

HOWARD GISKIN

*Appalachian State University*

*Boone, North Carolina*

## **Dreaming the Seven-Colored Flower** **Eastern and Western Approaches to Dreams in** **Chinese Folk Literature**

### **Abstract**

In this paper I examine the role of dreams in Chinese folktales with particular focus on psychological, moral, and spiritual aspects of a tale called “The Seven-Colored Flower.” I provide an analysis of this folktale, considering more generally the functioning of dreams in Chinese folktales, and investigate whether Western or non-Western conceptions of dream states are better suited to understanding the significance of dreams in Chinese folk literature. I conclude that judicious and careful use of Western theoretical models coupled with sensitivity to and deep knowledge of non-Western systems of thought have the best chance of eliciting important insights regarding dreams and other matters in Chinese folktales. In the course of my discussion of “The Seven-Colored Flower” I draw from both traditional Western psychological systems of thought as well as non-Western beliefs and systems, including Native American, Buddhist, and Taoist.

**Keywords:** folktales—folk literature—psychology—shamanism

THE ROLE OF DREAMS in Chinese folktales is an ambiguous one with no definitive answer as to whether the portrayal of dream states seems to fit what has been said in the West (Freud, Jung, and others), or whether non-Western (Native American, Asian) conceptions of dream states and their significance are better suited to understanding the significance of dreams in Chinese folk literature. Underlying any discussion of dreams in Chinese folk literature, however, are considerations of universality related to concerns regarding the appropriateness of using “alien” (that is, foreign) thought systems to examine aspects of cultures whose roots lie outside the Western tradition, and whose application might be regarded as a type of cultural imperialism. While many feel that using Western theoretical constructions to examine and make sense of non-Western literature, thought, and art is acceptable, warnings must be taken seriously and used in an effort to avoid erroneous conclusions resulting from cultural chauvinism.<sup>1</sup>

Dream interpretation has long held importance in the culture of China, a practice perhaps encouraged by the central role of ancestor worship in Chinese society since the most ancient times. It is speculated that ancestor worship strengthened the belief that dreams carried crucial messages necessary for performance of duties toward one’s ancestors, and that through dreams the departed offered instruction in the affairs of the living (FANG and ZHANG 2000, 11). As early as the Shang Dynasty (sixteenth to eleventh centuries BC), official positions in the imperial courts existed for those specializing in dream interpretation and other forms of divination, and though such official positions disappeared by the Han, dream interpretation remained central both in the court and daily life of the people (FANG and ZHANG 2000, 16; ONG 1985, 29–36).

While the history of dream interpretation in Chinese culture is complex, and approaches to understanding dreams changed throughout the centuries,<sup>2</sup> dreams in folk literature, I will argue in this paper, appear to preserve certain archaic elements from the earliest periods in Chinese society of a shamanic nature involving contact with the spirit realm.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, I suggest that particular elements that are preserved in some dreams in Chinese folklore are

similar in structure and form to shamanic experiences as elaborated by Mircea Eliade, and that this similarity allows for an analysis of these elements as genuine representations of a type of shamanic experience (within the context of the folktale, of course).

The following is a curious tale of a young girl who seems, for a period of time, to move into another dimension, and upon returning finds she has a gift that will allow her to help others in a profound way. This story is interesting for several reasons, not the least being that it combines a profound lesson with a genuinely strange voyage that brings into question accepted ideas about the nature of reality.

#### THE SEVEN-COLORED FLOWER

Long, long ago, there was a pretty little girl who lived beside the sea. She was bright and lovely. There were three people in her family: her mother, her father, and her. Her parents loved her very much, and she loved them too. They lived a happy life in a little house by the sea.

Every evening the girl sat by the shore and looked at the wide sea. She often thought about the things on the other side of the sea and wondered what happened there. She longed to go there very much.

One night she had a beautiful dream. She saw a big, magnificent ship coming from the other side of the sea, stopping near her house. She was interested in the ship, so she boarded it and hid herself in a corner. The ship set out and, after six days, arrived at the shore. People began to take things out of the ship and found the girl, whom they took to see the king at his palace. At the palace, the girl saw an old man in golden clothing who turned out to be the king. This king had no daughter, so when he saw the little girl and found her to be lovely, he wished her to stay with him in his palace. The king asked her where she was from, and she replied, telling him all about her home and her family. She agreed to stay on and live as his daughter.

