

BOOK REVIEW

KAMINSKI, J. D. (2025). *Dreams in Chinese Fiction: Spiritism, Aestheticism, and Nationalism*. New York/London: Routledge. 114 p. ISBN 978-1-032-77217-22025.
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The term “Chinese Dream” is certainly well-known not only to scholars specializing in Chinese Studies but also to all those interested in contemporary China and politics. However, Johannes D. Kaminski in his book does not limit its scope to the contemporary notion of the Chinese Dream that has been put forward in the era of China’s governance under Xi Jinping¹, but discusses dreams and their treatment that have been present in Chinese philosophical and literary texts since antiquity. The book *Dreams in Chinese Fiction: Spiritism, Aestheticism, and Nationalism* provides the readers with a complex and multifaceted representation of dreams and their interpretation across the centuries and literary genres. The author opens his study with a preface reflecting his motivation for exploring the Chinese Dream while studying the long novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber*² written by Cao Xueqin in the eighteenth century, a text which is “famed for blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy...the whole text is also framed as a dream, advancing a grand Daoist vision of cosmic instability” (p. vii). In contrast, the contemporary perception of the Chinese Dream has become an inseparable part of nationalistic slogans and writings. In addition, this notion has already surpassed the boundaries of politics, spanning different fields in academia or pop culture (e.g., the

¹ The *Chinese Dream* is also translated as the *China Dream* (*Zhongguo meng* 中国梦), the official narrative of President Xi Jinping introduced in 2012. See e.g., Gallelli, B. (2017). 中国梦理论：中国国家话语的新形态 [Zhongguo meng lilun: Zhongguo guojia huayu de xin xingtai / The Chinese dream theory: The new shape of China’s national discourse]. *Xueshujie*, 2, 136-144.; Wang, Z. (2014). The Chinese Dream: Concept and context. *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 19(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-013-9272-0>

² *The Dream of the Red Chamber* also referred to as *The Story of the Stone* is considered to be one of China’s greatest classical novels with a large number of translations and extensive scholarship in the field of literary and translation studies, see e.g., Moratto, R., Liu, K., & Chao, D. K. (Eds.). (2023). *Dream of the Red Chamber: Literary and translation perspectives*. Routledge.

showcase of *The Sound of the Chinese Dream*). Given the prominence of the Chinese Dream in the context of the contemporary governance of China mainly in the field of political science, this book provides a novel perception of dream parlance by exploring and examining its representations in Chinese literary works across the centuries in order to exemplify also dreams which do not carry any sociopolitical references as is the case in contemporary China. Prior to discussing individual dreams, the author in the preface briefly explains the meaning of the character *meng* (dream, dreaming) among various concepts in China. This section concludes with an overview of the book chapters and contains the author's notes that consist of valuable additional information on relevant literature and an explanation of specific terms.

The monograph comprises five chapters with each representing a particular *dream category* in different genres and originating from different periods. The first chapter introduces the philosophical foundations that are crucial for understanding the core concepts in Chinese oneirology by presenting six iconic dreams that emerged from the times of turbulence and collapse of the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE). Based on oneiromancy as it originated and was practised in ancient China, dreams could possess different functions, and so the approach to their interpretation varied as well. Dreams presented in this chapter belong to the categories of ancestral dreams depicting the interaction of a dreamer with spirits or time-transcending authorities, and strange dreams linked to spiritual awakening. As can be seen from the examples of prophetic dreams, such as those documented in the *Classic of Poetry* (11th to 7th centuries BCE) and the *Records of the Grand Historian*, various forms of dream interpretation were inseparable parts of the lives of the ruling family and of state administration during the Shang (1600–1046 BCE) and Zhou dynasties. Although the role of divination and its impact on statecraft could be perceived as questionable, the mancer's dream interpretation represents a complex process since it combines principles from Chinese philosophy, medicine, and cosmology. However, it was not only the emperors who were interested in oneiromancy practices; dream interpretation also attracted the common people who "consulted" for instance the *Duke of Zhou's Interpretation of Dreams* to reveal dream motifs. In the category of strange dreams, this chapter necessarily includes the example of *Zhuangzi's butterfly dream* that discusses and reflects upon the distinction between reality and dream. The author exemplifies different approaches taken towards the interpretation of *Zhuangzi's butterfly dream* to provide valuable insight into its various interpretations. The chapter concludes with an example of the dream of having the Yellow Emperor as the main character to depict the rightness of the state rule. The dreams chosen also offer an insight into their understanding and interpretations within the scope of various philosophical concepts found in Confucianism, Daoism, or Buddhism.

After taking philosophical concepts as the starting point of the present book, the second chapter moves to a different category of dreams, ones that depict various supernatural encounters. The supernatural dream encounters explored in this chapter consist of four representative dreams selected from the following literary works: *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (1596–1620) written by an author with a pseudonym translated as The Scoffing Scholar of Lanling, *The Peony Pavilion* (1598) by Tang Xianzu, *The Romance of the Western Chamber* (13th c. CE) from Wang Shifu, and *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (1759/1792)

by Cao Xueqin. Rather than taking a chronological approach when introducing these individual dreams, the author skilfully discusses them based on the characteristics of the encounter they embody and the content of the chapter thematically moves from spiritism to philosophical visions. Moreover, each dream is supplemented by a short excerpt to show the different narrative styles and the perception of the dreams.

