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# A Reconstruction of Arguments on the Relationship Between Dreaming and Awakening in the Interpretations of *Zhuangzi*

Zilu Yang 

Department of Philosophy, College of State Governance, Southwest University, Chongqing 400715, China; aayzl@foxmail.com

**Abstract:** In the interpretations of *Zhuangzi*, there are four levels to the relationship between dreaming and awakening: awakening is more realistic than dreaming, dreaming is more realistic than awakening, dreaming and awakening are equal, and there is no distinction between dreaming and awakening. From the view of the Chongxuan (重玄) School, 1. insisting that awakening is more realistic and cherishing life is attached to substantiality as a psychological intention to seek out a specific object; 2. insisting that dreaming is more realistic is attached to nihilism as a cynical intention of desirelessness; 3. non-attachment to the distinction between dreaming and awakening as a false objectification of the mid-way (madhyamā-pratipad) is a first-order non-attachment and a new kind of self-deception to form a hidden meta-desire to transcend the two kinds of desires above; and 4. Chongxuan, as a second-order non-attachment of non-attachment, allows people to forget the distinction between dreaming and awakening. This topic has also been reflected upon or reinterpreted by ancient and modern philosophers and has a continuous impact on social reform in modern China.

**Keywords:** Zhuangzi's philosophy; dreams and reality; meta-non-attachment theory



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## 1. Introduction

Although dreaming is an irrational and absurd psychological experience in appearance, its symbolic and camouflaging mechanisms, such as condensation and displacement, revealed through analysis, are keys to understanding the unconscious and self, one's personal identity, collective representation, and one's cultural identity.

In the history of Chinese philosophy, Zhuangzi and his successors first proposed a relationship between dreams and reality (the differentiation of dreaming and awakening). As stated by Mou Zongsan, "they have very deep theoretical insights in the questions of life value and the key of dreaming and awakening" [1]. In this paper, I attempt to reconstruct and analyze related thoughts in the text of *Zhuangzi* and its later interpretations and discuss some criticisms of the literature.

## 2. Similarities and Differences Between Dreams and Waking States

Although Zhuangzi maintained a skeptical attitude in questioning ordinary people's common sense about reality and criticized the unreflective view of value based on Cheng xin (成心 matured heart or prejudice), he never argued that there is no right or wrong. As Robert Allison stated, "to rise above conventional value judgments is not to rise above all norms" [2]. In fact, the chapter "Qi Wu Lun" in *Zhuangzi* makes a more concise and clear distinction between dreams and reality: "soul has communion with soul when asleep, and the body is freed when awake". Thus, whether the deep consciousness or the body is active could be taken as the difference between dreaming and awakening, as Guo Xiang briefly commented [3] (pp. 51–52).

The chapter "King Mu of Zhou" in *Liezi*<sup>1</sup> [4], which was gradually finalized in the Western Jin Dynasty, analyzed Zhuangzi's theory as "there are eight signs of awakening and six signs of dreaming". The six types of dreams in this chapter include ordinary dreams, bad dreams, thinking dreams, waking dreams, happy dreams, and fearful

dreams [5] (pp. 101–102). The varying dream types mean that dreams are accompanied by emotions such as peace, surprise, contemplation, enlightenment, joy, and fear. Regarding Zhuangzi's words cited in *Liezi*, these different dreams come from communicated souls. Moreover, *Liezi* categorized the state of awakening into eight signs, namely reason, action, acquisition, loss, sorrow, joy, survival, and death, which activate the body [5] (p. 101). To distinguish the different emotions in awakening and dreaming, *Liezi* discusses the similarities and differences between them in order to further explore the question raised by Zhuangzi. What is more, Cheng Xuanying, a Daoist priest in the Tang Dynasty, absorbed some Buddhist ideas to interpret "Qi Wu Lun" and stated that dreams accompanied by strong indulgence, grasping the realm of greed, make unenlightened people restless, and they usually perform physical activities in pursuit of desires when awakening [3] (p. 52), showing that dreaming and awakening are both accompanied by various emotions.

