

Life-Is-A-Dream Theme: Pillow/Dream in Chinese and Japanese Drama

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The notion that life is but a dream harks back to ancient times. In the Western world, the sixteenth century Spanish preachers had already proposed the analogy of life as "soplo, homo, sueño y sombra."¹ Christianity also has repeated for centuries that life is a dream, although it gives life and dreams a different value from the negation of life propounded by Buddhist ascetics. In the East, both Taoists and Buddhists persistently try to convince people of the ephemeral condition of life and the wisdom of detachment. According to them, reality does not exist, paradoxically the only reality is nothing (空). Birth, love, life, old age and death (生、老、病、死) are all misery; the only way to avoid the suffering they entail is to negate the self (去私), to destroy sentiments (去情), to forsake the present, the past and the future, and finally to abolish time and space, the visible and invisible worlds.

Literature is a reflection of life and thought, and also an expression of a general attitude toward life. The notion that life is but a dream then becomes a literary theme which prevails especially in Chinese and Japanese literatures. It is not astonishing that great playwrights such as Ma Chih-yüan (馬致遠), T'ang Hsien-tsu (湯顯祖), Zeami Motokiyo (世阿彌元清)² and Yukio Mishima (三島由紀夫) should have chosen the life-dream equation as their topic. What astonishes us is that all these writers of different periods of time, having sensed the effects of dramaturgy in presenting the dream, should have recreated the pillow/dream motif, each one imbuing in his works fresh philosophical ideas and dramatic techniques representative of his times.

In order to explore the life-is-a-dream theme as presented in the dramatic works of the authors mentioned above, I shall arrange their plays more or less chronologically and my primary concerns are: 1) the influence of the Buddhist and Taoist tradition, 2) the method of presenting the theme and intensifying the dramatic quality of the life-dream equation, 3) the metaphysical concepts of life-is-a-dream theme is reflected, and 4) the effect of modernism on the pillow/dream literature.³

The origin of the Chinese pillow/dream story can be traced to *Sou-shen Chi* (搜神記) in the Chin dynasty; in several lines the author Kan Pao (干寶) narrates with plain words the dream of a traveller.⁴ The first literary work dealing with pillow/dream motif is found in a collection of the Tang dynasty, *T'ai-p'ing Kuang-chi*, (太平廣記), a short story originally known as "Lü Wung" (呂翁) or "Chen-chung Chi" (枕中記), written by Shen Chi-chi (ca. 750-800 沈既濟).⁵ It tells of the conversion of a scholar named Lu Sheng (盧生) to Taoism by the Taoist Patriarch Lü Tung-pin (呂洞賓), who by offering a pillow induces the young scholar to experience in dream the ups and downs of life. When Lu Sheng awakes, the millet that the innkeeper has been steaming is not yet ready. According to the story, Lu Sheng sits lost in deep thought after the dream:

Of the ways of favor and disgrace, the vagaries of distress and prosperity, the patterns of accomplishment and failure, the emotions of life and death. I have thoroughly been made aware.

The author of this short story gives special attention to the function of pillow, entitling his work "Chen-chung Chi" (The World Inside a Pillow). The distinguished later playwright of the Yüan dynasty Ma Chih-yüan in treating with the same story prefers *Huang-liang-meng*⁷ (The Yellow-Millet Dream 黃梁夢) showing his intention to illuminate and to contrast what happens before and after the dream. The protagonist in *Huang-liang-meng* like Lu Sheng in the short story, originally a poor scholar, suddenly finds himself promoted to a generalship in the army, rolling in wealth and fame and enjoying the blessings of a happy family life. To create a dramatic contrast between happiness and tragedy, however, the writer of the thirteenth century inserts a scene in which the protagonist, unfortunately accused of having accepted bribes from a rebel general, is divorced from his unfaithful wife and exiled with his two young sons. They suffer in whipping winds and freezing snow and are even pursued by a bandit who throws the sons

into a deep ravine and threatens the protagonist's life. The young scholar thus is suddenly enlightened and consequently disillusioned with wealth, rank and family ties. He acknowledges the ephemerality and futility of life.

