A Fantastic Dream World: New Literary Motifs and Buddhist Culture

Along with the thematic changes that developed under the influence of Buddhism and the new fictional images that were created in the Buddhist milieu or derived from Buddhism, a group of literary motifs appeared in the Youming lu under the impact of Buddhist culture, adding another layer of Buddhist coloring to the tales of the supernatural in early medieval China.

These new motifs are related to dreams, and the relationship between these dream-related motifs and Buddhism and Indian culture has been a continuing focus in scholarship regarding medieval Chinese narrative. Previous scholarship, as outlined below, tends to characterize these motifs as either influenced or not by Buddhism; however, the matter of influence is much more complex. While a hypothesis concerning influence cannot be made or denied so simply, a preliminary hypothesis can be put forth on good evidence and with careful analysis. In this chapter I will reappraise and challenge previous scholarship concerning the origins of two motifs connected with dreams by providing in-depth analyses, as well as define another new dream motif in the Youming lu and trace its origins and possible relations with Buddhism.

It is necessary to make clear the issues involved in any hypothesis regarding influence. “The study of influences has always occupied an important place in comparative literature,”¹ though “Few problems can prove more vexing to the critic or historian of literature than the problem of influence,” and “Of the various types of influence none seems to be more central to literary history, or more challenging to the literary scholar, than that type which seeks to define the relation of an author’s work to another author or another tradition.”² The general convention in the scholarly method is when a new literary work or phenomenon appears, and a likely origin in the indigenous culture cannot be identified, we should look for a catalyst in foreign cultures. If there is something identical or similar in a foreign tradition, we then try to determine the likelihood of influence. Through comparison we can suggest similarity, but

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cannot establish influence. In other words, a hypothesis concerning influence can be suggested, but may not be verified easily. Ihab Hassan says,

When we say that A has influenced B, we mean that after literary or aesthetic analysis we can discern a number of significant similarities between the works of A and B. We may also mean that historical, social, and perhaps psychological analysis of the data available about A and B reveal similarities, points of contact, between the “lives” or “minds” of the two writers. So far we have established no influence; we have only documented what I shall call an affinity. For influence presupposes some manner of causality and causality has repeatedly shown itself to be scholar’s Gordian knot.³

This is not to say that research on literary influence is impossible. Besides literary analysis, possible influences between similar works or phenomena can be examined through multilevel analyses. As Ihab Hassan suggested, “….when we have gleaned from biographical, sociological, and philosophical research to facts which allow us to see correlations operating on several coordinate levels, that we can permit ourselves to think of influence.”⁴

The Motif of Dream Adventure inside a Microcosmic World

“Dream adventure inside a microcosmic world” is a well-known motif in traditional Chinese fiction and drama.⁵ While the extant prototype of this motif is found in the Youming lu, the representative work of this motif is Shen Jiji’s 沈既濟 (750–800) “Zhenzhong ji” 枕中記 (The World Inside a Pillow), one of the most famous Tang tales. There has been debate on whether the origins of this motif are indigenous to China. This study reappraises previous scholarship and tries to provide a detailed analysis of this motif.

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³ Ibid., p. 68.
⁴ Ibid., p. 73.
⁵ This definition is narrower compared with “Dream Adventure,” a term that David Knechtges used forty years ago. See his “Dream Adventure Stories in Europe and Tang China,” Tamkang Review 4:2 (October 1973): 114–15.