Guo Xiang stated that the relationship between dreaming and awakening is also intrinsically related to the distinction between life and death [3] (p. 113). Cheng Xuanying also stated that the change of life to death is analogous to the difference between dreaming and awakening [3] (p. 105) as there are four levels to the relationship between life and death: cherishing and preserving life; nihilistic aversion to life and attaching to death; death and life transforming into one another without essential change; and forgetting both of them [6]. Analogously, there are four levels to the relationship between dreaming and awakening: awakening is more realistic than dreaming, dreaming is more realistic than awakening, dreaming and awakening are equal, and a lack of distinction between dreaming and awakening.

### 3. The Authenticity of Dreams and Waking States

#### 3.1. Awakening Is More Realistic than Dreaming

Common sense tells us that the experience in the waking state is real, whereas the experience in the dream state is false. However, in the pre-Qin period when divination cultures were much more prevalent, dreams were often regarded as mysterious as if having some kind of predictive function. Therefore, the Zhou Dynasty established officials responsible for oneiromancy. There are six categories of shushu (數術) in the bibliography of the *History of the Han Dynasty*, including various divination methods led by oneiromancy. This bibliography emphasizes that there is more than one method of divination, with oneiromancy being the most important; therefore, an official position in this regard was established in the Zhou Dynasty [7]. According to Lu Deming's preface to *Classical Texts* [8], before Guo Xiang compiled *Zhuangzi* into thirty-three chapters, the ancient version of *Zhuangzi* even contained some content relating to oneiromancy.

However, the metaphor of the story of Great wizard Ji Xian in *Zhuangzi* shows that Zhuangzi's philosophy had absorbed introverted mysticism while criticizing the symbolic thinking of witchcraft culture. The inner section of *Zhuangzi*, which reflects Zhuangzi's own thoughts, does not echo the prevalent custom. In the ideal state described by the chapter *The Great and Venerable Teacher* in *Zhuangzi*, authentic (the enlightened) individuals sleep without dreams and wake up without worry [3] (p. 228), which shows that Zhuangzi actually admits that dreams are unreal psychological experiences. Furthermore, Cheng Xuanying explained that the cause of dreams is people's emotions and consciousness, whereas authentic people worry little and rarely dream. Cheng Xuanying's commentary also refutes the claim that dreams are directly related to some empirical facts [3] (p. 228).

According to the scholar Jiang Yu, who is quoted in Jiao Hong's commentary on *Zhuangzi*, awakening is more realistic than dreaming as the awakened state can independently recall and understand the situation in the dream, whereas the dream state cannot independently recall and understand the experience of awakening. In addition, the mental experience in the waking state usually has clear narrative plots, whereas the experience in the dream state is often in a state of fragmentation [9]. Moreover, it is not possible to even form a clear intellectual judgment in a dream. If reality is limited to the world of everyday

experience given by sensibility, then the experience in the awakened state is more real than the dream.

### 3.2. *Dreaming Is More Realistic than Awakening*

As quoted in Jiao Hong's commentary on *Zhuangzi*, Jiang Yu also argued that the state of awakening exists only in the activity of rational thoughts, whereas dreams reflect phenomena outside the activity of rational thoughts, which shows that dreaming is more efficacious (靈) than awakening [9]. *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* interpreted *ling* (靈) as the wizard who used jade to serve the gods [10]. The great poet Qu Yuan also wrote that "the wizard (靈) danced and wore colorful costumes" [11] in his poem "East Emperor Taiyi". Therefore, the original meaning of the Chinese character "靈" refers to the enchanted sorcery, which is extended to the real effect. For example, the Daoist master Liu Chuxuan stated, "if cultivation works (靈), health preservation will be effective" [12] in his poem "Four Words of Praise".

If "rational thoughts" reflect the conscious activities that enter the symbolic world order, while those that are "outside the activity of rational thoughts" reflect the unconscious activities that are not encoded by the symbolic world, then Jiang Yu's argument could be reconstructed as follows:

- (1) The more the unconscious activities not included in the symbolic order are revealed, the more reality (effectiveness) is revealed;
- (2) Dreaming is more likely to reveal unconscious activities not included in the symbolic order than awakening;
- (3) Dreaming is more realistic than awakening.

