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Zhou Mengdie's
Poetry of Consciousness

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Prelude

Assume water. Say it is characterized by flow. Say also that wherever it is bounded by land, the land is called ‘shore’ and that wherever we designate a ‘this shore,’ there is presumed to be an ‘other shore’ no matter how distant. Consider that there may be great differences in terrain, climate or other features between This Shore and the Other. Remember that in the course of a lifetime, a person may move or even emigrate from This Shore to the Other; note that thereby Other becomes This. Say there is an agency standing upon This Shore, reflecting upon the water upon which it is reflected. Call that agency ‘I.’

You have just sketched an outline for a study of the life and works of Zhou Mengdie 周夢蝶 (pseudonym of Zhou Qishu 周起述, 1921–), one of Taiwan’s most famous poets.

Now, however, say: no. What we were looking at in the first paragraph was not biography but Buddhism. The ‘flow’ is the movement, or apparent movement, back and forth between Lokadhatu (the ‘realm of particulars’) and Dharmadhatu (the ‘region of essence’).¹ Does not Zhou Mengdie himself begin a poem with a quote from a sutra describing this ‘flow’? And the two Shores are the *ci an* 此岸 and *bi an* 彼岸 of Chinese Buddhism: the This of worldly consciousness contrasting with the Yonder, the Other that Enlightenment is.

But (say now) if the ‘flow’ is not water but consciousness (which as William James said, ‘is no thing jointed; it flows’²)—aren’t we really talking about phenomenology? When Fa-tsang set up a hall of mirrors to demonstrate the ‘Totality in the Dharmadhatu,’ such that in each mirror in the room ‘you will find the reflections of all the other mirrors with the Buddha’s image in them...’³

1 Terms from D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, 3rd series. Quoted in Laycock 1989, pp. 178–179.

2 William James, vol. 1, p. 239.

3 From a translation by Garma C. C. Chang. Quoted in Laycock 1989, pp. 191–192. As I will be quoting Laycock in subsequent chapters, it will be well to observe at the outset that in his various writings he sometimes does, and at other times does not, seem eager to see similarities between Husserlian phenomenology and Buddhist views. In Laycock 1989 he is clearly trying to see them, even explicitly first formulating and then overcoming objections which he admits might be made to that point of view. In Laycock 1986 (pp. 178–179) he had already used the ‘hall of mirrors’ image as a picture of the Husserlian *Gotteswelt* in which ‘each “mirror” (consciousness) has access to the ideally communalized metastance from which each consciousness, in its intersubjective relationships with each other consciousness, may be viewed.’ In the book-length Laycock 1994, however, he seems much more

wasn't he really anticipating Husserl's position that 'the self-being of each and every subject depends upon its relation to other subjects'?⁴ And as for the two Shores: are these the splitting of Husserl's 'stream of consciousness' into the two components of 'sensuous content' and 'meaning-giving'?⁵

On the other hand, this is sounding rather abstruse. We are getting a bit far from the concrete personal experience of Zhou Mengdie, of the reader. Say then: the two Shores of mental life are what Freud called the primary process (of the Unconscious) and secondary process (of the Conscious).⁶ If Buddhist descriptions of the Other Shore (or the Zen statements which are supposed to facilitate its perception) sound illogical or paradoxical, so do dreams. Classical Chinese writers were aware of these logical overturnings and built them into some of their works dealing with dreams, precognition, and relations between the living and the dead.

So, are we really 'just' talking about the devices and structures of literary technique? When Zhou Mengdie, claiming to be quoting the Hua Yen Sutra, says

一切從此法界流，一切流入此法界

All floweth forth from this Dharmadhatu,
all floweth into this Dharmadhatu⁷

is he making a literal statement, a metaphorical statement, an iconic statement, or a literary-conventional quasi-statement of what is actually too 'paradoxical' to be stated at all?

Say these various possibilities do not rule each other out. If a China-born poet, now resident in Taiwan, says he is getting on in years and will soon 'go back,' in idiomatic Mandarin this could mean he will soon return to China or—equally well—that he expects to pass away soon. Is the 'metaphorical' version less true? From Taiwan as This Shore, the *xi tian* 西天 or 'Western heaven' is either the physical sky over China, or the Western Paradise into which the deceased may be welcomed at a funeral. Either/or. Both/and. In the 18th-century novel *Dream of*

anxious to see contrasts, according to Schroeder's (1997) review. I take this on Schroeder's authority; I have tried to read the book itself and find it frankly incomprehensible.

4 Formulation by Zahavi, in Zahavi 2003a, p. 115.

5 Zahavi 2003a, p. 57.

6 See for example James Strachey, 'Sigmund Freud: A Sketch of His Life and Ideas,' in Freud 1991a, pp. 19–20.

7 *13 Bai*, p. 26. I say 'claiming' because I have not been able to verify that the quote actually occurs verbatim in the Hua Yen Sutra. For the title abbreviations I use in citing Zhou's books, see the beginning of the Bibliography.

the Red Chamber by Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹,⁸ the main character Baoyu's 寶玉 name is a composite of syllables taken from the names of his two girl friends, Baochai 寶釵 and Daiyu 黛玉. This both/and structure (so reminiscent of the psychological 'condensation' described by Freud as a recurrent feature of dreams, but also appropriate to the 'universal interpenetration' of the Dharmadhatu and perhaps to Husserl's 'transcendent intersubjectivity') does not exempt him from the either/or predicament of having to marry one of them but not the other. (He ends up marrying one while under the impression that she, veiled and all, is the other. No matter: their fates were foreseen in a dream, hence doubtless fated to happen. Besides, his own surname, Jia 賈, can be read to mean 'not real'.)