At first the girl lived happily in the palace, but after a month she thought about her parents and began to cry. The king asked her what was wrong, so she told him that she missed her family and wished to go back home. This made the king very sad, for he knew that he would never see the lovely little girl again. At last he agreed. Before she left, however, he wished to give her a present, so he took her to his treasure room and told her to choose something that she found beautiful. As she gazed into the room, she found it full of fabulous treasures. Suddenly her eyes fell upon a dazzling seven-colored flower made of jewels. She liked it very much so she chose it, and the king told her that the flower would allow her to make seven wishes come true. She thanked the king and went off to sleep for the night.

When the girl awoke in her own bed, she found the seven-colored flower lying by her side. She recalled her strange and beautiful dream as she lay there.

When she finally got up, she accidentally knocked a vase off the table that belonged to her mother, a vase her mother treasured. The girl was frightened, but then she remembered the flower and the king's promise. She picked one petal of the flower and said, "Make my mother's vase as good as new." No sooner had she said this than the vase appeared in perfect condition on the table. The girl was happy and thanked the king in her mind.

The next day the girl was playing with a companion who had a toy, while she had none. This made her angry, so she picked another petal of the flower and said, "I want to have many toys." Immediately a pile of toys appeared. The pile of toys got bigger and bigger without stopping. The girl quickly picked another petal and said, "Please, flower, take these toys back," and the toys promptly disappeared. Her companion was dumbfounded.

After a year, the girl had only one petal of the seven-colored flower left. One day she saw an unfortunate boy who had no legs. The girl asked him what had happened, and he replied that when he was a child, an accident took away his legs. From that day on, he told the girl, he never played with other children or even by himself, but he dreamed of walking and playing like a normal boy. The girl was so moved that she took off the last petal of her flower and said, "Oh, seven-colored flower, please give this poor boy his legs back."

Suddenly the boy found that he had two perfectly fine legs. He stood up to walk and even run, and the two played together joyfully.<sup>4</sup>

In his essay "On the Psychology of the Unconscious," Carl G. JUNG writes that we have no right to accuse a dream of "a deliberate maneuver calculated to deceive." "Nature," Jung continues, "is often obscure, but she is not, like man, deceitful.... The dream itself wants nothing: it is a self-evident content, a plain natural fact like the sugar in the blood of a diabetic or the fever in a patient with typhus" (1956b, 110–11). Jung's point here is simply that whatever we might assert of dreams we are hard pressed to attribute to dreams themselves any of the baser motives that drive persons in their waking hours. In this sense, the dream of a violent or habitually untruthful person would be as reliable and true as would be that of any other person. Similarly, I believe, we may begin analysis of dreams in folk literature by asserting their fundamental truth, not as products sprung directly out of the mind of the dreamer, but rather as artifacts whose truth may be borne out within the context of the stories in which they occur, and which resonate with archaic mythical material related in some way to actual dreams.<sup>5</sup> Freud himself wrote a convincing literary study of the novel *Gradiva* by Wilhelm Jensen, in which he demonstrated that dreams in a literary text can be analyzed like real dreams, since the author draws from his own unconscious psychic processes thus giving them artistic expression. FREUD concludes that we may "discover [the laws of the activity of the unconscious] by analyzing

his writings just as we find them from cases of real illness" (1966, 92). The author of the dream, according to Freud, is the character in the story.<sup>6</sup>

