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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The hidden dimension of Chinese culture as seen in the dream of a Taiwanese woman

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This paper analyses the dream of a middle-aged professor in Taiwan whose marriage and life had fallen apart. “All my life,” she said, “I followed the agenda, but I didn’t get the reward.” She contemplated suicide. The dream revealed that at this time in her life her conventional Confucian agenda, corresponding to Jung’s ego psychology of the first half of life, was changing into a post-conventional Taoist one, representing the enlightened trans-egoic psychology Jung, Maslow, Campbell, Wilber, and others find in lives that continues to develop. Only from the Confucian viewpoint had her life come to an impasse. According to the Taoist one she merely faced the death of her former way of being and the prospect of a remarkable new one. Viewing Chinese culture as merely Confucian misses the ontogenetic relationship between its two ancient wisdom traditions and the rich transformative potential of China’s indigenous post-conventional Taoist tradition.

Keywords: Chinese culture; Chinese psychology; dreams; Ullman experiential dream group; Lao Tzu; Confucius; suicide

Introduction

Carl Jung (Jung, Adler & Hull, 1956, 1969, 1974), Abraham Maslow (Maslow, 1968, 1970, 1971), and Joseph Campbell (Campbell, 1949, 1969, 1972) all pursued their investigations of psychology primarily by focussing on individuals who, for one reason or another, had grown beyond the earlier conventional stages of adult human development and embarked on the more advanced later post-conventional stages, which involve the flowering of what Jung envisioned according to his concept “individuation,” Maslow according to his concept “self-actualization,” and Campbell according his concept “hero’s journey.” More recently the philosopher (Wilber, 1977) has presented a whole spectrum of stages that the developing adult can traverse from the personal or egoic stages onwards to the transpersonal or trans-egoic ones. The work of these men is all in keeping with modern thinking on creativity and the creative process (Arieti, 1976; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Ghiselin, 1952; May, 1975; Neumann, 1959; Storr, 1993) in suggesting that in every culture, and in every age, there are individuals who break out of the conventional mould not just to create art, science, culture, and religion – but to create themselves, and some of

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their disciples, into wholly developed human beings. This kind of person fits the ancient Eastern ideal of “the superior man” (Merton, 1961, Merton, 1965; Mitchell, 1988).

While modern thinkers in this area are Western, they ground their work, to one degree or another, in the wisdom traditions of the East, including those of China. The paradox we find is that, though China for some 2500 years has been dominated by Confucian thought, the particular ancient Chinese tradition that has proved so seminal to these Western thinkers isn’t Confucianism, but the earlier, indigenous Chinese wisdom tradition of Taoism, particularly as expressed by Lao Tzu’s slim masterpiece Tao Te Ching and various of Chuang Tzu’s writings.

The way of Lao Tzu, so influential in the West today, hasn’t fared so well in its native land, where it has been philosophically mangled by Confucian scholars, reified into a religion by the populace, and finally interwoven itself completely with the Buddhism that arrived from India to form the uniquely Chinese Ch’an (Zen in Japan). Today, in Chinese culture, the life of convention (Confucianism) is markedly evident – or so it seemed to me when I first arrived in Taiwan six years ago and began leading Ullman experiential dream groups. But, as over the years I worked with hundreds and hundreds of Taiwanese dreams, I began to get quite a different picture. This proved possible because moreso than either Freudian or Jungian dream interpretation, the Ullman group method refrains from imposing imported Western doctrine upon the unconscious imagery arising in a dream (Ullman 1996; Ullman & Zimmerman, 1979) and thus can register in a faithful and unbiased way Chinese psychology, culture, and religion as it operates under the threshold of consciousness (Stimson & Wang, 2004).

This paper presents the analysis of a dream that pivots on a telling moment in the developmental maturation of a middle-aged Taiwanese woman – a university professor whose marriage and life had fallen apart. She saw no way out and admitted contemplating suicide. “All my life,” she said, “I followed the agenda, but in the end I didn’t get the reward.” A close look at her dream and current life situation revealed that, in fact, she was following not one, but a jumble of two different and conflicting agendas – and that it was only from the perspective of the first, which closely paralleled mainstream Chinese (Confucian) convention, that her life had come to an impasse. From the vantage point of the second agenda, emerging spontaneously at the time to afford her the perspective and resources needed to cope with her crisis, it wasn’t suicide at all she was headed towards, but merely the death of her former way of being and the emergence of an entirely new one whose trans-conventional values were those of China’s other ancient wisdom tradition – Taoism.

