**Name: Laiba Fatima Khan**

**ID: Lk04067**

**Response to:**

**Dreaming in the World’s Religions: A Comparative History**

**(by Kelly Bulkeley)**

**Chapter 2: Chinese Religions**

All humans have some experience of the natural cycle of sleeping and waking. Sleep is often accompanied with dreams, and these dreams impact every person’s life in a unique way. Throughout the history of the world, we can find various beliefs and practices regarding dream visions and their interpretations.

“Dreaming in the World’s Religions: A Comparative History”, as the name suggests, is a detailed account on the history of dream narratives across the world based on religious beliefs, the evolution of these narratives and religious dream practices over centuries, and their comparison. The book is an amazing work by Kelly Bulkeley, which shows his specialization in dream research in relation to psychology, religion, evolutionary science, politics, art, and culture.

In this paper, we will be reviewing the second chapter of the book, which covers the history of dreams in Chinese religions. We will discuss the historical timeline of religiously significant dreaming in China, which includes the Shamanistic practices of early imperial dynasties, the rationalist philosophy of Confucius, the mystical musings of the Daoists[[1]](#footnote-1), and the artistic and literary creativity of the Ming and Qing dynasties. Most of these traditions recognize a divine origin for dreaming, although some traditional Chinese teachings either neglect the importance of dreams (the Confucians) or ignore them as illusions (the Daoists).

**The Shamanic Origins of Dreaming:**

Around fifty thousand years ago, early human communities started spreading in Asia. One central feature of these human groups was that many (and perhaps all) of these groups included at least one person who served as collective dreamer, healer, ritual specialist, and mediator between the living and the dead. Tungus people of Siberia called this person a *Shaman,* meaning ‘one who knows’[[2]](#footnote-2).

A person did not choose to become a Shaman but rather was chosen by the spirits through a transformative dream, vision, or illness. Forever after this initiatory experience, the Shaman became a person able to journey beyondthis physical world, and obtained the power to channel energies from those transcendent realms back into his or her community.

An awareness of Shamanic practices is useful in contextualizing the study of dreaming in Chinese history. Many of their practices eventually found their way into the center of the emerging Chinese dream tradition.

**Dreaming in the Early Imperial Dynasties:**

During the second millennium BC[[3]](#footnote-3), new political dynasties began to form in China, with an unprecedented range of unified territorial control. The ruler of a dynasty was directly responsible for maintaining the prosperous state of affairs, so they put careful attention to all possible sources of information, including any guidance from ancestral spirits and other trans-human powers.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The extensive political use of dream divination suggests that the earliest kings of China were essentially warrior Shamans who combined military prowess with the ritualized function of mediating between human and trans-human realms. The first definite indications of these Shaman-like practices appear in the oracle bone inscriptions of the early *Shang* period.[[5]](#footnote-5) The patterns in the bone-cracks were then interpreted as auspicious, inauspicious, or neutral responses from the spirits to a question posed by the king.

The earliest surviving texts from ancient China are from the early Zhou period which include:

1. ***Shu Jing*** *(Book of Documents)*: it highlights the strong faith of early Chinese rulers in dreams and other methods of divination. The stories in Shu Jing also dramatize the virtue of a ruler’s submission to the mandates of heaven.
2. ***Shi Jing***(*Book of Odes*): this text reflects the official practice of dream divination, using symbolism.
3. ***Zuo Zhuan***(*Zuo Commentary Tradition*): Some stories in the Zuo Zhuan are about shared dreaming (*tong meng*), when two people had the same dream at the same time. Shared dreaming worked as an additional proof of the dream’s importance and veracity. Other dream interpretation stories present the beginning of *paradoxical interpretations,* in which a dream’s true meaning is said to be the opposite of its apparent meaning.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Confucian Philosophies and Dreams:**

Confucius was a great philosopher and politician of *Chunqiu Shidai* (the Spring and Autumn Period), the most turbulent time during the Zhou dynasty[[7]](#footnote-7). Many vassal states fought and competed for supremacy and it no longer mattered who reigned in the Zhou court. At that time, people believed in heavenly favors maintaining the social peace, hence, the relentless bloodshed in the empire was interpreted as a sign of problem in human relations with the ancestors. Philosophers started reflecting upon the fundamental questions of nature and society in order to restore the social tranquility and prosperity.

Confucius, with a primary focus on practical application of moral reasoning of world problems, discouraged speculation about life after death, and questioned the spiritual explanations of natural phenomena.

Despite his generally skeptical attitude towards any kind of divination, Confucius showed an interest in his own dreams[[8]](#footnote-8), specifically his dreams of the Duke of Zhou, and he associated these dreams with a feeling of personal vitality, expressing a harmony of personal and collective virtue, an internal unity of purpose that inspired his life and philosophy.

