

A “False” Dream that Turns True in 18th-century Xiaoshuo Literature

Aude Lucas

École française d’Extrême-Orient

Abstract

Dreams are a pervasive motif in Chinese classical culture and literature, and thus are omnipresent in narrative literature. The “small talks” (xiaoshuo 小說) inherited from the oneiric discourse in the religious and philosophical fields, and one may thus often read short stories that imply a dream. Dreams in xiaoshuo often bear the mark of the earliest use of dream recording that is divination. Even in xiaoshuo, dreams often have a predictive function: dreamers receive a clear message, or witness scenes that hints them with future events. They are thus able to anticipate coming events and success in life achievements or help others to do so.

One of the main fields in which dream forecasting is a major asset is undoubtedly civil service examinations of late imperial China. As Benjamin Elman has shown, candidates to the examinations were expecting dreams to reveal their future success or failure. May they be true or subsequent literary constructions, some dreams were considered to be evident phenomena preceding success in the examinations, especially for civil servants that pursued a brilliant career later. Such an important facet of dream culture was consequently fairly represented in xiaoshuo literature, that counts dozens of short stories recounting how such a candidate dreamt of his coming success, or how, in a wittier spirit, he was given the subject of the dissertation by a god in a dream. Such dreams are usually followed by the expected success of the candidate, the main point of the narrative being to show the coincidence between the oneiric message and its fulfillment in waking life.

In her recent study of the late Ming crave from dream recording and literature, Lynn A. Struve depicted the social and intellectual background of the fondness for dreams. She reminded the growing dismay in the civil service system, that led a lot of writers to author dream poems, dream recording, and dream stories. From the turn of the 16th century to the middle of the 17th century with the dynastic change, dream literature went through a massive increase, as dream worlds were a place to escape life uncertainties and traumas and to express one’s doubts. Lynn A. Struve’s conclusion to her study is that the fondness and increase in dream literature – that she calls a “dream arc” – disappeared by the early 18th century, when the trauma of the dynastic change faded away and that political stability settled for good with early and mid-Qing emperors. Never again, according to Struve, has dream literature known such an upsurge again. It is true that Qing literati let aside such intangible objects as dreams to focus on positivist approaches that valued evidence – one may think of kaozheng 考證, this intellectual trend that sougheed demonstration by proof.

But however less numerous dreams appeared in Qing literature, and more especially in xiaoshuo, they still remained an important theme. What is more, my argument is that the treatment of dreams in xiaoshuo reveals a specificity of Qing literature, that is a kind of disillusion, a detachment, and an ironic stance. Keith McMahon depicted this as a “cynical detachment”. In narrative literature, this disappointment was translated in the subversion of very traditional motifs. Narrative devices that had been stereotyped for centuries were written

anew in a disenchanted way. Dream stories' usual characteristics were reinvented, as if authors wanted to underline the limits of the traditional dream discourse. Although stories that display such a kind of rewriting of the dream lore remain quite rare, they appear in a growing number of tales.

This talk is a study of a mid-Qing narrative that subverts the usual features of dream stories. It is entitled “The False Dream of the Prefect Kuang Sanctuary” (Kuang taishou ci yanmeng 況太守祠贗夢) and is to be found in *Words of Humour for an Ancient Bell* (Xieduo 諧鐸) by Shen Qifeng 沈起鳳 – published in 1791. The story is an extremely ironical rewriting of dream that deals with examinations and civil service career. The story goes that a student of the Imperial College from Jiangsu went his way to the provincial examination – thus hoping to become a juren 舉人, a licentiate. As often in these times, he travels with fellow students, all candidates to the examination. On their way, they stop at the Sanctuary of Prefect Kuang 況太守 (Kuang Zhong 況鍾, 1383-1442), where they pray for a dream (qimeng 祈夢). This religious practice with divinatory roots was extremely common since the Ming, and even more when it came to examinations: candidates were hoping the gods would reveal the examination subject to them or whether they would see their name on the list of successful candidates or not. This story takes a very original turn as it tells how the student prays for a dream and... does not have any dream, as he cannot find sleep. Whereas an absence of dream must be what usually happened in real life in imperial China, it is very uncommon – if not unprecedented – in xiaoshuo literature that the prayer for a dream is not followed by a dream. The fact that the dreamer cannot find sleep is thus quite a subversive turn, as it looks as if the god is giving up on him.

On the second day, all the student's friends gather around to tell each other what they dreamt of the previous night. Some have had promising dreams, while others had nefarious omens. They all comment, interpret, and speculate about one another's dreams. Among them, the student that could not fall asleep speaks up. He tells his friend that he dreamt of being right in this sanctuary, where the god – Prefect Kuang – gave him his own seat while kneeling to him. The god addressed him as if he were his superior, and asked people to clothe him with the hat and belt of civil servants. Thus dressed, the student sat at the place of honor, in front of several seal boxes. But he did not feel at ease with this sudden esteem, so he stepped down to leave the room, while Prefect Kuang was escorting him out, and then – in a very typical motif of dream ending – he stumbled and fell, awaking from his dream.

