

**RESEARCH TITLE**

**Similarities in the Functions of “Dream” in Chinese and Arabic Dream Literature**

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**Abstract**

Ephemeral yet thought-provoking, dream has been portrayed as a connection between reality and fantasy in literature masterpieces throughout various epochs in both China and the Arab world, occupying a well-deserved literary status inspiring numerous masterpieces of poetry, theatrical art and fiction. Encompassing exuberant emotions, unconstrained imagination and profound reflections of the reality, dream constitutes one of the favorite topics in both Arabic and Chinese literary traditions and has inspired some of the most prominent literature works in both cultures, such as *A Dream of Red Mansions* in China and *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* in the Arab world. Despite the distinct stylistic characteristics of different genres, the influence of different literary canons and poetic traditions as well as inherent Arabic-Chinese cultural differences, there is considerable commonality in the way dream is portrayed and viewed in Arabic and Chinese literature works. This article offers an overview of dream literature in the Arab world and in China, followed by a close observation of three main functions of dream in literature, namely a vehicle of morals and admonition, a literary device of lyricism and a means of voicing irony and ridicule. Striking similarities are identified in all these three functions of dream between Arabic and Chinese literature. Explorations into such intertextuality shall provide new inspirations for Arabic-Chinese comparative cultural studies and offer new insights into the history of cultural exchange and mutual influence in literary traditions between China and the Arab world.

**Key Words:** Dream Literature, Arabic Literature, Chinese Literature, Comparative Cultural Studies, *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* (The Thousand and One Nights)

## (I) Introduction

Dreams and the divination of dreams occupy a high position in both traditional Arabic and Chinese cultures. Although in the Arabic language, “dream” can be divided into “al-Ru’yah” (real dream) and “al-Hulmu” (chaotic dream), while in Chinese, the Chinese character “梦” (Meng, dream) has undergone morphological changes throughout various stages, yet the connotation and extension of the meanings of “dream” in both Arabic and Chinese languages and literary traditions have been strikingly similar from ancient times to the present. Despite their differences in historical, religious, linguistic contexts and other cultural dimensions, based on different types of dreams, the Arabs and the Chinese have managed to define their respective methods of interpreting dreams and developed distinct dream-related theories. and professional dream diviners are seen in both cultures.

Dreams are fleeting and ephemeral, therefore are difficult to grasp, yet they have an irreplaceable role to play. They represent not only a mental activity or spiritual experience but also a mysterious territory. It would be unfair and illogical to consider “dreams” as something optional, for illusory as they are, they are common and visible in life. It is precisely their ubiquitous presence in human existence that have made “dreams” one of the favorite topics of literature in both the Arab world and China. So why do most literati regard the “dream” as an important part of their works? To answer this question, we have to understand the role of the “dream” in literature. Of course, “dream” has both positive and negative effects. For example, nowadays it is generally believed that dreams affect the quality of sleep, yet more substantial evidence is needed to either define or measure such influence, and the potentially negative side from a physiological perspective can be omitted from the current discussion from the perspective of literary traditions. Instead, this article shall focus on how “dream” is portrayed in ancient Arabic and Chinese literature. The discussion of the role of “dream” will not shed new light on future study of Arabic and Chinese literature but also provide inspirations for the creation of dream literature of today.

Several key similarities are observed in the role of dream literature in both Chinese and Arabic literary traditions, such as “dream” used as the theme of literary works, and the narration or description of dreams or events related to dreams as part of the artistic value of the work. There are three functions of “dream” that are very similar in the ancient dream literature in China and the Arab world: expressing morals and admonition, expressing lyricism, expressing irony and ridicule. To elaborate this point, citations and extracts related to “dream” shall be taken from Alf Laylah wa Laylah (A Thousand and One Nights) and ancient Arabic poetry, as well as works of Chinese literature of the pre-Qin and Han Dynasties and the Tang legends, so as to demonstrate and elucidate these three functions of “dream” in ancient Chinese and Arabic literature.

## (II) An Overview of Dream Literature in Arabic and Chinese Literary Traditions

Dreams are literature without a sound while literature is a dream verbally expressed. Liu Hsieh, a literary theorist in the Southern Dynasty, stated that “In the case of composing literature, the affections are stirred and words come forth; but in the case of reading a work of literature, one opens the text and enters the affections [of the writer], goes against the current to find the source; and though it may [at first] be hidden, it will certainly become manifest.”<sup>1</sup> Such is an indication that the use of words and the creation of literary works find

<sup>1</sup> [Southern Dynasty] Liu Hsieh. (2012). *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*. translated into modern Chinese and annotated by Wang Zhibin. Zhonghua Book Company. p.555. English translation with reference to *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*. (1992). Translated by Stephen Owen. published by Massachusetts and London: The Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, Distributed by Harvard University Press. p.290.

their origins in emotional interactions with the surrounding world, as affection is triggered by the sight of an object or a scene, and then committed to writing. Dreams, as a particular mental phenomenon that bridges awakes with sleep, reality with imagination and consciousness with subconsciousness, inspires literature with its illusive, mythical, heuristic and symbolic nature, hence playing an irreplaceable role in the production and criticism of literature.