Another difference between *Huang-liang-meng* and "Chen-chung Chi" lies in the fact that in order to increase the appreciation of the audience, Ma Chih-yüan employs Lü Tung-pin, one of the Eight Taoist Immortals in folk belief, as the one converted to Taoism. It is understandable that Ma Chih-yüan, oppressed like the rest of his contemporary intellectuals, should have condemned the confusion, tyranny and corrupted government of the Yüan dynasty through the sufferings of the protagonist. It is not surprising, furthermore, that haunted by memory and despair, Ma Chih-yüan should have yearned for the blessing of Taoist immortality in the great world beyond.

The influence of the Taoist and Buddhist philosophy upon Chinese literature is widespread. The life-dream equation has been part of an extensive tradition of Taoist and Buddhist ideas, ranging from *The Four Dreams* (*Yü-ming-t'ang ssu-meng* 玉茗堂四夢) of the Ming playwright T'ang Hsien-tsu to the great eighteenth century work of fiction, *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, a masterpiece employing the dream technique to portray an entire philosophy of life. In Japanese literature, the Buddhist philosophy mingled with the love for the transient, the glorious present combined with the "floating world" (浮世) has provided writers from Murasaki Shikibu (紫氏部) to Kamo no Chomei (鴨長明) with backgrounds for writing about the uncertainties of human existence.

Kin Kin Sen Sei Eiga No Yume (金金光生榮華夢), a novelette published in 1775, a Japanese adaptation of Shen Chi-chi's pillow/dream framework, once again highlights Taoist and Buddhist teachings.⁸ Another much earlier prose version of the pillow/dream appears in *Sand and Pebbles*⁹ (沙石集 1283), a collection of Buddhist sermons, which, however, is one of the most explicit works in presenting the life-is-a-dream theme. The pillow/dream motif is one of the prevailing themes in Japanese literature. The distinguished master of the Japanese Noh drama, Zeami Motokiyo (1343-1463) is another major writer influenced by Buddhist and Taoist philosophy. In addition to treating the life-dream equation, Zeami even introduces Buddhist philosophy into his aesthetical theory, represented by his *Kadensho* (花傳書).¹⁰ The studies of *Kadensho* are many; there are few critics, however, who have penetrated into the life-dream equation exemplified in his dream plays,¹¹ especially *Kantan*,¹² a play based on the

Chinese short story "Chen-chung Chi" mentioned above. The Medieval period in Japan, was in general, a time of upheaval, like the Chinese Yüan dynasty. Although there was no conflict and no oppression from invading tribes, other forms of social unrest and tumultuous personal life impressed the Buddhist principle of *mujo*, the impermanence of life, on the minds of people.¹³ It is not wonder that Zeami, perceiving the turmoil of contemporary life, should have adapted the T'ang short story into his play.

There is no proof that Zeami had read Ma Chih-yüan's *Huang-liang-meng*, and it is obvious that this Japanese version of pillow/dream has been imbued with a Japanese spirit, although at first sight it seems impossible to shape the same material and subject into a Noh play. The sage Lü Tung-pin is eliminated in Zeami's *Kantan*; however, and in the dream, Rosei (盧生) immediately becomes Emperor of Central China instead of a man of court. Arthur Waley's statement is questionable when he says that the play was adapted from a story by Li Pi (李泌), but his suggestion that Zeami's employing Rosei as an emperor "affords an excuse for the Court dances,"¹⁴ is to the point. The refined speech and elegant movement of the court dance traditionally represents the spirit and essence of the Japanese Noh drama.

The basic difference between Ma Chih-yüan's *Huang-liang-meng* and Zeami's *Kantan* lies in the fact that Rosei seems to be not as ignorant about the mundane life as Ma's young scholar. His first words on the stage are:

Lost on the journey of life, shall I learn at last that I trod but a
path of dreams.¹⁵

Zeami, furthermore, conforming to the structure of Mugen Noh plays (夢幻能)¹⁶ has the protagonist tell of his intention to visit the village of *Kantan*: "They tell me that on the Hill of the Flying Sheep . . . there lives a mighty sage; and now I am hastening to visit him that he may tell by what rule I should conduct my life" (Waley 195). Zeami seems to be disinterested in the function of the pillow, for once Rosei sleeps on the magic pillow, he is immediately called by an envoy to succeed to the throne of a certain country. Like any traditional Japanese Noh play, the chorus in *Kantan* serves the function of providing information. Contrasting happiness and sorrow and suggesting changes of seasons, through the chorus:

Fifty years of glory have passed by me,

And because they were a dream. (Waley 202)

Dance and music are the essence of Noh plays. With the *yugen* (幽玄)¹⁷ language, the *yugen* music and dance, namely, pleasant melody and consummate dancing skills are represented in Rosei's Gabu (宮舞). Zeami indeed produces beauty and perfection through his deliberately emphasized dreamlike and unrealistic atmosphere. The life-dream equation, a concept influenced by Taoism and Buddhism, has therefore been transported into a more refined and religious dream world.

T'ang Hsien-tsu, the great playwright of the Ming dynasty, provided the pillow/dream motif with a refreshed outlook. Transcending the limitations of structure and length of Yüan drama, and the confining brevity of the Japanese Noh play, T'ang Hsien-tsu assumed the freedom of expanding the two-page short story into a third-act play, in which the function of the pillow, the contrasts between happiness and sorrow, and the process of enlightenment are all emphasized. T'ang Hsien-tsu's work is the most faithful dramatic adaptation from the story by Shen Chi-chi and its protagonist Lu Sheng is also a traditional Chinese. Like his predecessors in the T'ang short story and in Ma Chih-yüan, he endeavors to attain wealth and fame through service at the court:

A man is born to do great deeds and build a name for himself, to be a general in the field and a minister at court, to eat from lavish dishes, listen to beautiful music, to bring glory to his clan and prosperity to his family.¹⁸

By entering the unexpected and bewildering dreamworld, however, he finally experiences a psychological condition unattainable by ordinary people. "Pillow" in this play has a special significance in terms of both theme and technique, and it is by means of a pillow that Lu Sheng is initiated into a dream world:

(Lü Tung-ping) You uncleverly trouble yourself and bother your spirit. Now sleep on this pillow, and you are assured to achieve everything you want, so majestically. Innmaster, cook some yellow millet and let him wonderfully sleep for a while.

(Lü left; Lu Sheng was in an unsteady sleeping position, looking at the pillow)

(Lu Sheng) This pillow was not woven from rattan, nor made of embroidered satin. The good aspect is that it looks like it was cut and engraved from jade with good style. Oh, it's a porcelain made in Tse County, but why on both sides there licks the light . . . and there are houses with red roofs.¹⁹

Lu Sheng jumps into the hole of the pillow, and encounters all kinds of happenings throughout his dream. The dream not only provides wish-fulfillment as part of the exposition of Lu Sheng's character, which indirectly derides the relentless search for wealth and fame in the transient life on earth but also helps the protagonist achieve Taoist enlightenment.

T'ang Hsien-tsu is a master of dream technique and of romantic love; in his *Han-tan Chi*, moreover, T'ang reveals his talents as a social critic, and satirist as he uses the life-is-a-dream theme to portray the contradictory and absurd aspects of human life. The dream of his protagonist, Lu Sheng, begins ironically with the latter's encountering a beautiful girl and is followed immediately with a wedding ceremony, during which an old and a young maid are tickling each other along the aside. This sharply contrasts with the romantic love found in *The Peony Pavilion* (*Mu-tan Ting* 牡丹亭).²⁰ When the dream leads to his exile and impending death as a result of being falsely accused Lu Sheng seems to ridicule himself by saying that he has tasted lots of unripe olives. His only words before his execution are:

Wife, wife! My home was in Shan-tung, with several square miles of property, which could have prevented me from hunger and poverty. But for wealth and fame, what have I become?
(*Han-tan Chi*, p. 2420)

If Lu Sheng is deliberately created as a clown, the purpose of T'ang Hsien-tsu is to intensify the absurdity and stupidity of pursuing wealth and fame. The story becomes even more ironical when it is revealed that Lu Sheng had ranked first in the imperial examination through bribery. *Han-tan Chi* is the last work of T'ang Hsien-tsu, reflecting his pessimistic view of life after his voluntary retirement, and the deaths of his son and his best friends. The play further reveals that after being enlightened and feeling the ecstasy of peace, Lu Sheng will be 'promoted' to be one of the sweepers in the P'eng-lai Island Paradise. In this as Immortal Lü Tung-pin has already suggested in the third act of the play just to enlighten Lu Sheng because

there is a vacancy for a sweeper or is it that T'ang Hsien-tsu intends to ridicule us readers, by letting us ponder upon the fitness of Lu Sheng's being a sweeper after the initiation? T'ang Hsien-tsu's metaphysical questioning the meaning of life and enlightenment even shock us modern readers.