"The Seven-Colored Flower" begins by telling the circumstances in which the little girl lives, that she is provided for and lives in a healthy and comfortable manner. The fact that the little girl is loved by her parents and that they are all happy suggests at the outset that there is no obvious reason for her to want to leave her home. In the second paragraph, however, the tone of the story abruptly changes from a focus on the domestic happiness and security of the family environment to longing on the part of the girl for something she cannot clearly grasp. This rapid shift sets the scene for the events that will shortly occur, but also tells us something about the personality of the little girl, that she is not content with living a life simply of comfort, but searches for the deeper meaning of existence. What is stated in a most matter-of-fact way in the first two brief paragraphs of the story turns out to be a portrayal of a rather uncommon situation, though one that is subtly recommended to readers or listeners. It is a situation in which one realizes that the seemingly happy and tranquil life one leads may not be all there is, an intuition that is symbolized by the image of the little girl sitting "by the shore and look [ing] at the wide sea" (86). The clear, though cautious message here, conveyed through the little girl's actions, is that one should not be content with things as they are; put another way, the unknown presents possibilities for improvement and change, though perhaps of danger as well, that are unimagined by most in their daily unquestioning existences. The dream, while not obviously prefigured by what is presented in the first two paragraphs, does however seem to be connected to her longing as she gazes out at the "wide sea." The little girl's dream, then, appears linked to a conscious (though perhaps vague) state of mind, rather than repressed or unconscious material as might be assumed in Western psychological analysis.

SHAMANIC RESONANCES: DREAMS AS PORTALS TO NON-PHYSICAL REALITY  
According to Wolfram Eberhard, dreams in Chinese culture are regarded as "experiences of the soul, which can leave the human body during sleep" (EBERHARD 1986, 86); this, however, is only a partial explanation of what happens in this story since, as we see, the little girl's return home with an object from the other world she has visited (the seven-colored flower) suggests that her experience of traveling across the water, whether taking place in the dream or waking realm, is very real indeed. A curious parallel to the events in the tale is found in Native American belief in the form of Ojibwa conceptions of the relation of the dream world and the self, which more closely fits the experience of the little girl in "The Seven-Colored Flower." Indeed, in Ojibwa belief self-related experience includes not only what is seen, felt, or

heard while awake, but also what occurs in dreams, all of which make up one's legitimate autobiography. Such dream experiences, in fact, can be of more importance than events in waking life, since in dreams persons come into face-to-face contact with powerful non-human beings ("grandfathers"), who convey "important revelations that are the source of assistance to them in the daily round of life, and besides this, of blessings that enable them to exercise exceptional powers of various kinds" (HALLOWELL 1975, 165).

As is the case with most folktales, the purpose of the story is not merely to entertain but to teach a lesson, and here the lesson involves learning that there is more to life than happiness, that unselfconscious contentedness is not necessarily the best state of affairs for the betterment of the human race. The little girl's dream then appears to serve both as a means by which the girl can learn an important lesson and also, more subtly perhaps, as a way of conveying that there are cracks in our perceived world of waking consciousness that, under the right conditions, allow us entry into other worlds. While Eberhard's suggestion that dreams are understood as wanderings of the soul explains some aspects of dreams in Chinese folk literature, it leaves other aspects needing further exploration, central perhaps being the fact that these "soul wanderings" sometimes have the curious result of bringing back to the waking world real objects, such as in the case of the little girl in the "Seven-Colored Flower." More specifically, the tale calls into question the supposed separation of waking states and dreaming by suggesting that we cannot be sure if we are awake or asleep, and that the world of dreams may be as real as that of waking, and that both dreams and waking consciousness may arise from the same root source, an "imaginal" plane of being (IZUTZU 1983, 12). If dreams then arise from the same source as waking awareness, they take on an ontological status very similar to that of waking, and thus are a source of knowledge and experience in every way as valid as waking perception. The result is that the little girl's dream, far from being a mere fantasy or hallucination of nonexistent things, can be considered rather a reflection of an actual state of existence, albeit that of a non-physical plane. Stranger still is the possibility that this root non-physical plane may play a role in the formation of physical reality itself through volitional processes, both conscious and unconscious, thus determining what actually exists in the waking world, and hence the seemingly inexplicable carryover of the seven-colored flower into the real world of the little girl.<sup>7</sup>

Contrary, then, to the modern Western focus on the interpretation of dreams as manifestations of inner psychic complexes—the bubbling to the surface of a complex and mysterious river of hidden thoughts, desires, and drives—folk literature seems to draw from a much more archaic way of interpreting dreams that assumes the objective reality of the dream experience. In

