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DEVELOPMENT OF ONEIROSHERE IN TRADITIONAL CHINA

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Abstract. Dreams have fascinated humankind since antiquity; the story-like events experienced during sleep have inspired countless efforts to make sense of their meaning. This article discusses the theories of dream interpretation in traditional China, and how the signs and messages in the dreams of Chinese people reflects the culture, worldview and traditions.

Key words: dream, symbols, oneirosphere, dream message, dream interpretation.

Oneiromancy, the interpretation of dreams in order to foretell the future, has featured prominently in virtually all ancient civilizations as well as contemporary small-scale, traditional societies¹. The universality of dreaming itself is not surprising. Contemporary research in neuroscience has shed light on the neurological mechanisms of dreaming and psychologists have proposed adaptive, evolutionary explanations for its occurrence. Anthropologically, considerable effort has been devoted to identifying universal features in dream content. Of course, the interpretation of dreams is almost certainly a culturally mediated practice. That is, how specific signs (what appears in one's dream) correspond to meaning (what the dream reveals about reality) is often heavily dependent on the cultural contexts.

What is perhaps more noteworthy is the ubiquity of using dreams as a valid source of information. Oneiromancy has been well-documented in the ethnographic literature and the cultural significance of dreaming has been thoroughly explored by anthropologists. Existing research, however, leaves an important and obvious question inadequately addressed: why do people believe in the validity of oneiromancy when modern neuroscience has shown that dreams do not necessarily have any bearings on future events? Typically, oneiromancy, like many other divinatory practices, is explained from functional perspectives which emphasize its social, political, and religious role in a society. It is undeniable that oneiromancy certainly serves these functions; for example, a general in a battleground may fabricate auspicious dreams to boost his troops' morale and a king may make up dreams to legitimize his political power. But the effectiveness of such deceptive techniques depends on the audience's

¹ Ambuehl, S., & Li, S. (2018). Belief updating and the demand for information. *Games and Economic Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geb.2017.11.009>



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confidence in the prophetic power of dreams. Therefore, we still need an account to explain why people believe in the validity of dreams in the first place.

Historically, the art of dream interpretation was often viewed as a form of magic which has been subject to extensive anthropological theorizing. Briefly, early thinkers tend to treat magic as ineffective technology: that is, what we (modern readers) consider as “magical” activities were really instrumental efforts to achieve some desirable outcomes. As such, the “magicness” of these efforts stems from their ineffectiveness. Why would people engage in these ineffective activities? According to some early anthropological theories, this is because people in certain societies reason in a faulty fashion. Tylor, for example, offers some possible factors that lead to faulty reasoning of people in traditional² societies, such as successful outcome by natural means (chance), vague diagnosis, and under-appreciation of negative evidence. More recently, Horton has taken up this line of argument by suggesting that while traditional magic practices and western science share the same fundamental goals of explaining, predicting, and controlling worldly events, individuals in traditional societies differ from those in the West in their reasoning habits; specifically, when evaluating the effectiveness of some technology, people in traditional societies do not readily entertain alternative possibilities³ (e.g. the technology does not work) and do not engage in much reflective thinking.

The above view has gone out of fashion for quite some time, as later scholars in anthropology tended to focus on the symbolic function of magical, ritualistic activities. In the field of psychology and cognitive science, however, there has been a revival of interest in understanding these seemingly irrational beliefs and actions. Vyse, for instance, offers an excellent review of the psychological and cognitive explanations of why people hold irrational beliefs and engage in ineffective actions. The psychological literature on contemporary superstition and traditional divination/magic has grown substantially in recent years; in general, psychological theories tend to attribute these irrational beliefs and actions to some type of *intuition*. In other words, factually incorrect beliefs are held as a result of intuitive reasoning, and ineffective technologies are practiced because they are intuitively plausible with regard to achieving the alleged goals. In particular, cognitive psychologists and anthropologists often attribute the cultural success of certain magic/divination practices to their specific features that increases their perceived efficacy, and much

² The word “primitive” was often used to denote these societies in early anthropological writings.

³ To'rayeva, U. (2023). THE ORETICAL AND PRACTICAL BASIS OF TRANSLATION OF TERMS. *Scientific Journal of the Fergana State University*, 29(4), 64. https://doi.org/10.56292/SJFSU/vol29_iss4/a64



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progress has been made on this front. For example, Legare & Souza experimentally show that procedural features such as repetition and the presence of religious icons enhance the perceived efficacy of rituals; Nemeroff & Rozin suggest that magical principles of sympathy and contagion are intuitively attractive and speculated the adaptive benefits it may have conferred in our evolutionary past (e.g. pathogen avoidance); Miton et al. contend that the popularity of bloodletting is due to the match between its form (releasing blood from the body) and folk intuitions on the nature of illness and how the body works; Singh proposes that specific aspects of shamanism such as inhumanness increases the plausibility of shamanistic practices which culturally evolved as a result of a selective retention process; Barrett and Boyer have argued that concepts (and by extension, cultural practices) that are “minimally counter-intuitive” are more memorable and enjoys an advantage in the transmission process.