Or so is what he tells his friends. Because of the hyperreadability of the dream's omen, his friends exclaim with enthusiasm that this is with no doubt the sign that he will succeed in the examination and receive good fortune. The student makes the promise of taking good care of them should he indeed access a high position. But very unfortunately for the student, he fails at the examination. Feeling very unlucky, the student wishes to go back home, but alas his travel stipend is exhausted, and he can only stay and make his living there. As he once were a good singer, he works as an actor in an opera, taking on shengjiao 生腳 roles – that is, a masculine character whose face is not painted, and who performs high dignitaries. One day, his company plays Zhu Suchen's 朱素臣 *Fifteen Strings of Cash* (Shiwu guan 十五貫). Wearing a civil servant's hat and belt, he sits in front of boxes of seal, while the actor playing the role of extra – Prefect Kuang, in this play – kneels before him. The scene is exactly as described from the dream he did not have and invented. Realizing this, the former student thus burst into tears. His companions ask him about his suddenly low spirits, and they learn that he is a former literatus from an old family of Jiangnan. Ultimately, the narrator's uncle, who is an

academician, offers the former student a travel stipend to send him back home.

This story shows an unprecedented treatment of dream lore in xiaoshuo literature.

As I pointed out above, it is extremely unusual that in a literary narrative the prayer for a dream (qimeng) should be followed by no dream at all. In other subversive stories, a dream still occurs, even though it might be a deceptive dream or a dream that can never be interpreted. In “The False Dream of the Prefect Kuang Sanctuary”, the dream is... false, entirely invented by the main protagonist. The student makes his own prediction, settling his own future without knowing it. In inventing this omen, the character bypasses the dream tradition to express his own fantasy. This attitude sounds very subversive if not bold, as the character makes his own way without the dream tradition.

However, the student’s self-prediction catches him up in a very cynical way. All what he had invented for himself happens, only in a “fake” way, on a theater scene. The student had invented his dream on a metaphorical level, not expecting to see a god bow to him for real. But this is exactly what happens: the god – or so the actor playing the god – reproduces the exact motion the student had imagined. The invented prediction is fulfilled on the literal level.

This literal fulfillment of a prediction reminds of one of Pu Songling’s major narrative techniques, that is the literal realization of the dream instead of a figurative one. This characteristic of Pu Songling’s stories was depicted by Judith Zeitlin, in her study of “Minister of the Five Pelts of Black Ram” (Wugu dafu 五穀大夫) and “Flying Ox” (Niufei 牛飛) from Records of the Strange from the Made-Do Studio (Liaozhai zhiyi 聊齋誌異). In the first of these two stories, a bachelor such as the one of Shen Qifeng’s story, dreams that someone addresses him as “Minister of the Five Pelts of Black Ram”. As a literatus that knows his classics, the student sees a literary allusion in there: during the Springs and Autumns, Duke Mu 穆公 of Qin 秦 had offered five black ram pelts to Baili Xi 百里奚 before appointing him his minister. The student thus sees a beautiful omen 佳兆, thinking that he should become a minister as well. Later, as bandits operate in the region, the student has to flee and hide. One night, he hides in an empty room, where he is about to freeze to death. He fumbles in the dark and finds pelts of sheep 羊皮 to cover himself with. At dawn when he wakes up, he realizes the pelts are black ram pelts, and he understands that his dream has just fulfilled. What he thought was a metaphorical dream prediction of a glorious future was actually a very objective foresight of what would literary happen.

The logic here is exactly the same as the one Shen Qifeng used about a century later in “The False Dream of the Prefect Kuang Sanctuary”. The difference between the two tales, however, is that there is no actual dream in the latter. What does it say to us? That this false dream is just as important, as performative as any true dream. The word “false” itself is subverted, wearing the sense of “true”. In other words, the student’s subjectivity, what he had at heart 心, found its realization just as in the case of a prediction coming from outside. It is because of what the student had at heart that things happened the way they did. Having not succeeded in sleeping, the student somehow knew that he should not expect any success, a success so great that the gods would previously predict it to him. So the student unconsciously felt that his destiny was not paved with success, and his discourse on the so-called dream actually constructed his own future. This story thus tells us that when one’s unconscious is expressed, it finds its truth. Of course, we might underline the

“supernatural” aspect of the tale, that fantasy is fulfilled although it just came from the subject’s imagination. In this light, it looks as if Heaven played with cynicism with the character’s life. But I would rather focus on the message that this story conveys about subjectivity: at some point – and this point is the end of late imperial China –, it all revolves around the individual himself: what he unconsciously knows and what his fantasies are are crucial in what happens to him.

The theme of the theater is particularly interesting in this very story, as it reflects on the character who sees his own life as a fictional play. It seems to reveal that the power of imagination of the student may only create a fiction – in other words a story that looks real but is false. Just as he tells his companions a lie about having had a dream, he completes a fictional story for his own life, a story that actually comes to be true because it was told by his unconscious – as on an interior scene that one plays for himself.

Taking on the tradition of writing a comment on the story under a pseudonym, the author Shen Qifeng ends the narrative this way : “It is to be feared that when one’ s heart is a prior omen, one may enter illusion without a dream” (殆心為先兆，非夢能入幻歟！). In other words, when we forecast things with our heart, there is no need of a dream to enter a deceitful dimension, as the heart is a catalyst for illusion. Human beings do not need dreams to have fantasies, as their own heart – their own desires – may create such fantasies (that is to say the heart’s fantasies shape the waking life).

“The False Dream of the Prefect Kuang Sanctuary” is a very interesting “dream” story as it plays with the usual characteristics of dream narratives while totally subverting them. The dream is put aside, replaced by the character’s own fantasy, and yet the facts still occur as if they were predicted in such a supernatural environment as predictive dream. This story claims the subject’s ability to create a fiction for himself without the help of an external force, and thus displaces the responsibility of facts from a superior instance – Heaven, the gods, agency... – to the subject himself.