“The Seven-Colored Flower,” the notion that the place the dream-voyager has traveled to is the product of mere fantasy or oneric invention is belied by the fact that not only is the impression of the dream as real as life, but that the object brought back is solid, recognizable, and magical as well. The experiences of the little girl, in fact, seem to follow those accepted as taking place in shamanic traditions throughout the world, where the otherworldly experiences of the “chosen” individual are seen to be as real as anything else that may happen to someone in waking existence; typically, the “chosen” individual is the recipient of a vision, meets a spirit guide, often in a dream, receives a magical gift that endows him or her with the power to help others, and finally in the process gains wisdom that can be used for the benefit of the wider community. According to Mircea ELIADE, shamanic initiation may take place in public, but may also occur in dreams that involve “an initiation whose structure is well known to the history of religions” (1964, 13–14); in short, the structure and contents of “The Seven-Colored Flower” suggest that vestigial elements of archaic shamanic traditions continue to survive in China, though the accounting of these events has been altered by time, changing social circumstances, or evolving regional traditions.<sup>8</sup>

The intuitive effect of the shamanic resonance of the tale is to lend credence to what happens in the story, perhaps in the form of an unconscious appeal of the shamanic drama of a psychic voyage to another world and return with wisdom and magic that can be used to help those in the everyday world of the living. The third paragraph of the story stresses the seductive qualities of the dream world which, though it is at first enjoyable, is ultimately not a place where the little girl can stay. Initially upon her trip into the dream world she appears merely to board the ship out of curiosity at discovering something new. The appearance of the king and his “adoption” of the little girl has the effect, however, of transforming what has started out as a seemingly harmless excursion into a permanent stay, a situation that prompts the girl (however vaguely she realizes this at the conscious level) to sense that she should not stay in the dream world forever, but rather must return to the world of the waking to do something good.<sup>9</sup> Buddhist echoes appear as well, as the little girl’s return to the waking world is structurally reminiscent of bodhisattvas’ vows not to attain nirvana until those on earth are helped first. In general, both shamanic and Buddhist systems stress the importance of helping others, and not remaining in a dream world, whether it be one of meditation, ecstasy, or even suffering. A key point of such experiences ultimately seems to be to do something productive and morally good with what one learns. And it is this pattern that clearly plays out during the voyage of the girl.

EASTERN AND WESTERN INTERPRETIVE SCHEMAS FOR UNDERSTANDING  
FOLK LITERATURE

From the point of view of Western psychoanalysis, it is conceivable that the “big, magnificent ship” and the king have symbolic value. According to Freud when one sees a king in a dream one is thinking of one’s father, and a ship is related to one’s soul, or a voyage of the soul. In the story, then, the taking of the ship across the sea where one meets a king would suggest a voyage of the soul into the depths of the unconscious, where the little girl meets not her literal father, but rather a father figure in a more spiritual sense, a spiritual benefactor, as it were, who will do for her what her earthly father cannot. This is not because of any deficiency on the part of her father, but because the rules are different in the world of the waking. Here, at a basic level of interpretation, there need be no deep contradiction between Eastern and Western modes of interpretation of at least some parts of the story, though there are a number of points where neither standard psychoanalytical, archetypal, structuralist, or other Western analyses will necessarily ferret out the full meaning of the tale. While Freud himself was drawn toward both sexual and excremental symbology in dreams, one is hard-pressed, I believe, to make such connections between material in “The Seven-Colored Flower” and any such meanings. Freud, for instance, argues in “Dreams in Folklore,” an essay he wrote with D. E. Oppenheim in 1911, that in “dreams in folklore gold is seen in the most unambiguous way to be a symbol of faeces” (FREUD and OPPENHEIM 1958, 38), a statement that seems highly suspect when applied to the voyage of the little girl in the tale, and her encounter with “an old man in golden clothing who turned out to be [a] king” (86). Nevertheless, as Adam Kuper points out, though Freud himself was ambivalent about assigning fixed definitions to symbols in dreams, he generally opts for the “realist alternative” that offers a check-list of fixed definitions. This position, however, as KUPER suggests, while attractive to Freud because of its promise of providing a master key to the interpretation of dreams, nevertheless landed Freud in serious interpretive difficulties (1989, 26–27).