It is not the case that people dream in an ontological and epistemological vacuum, then newly arrive at the very idea of spirits to explain their dream experience. Instead, in dreams they meet beings the idea of whom (and relationships with whom) already exist in their community, however much those relationships might be newly initiated, or furthered or changed, in and through dreams.<sup>2</sup> Dreams in literary works may be concrete cultural symbols, in which sense both dreams and literature possess a sociologically diachronic significance. “One dreams at night of what is on his mind during the day”, so goes the saying. Dreams are the extension of one’s thoughts as well as the projection of real life. In his *Dream Culture in China (Zhongguo Meng Wenhua)*, Fu Zhenggu relates dreams as a cultural phenomenon with various aspects of social mores and institutions in ancient China--political and military attempts, etiquette and decrees, sacrificial rites and rituals, penal laws, philosophy and history, folk beliefs, nomination of governmental officials, fate and code of ethics.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, dreams in literary works can be abstract, as the spiritual journey from dream to soul and to deities and immortals constitute the rudimentary folk beliefs in the childhood of mankind as a result of collective unconsciousness. While the “unspeakable”, i.e. deities and ghosts as in “The Master (Confucius) never speaks about supernatural or weird powers, riots, deities or ghosts”, is the earliest evidence of mythology. Therefore, some scholars associate the roots of mythology as the infancy of literature with accounts of dreams.

### 2.1. A Crossover of Poetics and Sacredness: Dream Literature in the Arab World

Dreams in Arabic literature can be observed from two dimensions, namely secular literature and religious classics. First, the Arab-Islamic literary tradition is rooted in the pagan era that preceded the advent of Islam, termed the Jāhiliyyah, the Age of “Ignorance” or “Impetuousness”<sup>4</sup>, when the Arab Peninsula was populated by numerous nomadic tribes. Qaṣīdah was the preeminent form of literature during this period, which, focusing on lavishing emotions rather than depicting reality, was orally composed and transmitted to praise the majesty of tribal chiefs, to mourn over the loss of heroic warriors on battlefield or to insult or defy hostile tribes. Most common poetic images included sky, star, land, mountain, plains, night and desert as well as horse, camel, date palm with deep emotional connections. Poetic language in this era was rather direct with few metaphors or allusions, which can be partially explained by the absence of literary or religious canons from which allusions or rhetoric exuberance were supposed to be bred, as Arabic literature was still in its infancy. Another explanation was rooted in the nature of Arabs who had nothing to lose and nothing to fear. Hence hardly any trace of “dream” was found in Arabic poetry of this era, as dreams were usually viewed as a kaleidoscope of fantasies brimming with exuberant colors and vagaries of sounds and feelings. Although early Arabic poetry did not fall short of imagination or emotional resonance of dreams, the form, mostly mono-rhymed and mono-metered, was insufficient to build a “dreamscape” on its own.

The earliest “dream” depicted in an Arabic poem is likely to be found in the following

<sup>2</sup> Robert Ford Campany. (2020). *The Chinese Dreamscape: 300 BCE-800 CE*. Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London: Harvard University Asia Center, Harvard University Press. p.21.

<sup>3</sup> Fu Zhenggu. (1993). *Dream Culture in China (Zhongguo Meng Wenhua)*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.

<sup>4</sup> Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych. (2010). From Jāhiliyyah to Badīciyyah: Orality, Literacy, and the Transformations of Rhetoric in Arabic Poetry. in *Oral Tradition*, 25(1), p.211.

stanzas composed by Emru' Al-Qays:

“The night was like sea waves that cast sorrows upon my heart,  
Sharp, sharp sorrows like a piercing sword.  
As my bosom was filled with woes, I implored,  
Long, long night, will thou from thy tempo ever depart?”<sup>5</sup>

The mental image portrayed in the poem was a nocturnal one. Although the concept of “dream” was not directly mentioned, yet it was obvious that what “cast sorrows” upon the poet’s heart was most likely to be a dream. Besides, Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn al-Husayn ibn Ali al-Mas’udi in his *Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gem* gave an account of Shiq’qu and Sutaihu, two priests in the 5<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of King Lakhmeen up to 620 A.D, were known for their ability of interpreting dreams and were therefore invited by the Yemeni King to interpret his dreams.