Jiang Yu also believes that the change between dreams and awakening is rapid and the difference between them is obvious; the change between dreams and awakening is significant, and if someone is not enlightened, it is difficult for them to escape the troubles of death and life; if we are able to interpret our dreams and awaken early, then the question of death and life would be irrelevant [9]. Jiang Yu believed that although the difference between death and life is greater than the difference between dreams and awakening, these two differences, in fact, share some similarities. An enlightened person should realize these differences, understand the true message manifested by dreams, and reflect on the various symbolic orders and cultural structures in the world in which they engage in daily life in order to break through the anxiety and fear of death.

By interpreting "Qi Wu Lun", Cheng Xuanying stated that as some people have bad experiences in their daily lives but have good dreams, it is possible that we live in sorrow but become joyful after death. Therefore, we need not obsess over the change between awakening and dreaming [3] (pp. 104–105). By this logic, while some people may live a good life but experience nightmares through dreaming, they can often achieve their aspirations; thus, this dream state may be better than waking. For a person who has suffered great pain, death may also serve as a pleasant experience, as we all suffer from the physical and psychological pains of birth, old age, illness, and death. This theory does not directly admit that dreams and death are more real but rather that dreams and death may be preferable for the individual in question.

### 3.3. *Dreaming and Awakening Are Equal*

The third level recognizes that dreaming and awakening are both unreal; therefore, an individual should realize reality by recognizing that dreaming and awakening are equal, which could be deduced from the theory of Qi Wu: treat opposites as equals (rather than treating everything as equal).

In the Northern Song Dynasty, a Daoist scholar, Chen Zhixu, interpreted *Zhuangzi*'s story "The Butterfly Dream" and stated "dreaming of drinking or crying is because of changes in mood, but an enlightened person is not like so, he takes eternity as just a dawn, which could show he is a great waked person. He could realize dreaming and awakening are the same thing, so he does not have any dream again". In addition, he stated, "An en-

lightened person takes life and death are both long dreams, while the transcendence of life and death is a big awaking (enlightenment). So the great person makes great comments to transcend (吊) the weirdness (詭) of death" [13] (p. 213). His theory interprets 吊詭 (*diaogui*, usually translated as "paradox" [14]) as the release of the paradox and existential anxiety of life and death and shows that true awaking is to realize the balance between waking and dreaming and life and death.

In the Southern Song Dynasty, a Daoist scholar, Chu Boxiu also stated "the scripture (*Zhuangzi*) said, ancient enlightened people did not dream, but why Zhuangzi told us he became a butterfly in a dream? In fact, he probably just use the relationship of awaking and dreaming to discuss the consistency of death and life" [13] (p. 219). As such, Chu Boxiu provides an argument that can be reconstructed as follows:

- (1) The relationship between the two states of life and death is similar to the relationship between awakening and dreaming in the sense of mutual ignorance;
- (2) The waking and dreaming states cannot realize one another (such as in the case of Zhuangzi's butterfly dream), and people should not worry about other situations;
- (3) People should not worry about death in their daily lives, nor should they cowardly hold onto life when dying.

Chu Boxiu's interpretation is in fact based on the interpretation of the metaphor of Zhuangzi's butterfly dream, presupposing the absolute difference of the self in different situations or social contexts. If a person wants to live in peace and spirituality, they should realize that they have no unchanging self and then they will minimize or even stop pursuing their desires.

In terms of regarding dreaming and awakening as equal, in addition to the adverse consequences of external elixirs in the Tang Dynasty, Daoists who pursued immortality gradually demonstrated their belief in physical immortality and their strong attachment to the physical body [15] Wang Zhe created Quanzhen Dao in the twelfth century in the Jin Dynasty, and wrote a poem entitled "Dream", stating "this body as a provisional combination of four elements does business during the day, could counts as a sleeping person actually" [16]. His disciple, Qiu Chuji also stated "Human's life and death are just like night and day, both are illusions transform each other" [17]. Before Qiu died, he still believed that "Death and life are like morning and evening, which are the common law of things".