To provide a better understanding of a genre spanning approximately more than two millennia starting from the later Han (2nd century CE), the third chapter, devoted to the *tales of the strange* (*zhiguai*), opens with a section on its origins to clarify the position of this genre throughout the centuries as well as to outline several representative works, such as the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (4th century BCE) by Liu Xiang, the *Treatise on Curiosities* (3rd century CE) by Zhang Hua, and the *Garden of the Extraordinary* (4th century CE) by Liu Jingshu. In addition, the *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era* (978) written by Li Fang, and *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (1766) by Pu Songling were chosen to exemplify the nature of the dream narrative in the genre of *zhiguai*. An example of a soteriological dream can be found in the story of the *Governor of Nanke* which belongs to the *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era*, which combines frameworks present in Buddhism and Daoism when looking at human existence and life. As the author states “The narrative twist towards the end of the story departs from the conventions of earlier ‘zhiguai’ stories. The aim is not mere documentation of a strange event, but to convince readers of the falsehood of their worldly lives” (p. 51). Unlike the previous example, the *Fox Enchantment*, included in the collection *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* and which mainly consists of stories depicting supernatural encounters of various nature, portrays intercourse between a male human and a seductive fox. The function of dreams in this story is two-fold: on the one hand, it is used by a supernatural creature to interact with the humans, on the other hand, it preserves the traditional belief that ghosts vanish from the human world only after they find their peace. Apart from the plot of the stories, the author enriches the content of the chapter with several interesting notes, for instance by mentioning an allusion to a Confucian classic the *Commentary of Zuo* (4th century BCE), and concisely presents the genre *zhiguai* from a broader perspective, taking into consideration the literary works already mentioned in the previous chapter on the supernatural encounters.

The fourth chapter concerned with erotic dreams exemplifies this category based on four dreams to illustrate the distinctive nature of their perception and comprehension in China. Unlike the traditional Western perspective that considers erotic dreams as something sinful in nature, the dreams in the *Carnal Prayer Mat* (1693) by Li Yu and the *Dream of the Red Chamber* reflect a completely different perspective – they lack any negative connotation such as we are familiar with from Western culture – since these dreams relate to medical conditions and karmic entanglement. However, following the societal and governmental transition in the later phases of Chinese history, the attitude towards erotic dreams changed as well and Western concepts were incorporated in various literary works. In contrast to the first two examples that both described a completely different embodiment of erotic dreams in their primary nature, Western concepts such as Freudian ideas can be found in the works of Yu Dafu, *Moving South* (1921) and *Boundless Night* (1922), or the *Caramel Girl* (1924) by Guo Moruo that were chosen for this chapter.

The author also draws comparisons with some of the literary works that were mentioned in the previous chapters to illustrate better the characteristic features of the dream encounters depicted by modern Chinese writers.

The last chapter introduces dreams from a completely different category – the collective national dreams – that are linked to governance and politics. As we read in this chapter, collective dreams “are neither facilitated by direct divine inspiration nor require personal repentance; instead, they seek to rectify the disjunction between the universal law and its implementation in the world of humans” (p. 90). The collective national dreams are presented based on three examples: two dreams that refer to the late period of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) and the last one embedded in the period of China’s modern history. Starting with the first example from the *Travels of Lao Can* (1903–1904) by Liu E the author takes a rather cautious position towards the country’s future direction considering the traditional imperial system and modern concepts brought from the West, whereas the second dream from the *New Story of the Stone* (1905/1908) written by Wu Jianren takes a more positive attitude towards the country’s bright future and also incorporates some borrowings from the *Story of the Stone (Dream of the Red Chamber)*. With the last example from *China Dream* (2018) by Ma Jian, we move to a more recent period with a reference to the *Chinese Dream* as a political concept used by Xi Jinping that might be interpreted as an allusion to the ancient political legacy of the Mandate of Heaven. According to Kaminski, this literary work by Ma Jian “gives a satirical account of the manipulation of the national collective dream by the state apparatus, thereby offering a counter-narrative to state-endorsed ideas of collective dreams” (p. 103). Although the last chapter maps dreams from the same category, one may observe the varied approach adopted by each author in their narrative for depicting the utopian-like striving to build an ideal community represented by the nation which is supposed to dominate the world.

The book provides informative reference sources for various literary works that originate from different historical periods starting with ancient China and its philosophical concepts and following modern history up to contemporary China and the novel notion of the *Chinese Dream*. Each chapter offers a conclusion to summarize the main aspects of the particular dream category discussed, followed by extensive notes on the terms and main sources to provide additional information. Furthermore, the chapters include excerpts from the dreams studied so as to further the reader’s understanding of the dream narrative and interpretative practice without the need to search for and read them in advance. To sum up, the book *Dreams in Chinese Fiction: Spiritism, Aestheticism, and Nationalism* constitutes a comprehensive reference tool for scholars and experts specialized in different fields not only within but also outside the Chinese Studies research community as well as for other readers interested in the practice of dream narrative in ancient and modern China.

Mária Ištvanová