Literature in Umayyad Dynasty was more imaginative and outspoken in the expression of emotions. A writing technique characteristic of this period was expressing genuine desires, especially the yearning for a loved one or for love itself, through fictional narration of dreams. The notion of dream was occasionally camouflaged in subtleties and implied by words such as “sleep”, “night” or “awakened”. An example is offered in the following stanza by Tamim Ibn Ubai Ibn Muqbel:

Awaken from a long sleep, Zainab knocked at your door,  
Outside the city, without a single companion.<sup>6</sup>

Alf Laylah wa Laylah, also known as A Thousand and One Nights, was the pinnacle of medieval Arabic fictions. Its frame story itself was closely associated with dreams, as the “Night” not only set the scene for the storyteller like “Chapter” in ancient Chinese novels but also played a key role in the development of plots. Dreams were a metaphor and an omen, as in the story of the King and his seven daughters where the seven pearls appearing in the King’s dream symbolized his seven daughters, while the most brilliant and beautiful pearl being snatched away by a crow foreboded the fateful mishaps of his youngest daughter whom he loved most.

The late Abbasid Dynasty saw the emergence of a new category of fictional literature known as fantasy literature, which, breaking free from the traditional “account” of dream, was built upon an illusion or fantasy as the frame of story where consciousness and unconsciousness were interwoven. *Risalat al-Ghufran* by Abu Alaa Al-Ma’arri was the representative work of dream literature during this period which has inspired many modern and contemporary works of Arabic literature. For example, Taha Husayn, nicknamed “the dean of Arabic literature”, was known for his unique experiments with modern dream literature where illusions mingled with reality and dreams transitioned from unconscious fantasies into a materialistic world choked with desires. *Risalat al-Ghufran* has exerted much influence not only on literary creation of authors in later years, including the prominent Taha Husayn and the Nobel Prize laureate Naguib Mahfouz, but, according to European scholars, even Dante’s *Divina Commedia* is left with the imprint of this masterpiece featuring audacious imagination and philosophical profundity.

To apprehend “dream” in Arabic literary traditions or even the spiritual homeland of

<sup>5</sup> Emru' al-Qays. (2014). *Poems of Emru' al-Qays*. Cairo: Dar al-M'arif press. p.18. English translation by author.

<sup>6</sup> Tamim Ibn Ubai Ibn Muqbel. (1998). *Poems collection of Tamim Ibn Ubai Ibn Muqbel*. Beirut: Dar al-Jeel press. p.13. English translation by author.

Arabs in the light of religious canons, the Holy Qur'an undoubtedly occupies the utmost lofty and sacred position with the most far-reaching impact. For example, Ibrahim saw himself in a dream to sacrifice his beloved son Ismail, and All-Knowing, All-Merciful Allah acknowledged his faithfulness and instructed him to replace his son with a lamb, where the tradition of Eid al-Adha was rooted. Besides, Yusuf's dream in his youth and his capability of interpreting dreams for his fellow prisoners and the pharaoh, the accounts of al-Israa Wa al-Mi'raj of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in his dream and in reality all testified to the significance of dream in Islam. Notably, the story how Yusuf (Joseph in the Bible) dreamed and interpreted dreams is also found in the Bible, which further proves the authenticity of the history and the cultural commensurability reflected in the spiritual perspective.

## 2.2. From Zhuangzi to the Red Mansions: Dream Literature in China

Robert Ford Campany in his *Chinese Dreamscape: 300 BCE-800 CE* has defined five paradigms of dreams in ancient China, namely the exorcistic paradigm, the prospective paradigm, the visitation paradigm, the diagnostic paradigm and spillover paradigm.<sup>7</sup> This means that “dream” in the horizons of traditional Chinese literature is more than a literary metaphor but is an indication of early folk belief and philosophical thinking, as is manifested in classics before the Qin Dynasty. In *Zhuangzi: Discussion on Making All Things Equal*, “While he is dreaming he does not know it is a dream, and in his dream he may even try to interpret a dream. And someday there will be a great awakening when we know that this is all a great dream”<sup>8</sup>, it is obvious that Zhuangzi compares life with a dream as one of the quintessential elements of his spiritual realm that breaks free from the finitude of the material world and pursues the unconstrained freedom “breezily as if standing alone beyond the world”. While Zhuangzi's “butterfly dream” further reflects his perception of life where “Self” and “Thing” become One and heart follows the Transformation of Things. “Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakably Zhuang Zhou. But he didn't know if he was Zhuang Zhou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuang Zhou.”<sup>9</sup> Existence is therefore placed in the original form of life where “without them we would not exist; without us they would have nothing to take hold of”. The existence of “Me” is stripped from the temporal and spatial fragment of being, and “Self” and “Other”, “Me” and “Things” become one in ultimate freedom, which is the ideal state in Zhuangzi's philosophy.

Dreams and reality were closely associated in the literature during the pre-Qin period and the Eastern and Western Han Dynasties, when lifelike dreams were a medium to express strong feelings and were used for divination. For example, in the following stanza in *Book of Songs: Minor Odes of the Kingdom: Si Gan (The Creek)*, “What was the good omen in my dream? Bear and brown bear they were. Cobra and hissing snake they were. By Chief Diviner the dream is divined: Bear and brown bear foretell the coming of a son; Cobra and hissing snake are signs of a daughter.”<sup>10</sup> Animals appearing in one's dream foretell if a son or a daughter is about to be born. And the following poem titled *Wu Yang (No Sheep)* goes, “Then dreams the herdsman--Of locusts transforming into swarms of fish, of tortoise and snake on

<sup>7</sup> Robert Ford Campany. (2020). *The Chinese Dreamscape: 300 BCE-800 CE*. Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London: Harvard University Asia Center, Harvard University Press. p.5-6.