This case suggests in a particularly clear manner that the relationship between these two ancient Chinese cultural traditions is an ontogenetic one – with concerns such as those customarily attributed to Confucius corresponding roughly to what Carl Jung would call the ego psychology of the first half of life, and concerns such as those customarily attributed to Lao Tzu reflecting the more enlightened stance that comes to select individuals who successfully move forward from there, or are driven forth by life events, to a higher stage of developmental maturation later in life.

For us in the West, or for Chinese themselves, to continue viewing Chinese culture as merely Confucian, misses the ontogenetic relationship between that culture’s two ancient wisdom traditions and the rich transformative potential of China’s indigenous post-conventional Taoist tradition that stands to play a creative and freeing role in China’s future, as it seems to already have begun to do in the more highly developed and open Chinese culture of Taiwan.
Method

The American psychiatrist Montague Ullman developed a radically simpler and more direct concept of dreams and their meaning than the one held by Freud, or even Jung. In Ullman’s view Freud was wrong to view dreams as attempting to mask or hide anything. Ullman felt that – like the work of a creative artist – a dream strives in every way to express a truth that is difficult to understand only because it is so at odds with the compromised, expedient, and dishonest lives we lead.

Whereas both Freud and Jung developed a body of theory to be applied to dream interpretation, Ullman recognised that each dream was its own theory about the dreamer and that outside dogma only got in the way of this. He came to realise from working with dreams that deep within the unconscious of every person lies the spontaneous and creative intuition of an artist, mostly suppressed by education, conditioning, and the expedient dishonesty of everyday life – but freely functioning in dreams. He saw every dream as a masterpiece of truthfulness – a work of art and believed it only needed to be approached in a way that allowed it to express itself. It’s telling that the stages Ullman came up with for his experiential dream group closely parallel those of the creative process itself:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Stages of the creative process</th>
<th>Stages of the Ullman dream group</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Preparation:</strong> The time for research, fact gathering, assembling materials, gathering needed information before the creative act.</td>
<td><strong>Bring forth and clarify the dream and its meaning:</strong> The dreamer tells her dream and then answers questions to clarify it to the group. Each member of the group, pretending the dream is their own and projecting freely from their own life, explores the dream for (a) feelings and (b) metaphors. Afterwards, the dreamer shares all the new insights this awakens in her.</td>
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<td><strong>Incubation:</strong> This is the period of gestation, of letting go so that the mind, the unconscious, intuition, and emotion can mull over the information and put it into its own original perspective.</td>
<td><strong>Set the dream aside and look at the dreamer’s recent life:</strong> Laying the dream aside, the group and dreamer explore the dreamer’s life situation prior to the dream – starting with the thoughts and feelings the dreamer had before dozing off to sleep the night before and working back through the day, or even further to explore the emotional context out of which the dream arose.</td>
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<td><strong>Inspiration:</strong> The “Aha!” when the solution, illumination, or discovery either emerges or forces itself through into a coalesced form.</td>
<td><strong>Return to the dream now and hold it up, piece by piece, to the dreamer:</strong> Having explored the dream and its imagery, and then having looked into the details of her life in the period immediately prior to the dream, the dreamer now has everything she needs to grasp, image by image, what the dream is saying. In this stage the dreamer is illuminated from within herself with the meaning of her own dream and pours out in amazement to the group, image by image and scene by scene, as the dream is read back to her, what her dream means.</td>
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<td><strong>Evaluation and confirmation:</strong> This is the time to ask, Will it work, does it hold up next to other theories, does it logically fit with the original stimulus?</td>
<td><strong>One by one, members of the group tell the dreamer what they think:</strong> After the dreamer has finished discovering the meaning of her own dream, one by one the other members of the group speak up and give their views. This stage is like the blind men with the elephant. Each group member can only see in the dream what they themselves are, but the group as a whole serves to powerfully validate and confirm the dreamer’s view of the whole dream so that she knows she’s been heard, and she hears, often for the first time, what she herself discovered, when it’s mirrored back to her by the group in this way. The dreamer always has the final word. Usually all she says is “Thankyou so much!” In the days and weeks subsequent to the dream group further insights occur to the dreamer, which she may report back to the group if she wishes.</td>
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Sometimes it also happens that subsequent to the dream group, some other member of the group, not the dreamer, is moved to take a deeper look at the dream on their own. That individual may arrive at a new understanding of the material and is also invited to present this at a subsequent meeting of the group.