My point here is that common sense suggests that we use a variety of interpretive schemas in attempting to make sense of Chinese folktales, and that while in general we must take care when applying Western theoretical constructs to Chinese folk material, there may nevertheless be some symbols that are universal enough to be accessible through a variety of interpretive systems, both Eastern and Western. In a general sense, the girl’s dream seems related to Buddhist/Taoist conceptions of dreams as having a teaching function and providing a clearer vision of reality and morality, a focus shared by shamanic traditions worldwide.<sup>10</sup> Yet while the tale shows concern for these larger socio-religious issues, there is nevertheless a sustained focus



on more individual, human emotional preoccupations as shown in the little girl's quick shift from excitement over her adventure to missing her family after only a short absence ("The king asked her where she was from, and she replied, telling him about her home and her family. She agreed to stay and live as his daughter...but after a month she thought about her parents and began to cry") (86). The story, in fact, nicely balances these very human reactions with larger, more universal concerns that relate not just to the girl herself, but to the wider society in which she lives. In short, the appearance of a significant dream that demands integration into the larger fabric of the little girl's life and social circumstances still takes place in the context of her personal life, hence her initial difficulty in determining the dream's message.

While the tale's focus is clearly on the girl, the king's reaction to her decision to leave also highlights the story's concern not just with the social and ethical implications of the girl's experience, but also with the more subtle connection between human emotion and eventual ethical outcomes. The king is shown as kind and understanding, just as a father should be, inasmuch as he realizes that it would not be in the best interest of the girl to force her to stay with him, though he will miss her deeply. Although it could be argued from a structural perspective that the king must let the girl return home (she must return to her "native land" to complete her learning as a traveler to the dream world), the portrayal of the king, though simple, is nevertheless finely tuned to show his sadness at the departure of the young girl he now sees as his daughter. Interestingly, at this point in the narrative it becomes evident that the tale is operating on two well-defined levels. One is what we might call a literal level, where events are happening as they might in the world of everyday waking life, and the other level (psychic, metaphysical, ethical, spiritual, teleological) is where the events taking place have a clear purpose beyond the events themselves. The king's action is then both kind, compassionate, and understanding, as well as necessary to allow things to unfold as they must for the girl, a notion that reminds us that these events are taking place in a dream, albeit a very realistic one, and so must be governed by more than chance or simple volition.<sup>11</sup>

#### "THE SEVEN-COLORED FLOWER" AS MODEL FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

It is also at this point in the narrative that echoes of the archaic shamanic tradition again become visible. In choosing the seven-colored flower from the king's treasure room (allowing her to make seven wishes come true), she is prepared for her return to the world of the waking where she has work to do; yet her return to normal consciousness does not guarantee that she will be able to integrate the experiences and learning of the other world. Many things may occur: she may experience a rupture in consciousness (shock)

upon return to the waking world, or perhaps simply forget what has happened; she may dismiss it all as a dream, fantasy, or a product of the imagination. Something, however, obviously happens that makes it difficult for the little girl to deny the importance of what she has dreamed, her finding the seven-colored flower at her side upon waking. Stylistically, this key element is introduced so seamlessly into the narrative that we have little sensation of its strangeness, yet upon reflection we can see how odd it really is. Many episodes of *The Twilight Zone*,<sup>12</sup> for instance, are predicated upon such happenings, and the entire genre of fantastic literature makes liberal use of events that involve the blurring of boundaries between worlds or levels or types of reality. Although its casual presentation dulls our sense of the strange or eerie, what we see upon the girl's waking is no less than a significant crossing of boundaries between two distinct levels of reality, the dream or imaginal world and the world of waking consciousness. This crossing over marks the moment of waking as a portal of sorts between these two worlds, and also a place where the influence of one world may leak into the other. In other words, at the moment of waking what has been experienced in the dream world begins to have an effect on what happens or may happen in the world of waking or normal consciousness. This is significant, since it is consistent with belief systems that stress the ideational roots of reality, where what happens in the world we see and experience every day has its genesis in a realm that is normally invisible, but which exists nevertheless.