"A modernist culture is committed to the view that the human lot is inescapably problematic."²¹ Problems concerning human existence, to be sure, have been discussed throughout the centuries, and the life-is-a-dream theme has long been part of human heritage. The questionings of existence by Nietzsche, Samuel Beckett, William Butler Yeats, and Jorge Borges, have raised the problematic to an imperious mode in modern literature and philosophy. It is also to be found in Yukio Mishima's pillow/dream.

Yukio Mishima, the first genuinely successful modern Noh playwright,²² is a man of broad knowledge. Like other leading Japanese writers, he has drawn freely on Japanese and Western sources, fashioned pastiches on traditional themes, and tried to fit modern conceptions into old forms. Fascinated by the structure and the subject matter of the Noh plays, Mishima has reworked dream-like, allusive and symbolic materials of the Noh tradition. His *Kantan* (邯鄲) follows the story of the Noh progenitor — a traveller sleeps upon a magic pillow dreaming of a glorious life and awakens to the realization that life is but a dream. Mishima's protagonist, however, is a spoiled young man instead of a scholar. He sleeps and dreams while his old nurse prepares breakfast. The problematic, the absurd, and the necessity of suffering as represented by this eighteen-year-old young man suggest that modern man has to find comfort in his wounds.

Mishima's modern version of *Kantan* begins with pessimistic but metaphysical comments on existence:

(Jiro) Everything's at an end for me. I'd never have decided otherwise to make my way such a place. My life is finished. . .

(Kiku) What a strange thing to say! You are just eighteen. . . Your head's not getting bald! Your back's not bent! You haven't a wrinkle on your face!

(Jiro) You can't see them. My hair may look black, but it's really snow-white; my teeth are gone and my back is bent double.²³

Since Jiro wants to borrow Kiku's pillow, Kiku then mentions its magic quality and indicates furthermore that it helps her get rid of her suitors,

which without doubt, intensifies the theme of absurdity: the pillow is to contrast the characters of Jiro and others, since all people sleeping upon the pillow go on a journey in which they abstain themselves from all worldly attachments. Kiku expresses her fear that Jiro would be like those suitors who slept on it and went away without returning. Jiro, however, promises to come back.

The dream in Ma Chih-yüan is a nightmare, that in T'ang Hsien-tsu is ironical and the one in Mishima is bitter. In the latter a character Beauty is introduced, whose conversation with Jiro, portrays every aspect of life — wife, child, money as even uglier than they are in Strindberg's *A Dream Play*.²⁴ Jiro in his dream smashes his own baby, verbally abuses his wife and shows himself indifferent to everything else.

Jiro's dream is that of a financial tycoon and director, instead of an emperor or an important official or governor. But the irony lies in the fact that he does not crave for the position, not to mention Beauty, who becomes his wife automatically. The ending of Mishima's *Kantan*, however, is even more cynical and satirical especially when Mishima touches upon the death scene in which the protagonist is forced to take poison:

(Physician) Are you listening to me, Jiro? We are spirits from the town of Kantan It is our fixed rule that everyone who sleeps on this pillow must gain enlightenment. In ancient times there was a man who dreamed through a whole lifetime while a bowl of gruel was being cooked for him and this made him realize the meaningless of human life The others have all obeyed the rules but what about you You're been dying while you're still alive. How can you say that you don't want to die? (Mishima 137)

Jiro does not die in the dream; he wakes up to find that breakfast is ready and the withered greens and flowers in full bloom. The contrasts between life and death, withered and blooming flowers, suggest psychological change, the author's disillusionment — a metaphysical a waking from death to life.