<sup>8</sup> *Zhuangzi*. (2010). translated and annotated by Fang Yong. Beijing: China Book Company, 2010, p.37-38. English translation with reference to *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings*. (2003). translated by Burton Watson, New York: Columbia University Press. p.43.

<sup>9</sup> *Zhuangzi*. (2010). translated and annotated by Fang Yong. Beijing: China Book Company. p.42. English translation with reference to *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings*, translated by Burton Watson, New York, Columbia University Press, 2003, p.44.

<sup>10</sup> Cheng Junying. (2010). *Translation and Annotations of The Book of Songs*. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House. p.300. English translation by author.

flags turning into eagles. By Chief diviner the dream is divined: In locusts becoming swarms of fish, a good harvest is envisioned; as the tortoise and snake on the flag turn into eagles, many births will be celebrated.”<sup>11</sup> Here the mythical transformation of locusts into fish betokens a plentiful harvest; while the transfiguration of totemic motif of tortoise and snake into eagles betokens increasing population. Notably, the stanza “by chief diviner the dream is divined” has appeared in both poems, where “chief diviner” (*taibu*, also known as *dabu* in the Zhou Dynasty) is a soothsayer considered to have mastered the secrets of *yin* and *yang*, whose responsibility includes untangling the dilemmas of the ruler and divining the upcoming fortune or mishap. It is therefore clear that it was generally believed that dreams were auguries of fortunes and calamities and that the divination and interpretation of dreams were already popular during this period.

Illusionary and illogical as they might appear, dreams recorded in the official annals and biographies as well as prose of philosophers in the Pre-Qin period had their realistic significance. For example, it was recorded in *Zuo Qiuming's Commentary on Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Zuo Zhuan*): *3<sup>rd</sup> Year of Lord Xuangong's Reign* that “Yan Jie, a humble concubine, dreamed that an angel presented her with orchid and said, ‘My name is Bo Tiao and I am your ancestor. Take this as your son.’”<sup>12</sup> The orchid appearing in the dream of the pregnant concubine was an indication of majesty of the baby in her womb, and “dream” therefore became a testimony of legitimacy and historical authenticity of the ruler. What appeared to be pure absurdity in fact rendered a much needed service to the rule of order in a Confucian context, examples included the unusual sign preceding Emperor Liu Bang's birth: “his elderly mother used to rest by the Great Marsh, where she encountered god in her dream”, Concubine Boji's dream of “an azure dragon in her womb” before Emperor Wen of the Han Dynasty was born, and the dream of “the sun in her arms” of the mother of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, to name just a few.

Impractical discussions were popular among literati during the Wei, the Jin and the Southern and Northern Dynasties, when *zhiguai* (accounts of supernatural beings) fictions emerged and narration of dreams became more vivid with mythical touches. Prophetic dreams and apparition of departed souls making a request in dreams were seen for multiple times in *In Search of the Supernatural* (*Soushenji*) and *In Search of the Supernatural Continued* (*Soushenhouji*), where stories followed the logic of “dreamer giving an account of dream--listener feeling touched or impressed--fulfillment of prophesy in dream” and concluded with “so it was, as appeared in the dream” or “so it happened, exactly like what was in the dream”. The correlation between dream and reality was manifested in the mysterious and occult plot.

During the Tang Dynasty, tales “were still written about marvels and strange phenomena, the plots became more elaborate and the language more polished. Compared with the tales of the Six Dynasties, which give the bare outlines of stories, there was a marked advance.”<sup>13</sup> Significant advancement was seen in artistic value and curiosity compared to those composed in previous dynasties. A distinct feature of dream literature of the Tang Dynasty was the visible indication of Buddhism as teachings of reincarnation and karma were integrated into dreams. Besides, accounts of “dream travels” emerged during this period.

<sup>11</sup> Cheng Junying. (2010). *Translation and Annotations of The Book of Songs*. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House. p.303. English translation by author.

<sup>12</sup> *Annotations of the Thirteen Classics, Orthodox Exposition on the Commentary of Zuo on the Spring and Autumn Annals*. (1980). Volume 21. proofread and inscribed by [Qing] Ruan Yuan. Beijing: China Book Company. p.1868. English translation by author.

<sup>13</sup> Lu Xun. (2006). *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction (Zhongguo Xiaoshuo Shilue)*. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House. p.44. English translation with reference to Lu Hsun. (1923). *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*. translated by Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang. Peking: Foreign Language Press. p.80.