While the unusualness of the girl's dream and her waking with the seven-colored flower is downplayed (a truly extraordinary event is made to seem ordinary), we nevertheless are told that upon waking she "recalled her strange and beautiful dream" (86), a narrative choice suggesting that at the very least the girl is struck by what has happened to her, and wonders at her experiences during slumber. The text suggests also that she stayed in bed for some time, perhaps reflecting on her dream, but then upon deciding to get up accidentally "knocked a vase off the table that belonged to her mother" (86). This event acts as a catalyst in moving her back into the waking world, and also curiously, though quite understandably, causes her to become once again focused on the concerns of everyday life, such as not angering her mother or getting in trouble for breaking things. In a sense, this completes the narrative circle that has been created by the dream episode in that we are returned structurally to the brief frame narrative at the beginning of the story before the start of the dream, which is now clearly seen as encasing a bubble or story within a story, the dream itself. The effect of this smooth transition from the dream to waking, and the concerns of daily life, seems to be that we can identify with the girl's feelings, with the odd sensation we have all had of having woken with the sense that we have experienced something

significant and real during sleep. This is something that insistently impinges upon us as we move back into the world of daily life, something, in short, that seems worth remembering and that seems worthy of influencing the way we live our life.

Yet we also see that while the events in a dream may be important guides in helping us determine how we are to live our lives, dreams, no matter how real, have an elusive quality that easily slips from our grasp once we reenter the waking world. Like a fading memory of a trip to a strange and distant country, the little girl is quickly (and understandably) distracted from focus on the dream and its significance and is seemingly redirected towards dealing with the crisis that has presented itself, the vase she has broken (again, this transition is familiar to all of us, as we gear up to meet the challenges of daily life). But then, as if to suggest that the events of the girl's dream were real, she remembers the flower and the promise the king made to her, and uses her first wish to restore the vase to new, and avoid, of course, getting into trouble. It is difficult to say if she has wasted a wish, though her use of it to repair her mother's broken vase is obviously not the best use of such a wonderful gift. In fact, it is clear at this point that the little girl does not realize the significance of the king's gift, invoking for us again the image of shamanic experience that involves multiple levels of training, testing, and continued learning, where acquiring a special spiritual talent for helping others is merely the beginning of true wisdom involving how to best use the gift. As with all such supernatural gifts, the receiver has the choice of whether to learn to use the newly acquired powers properly, to squander them, or even to use them for personal gain.

The girl's integration of her gift continues in the next paragraph, this time with an attempt to get for herself more toys than a playmate, but again her use of the magical flower is misguided, since it is motivated by greed and jealousy, emotions that have no place in helping others. Importantly, after creating a "pile of toys" that got "bigger and bigger without stopping" (87), she promptly makes them disappear with another wish from her flower, another wasteful use of her gift, but yet one that seems to involve some learning. The girl's sudden reaction to the growing pile of toys is interesting, in that it is a response as much to the grotesque image of the growing pile as to the more mundane fact that the pile clearly includes more toys than she can possibly play with or need. The power of the image, in fact, resides in the pile's growth in a manner that resembles something ugly and unnatural that inspires fear and disgust. What it represents, greed, wanting more than one needs, wastefulness, are indeed ugly from a moral point of view, and justly inspire repugnance on the part of the girl whether she realizes this consciously or not. In any case her reaction is visceral and immediate, setting the

stage for more profound learning that must take place. Interesting also is the fact that she has obviously already used three of her seven wishes, making it clear that the number of mistakes she can make before mastering use of the flower is limited.

#### CONCLUSION

The end of the tale is simple but moving. Over the period of a year the girl uses all but one remaining wish, then meets a boy who has lost his legs in a childhood accident. Finally, she is able to use this one wish to truly do something good. She has been to another world in a dream, received a wonderful gift, and learned how to use it to help others. While the number of wishes granted to her is limited, the lesson she has learned about helping others will, one hopes, last for her entire life. The story aims to teach a simple lesson of the necessity of compassion towards others, but does so in a nuanced, subtle way. The story concludes on a note of communion, for after the boy's legs are restored he and the little girl "played together joyfully," free of cares as children often are. Thus, this tale of a most unusual adventure ends in a most simple, natural way.