The process of enlightenment in all these pillow/dream literary works takes the protagonist through a fictional journey during which he experiences disillusionment and emerges as a philosopher. The metaphorical pattern resembles that in Plato's *The Republic*. The vision of life as a dream has

taught these characters in Eastern fiction and drama to escape from the 'caves' that they have been trapped in. As readers of these pillow/dreams perceiving the problems of existence they embody, we may like Plato's prisoners be able to have a "better view of the stars."²⁵

Notes

1. Felix G. Olmedo, *Las fuentes de la vida es sueno* (Madrid: Editorial Voluntad 1928), p. 10.
2. Arthur Waley, *The Noh Plays of Japan* (London: George and Unwin, 1954), p. 154.
3. Refers to Mishima only.
4. Hu Yu-feng 胡幼峯, "Kan Pao *Sou-shen chi k'ao*" 干寶搜神記考, *Essays on the Classical Chinese Fiction* 中國古典小說論集 (一), vol. 1 (Taipei: Yu-shih 幼獅, 1974), pp. 63-84.
5. Shen Chi-chi 沈既濟, "Chen-chung Chi" 枕中記, *Legends and Stories of the T'ang Dynasty* 唐人傳奇小說 (Taipei: Shih-chieh 1975), p. 39; it contains an introduction and information related to *T'ai-p'ing Kuang-chi* 太平廣記.
6. Lao & Ma, "The World Inside a Pillow," *Traditional Chinese Stories* (N.Y.: Columbia University, 1976).
7. Ma Chih-yüan 馬致遠, *Huang-liang-meng* 黃梁夢, *One Hundred Plays of the Yuan Dynasty* 元人雜劇百種 vol. 4 (Taipei: Shih-chieh, 1978), p. 1123.
8. Liu Chung-lin 劉崇稜, *Appreciation of Japanese Literature* 日本文學欣賞 (Taipei: Lien-ching, 1979), p. 255. For original text, see *King King Sen Sei Eiga No Yume* by Koikawa Harumatsu, published by Iwanami Bookstore.
9. Muchio 無注, *Saseiki Sho* 沙石集 (Iwanami, 1980).
10. Edward Patzar, *Japanese Literature* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1973), p. 100.
11. Wang I-chun, "Mugen Noh," *Asian Culture*. Vol. xv. 3. (Autumn, 1987), Taipei p. 2.
12. Motokiyo Zeami, *Kantan*, in *The Noh Plays of Japan*, trans. by Arthur Waley (London: Allen & Unwin, 1954), pp. 193-204.
13. Patzar. p. 80.
14. Waley, p. 193.
15. Waley, p. 195.
16. Frank Hoff & Willi Flight, *The Life Structure of Noh* (London, 1976), p. 214.
17. Hisamatsu Senichi, *The Vocabulary of Japanese Literary Aesthetics* (Center for Asian Studies, 1963), p. 112. His definition is: "Yugen is always a symbolic beauty, although its specific connotation changes from 'quiet beauty' (Shunzei) to 'elegant beauty' (Zeami) to 'elegant simplicity' (Zenchiku)." In drama, the inner person's yugen is expressed by graceful attire. The performer must use refined speech and acquire the expressions and ways of speaking of the aristocracy so that his words are gentle. This is the yugen of language. Yugen of music, however, means its pleasant melody. Dance yugen is the skill consummate and quiet elegance of body. (See also Edward Patzar's definition)
18. T'ang Hsien-tsu 湯顯祖, *Han-tan Chi* 邯鄲記, in *Complete Works of T'ang Hsien-tsu* 湯顯祖全集 (Tainan: Hung She, 1978), p. 2297.
19. T'ang, p. 2299 (Act 4).

20. T'ang Hsien-tsu, *The Peony Pavilion*, trans. by Cyril Birch (Indiana Univ. 1983), see introduction.
21. Irving Howe, *Literary Modernism* (Fawcett Premier Book, 1967), p. 18.
22. Yukio Mishima, *Five Modern Noh Plays*, ed. by Donald Keene (N.Y.: Alfred & Knopf), see introduction.
23. Mishima, p. 85.
24. August Strindberg, "A Dream Play," *Easter and the Other Plays* (Anglo-Swedish Literature Foundation, 1948), pp. 260-86.
25. Plato, *The Republic and Other Works* (N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), chapter seven, p. 268.