sought self-cultivation. By studying these ideas and practices, we approach the woven interfaces between dreaming and self-cultivation. As Campany’s metaphor indicates, we readers no longer have access to dreams and their meaning, but with the so-called traps and snares—the ideas and practices surrounding dreams and self-cultiv-
ation examined in this book—we can learn something of the vestiges of dreams and their meaning for those who wrote about both in self-cultivation texts. Perhaps, by the end of Campany's book, we, too, have come closer to capturing dreams themselves, which at least, according to so many of the texts Campany proffers, offer a sense of progress along a path of self-cultivation.

This is a book for anybody interested in Chinese religions, dreams, and intellectual history. The work will also appeal to scholars in translation studies for its thoughtful consideration of terminology, etymology, and textual comparison. In this 2023 publication, Campany successfully illuminates the relationship between self-cultivators' experiences and their attempts to clarify, interpret, and use these experiences in accordance with their varied and complicated beliefs about dreams. Campany illuminates religious practice and thought in early to medieval China, revealing a shared dreamscape across the so-called religious "isms." The book's cover image, with the same ever-elusive butterfly from Campany's 2020 publication about the Chinese dreamscape, clearly indicates that these two monographs complement one another and make for an interesting and well-matched set. Of course, the two can be read separately, but for the strongest understanding of the Chinese dreamscape and the place of dreams in self-cultivation, the two works should be read together. If Campany's earlier book on dreams offered us a glimpse of the butterfly, this 2023 monograph allows us to follow the butterfly's path toward self-cultivation.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism

Citation: Brigid Vance. Review of Campany, Robert Ford, *Dreaming and Self-Cultivation in China, 300 BCE-800 CE.* H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. April, 2024.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=60186