Analysis of dream content in Chinese folk literature, as I have shown in this paper, is possible through use of both Eastern and Western critical material, though as I stated at the start of my discussion, care must be taken to make use of non-Asian thought systems in a judicious manner so as not to impose Western ideas onto the cultural products of an Asian culture. Some aspects of all cultures, it seems, are universal enough to benefit from being viewed through the lens of global intellectual developments, but must also be seen as unique creations of local culture. And in this way, Chinese folk literature can be seen for what it truly is, a cultural creation whose meaning can be revealed through the insights of Freud, Jung, and others, as well as by its examination in the light of the society and people from which it came.

#### NOTES

1. Some post-colonial critics argue that universalist claims should be abandoned since assertions of universalism in cultural matters (this would include literature and folklore) are merely attempts at imposing Western values and norms on non-Western societies. See Charles LARSON 1995 and Chinua ACHEBE 1995. Other voices, most notably Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell argue for the existence of a common ground of inherited ancestral psychic material (archetypes), making it likely that some elements of cultural practice and belief are common to all irrespective of ethnicity or culture (See CAMPBELL, 1989, 162; 1988, xii). In this paper I assume non-Western (that is, Chinese) folktales can benefit from use of Western conceptual structures, while acknowledging that one must be especially careful not to ascribe universality to conventions that are likely of local cultural origination. For a brief, though balanced discussion of the application of Western psychology to the study of dreams in China, see Carolyn T. BROWN's introduction to her edited volume (1988).

2. Discussion of the long history of dream interpretation in Chinese culture, which is beyond the scope of this paper, is covered in considerable detail in a chapter entitled “Theories and dream interpreters” (19–43) in FANG and ZHANG 2000. The authors cite a large number of texts from early antiquity to more recent times, convincingly showing that dream interpretation has been of concern to the Chinese at least since the Shang dynasty. It is clear from Fang and Zhang’s discussion that during the course of Chinese history, while widely differing approaches to dream interpretation prevailed at various times and places, the interest in understanding dreams has remained a constant.

3. In an informative article, Robert E. HEGEL (1988) suggests that archaic conceptions of dreams indeed survived well into later periods of Chinese society, arguing that dreams that appear in fiction and drama “most commonly serve as a means of communication between the dreamer’s waking world and other levels of existence in other places” (1). Hegel convincingly links early literary and historical depictions of dreams in Chinese culture to vernacular literature, where “even realistically personal dreams have far-reaching significance. Dreamers invariably reach a higher level of meaning in dreams than in waking rational thought, a level that mysteriously places the dreamer in touch with cosmic patterns of right and wrong and the destiny that balances the two, and with ultimate transcendence from all attachments to these patterns” (6).

4. “The Seven-Colored Flower” is taken from my collection, GISKIN 1997, 85–87. All future references will be by page number only. This story was told to me by one of my students during a year-long teaching and research stay in 1993/1994 at Northeast University, Shenyang, People’s Republic of China. The story is from the city of Dalian, in Liaoning Province. In the preface to the written version of the folktale the student wrote, regarding how she herself learned the story: “One summer day I went to the shore to swim. As I sat on the beach, I got to know an old woman, who told me this beautiful and interesting folktale” (GISKIN 1997, 85).

5. Jung links dream-thinking with early human patterns of thought, though he does caution that to the extent that dreams can be linked to myth, neither dreams nor myth should be equated with infantile or primitive thinking. This is because myth, in JUNG’s opinion, is a most mature product of early humanity, and evidently a requirement of prehistoric life (1956a, 23–25).