Poems and prose such as Li Bai's *Tianmu Mountain Ascended in a Dream*, Li He's *A Journey into the Heaven*, Li Gongzuo's *An Account of the Governor of the Southern Bough* and Shen Jiji's *A Tale in the Pillow*, etc. Apart from the grandeur and fantasy of narration, the transcendent experience of the narrator and even the incarnation into a non-ontological “Other” in the dream seemed to echo with Zhuangzi's dream of butterfly despite the temporal and spatial differences, casting far-reaching influence onto literature in the epochs to come.

A significant feature of dream literature from the Song to the Qing Dynasties was the return from supernatural and mystical beings to human nature, as human desires suppressed by the Confucian school of idealist philosophy of the Song and Ming Dynasties found their relief in dreams. It was in dreams that human emotions and mundane desires reached compromise with code of ethics and feudal virtues. “The Four Dreams of Linchuan” by Tang Xianzu, a distinguished playwright of the Ming Dynasty, i.e. *The Peony Pavilion*, *The Story of the Purple Hairpin*, *The Story of Handan*, *A Dream Under the Southern Bough*, explored into the philosophical questions of love and death, mundane affairs and seclusion, illusion and reality which, in a sense, mirrored the spiritual realm of the Chinese people. With “dream” in its title, the unquestionable pinnacle of Chinese classic literature, *A Dream of Red Mansions* (*Hong Lou Meng*, also known as *The Story of the Stone*) depicted a total of 32 dreams, including Chapter 1 “Zhen Shiyin in a Dream Sees the Jade of Spiritual Understanding”, Chapter 5, “The Spiritual Stone Is Too Bemused to Grasp the Fairy's Riddles”, Chapter 82 “The Queen of Bamboos Falling Ill Has a Fearful Nightmare” and Chapter 98 “Deranged Shen Ying Sheds Tears in the Lodge of His Loved One”, etc. In these chapters, dreams either set the scene for narration, carried a message of admonition, expressed emotional attachment or symbolized yearning in vain. Dreams were a prelude, a foreshadow, the implied logic that connected all chapters together and the vanity of vanities in the Great Void. Zhi Yan Zhai left the following comment in Chapter 48, “This great work starts with a dream. Dream is where Baoyu sent his deepest love, where Jia Rui fell prey of his erotic fantasies, where Lady Qin gave admonition concerning the management of the household, and where (in this Chapter) Xiangling made an effort in composing her first poem. The Precious Mirror of Love came into being from a dream, hence it is called *A Dream of Red Mansions*.”<sup>14</sup> *A Dream of Red Mansions* deserves indeed its reputation as an unprecedented and unmatched work of dream literature in ancient China.

### (III) The Three Functions of “Dream” in Dream Literature of China and the Arab World

#### 3.1 Dream as a vehicle to express morals and admonition

3.1.1 It is found that dreams in these literary traditions can be repetitive or complementary with one another. For example, a person may dream of the first part of a story, while another person dreams of the second part; their dreams complement each other to form a complete dream, which can be termed as “complementary dream”. While it is also possible that two people see exactly the same scene or experience the same story in their dream, which can be termed as “identical dream”. In either case, when two dreamers meet, they do not only put their stories together to get the big picture, but the complementary or identical nature of the dream itself may help them to elucidate the essence of the dream and to solve the mystery or enigma in the dream.

In Alf Laylah wa Laylah (*A Thousand and One Nights*) there is a well-known story featuring a complementary dream, i.e. the Bankrupt Baghdad Merchant Becoming Rich

<sup>14</sup> Cao Xueqin. (2009). *The Story of the Stone*. with Comments by Zhi YanZhai. Reviewed as of the Year 1760. Beijing: The Writers Publishing House. p.317. English translation by author.

Through Dreams. In the story, there was a very wealthy Baghdad merchant who went bankrupt because of his extravagant life. One day, he dreamed that there was a treasure in a certain area of Egypt. Having seen this scene several times in his dream, he finally decided to visit Egypt in search of the treasure. When he arrived in Egypt, he was penniless and had to rest in a small church. Accidentally, just before he arrived, some thieves had hidden their booties plundered from the church, and when the patrolling officials arrived, the thieves had already escaped, so the merchant, taken as a scapegoat, was arrested and imprisoned. He appeared before the judge, and when interrogated why he committed the sin of theft in the church, the merchant replied that he was not a local citizen and he had not stolen anything, explaining that he had travelled all the way to Egypt because of the treasure that repeatedly appeared in his dream. The judge burst into laughter at his words and reprimanded, “What a fool you are to come to Egypt for the hidden treasure just because of this absurd dream! How ridiculous!”, adding that “I dreamed several times that there was a fountain in the garden of a house in Baghdad, where there were many hidden treasures, but I never believed it.” Finally, the judge gave the merchant a little money just to cover his journey to Baghdad, warning him that he should not take these dreams by their face value. But the judge was unaware that the house in Baghdad appearing in his dream happened to be the merchant’s house. After returning home, the merchant dug up the hidden treasure from the fountain in the garden and became rich again.<sup>15</sup>

The moral this kind of story lies in the teaching that the real treasure for people is inherent, and everyone should look for his own inner talent which is his real priceless treasure.