The material presented below combines what was said and revealed in the group as well as understandings that arose in the subsequent weeks as I subjected what the dreamer shared in the group to a more detailed examination.

**Ching’s dream**

Ching, a middle-aged Taiwanese college professor, attended several of the dream group weekends Dr. Shuyuan Wang and I held at Chaoyang University of Technology in the Spring of 2004. The first time she came, she broke into tears when her turn came to introduce herself. “It’s not going to be easy for me to open up in front of all these people,” she explained, wiping her eyes. Her interest flagged when working on the dreams of others. She grew quiet, drew into herself and looked bored. Once she even dozed off. She was very eager, though, to come forward with her own dreams and seemed very forthcoming with information about her life. One of Ching’s dreams that we worked on ended with a particularly disturbing image. In the dream she was her mother, riding on a black sailing ship across the sky. She stood on the ship’s deck peeling away, strip by strip, the sunny blue sky, to reveal the black nothingness that lay underneath. In working with that dream Ching mentioned a problem with depression.

In the summer, Dr. Wang and I vacationed briefly in the city where she lives and enjoyed a few days in her company. She lived alone in an attractive modestly sized apartment that had one very interesting architectural feature. The sliding door between the living and bedroom area was cut to a strange shape. When I commented on this, she demonstrated how the door closed tightly over the middle of the long built-in desk that stretched along the window the length of that side of the apartment. “That way one person can keep working late into the night even if the other one needs to sleep,” she explained. That’s when I noticed the long desk was composed of two workstations, one on each side of the sliding door. There were two computers, two office chairs, two of everything. “There’s another person?” I asked without thinking. I realised immediately I was being intrusive.

“There was,” she replied before I could withdraw my question. When you work together with someone on dreams for even a short period of time you end up knowing more than you expect about their life and inner feelings. Yet Ching had worked on a number of her dreams in the group, and never once mentioned any recent breakup.

During our stay, Ching let us have the use of another apartment she owned, out in a scenic area at the edge of town. She told us she’d lived there herself until a year or so ago. Two bicycles that looked new and hardly used stood side by side in the living room, gathering dust. There were two coffee cups, two saucers, two plates – two of everything throughout the apartment. The place had the unspeakable sadness about it of a life together that had abruptly ended. The story that emerged by the time our vacation took us on to a further city was that Ching’s husband had in the last year or so abandoned her for another woman and was filing for divorce. Ching was furious at him and fighting him every inch of the way in the courts.

The earthquake relief fund that supported our programme of free dream workshops was gradually exhausted. Dr. Montague Ullman, the originator of the experiential
dream group method, suggested we conduct an experiential dream group leadership
training in Taiwan so that Taiwanese professionals could take this work back to their
institutions and lead dream groups themselves in Chinese. We decided to use the last of
our funding to do that in the Fall of 2005. We designed an eight-day programme that
extended over four weekends spaced a month apart. We were glad Ching signed up
and that she was thinking of using the experiential dream group method in her own
therapy practice. Due to a scheduling conflict she missed the September weekend.
She arrived in October and shared a dream. Again, she didn’t utter a word, during
the whole process, about the breakup of her marriage. In November she came
forward again with a dream but had to back down before someone who hadn’t yet
shared one.

In December, no sooner did the trainee leader call for a dream than Ching’s hand shot
quickly up. There were several present who hadn’t yet had a chance to share a dream. The
trainee didn’t know to keep the floor open a few more moments to see if one of them
wanted to come forward. Instead she seized right away on Ching’s dream and started in on
the process.