6. To the extent that dreams in fiction and folk literature are taken seriously, we must consider the role of such dreams in the social construction of reality and the interdependent relationship between dreams and culture. Carol Schreier RUPPRECHT and Kelly BULKEY (1993), basing their argument on work by anthropologists, such as Barbara Tedlock and Waud Kracke, and sociologists, such as Peter Berger, suggest that while “social science research testifies to the somewhat determining effect on dreaming of the psychological, social, epistemological, and religious assumptions of a culture, it reveals the force of the reverse process: dreams also shape cultures.... [D]reams have an impact that often changes the cultural paradigm in which they occur, an impact often ignored or obscured in Western culture” (3).

7. Deepak CHOPRA (1988, 91–110) argues that there is a hidden substratum of being that lies behind both mind and matter, which influences and possibly even causes the reality we experience through perception, that is, the physical world. While Chopra is particularly interested in cases of spontaneous remission of illness, the principle he refers to essentially refers to all causal effects in physical reality. For more on this see the chapter “The Quantum Mechanical Human Body,” in the above volume.

8. The experience of the little girl in “The Seven-Colored Flower” lacks certain markers that signal the transition from a normal state of being to shamanic consciousness, namely ini-

tiation that involves not only didactic aspects (which are present in the “The Seven-Colored Flower”), but also powerful altered states brought on by “sicknesses, dreams, and ecstasies [that] transform the profane, pre-‘choice’ individual into a technician of the sacred” (ELIADE 1964, 33). Despite these differences, however, similarities between “The Seven-Colored Flower” and typical shamanic initiatory experiences as described by Eliade are still considerable. Eliade notes that the “content of these...ecstatic experiences...almost always includes *one or more* [my italics] of the following themes” (34)—dismemberment of the body, followed by a renewal of the internal organs and the viscera, ascent to the sky and dialogue with the gods or spirits, descent to the underworld and conversation with spirits and the souls of dead shamans, and various religious and shamanic revelations—suggesting that variations on the above themes are far from uncommon. Similarly, Eliade argues that among certain groups shamanic transmission takes place in dreams, which include an initiatory scenario, and where instruction often takes place (103).

9. From the perspective of the little girl in the tale, she simply becomes homesick for her family after agreeing to be the king’s adopted daughter, though the larger issue in relation to the focus of this paper is clearly that the girl’s entry into a form of dream travel that takes her to a “foreign” (non-physical) land, where she has various meaningful experiences, and from which she eventually returns to her native land (the everyday physical world), parallels the shamanic experience as described by Mircea Eliade and others. Interestingly, this aspect of the story (the girl’s decision to return home) emphasizes the fact that meaning is to be found at both a literal and deeply interpretive level. This helps explain folk literature’s appeal to a wide (and sometimes unlettered) audience, and also to “specialists” who find significant meaning embedded in the text.

10. See STRICKMANN’s discussion of Chinese Buddhism’s treatment of the question of the reality or unreality of dreams, as well as the central issue of the moral import of dreams and actions performed in dreams (1988, 38–39)

11. This situation raises the rather curious question of whether characters in a dream can be said to act according to their own will. Since dream characters are akin to puppets or characters in a play, it is obvious that in one sense their actions are determined and directed by someone (or something), that is, the dreamer. Yet from within the dream, as from within plays, where characters’ motivation is often discussed and seen as a legitimate area of conjecture (“Why does Iago plant the idea of Desdemona’s betrayal in Othello’s mind?” for instance), it would seem the question of free will is related more to the depth of development of the characters (their psychological verisimilitude) than the fact of their “fictional” status. In other words, if a character in a dream or play (any piece of literature for that matter) appears real enough to have motivations, then it is legitimate to ascribe them. This also explains why a puppet in a shadow theater is not normally seen to be motivated by thoughts and actions, though even here the distinction may be ambiguous, as it sometimes is in dreams.

12. *The Twilight Zone*, a CBS (1959–1964) television science fiction series written and narrated by Rod Serling, played heavily upon the idea of an unseen, mysterious world beyond the normal range of perception, but sometimes accessible in eerie ways. For seminal discussions of issues relating to the blurring of boundaries between the perceived reality of the everyday world and the mysterious unseen, see FREUD’s (1953) essay, written in 1925, and Tzvetan TODOROV (1973), both of which deal with literary manifestations of the uncanny and fantastic.

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