**Dreaming in the Daoist Philosophies:**

In contrast to the reform-minded Confucius, other teachers from the “Hundred Schools of Thought” period[[9]](#footnote-9) rejected the idea of actively working to improve society through moral and political change. These philosophers emphasized the natural way (*Dao*) of the cosmos. The spiritual tradition that grew from their teachings (known in English as *Daoism*) offered its followers a mysterious, otherworldly process of discovering their own personal connection with the primal energies of creation.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The earliest Daoist sages, Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi, took a decisive turn away from Confucian political activism and toward mystical dimensions of awareness and insight very similar to the *Upanishads[[11]](#footnote-11)* of Hinduism.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In the Daoist view, the continuity of waking and dreaming was a sign of our existential imprisonment. Sleep and dreaming were considered, at least potentially, a natural opportunity for people to experience a kind of ultimate freedom, where spirits roam beyond the limits of mortal bodies and artificial boundaries, created by social authorities.

The Daoists offered an alternative way of understanding the relationship between the living and the dead. They minimized ancestor worship and instead, concentrated on each person’s existential fear of death, trying to transform that fear into a heightened state of philosophical self-awareness and spiritual tranquility.[[13]](#footnote-13)

In Daoism, there is no point in trying to distinguish waking from dreaming, no purpose in worrying about what is real or unreal. Such oppositions are mere fabrications of the human mind, and the Daoembraces them all.

**The Golden Age of Chinese Dreaming:**

In actual practice, most Chinese people lived their lives by blending different elements from several traditions. For example, a person might hold Confucian political ideals, practice Buddhist meditation, participate in Daoist rituals, and seek the healing skills of Shamans. All the Chinese traditions valued the spiritual potentials of dreaming, and popular interest in dreams expanded dramatically through the next several periods of dynastic rule.

By the time of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, the dynamic multiplicity of dream beliefs and practice reached a peak of cultural creativity. The author refers to this period as the “Golden Age” of Chinese dreaming, which can be seen through three interrelated areas: popular dream books, incubation practices, and artistic creativity[[14]](#footnote-14).

Numerous books were also being printed on the practice of dream interpretation, and these texts both consolidated past traditions and added new refinements. Two of these dream books are worth considering.

1. ***Meng Zhan Leikao***(A Categorical Study of Dream Interpretation): written in the late sixteenth century CE by Zhang Feng Yi, this book is a systematic survey of all Chinese knowledge relating to dreams. Zhang, inspired by his own healing dreams, applied the same approach to the study of dreams that Confucian scholars had long been applying to other phenomena of the natural world.
2. ***Meng Zhan Yi Zhi***(An Easy Guide to Dream Divination): this book by the late Ming writer Chen Shi Yuan based its claims on extensive observations of people’s actual dreams.

Several other dreams in the Meng Zhan Yi Zhi, and other contemporary dream books, included interpretations where reference was made to puns, word play, and logographic similarities (e.g., a dream of a turtle [*gui*] means that something good and honorable [*gui*] will happen)[[15]](#footnote-15). Also, caution was urged in these texts regarding the use of fixed interpretive categories, since same dream could have different meanings for different people.

The text covers the history of dreaming in Chinese religions in a really interesting manner. The language is simple and engaging, all the traditional Chinese terms are followed with English translation and a brief explanation which makes the reading very easy to understand. My favorite part was the beginning of the chapter, where the author mentions exam dreams and the possibility of such dreams being originated in China, which I think is a great way to attract the readers, since it helps the audience relate to the topic.

**References:**

* Bulkeley, Kelly, 2008: ‘Chinese Religions’, in *Dreams in the World’s Religions: A Comparative History* (New York City: New York University Press) pp.50-78.
* <https://www.britannica.com/event/Spring-and-Autumn-Period> (19.10.2019)

1. Taoists: followers of Taoism, a religion developed from Taoist philosophy and Buddhism. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (Bulkeley, 2008: p.52) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The period between years 1001-2000 BC [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. (Bulkeley, 2008: p.54) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. (Bulkeley, 2008: p.54) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. (Bulkeley, 2008: pp.55-56) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. (Encyclopedia Britannica: Spring and Autumn Period, Accessed: 19.10.2019) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Analects, the core collection of Confucius’s teachings, contains his own dream stories. (Bulkeley, 2008: p.61) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The philosophical reflections on the political and social chaos in China (during the Spring and Autumn period) gave rise to hundred different schools of thought, hence, the era became famous known as the ‘Hundred Schools of Thought’ period in Chinese history. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. (Bulkeley, 2008: pp.61-62) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Upanishads:ancient Sanskrit texts that contain some central philosophies and ideas of Hinduism. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. (Bulkeley, 2008: p.63) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. (Bulkeley, 2008: p.63) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. (Bulkeley, 2008: p.68) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. (Bulkeley, 2008: p.70) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)