“When did you have this dream?” she asked.
Ching’s face took on a blank look. “Maybe a month ago,” she said.
“Tell us your dream,” the student leader began.

I stepped in. There was something a bit too vague about Ching’s reply. “It’s useful in a
case like this to ask a follow up question that might pin the dream down more precisely in
time,” I suggested.

“I guess I must have had the dream sometime before the November workshop because
it’s the dream I’d wanted to work on then,” Ching said.
“Please tell us your dream,” the student leader said.

Ching reeled the dream off to us from memory. She hadn’t written it down.

I was in a room. I’m not really sure the woman is me. The room is a little bit like a European
kind of room. The door opens — two doors. The woman is arguing with a man. She wants to
kill him. So she, (here is not clear) try to hide in the room. There is some kind of smoke. She
take a position and try to hide from the man sight.

There’s some kind of smoke in the room. The man is frightened. The man try to find the
woman. The smoke block the sight. Then the end of the dream is that the smoke becomes
some kind of light.

So that the trainees might get a better feel for the real power of the experiential
dream group process, we suggested they write down any dream they felt they might like
to work within the group. We even suggested they add a few notes about events of the
previous day and any thoughts they remembered having just before dozing off to sleep.
These details vanish quickly from memory. To have them in writing would make it easier
for us all to do the dream justice within the tight time constraints of the leadership
training.

I was quite sure there were two or three individuals sitting around the circle who hadn’t
yet had a chance to work on one of their dreams and who had with them a carefully
written down dream they wished to explore in the group. Ching had rushed forward and
grabbed the spot. Then she had dumped on us a month-old dream, one she’d never
bothered to write down in the first place. What we had before us wasn’t a recorded dream,
or even a remembered one, so much as a dimly recollected synopsis or sketch. She wasn’t
even exactly sure when she’d had the dream. So we wouldn’t likely get at the immediate
life events that precipitated it. We’d be working with one hand tied behind our back.
The prospects didn’t look promising.
Members of the group unclear about one aspect or another of the dream came forward with questions. In responding to them, Ching expanded the dream a bit. She added the following material:

- “There were double doors, but only one of the doors was open. It was a wooden door.”
- “The room was circular. The room was a light yellow color.”
- “There was a round table in the middle of the room, made of wood. There was a small cabinet in the room.”

When questioned about feelings in the dream, Ching said “I think I’m frightened, and confused — frightened when the smoke appeared, and confused. The smoke is gray, fuzzy.”

When asked if the room in the dream was a real place or if the people were real people in her life, she replied, “No real place, no real person.” Then she said, “In the dream the woman is trying to devise some kind of plan. She is trying to hide from the man to figure out some way to kill him. The man is not that concerned. It’s almost like he’s stupid or naïve. He’s not aware of the danger. He doesn’t know the woman wants to kill him.”

She also said, “In the dream I was a little bit surprised at the light. It is a bright white shiny light. A little bit like the magical kind of light. Not fluorescent. It seems the light gives me relief. You can only see light.”

Ching sat back now while we moved into the next phase of the process. Members of the group took the dream as their own and probed it first for feelings and then for metaphorical meaning. Due to a dysfunction in the device we used to record the session, no record survived of the lively and free session that ensued, or the wealth of associations and insights that emerged. By the time the trainee leader handed the dream back to Ching and invited her response, we were all deeply involved and waited eagerly for what Ching had to say. I grabbed up my pen because, even when we’re recording a session, I try to get down on paper as much as I can of the dreamer’s actual words. They’re the key to the dream.

Ching sat there, with her legs crossed and arms folded in her lap. “I think I have nothing to add,” she announced coolly, looking out at us. She was dumping it completely on us, without even providing us a scant hint as to which of the things said resonated with her and which didn’t. It felt like she’d just tied our other hand behind our back and blindfolded us too. Ching had been to as many of our programmes as anyone in the group. She was better trained, smarter, and more interested in dreams than most. I couldn’t understand why she was doing this.