3.1.2 The influence of the Chinese tradition of “writing to convey the truth” is far-reaching for both the upper-class literati and the creation of lower-class literature to a certain extent. In ancient Chinese literature, the tendency of expressing moral truths and admonition through dreams is also obvious. For example, a story in *The Commentary of Zuo on the Spring and Autumn Annals: the Fifteenth Year of Lord Xuangong's Reign* is an example of the significance of great enlightenment, and more importantly, it can be regarded as part of dream literature.

In the early Wei Dynasty, Wei Wuzi had a concubine who ended up childless. When Wei Wuzi fell sick, he instructed Wei Ke: “After I die, you must send her off to marry someone else.” When he was about to breathe his last, he ordered: “She must be sacrificed for my death!” After Wei Wuzi died, however, Wei Ke allowed the woman to remarry anyway, explaining that “My father lost his sanity when he was seriously ill, so I followed what he instructed me to do when he was clear-headed.” During the Fushi battle, Wei Ke saw an old man tying grass into a knot to trip the enemy general Du Hui. Du Hui tripped and fell to the ground, and was consequently was captured. At night, Wei Ke dreamed of an old man talking to him, “I am the father of the woman whom you allowed to remarry. I have come to repay your kindness when you followed your father’s command when he was clear-headed.”

This story is highly instructive in that it admonishes people to be grateful and repay other people’s kindness. However, the subject teaching people about “gratitude” here is a ghost. It is the “ghost” that have most effectively aroused people’s awareness of such truth. This is perhaps associated with the Chinese tradition of “respecting ancestors and ghosts”. In this story, Wei Ke once saved the life his father’s concubine, and consequently affected the ghost of the concubine’s father to repay him and help him capture Du Hui. The concubine’s father told Wei Ke in his dream that it was because he had followed his father’s instructions when

<sup>15</sup> [Arabic] Anonymous author. (2013). *One Thousand and One Nights*, Bankrupt Baghdad Businessman Becoming Rich by Dreams. Chinese translation by Liu Xiaofei. Beijing: North Literature and Art Publishing House. p.167.

he was sane and therefore spared the life of the poor concubine that he tried to help him out of appreciation. The key point in this story is not only about being grateful and repaying for others' kindness, but also about staying clear-headed when making decisions. It teaches people the importance of sanity. Although the latter enlightenment is conveyed through conversations in a dream, it is obvious from reading the text.

The “dream” as the theme of the story has left a strong impression on readers' mind and effectively teaches the importance of gratitude, proving that using “dream” as a vehicle of explaining the author's thought is more effective and more relevant than a litany of plain words, as “supernatural beings such as ghosts and fairies” are closely associated with “dreams”.

### 3.2 Dream as a literary device of lyricism

3.2.1 Lyricism is most common in poems as compared to other literary genres. Poets often express their strong yearning for their loved ones through poems. A poet once stated “Although seeing the figure of his lover in a dream can satisfy his desire for her, it is not a warm feeling, but little more than a consolation for his strong memory.” This phenomenon exists in both ancient and modern poetry.

The greatest Arab poet Ibn Hazm Al-Andalusi (994-1064 AD) described his dream of seeing his lover in the article titled *Contentment* in his book *The Ring of the Dove* (Tawqu Al-Hamamatu). While many devout believers of Sufism hesitated to sleep for fear of interrupting their religious obligations, such as performing salah and worshipping, Ibn Hazm believed that “love” and “yearning” possessed the strongest power to keep those in love from sleeping. On the other hand, those tormented by unrequited love yearned for their beloved ones so much that they longed to fall asleep, so that they might be granted a chance to satisfy the desire of heart in their dream. For them, falling asleep would bring them closer to their lovers. As Ibn Hazm expressed in the following stanza:

“My lover's silhouette graced me with a visit. How fragile and pitiful am I, who would not sleep had it not been for my lover's silhouette.”<sup>16</sup>

*The Story of Women and Their Poetry* told by Asmayi to Harun Al-Rashid in Alf Laylah wa Laylah gave an account of three girls playfully held a poetry contest, agreeing that whoever composed the most beautiful piece of poetry would win three hundred dinars (the currency of Ancient Iraq). All the three girls composed lyrical poems that portrayed their dreams.<sup>17</sup>

The oldest girl composed the following stanza, “I was surprised that he breezed over my bed in my dream. Had he come to me in my wakefulness, I'd be even more surprised.”

Then came the girl in between, “Only in my dream can I see him and greet him with a message of welcome.”

Finally, it was the turn for the youngest girl, “I sacrificed myself and my family to see him every night. In my dream I tasted his saliva, which was sweeter than any perfume.”

The lyric poems of the three girls are alive with colors and affections, and the words conveyed much deeper connotation than the literal meaning. The first girl was eager to meet her lover in her dream, and the sight of her lover delighted her with a pleasant surprise. But in

<sup>16</sup> Abu Muhammad Ali Ibn Saeed Ibn Hazm Alandalusi. (1950). *The Ring of the Dove*. interpreted by Hasan Kamil Sayrafi. Cairo: Hijazi Press. p.99.