There is no doubt that intuitive plausibility contributes to the overall explanation of the persistence of ineffective technologies such as oneiromancy. However, evolved intuitions are unlikely to provide the full story. Previously, we have offered extensive ethnographic and historical evidence showing that people often entertain considerable uncertainty regarding their efficacy in achieving explicit goals and at the same time often care a lot about whether technological practices indeed achieve the promised outcomes or not. In other words, the empirical side of magic/divination matters as well; though occasionally failures can be explained away rather easily, frequent failures would likely lead to a certain level of skepticism⁴. Indeed, despite the documented biases and errors in human reasoning and decision making, humans do probabilistically modify their beliefs and consequently actions as evidence accumulates.

Given such probabilistic understanding of the efficacy of technological practice, it may be useful to explore factors that contribute to the estimation of technological efficacy⁵. In addition to individual trial and error learning (more generally, reinforcement learning), humans obtain a tremendous amount of information culturally. As such, psychological and social factors may create population dynamics in which over-estimation of efficacy occurs. In (Hong & Henrich, forthcoming), we have formally modeled the interaction between individual cognition and social

⁴ Саттарова, Е. А. (2020). Несовместимость эфемизмов русского и узбекского языков как основное препятствие для лингвокультурологического сопоставления. Проблемы современной науки и образования, (7 (152)), 63-67.

⁵ Barrett, D., & McNamara, P. (2007). The new science of dreaming (Vol. 3). Praeger Publishers Westport CT.



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processes where individuals update their belief regarding the efficacy of some technology in a Bayesian fashion, and through biased information transmission individuals may end up believing the technology to be substantially more efficacious than it actually is. One key prediction of the model is that overestimation of the efficacy of some technology may be caused by under-reporting of negative instance which I have found in other magical activities such as rainmaking⁶ (Hong, Slingerland & Henrich, submitted). In this paper, I aim to place the persistence of oneiromancy in a cultural evolutionary framework and examine the extent to which dream divination failures are under-reported as well as other psychological and social factors that may lead to the over-estimation of the predictive accuracy of dreams in a cultural evolutionary process.

A large literature in psychology and cognitive science has shown that many of our beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are transmitted culturally rather than through individual learning. Often, the anthropological studies on dreams implicitly presume the role of cultural transmission but rarely discuss it explicitly. In an obvious sense, the way people treat and interpret dreams is influenced by others in the community. In most small-scale societies, the meaning of dreams is passed on through word of mouth, and in literate societies such as ancient Greece and ancient China, as written texts⁷. The importance of cultural transmission, however, extends beyond dream oneiromancy manuals. In addition to how to interpret dreams, people also culturally obtain actual cases of dreams accurately (or not) predicting future events, which affect their confidence in the validity of dreams as a reliable information source. This latter point is important because ample research in cognitive science and evolutionary anthropology has shown that humans possess some level of “epistemic vigilance” and do not accept transmitted information uncritically. Predictively accurate dreams thus serve as “data” to corroborate the “theory” that dreams are indeed prognosticative of future events.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides the essential background information of theories of dreams in ancient China, and section 3 shows the results of a comprehensive quantitative analysis of dream occurrences in Chinese historical records and offers a cultural evolutionary account of the persistence of dream interpretation⁸. Additionally, I present tentative evidence that although oneiromancy has always been considered a valid technique throughout Chinese

⁶ Boyd, R., & Richerson, P. J. (1985). *Culture and the evolutionary process*. University of Chicago Press.

⁷ Абдиназаров, У. (2023). Ingliz va o‘zbek tillarida gippologik terminlarning lingvistik tadqiqi. *Ижтимоий-гуманитар фанларнинг долзарб муаммолари/Актуальные проблемы социально-гуманитарных наук/Actual Problems of Humanities and Social Sciences.*, 3(9).

⁸ Turaeva, U. (2021). Comparative study of uzbek and english legal terms legal linguistics: historical foundations, basic concepts and aspects. *Berlin Studies Transnational Journal of Science and Humanities*, 1(1.6 Philological sciences).



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history, the extent to which dreams were taken seriously may have declined over time. In the final section, I discuss the applicability and limitations of this account as well as the implications for divination/magic in modern societies. To preview, I argue that a theoretical commitment to the spiritual world, deliberate fabrication/retrospective inference of successful dream predictions, and the under-reporting of failed predictions collectively contribute to the persistence of oneiromancy. While the first factor can be largely attributed to evolved intuitions, the latter two factors crucially depend on our species' reliance on social learning, as our evaluation of the efficacy of some technology is often significantly affected by the testimonies, opinions, and behaviors of others in the community. The declining importance of oneiromancy over time, on the other hand, may be attributed to the uniqueness of oneiromancy compared to other divination and magic practices, i.e. dreams are by nature subjective to manipulation, cannot be readily produced to solve practical problems, and may be explained by naturalistic (psychological) causes.

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