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## BOOK REVIEW

# *Dreams in Chinese Fiction: Spiritism, Aestheticism, and Nationalism*

By Johannes D. Kaminski

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**關鍵詞：** 夢，國家主義，志怪小說

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It is easy to see why one might argue that dreams hold a special place in Chinese culture and literature. The phrase “life is like a dream” (*rensheng ru meng* 人生如夢) is a commonly heard truism in Chinese popular culture. The concept of dreaming is central to *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢), perhaps the most celebrated novel in Chinese literary history, which contains several enigmatic dream episodes and whose sprawling narrative further explores the idea of life itself as a kind of dream. Beyond the imperial period, one could also claim that “social dreaming” has had a particularly strong impact on China’s modern fate. Late Qing utopian and science fiction literature abounds in visions of national rejuvenation, many of which take shape within dream sequences. It could be argued that social dreaming was central to Maoist revolutionary discourse, despite the elevation of realism as the dominant literary mode. More recently, Xi Jinping has invoked the rhetoric of dreaming in his call for a “China Dream” (*Zhongguo meng* 中國夢). All of this makes dreams a fertile lens through which to explore Chinese literary history.

Johannes D. Kaminski’s *Dreams in Chinese Fiction: Spiritism, Aestheticism, and Nationalism* sets out to examine this very theme. In just over 100 pages, the book offers a stimulating and accessible survey of how dream narratives have functioned in Chinese literature from antiquity to the present day. While the scope ranges broadly, Kaminski places particular emphasis on the Ming and Qing periods, providing close readings of canonical texts and tracing recurring dream motifs across genres.

The first chapter establishes the philosophical foundations of dreaming in early Chinese thought by analyzing six canonical dream episodes. Among these is a dream from the *Liezi* 列子, where the Yellow Emperor dreams of the magical, utopian land of Huaxu 華胥. This dream not only connects the emperor to a higher cosmic authority but also legitimizes his political rule. Another central category of dreams Kaminski identifies is the “strange dream,” which can be traced to the famous butterfly dream in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子. Upon awakening, Zhuang Zhou wonders: “Was I Zhuang Zhou who dreamt I was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming I am Zhuang Zhou?” These dreams not only connect the dreamer to the Dao or to “Heaven” (*tian* 天), but also often destabilize the boundary between reality and illusion, plunging the self into ontological uncertainty.

Chapter 2 explores dream narratives in late Ming and early Qing fiction, including *Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Jinping mei* 金瓶梅), *Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting* 牡丹亭), *Romance of the Western Chamber* (*Xixiang ji* 西廂記), and *Dream of the Red Chamber*, while Chapter 3 takes a closer look how dreams figure in the tradition of *zhiguai* 志怪 (tales of the strange) in Chinese literature. In both types of stories, dreams frequently function as channels to the spirit world. In *Plum in the Golden Vase*, for instance, characters often communicate with deceased relatives in dreams. Wu Song 武松, who appears as a character in the novel, learns of his brother’s murder through a dream visitation, a motif Kaminski links to the folk belief that dreams serve as vehicles for ancestral communication. Other dreams reveal the illusory

nature of worldly success and promote Buddhist enlightenment (*wu* 悟), as in the well-known *zhiguai* story “The Governor of Nanke” (*Nanke taishou zhuan* 南柯太守傳). The protagonist lives an entire life of success and glory — only to awaken and discover it was all a dream. This moment of awakening affirms the Buddhist idea that the phenomenal world is nothing but “red dust” (*hongchen* 紅塵), a fleeting illusion.

Kaminski discusses *The Dream of the Red Chamber* in two of the chapters, underscoring its pivotal place in Chinese dream literature. In Chapter 2, he analyzes the sequence where Jia Baoyu dreams of meeting his double, “Zhen Baoyu.” This episode plays with the novel’s central dichotomies of “truth” (*zhen* 真) and “falsehood” (*jia* 假), echoing the *Zhuangzi*’s butterfly dream in its destabilization of identity. In Chapter 4, Kaminski explores the erotic dream in Chapter 5, featuring the “Fairy of Disenchantment” (*jinghuan xiangu* 警幻仙姑). While containing erotic elements, the dream also serves as a moral and spiritual allegory, though the full meaning of the dream unfolds only gradually across the novel’s arc of disillusionment. As Kaminski aptly writes: “Ultimately, no dream can have such a sobering effect as the experience of life itself — lest one considers the possibility that life itself is a dream” (p. 74). The discussion provides illuminating insight in how dreams function on several layers in this quintessential Chinese literary work.

Chapter 4 also examines erotic dreams in broader cultural and religious contexts. Unlike Christian tradition, in which sexual dreams often entail guilt, Chinese erotic dream narratives are more closely tied to Daoist and Buddhist ideas of moderation and transcendence. In *The Carnal Prayer Mat* (*Rou putuan* 肉蒲團) by Li Yu 李漁, the protagonist moves from libertinism to self-castration. The lesson, Kaminski argues, is not asceticism but *zhongyong* (moderation). With modernity and the arrival of Freudian ideas, dream narratives begin to explore the unconscious. Yet, as Kaminski shows through a reading of Yu Dafu’s 郁達夫 *Boundless Night* (*Mangmang ye* 茫茫夜), even these highly individualized and erotic dreams remain entangled with collective anxieties, especially the project of national salvation. In Yu’s work, erotic dreams and sexual frustration are intimately linked to a critique of the “slave mentality” (*nuli xing* 奴隸性) he perceived in Chinese society.