<sup>17</sup> Anonymous author. (1935). *One Thousand and One Nights*. 3<sup>rd</sup> part. revised according to the edition of Bulaq Press. Cairo: Alsaedia press. p.205.

fact, she is more eager to be with him in reality, The girl in the second poem can only greet her lover in her dream. It seems that both heroines of the poems were nurturing an unrequited love and their beloved ones do not associate with them at all in real life. The third poem, however, is more interesting as it expresses how her lover’s perfume and saliva was sweet and enchanting, showing that the romance is not an imagined one but the heroine connects with her beloved one in reality and not only in dreams. Many stories of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* show women’s strong desire for love and romance as well as their erudition and literary talent, their wisdom and elegant demeanor.

3.2.2 People’s interpretations of dreams always begin with an “illusion”. It is precisely because of the illusion of the “dream” itself that dreams can often coincide with the “illusory nature” of literary works. One may openly lament on frustrations in life in the era of political openness and ideological freedom, while in the era under strict ideological control, the literati must find a more subtle approach to express their emotions for the sake of their lives. Therefore, in this situation, “dream” becomes an emotional sustenance of literati in their literary creation. This may seem absurd but is very relevant in its specific historical context, as dreams did occupy a very special position in the mind of ancient Chinese people who did not only resort to dreams for temporary satisfaction but also regarded dreams as a vent of their emotions, and even a wishful symbol of their hopes and expectations.

For example, as is mentioned in the previous chapter, “*xióng pi ru meng*” (dreaming of a giant bear) has the auspicious meaning of “giving birth to male infants” for ancient Chinese people<sup>18</sup>, and in Wang Anshi’s poem *Missing Wang Fengyuan* there goes the following stanza: “As a learned man deserves offspring, may giant bears in your dream appear.” It can be said that in some of these literary works, “dreams” are the most appropriate vehicle for the author to express his emotions and thoughts. When a dream comes true, it brings people great joy, and if it is just a dream, not much regret would be felt, after all, a dream offers consolation and comfort amid the harsh reality. There might be a multitude of ways to express emotions and feelings, but in the minds of some ancient Chinese literati, such intimate and personal feelings, sometimes secret wishes, are best expressed in dreams.

### 3.3 Dream as a means of voicing irony and ridicule

3.3.1 Irony and ridicule have occupied a considerable space in ancient and modern Arab literature. In literary traditions in the Arab world, the most abominable disasters and evils are dealt with irony and sarcasm, as the old saying goes: “The vilest things and the worst calamities are those that instigate laughter”. Some of the greatest examples in poetry and prose is expressing irony and ridicule in the setting of “dreams”.

For example, a poet named Bashar Ibn Bourd (died in 784 AD) in the Abbasid Dynasty once visited his friends. He looked unhappy and his friends tried to find out the reason. He replied that one of his donkeys had died, and he dreamed of it last night. Bashar asked it why it left so early. Had he been treating it badly? The donkey told Bashar its love story in the form of poetry, saying, “I fell in love with a female donkey I met in front of the door of al-Asbahani. It broke up with me, and I died brokenhearted.” When describing the beauty of the female donkey, it said:

“It has a tender face, just like the face of al-Shanfarani.”

His friends asked the poet Bashar, “What does al-Shanfarani mean?” Bashar said, “How should I know? This is the strangest thing about this male donkey. If you meet it, ask yourself

<sup>18</sup> Liu Yan. (2012). Cultural investigation of Dream Divination in Pre-Qin and Han Dynasties. Shaanxi: Shaanxi Normal University. p.21.

about it.” This is the tragic ending of the love story of a donkey. In the dream of the donkey a witty and sarcastic allegory was created.<sup>19</sup>

3.3.2 Besides abundant literary works in ancient China aiming at “conveying the truth”, there is another genre or category that should not be ignored, that is, allegory literature. With the selection of officials in feudal China a system built upon meritocracy, most ancient Chinese literati, considering themselves well-educated and erudite, were zealous about participating in politics. The idea that “officialdom is the natural reward for good scholars” was very common among the aspiring literati at that time. However, these men of letters tended to feel righteously indignant when the rulers were tyrannical and unscrupulous. Unable to speak out their mind directly, they had to resort to satirical literary works. One may compare “dream” in ancient Chinese allegories with some sort of baking powder or catalyst as the expressiveness of “dream” in satirizing immoral politics can be overwhelming. “Dream” does not only recreate the reality in a desired way, but also give people an insight into the darkness of politics. When one wakes up, the “dream” disappears, but the feelings experienced from the dream would still linger.