Let us admit that surely any form of linguistic expression can be quoted from an 'attested' source in one literary work or another, and consequently, that no clear formal line can be drawn between 'literary' and 'non-literary' expression. Motivationally as well, it seems useless to try to make a distinction. Was *Dream of the Red Chamber* written for amusement *or*, or for amusement *and*, edification? Its 'philosophy' is inseparable from the style in which it is presented: or perhaps we should say that the style is justified or validated by the extra-literary message. When Yu Kwang-chung 余光中, a leading poet and the doyen of Taiwanese studies of modern poetry, described Zhou Mengdie as 'a reincarnation of Jia Baoyu,'⁹ he was presuming that his readers not only knew the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, but knew what it was about. In obvious factual ways, Zhou's biography can be shown to be incompatible with any comparison to Baoyu. What Yu Guangzhong was pointing to was a similarity in person, in emotions, in...consciousness. And now we have found the term at last which unites our various perspectives on Zhou Mengdie. Consciousness: his biography has been a growth in it; Buddhism provides a philosophy of it; phenomenology is a Western description of it; Freudian theory is one particular model of it; literary devices mediate it.

Baoyu's life toggles between two girls, between the two states of dream and everyday, between the *dhatu* of empirical egoic experience and that of the Enlightenment state. Zhou Mengdie's very nom-de-plume immediately reminds all educated Oriental readers of one of the most famous passages in all of classical Chinese literature, in which consciousness itself is described as a toggle. The Daoist philosophical writer Zhuangzi 莊子 (369?–286? B.C.) was surnamed Zhou. 'Mengdie' literally means 'dreaming of a butterfly.' At the end of the

8 One useful modern translation is the multi-volume annotated version published by Penguin under the title *The Story of the Stone* starting in 1973. See Cao Xueqin 1973.

9 Yu Kwang-chung, 'Yikuai caishi jiu neng bu tian ma?—Zhou Mengdie shijing chu kui,' in Liu Yongyi 1988, pp. 181–186. Quote from p. 185.

second chapter of Zhuangzi's book, we find the passage which has fixed the meaning of the butterfly image for all time in Chinese culture:

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 unmistakable 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.¹⁰

The sense of the image is clear: identity is relative. Who or what the 'I' is, is a matter of point of view. One is what one is by contrast with something else that one might also be, or might also have been.

Another famous story from Zhuangzi has become a famous locus of discussions as to the possibility of empathy or understanding between subjects. In the chapter 'Autumn's Full Streams,' we read that

Zhuangzi and Huizi were strolling along the dam of the Hao River when Zhuangzi said, 'See how the minnows come out and dart around where they please! That's what fish really enjoy!'

Huizi said, 'You're not a fish—how do you know what fish enjoy?'

Zhuangzi said, 'You're not I, so how do you know I don't know what fish enjoy?'¹¹

In Zhuangzi's butterfly story, the possibility of toggling in consciousness is related to the possibility of dreaming. Discovering oneself 'in' an alternate identity is literarily presented as the sort of thing that we could expect while in the dream state. But in one of Zhou Mengdie's poems, knowing or 'starting to be' someone who can identify with another identity is presented as a result of living itself:

不怕冷的冷

即使從來不曾在夢裏魚過

鳥過蝴蝶過

住久了在這兒

依然會惚兮恍兮

不期然而然的

莊周起來

由於近山，近水近松近月

10 Translation by Burton Watson in Watson 1968; transcription modernized. For a thoroughgoing literary reading of Zhuangzi, see Hoffmann 2001.

11 Translation by Burton Watson in Watson 1968, pp. 188–189; transcription modernized.

冷，總免不了有些兒

The Cold That Can Take the Cold¹²

Even if you've never in a dream been a fish,
 been a bird, been a butterfly –
 if you live here long enough,
 confused and all, still and all,
 without expecting it and all
 you'll start to be a Zhuangzi.

The local mountains, rivers, pines and moon
 are cold, so cold you're bound to get, a little.

In the original, the formulation accentuates the logical strangeness of what is being formulated. Instead of a standard verb like the English 'been,' what we see is the nouns 'fish,' 'bird' and 'butterfly' being used as verbs. They are unquestionably to be taken as verbs because they are followed by the verbal complement *-guo* 過 which as it were dislodges them from their normal noun status. Similarly, 'start to be a Zhuangzi' is Zhuang Zhou-*qilai*, in which the inchoative verbal complement *-qilai* 起來 imposes verb status on the preceding element which in this case would otherwise never have it. In other words, in this passage, words that could normally be only nominatives are suddenly functioning as predicates.

Reversibility of subject and predicate is, as we shall soon see, regularly generated or implied by the literary device of chiasmus, or the palindrome. But it is also one of the standard characteristics of dream psychology as described by Freud. More generally, I think we will see that reversibility, a quality of toggle between two points of view, two interdependent poles of a logical proposition, two identities, two Shores or whatever, is basic to what Zhou Mengdie's poetry is 'about.' And I do not hesitate to say that his poetry is about consciousness.

In the following chapters, we will examine the reversibility motif as it can be read from Zhou's poetry in the dimensions we have been sketching in this introduction: biography, Buddhism, Husserlian phenomenology, Freudian psychology, and literary style.

12 Original in *13 Bai*, p. 118.