In contrast, in the Southern Song Dynasty, Bai Yuchan also founded a sect advocating internal alchemy [18] and wrote a short essay called "On Dream". He cited *Nan Hua Scripture* (*Zhuangzi*) and stated "doing a lot of daily entertainment with all sorts of thoughts arising, being disturbed by things and making the mind restless, all of these are eye-opening dreams" [19]. Therefore, Zhuangzi's Qi Wu theory, which acknowledges that dreaming and awakening are equal, influenced the process of the mainstream Daoist practice changing from external elixirs to internal alchemy.

### 3.4. Forgetting the Distinction Between Dreaming and Awakening

Since the Southern Dynasties, the Daoist Chongxuan School (meta-non-attachment theory) has absorbed madhyamaka thoughts of Buddhism and re-examined Laozi and Zhuangzi's philosophy. According to Cheng Xuanying's commentary, xuan (玄) in the first chapter of *Dao De Jing* literally means profound but actually refers to non-attachment [20]. That is to say, one should not cling to the idea of substantiality as if there are unchanging entities behind phenomena. In addition, one should not cling to nihilism. What is more, the term double-xuan (又玄) in the first chapter of *Dao De Jing* means non-attachment to non-attachment. This school categorized the realms of human beings into four levels:

- (1) The first level: attachment to substantiality

Ordinary people usually cling to the substantiality of the phenomenal world or abstract ideas. Therefore, they have the mental intention to desire a concrete sensory or ab-

stract idea object. At this level, one would insist that awakening is more realistic than dreaming.

(2) The second level: non-attachment to substantiality but attachment to nihility

The second level relates to the desire for a desire-free state, which can easily lead to negative nihilistic desires and the belief that dreaming is more realistic. Its internal structure is self-contradictory.

(3) The third level: non-attachment to substantiality or nihility but attachment to non-attachment

The third level is first-order non-attachment (ㄨㄣ), which is a temporary break from strong desires and no attachment to the distinction between dreaming and awakening. However, by wrongfully objectifying the middle way (madhyama-pratipad), a new type of self-deception develops, resulting in a more hidden desire, a second-order desire to transcend the two first-level desires mentioned above.

(4) The fourth level: non-attachment to non-attachment

This second-order non-attachment (又ㄨㄣ) breaks all types of egocentrism and rigid symbolic identity (seeking identity externally or maintaining solidified identity inwardly) and reaches the realm of the great Dao after realizing the internal contradictory structure of the above psychological mechanism. Cheng Xuanying also believed that this level is the real meaning of non-determinate action (無為) in his account of “Knowledge Wanders North” in *Zhuangzi* [3] (p. 732).

The efforts of some to equate dreaming and awakening with the third realm have accidentally caused people to form new antagonisms, making such efforts ineffective. In “Qi Wu Lun”, Zhuangzi states “I say you are dreaming is also a dream” [3] p. 106). Based on Cheng Xuanying’s interpretation, Zhuangzi actually believed that although dreams can be observed in the waking state, observation is still a dream in the sense of attachment and ignorance. Cheng Xuanying also stated that “ordinary people are acting and making a big dream, but only enlightened saints keep waking and know people with worries in their hearts still do not wake up” [3] (p. 105). This realm is the fourth level. People in this realm forget the distinction between dreaming and awakening, which could be regarded as complete awakening in a metaphorical sense.

#### 4. Different Attitudes to *Zhuangzi* Regarding This Topic

The interpretations above mainly pursue metaphysical thinking and personal spirituality. However, some Daoist practitioners who wanted to become immortal were more concerned with the natural world and demonstrated certain skills in the fields of medicine and health. Some also quote *Zhuangzi* but only concern themselves with its health-preserving content. Before the eighth century, they regarded *Zhuangzi* only as an essay (“Nan Hua’s Essay”) and not as sacred scripture like *Dao De Jing*.