Tang legends have made great contributions to the development of Chinese novels and constitute an interesting field of research for contemporary scholars. One of the highlights identified by contemporary scholars is how dream functions as an integral part of those legends in terms of both narrative logic and style of writing. Traditionally Tang legends were not favored by orthodox literati of the Tang Dynasty when the literary values of poetry and prose were given more emphasis, however, the artistic accomplishments of the legends of this epoch of literary talents should not be overlooked. Fortunately, contemporary Chinese literary circles have become aware of the important role of legends in the development of literary traditions in ancient China, and works such as *Story in a Pillow* and *An Account of the Governor of the Southern Bough*, which are not only representative works of dream literature but also classics of allegory literature. Here *An Account of the Governor of the Southern Bough* shall be taken as an example to illustrate the satirical role of “dream” in ancient Chinese literature.

One day in September of the seventh year of Zhenyuan’s Reign, Chunyu Fen felt unwell because he was drunk. And his two friends lifted him from his seat, managed to take him home and laid him under the porch in the east of the guest room. His two friends said to him, “You’d better have a rest now. We’ll feed the horses and wash our feet here until you feel better.” Chunyu Fen removed his scarf and fell asleep the moment his head touched the pillow, when he suddenly felt a daze as if he was dreaming. He saw two emissaries dressed in purple bowing down to him and said: “The King of Huai’an Kingdom sent us to invite you to our country”. Chunyu Fen got up, adjusted his clothes and followed the two messengers to the door. He saw a black carriage with four horses and seven or eight attendants beside it. They helped Chunyu Fen into the carriage, which breezed through the gate and headed for the hole of the old locust tree... At that time his Zhou Bian and Tian Zihua, his drinking friends, both lived in Liuhe County, and it had been over ten days that Chunyu Fen lost contact with them. He sent his male servant to their houses, only to find that Zhou Bian had died of an acute illness and Tian Zihua was also ill in bed. Chunyu Fen sighed with emotion for the illusion of his dream, and became aware that life was just a fleeting moment, so he was converted to Taoism and abandoned all mundane desires. Three years later, it was the year of Ding Chou. He died at home at the age of 47, just in line with what his father had said in his dream letter.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Bashar Ibn Bourd. (1966). *Poems collection of Bashar Ibn Bourd*. interpreted by Muhammad al-Tahir ibn Ashur. Cairo: Translation, Writing and Publishing Committee press. p.214.

<sup>20</sup> Lin Hua & Wang Shuyan (ed.). (2004). *New Selections of Tang Legends*. Hubei: Hubei Education Press. pp.91-100.

This legend features an intriguing and instructive story, as the dream of the southern bough (*Nanke*) is not only an account of the personal experience of Chunyu Fen but also a portrayal of the unfortunate literati at that time, mirroring the fate of thousands of intellectuals who were in the same predicament and felt disillusioned. The story compares the filthy officialdom of feudal society to an “ant nest” and the mediocre people craning for an official career to an “ant assembly”, which is extremely ironic. Meanwhile, “dream” in this story, which is in fact an illusory portrayal of Chunyu Fen’s life experience, plays a central role in its conception. The varying plots and sense of excitement in the dream is in sharp contrast with the indifference and boredom of life in reality. Hence reality and fantasy are intertwined for readers to seek understanding of the true connotation of “dream of the southern bough”. The story draws to an end with Li Zhao’s comments: “Being a high dignitary with power that outweighs all officials in the capital, is no different from an assembly of ants in the eyes of the wise.” which is thought-provoking indeed.

#### (IV) Conclusion

The significance of dream is not to be ignored in either ancient Arabic or Chinese literature, with its functions encompassing but not confined to educating, satirizing, expressing emotions and building the narrative logic and structure. Meanwhile, its expressiveness is testified in voicing criticism for social injustice, portraying a beautiful world of imagination and ideal and expressing one’s bosom feelings in awe of the beauty of nature. “Dreams” are an indispensable and irreplaceable element of the timeless charm of ancient literature in the Arab world and in China alike.

Despite their variation in purposes and functions in different literary genres and styles found in the Arab world and China, the similarities are more than obvious in terms of how these purposes and their functions are embodied and expressed in literary language. This article has taken examples of dream literature from literary classics in both cultures--Al Laylah wa Laylah and a number of Arabic poems in their medieval Arab context, as well as Chinese classics such as poetry and historical annals in pre-Qin period and the colorful “Tang Legends” alive with imagination. It is observed that the dream culture, i.e. cultural elements and contexts related to dreams, have great influence on the composition of dream literature in both cultures. Three major functions of “dream” in literary traditions in ancient Arab and Chinese cultures are identified, namely to teach about morals and admonition, to create an effective of lyricism and to express irony and ridicule. Topics of literary works where these three functions are embodied also show strong similarities between Arab and Chinese cultures, such as yearning for a beloved one, insights into vanities of mundane life, indignation for social ills, etc. These common traits in dream literature indicate that cultural exchange and mutual influence in literary traditions between China and the Arab world may have started from the medieval ages alongside with political interactions and trade relations between these two ancient civilizations, which may shed some light on cross-cultural communication and mutual learning in the contemporary context.

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