The final chapter turns to national dreams, beginning with late Qing utopian novels such as *The Travels of Lao Can* (*Lao Can youji* 老殘游記) and culminating in Ma Jian’s contemporary satire *China Dream*. Although the late Qing has been the subject of extensive scholarship, Kaminski offers a compelling new interpretation of *New Story of the Stone* (*Xin shitou ji* 新石頭記). He argues that the novel’s final dream sequence, where Jia Baoyu leaves an already-utopian “civilized realm” for an even more fantastical future Shanghai, should be read not merely as a narrative device to emphasize the remoteness of such a vision but as an expression of the novel’s “double cultural matrix” (102). While the “Civilized Realm” evokes Western utopian models like Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, the final dream draws on native

Chinese traditions, such as the prophetic dreams in the *Liezi*. This reading, which complements David Der-wei Wang's work on hybridity in the late Qing (Wang 1997), is one of Kaminski's more original contributions.

The book concludes with a reading of Ma Jian's *China Dream*, connecting it to Xi Jinping's political slogan of the same name. In Ma's dystopia, a Party official aims to synchronize people's private dreams with the collective national vision using a technological device. This recalls Han Song's 韓松 science fiction story *My Fatherland Does Not Dream* (*Wo de zuguo bu zuomeng* 我的祖國不做夢), where the government suppresses citizens' dreams and forces them to work while sleepwalking. As Song Mingwei notes, the word that Han Song uses for sleepwalking is in fact *mengyou* 夢游 – or to “dreamwalk”, further connecting the story the culture and narratives of dreaming (2023, p. 36). Unfortunately, Kaminski does not engage with Han Song's work or with contemporary Chinese science fiction more broadly – which is somewhat regrettable, given the genre's rich engagement with collective and national dreaming, and Han Song's evocation of the dream-state as a metaphor for political control and social engineering (as noted by Song).

Kaminski's central argument – that dreams in Chinese literature have always maintained a link to the social world – is convincing in many places. Whether in the ancient tale of the Yellow Emperor or the modern psychological narratives of Yu Dafu, dreams do not simply reflect the self but reveal larger social, political, and cosmic structures. However, the book's broader claim that China possesses a unique and continuous “dream culture” all the way up to the present is less persuasive. Kaminski gestures toward this continuity from the *Liezi* to Xi Jinping, but the evidence provided – especially for the modern and contemporary periods – is thin. With only a brief discussion of Ma Jian's novel to support his claim, and no substantial treatment of the socialist period, the argument risks appearing essentialist and overreaching.

The omission of the Maoist era is particularly puzzling. Given that dreams of transformation were central to revolutionary discourse, one would expect some engagement with how socialism affected “dream culture.” Kaminski mentions in passing how modern critics like Hu Shi 胡適 downplayed the metaphysical aspects of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and how Mao Dun 茅盾 edited out its spiritual elements altogether, but he does not develop these observations further. Did socialism suppress or transform the function of dreams? How did the rise of realism as a literary doctrine impact dream narrative? These are crucial questions left unanswered. Kaminski's claim that the CCP “requires premodern subjects for its utopian vision, yet cannot escape post-Freudian subjectivity” (p. 106) while discussing Xi's *China Dream* is certainly intriguing, but without a deeper engagement with socialism's impact on literary and political culture more broadly, it remains speculative. After all, as the author is probably well aware, the goal of the socialist experiment was precisely to eradicate “premodern subjects” through thought-reform (*gaizao* 改造) in order to mould new modern subjects.

For these reasons, the reader may remain unconvinced by the book's overarching claim that Xi Jinping's "China Dream" is the modern inheritor of ancient oneiric visions. As Kaminski recounts in his preface, one of his Chinese professors dismissed the slogan as little more than "empty words" (viii). Indeed, Kaminski himself seems ambivalent, wavering between grand claims of cultural continuity and a more modest desire to "let the texts speak for themselves." (xi). Yet the book's structure — beginning and ending with the "China Dream" — suggests that the argument for continuity is not merely incidental, but foundational, and in the final discussion Kaminski also cannot resist the temptation to draw a straight line from *Liezi* to Xi (p. 103). More evidence, a broader range of examples, or a more nuanced framing would have made the case stronger.

Nonetheless, *Dreams in Chinese Fiction* remains an often insightful, wide-ranging and highly readable account of how dreams have been imagined in Chinese literature. Its discussion of dream narratives and tropes across genres — from Daoist parables to erotic fiction, Buddhist allegories to utopian satires — sheds new light on the porous boundaries between illusion and reality in Chinese literary thought. It also opens valuable conversations about how narrative dreams have served as conduits for political desire, spiritual insight, and psychological projection. Written in a lucid and often witty style, the book is a pleasure to read. It will undoubtedly serve as a useful resource for anyone seeking an introduction to the literary and cultural history of dreaming in China.

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