In the period of Emperor Gaozong (who reigned from 649 to 683) in the Tang Dynasty, Daoist priest Wang Xuanhe compiled *Sandong Zhunang* (《三洞珠囊》). In addition to mainly quoting Shangqing (上清) scripture originating in the fourth century, the beginning of its fifth volume about meditation also quotes three paragraphs from *Zhuangzi*. Except for two paragraphs referring to sitting in oblivion (坐忘) and purifying the heart (心齋), the other paragraph tells the story of Nan-Guo Ziqi (南郭子綦), who lost all consciousness of his companions, which is the beginning of the chapter “Qi Wu Lun” and “echoed with” [21] the allegory of “The Butterfly Dream” at the end of this chapter. However, Wang Xuanhe still claimed that this story “is also about meditation (精思)” [22] and concerned himself with only the practical skills in *Zhuangzi*.

Compared with Wang Xuanhe’s ignorance, in the fourth century, the Daoist philosopher Ge Hong, who practiced external elixirs, and some modern scholars criticized Zhuangzi and his followers from three aspects: the value of life, technology, and politics.

### (1) The value of life

First, as a famous Daoist proficient in medicine and health preservation practices, Ge Hong values life or longevity much more than spirituality, regarding death and life as equal. He stated “vulgar people noticed Zhuangzi’s metaphor of great dream, then they advocate death and life are equal one after another. Probably because they are very cunning, so they obviously speak insincerely... But such people holding this kind of statements usually seek acupuncture treatment as soon as they get sick, and have a great fear of death when facing danger” [23] (pp. 253, 254). Furthermore, Ge Hong argued that even Zhuangzi himself could not reach the state of regarding death the same as life, as Zhuangzi stated that he would rather be a tortoise wagging its tail in the mud than a tortoise in a net or a decorated ox; however, he still begged for millet from the river chief when he was hungry.

Ge Hong stated “although Wenzhi, Zhuangzi and the guard officer Yin Xi wrote essays revered Emperor Huang and Laozi as the spiritual source and took mysterious (玄) or emptiness (虚) as the beginning of all things, they only roughly explained the principle and always lack perfect words. Someone even took death as the same as life and thought living was not different from corvee service. These words have one hundred billion miles far away from immortals, how can one indulge in them?” [23] (p. 151).

Evidently, Ge Hong ignored the rhetoric and irony of the story of begging for millet in the text of *Zhuangzi*. In addition, we can see that he inherited the Daoist tradition of pursuing immortality [24] so had a strong bias against Zhuangzi’s philosophy. However, his idea represents those people who value life and actually explains why *Zhuangzi* was not taken seriously by religious Daoism before the Tang Dynasty.

### (2) The value of technology

Based on the relationship between dreaming and awakening, Zhuangzi focused on spirituality and ignored the experiential knowledge of the external world. However, as an expert in traditional Chinese medicine and external elixirs, Ge Hong not only developed empirical research methods including diligent exploration and experiments but also highly valued the role of technology [25].

Ge Hong stated “The ancient people were born without building and dead without funeral. They crossed rivers without boats, walked in the land without chariots and horses. They died by eating such poisonous bad food and lacking medical care when sick. Later saints made reforms benefitting the people until now. The function of skills and crafts does not easily fail” [26] (pp. 526–527). Therefore, he criticized some scholars who followed or even imitated Zhuangzi. He believed that their views exaggerated the problem of technological alienation and did not help to promote the progress of civilization.

### (3) The value of politics

In terms of public political ethics, Ge Hong also criticized the anarchist thinking of Zhuangzi’s followers in his time. He believed that, in the state of nature before government, “there were no officials to redress injustice in the upper class but some cliques to congregate in the lower class. Then lots of private fighting were crueler than public wars, and woods and stones were shaper than weapons. The dead bodies on top of each other were all over the wilderness, and roads were red with flowing blood” [26] (p. 522). In fact, this was a state of war in which security could not be guaranteed; thus, establishing a state became necessary. Furthermore, Ge Hong also stated that the reason why we respect Dao is not only due to its health-preserving effects but also its effect of governance without decrees [23] (p. 138). Evidently, although Ge Hong disagreed with anarchism from radical interpreters of *Zhuangzi*, he still did not accept Confucian ethics uncritically.