The trainee leader introduced the next stage of the process, in which we set the dream aside and begin to explore the real life events leading up to it. We always start by looking into the thoughts going through the dreamer’s mind immediately before she dozes off to sleep the night before. “You say you don’t remember exactly what night you had the dream...” I began my first question.

“Maybe I woke up with it on the morning of the workshop — Saturday morning,” she interrupted. It seemed like she was guessing.

I had nothing else to go on. I would have to work with a guess. “Is there anything you would care to say about what might have been going through your mind that Friday night just before the November weekend as you lay down to sleep?” I asked.

“I can’t remember,” she said flat out.

The group fell silent, stymied. The whole process depended on Ching and was in her control, but she wasn’t giving us anything.
“Well,” I said, hoping I might jog her memory, “You’re lying in bed... You’ve got to get up early the next morning to go to the November leadership training...”

“*To get here on time Saturday morning I had to leave home Friday night, which meant I had to change my schedule. I felt very pressed for time. Friday night I slept over at my sister’s in a nearby town.*”

She fell silent. I wanted for her to continue.
She stayed silent. I wanted longer.

“*Maybe that was the day I scolded my students,*” she said. This was clearly another guess. “The scolding of students I think is because I felt a time pressure. I want to do things right, perfect, so sometimes I find I cannot perform as well as I like. So I scolded my students.”

It didn’t feel like she was actually telling us what went through her mind that Friday night a month back. It seemed like some idea she was plugging in to fill up an empty space.

“That was on Friday?” I asked pointedly.

“I’m not sure.”

“But it was before the dream?”

“I’m not sure.”

Why was she doing this? She knew perfectly well that in this stage of the process we’re only interested in events prior to the dream.

“We want to stick to events that definitely occurred before the dream,” I reminded her.

“But the dream still relates to my present situation,” she objected.

I saw this was not going to be an easy session. I decided to go for what Montague Ullman calls “a general fishing question.” He often emphasises the power of a broad enough and open-ended enough question to allow a dreamer to come out and say whatever she wishes. “Let’s go back a month in time,” I said, “It’s the week just before you’re going to come to the November dream leadership training. Is there anything you care to say about what was going on in your life during that whole period of time before you came to the November workshop?” I continued elaborating my question, mainly to give her time to think. “That’s this Fall — September, October and early November. Classes are starting at the university, you’re beginning a new semester, you’re looking forward to the dream group leadership training weekend in November. Is there anything you want to say about what was happening in your life at that time?”

Ching opened right up and poured out a flood of material:

I have problems with the chairwoman of our department. She’s done a lot of awful things. Before she became chair, we were in same program. There was conflict between us. The other faculty just watched. She said hurtful things to me and for a while stopped talking to me altogether. I avoided her, except where socially appropriate. Now she’s the chair of the department and has conflicts with everyone. I feel I’m the one who has to suffer. I’m the only one.

I don’t like the way she has set the rules for the students. I want to change the way things are run and go back to the old program. She says she’s willing to change. Later I feel she wants to control everything herself. She is a strong woman. I feel she always gets her own way, she gets what she wants. She says I cannot go back to the old program because if I do then the students will have to choose between her specialty and mine. I really hate her. I dislike her. I told my students, ‘If you want to be my students you cannot take her practicum internship.’

Because I teach in this area, our university hospital is supposed to be giving me a salary increment. But they weren’t. I went to the chair of the department at the hospital to inquire. Maybe I approached him the wrong way. He was very rude to me. ‘I think this is bullshit,’ he said. ‘I don’t see what you’re doing to merit it.’ He said he wouldn’t give me it.

Frustrated, I went to our department chair at the university. It turns out that when the hospital asked her what I was doing to merit the pay, she’d told them she had no idea what
I did and wasn’t aware I did anything to merit it. I felt very hurt. Later, I found out that originally she didn’t get the extra pay either. Turns out now she is going to get it, I’m not. I have a conflict telling me, ‘She must be doing something right. How can she get what she wants?’ I hate her.

Right now she’s chair. It’s like she’s winning and I’m losing. She has grants. I don’t. She knows how to deal with the hospital. I don’t.