In modern times, after Yan Fu translated Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics*, some Chinese philosophers influenced by social Darwinism criticized the idea of *Zhuangzi* regarding equality under the pressure of colonialism. In 1919, Fu Sinian referenced Zhuangzi, and Ruan Ji, who wrote *Extend Zhuangzi’s Theory*, stated that good and evil or wisdom and foolishness were equal in his essay “A preliminary discussion of life problems”. However,

Fu Sinian argued that this thinking would make people lack an unyielding spirit and reject reform, leaving them without hope [27].

Concurrently, Hu Shi published *An Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy* and cited the sentence “all things are divided into their several classes, and succeed to one another in the same way” in the chapter “Metaphorical Language” of *Zhuangzi* and believed it to be close to Darwinian evolution. However, Hu Shi believed that *Zhuangzi* “abolished all distinctions between right and wrong or identity and difference, which looked brilliant which could not leave any hope of innovation and improvement; although *Zhuangzi* knew the truth of evolution, but unfortunately he regarded evolution as the nature of the way of heaven, and thought that human power was helpless, so his theory was indeed a great obstacle to social and academic progress” [28].

However, the philosophy of *Zhuangzi* could not just be concluded to value relativism [29]. As the chapter “Perfectly Happy” argues, “Is it really impossible to make sure of right and wrong? In fact, non-action could be the standard of righteousness” [3] (p. 612). His idea originated from Laozi, which takes non-harm as the moral bottom line in the chapter “Ruling a large country as you would cook small fish”. In short, the Daoist idea of “non-action” in Daoist thought refers to acting at will without interference in a negative sense, and, in a positive sense, it refers to the pursuit of truth.

From the perspective of formal logic, the Daoist proposition “action no-action” (為無為) is a self-contradiction. To resolve this paradox, Roger Ames and David Hall translated *wuwei* (non-action) as action non-determinately [30] and took *wu* (non) as an adverbial qualifier rather than a logical negative verb. Moreover, Feng Youlan translated *wuwei* as “action without purpose” [31] since *wei* (action) in Chinese is a polyphonic word that also means “for a purpose”. In all cases, words were added to enable proper translation.

However, from the perspective of dialectic thinking, there is a dialectic structure in the Daoist proposition “act no-action”, including three moments. The first moment is the abstract non-action; the second moment is to action arbitrarily with a contradiction of content and formality that will cancel the abstraction and emptiness in the first moment; and the third moment is the unity of the former two moments that will cancel the contradiction in the arbitrary action which is from oneself formally but deviates from the authenticity influenced by desires and drives. Thus, we cannot merely regard Daoist ethics as some form of negative nihilism.

Compared with radical attitudes to traditional culture, in the New Culture Movement period, Zhang Taiyan reinterpreted “Qi Wu Lun”. which absorbed Buddhist thoughts and Western philosophy. He discussed the question of dreaming and awakening and stated “enlightened people took both of dream and perception as mistaken discrimination. The words, feeling and perception in the awaked state are formed by perfumation and habits. Then they appear in the dream without external impression, but their contents are not out of the range of awakening. So awaking is original phases, accordingly dreaming is residual phases” [32]. Although his argument, influenced by Yogacara, was quite different from traditional interpretations, Zhang Taiyan still inherited the equality theory of “Qi Wu Lun” in *Zhuangzi* and criticized the inequality concepts of traditional bureaucracy and social Darwinism.

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## Note

- <sup>1</sup> Some scholars believe that the description of people with supernatural powers from the far west in this chapter comes from *Mouzi* or *Six Paramitas Sutra* translated by Samgha Hui from Kangqu. In contrast, Seishi Karashima argues that we cannot claim it is merely a copy, although a few parts of the story are similar [4].

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