My students and I have to recruit patients and are having a hard time. My students are frustrated. They say, ‘How come the chair and her students get what they want? We don’t have anything.’ I feel powerless. I don’t have the motivation to cultivate the relationships that will enable me to recruit more patients. How can she get what she wants while I keep running up against difficulties? She is such a bad person and I hate her. How come bad people get things while good people don’t? I feel it’s unfair.

It’s weird. It’s almost like I have to be tricky because I cannot confront her directly and fight. I talk to my other colleagues about so many things behind her back. I’ll ask a colleague something such as, ‘What should I do in the meeting so that I can get what I want?’ If I want something, and let her know, she’ll try to stop me from getting it. She feels if I’m successful it will destroy her. She’s protecting her turf. I get so mad. I don’t know a better way to deal with her or with the hospital.

I think it is very hard to maintain interpersonal relationships with my department colleagues. I try and try. One thing might improve. Another doesn’t change. Even though I try harder, it doesn’t mean things get any better.

So everyone should have a purpose in their life. I’m not sure what would be the right purpose.

I have doubts about my research. I don’t know what direction I should take. Should I be more aggressive or just lay back? I feel stuck. I feel no passion about the research. It’s interesting. But so what? So I do it. So what?

It’s not like I’m depressed every day. Sometimes I feel happy because I did something. I don’t know what is the long-term purpose or way.

Sometimes when I want something I rationalize and tell myself ‘You real don’t want it.’ I’m confused and tell myself, ‘Maybe I can’t get it. It’s better to tell myself I don’t need it.’

I’m trying to find a way to feel life, to feel good living, to feel that my life is worth living and that living feels good. I’m hoping, wanting, to improve how I feel.

I feel embarrassed to say my first reaction. ‘You get what you want. You control what you want to control. That’s the ultimate: You’re the god.’

If you have a menu and you follow the menu you should get the product.

What I want is an ‘in control’ thing. If you put your effort into something, you should get what you want. I feel very disappointed, even if I put in a lot of effort I get [nothing].

I want to feel ‘at home,’ to feel comfortable. I want to feel that no matter what happens, it doesn’t matter. I feel that ‘at home’ feeling is from my heart, whereas all the words come from my head.
I want to feel comfortable with people. No matter who, feel it’s OK interpersonally. I don’t want to hide, pretend, select. There are some times with my students I’ve had that feeling. Before I didn’t. Recently by myself I can feel peaceful. I don’t know the way to be ‘home’ yet. To go ‘home.’ I feel I try so hard, but haven’t come [home]. I feel out of place and that I don’t know where my place is. Especially, when it comes to the research program. ‘Is what I’m doing useful?’ I ask myself. I don’t really feel that I’ve been able to find my place yet. Since I was a child, I’ve had that same kind of feeling. As a child, I felt out of place. My first day in kindergarten, I remember standing alone. I dared not join in with the class. The first day I went to elementary school, my mother was supposed to be waiting for me at the front gate after school to pick me up. She wasn’t there. I waited and waited. She didn’t come. Finally, I started walking home alone. When I was half-way there, I ran into my mother. She was late. In junior high school, for the whole first half of the semester, I kept my book bag on my lap as I sat at the desk in class, instead of putting it in the desk compartment like all the other students did. Finally, one day the teacher confronted me. ‘How come you don’t want to put your bag in the desk?’ Only then did I start to do that.

She fell silent. She had finished.

We proceeded to the next stage of the process, the playback, in which the dreamer is invited to look anew at her dream in light of all the new information and feelings that have emerged.

Straight out I put it this way to Ching:

“In recounting the real-life events and feelings that led up to the dream, you told us all about problems at your job. Yet, on that night you fall to sleep and have a dream. You don’t dream you’re at the job, or about any of those people. You dream about the conflict between a man and a woman.”

A dream is precipitated by prior events in real life. When we can’t see a connection between the dream and the recent emotional context out of which it arose, we’re called to look deeper. This is the purpose of the playback stage — to give the dreamer the freedom to do this in any way she wishes. Ching, we knew from previous work she’d done with us, had a natural bent for this, at least when it came to her own dreams and life. She thought deeply and this is what she told us:

The woman in the dream is very angry, discontent.

I pointed out that she’d characterised the man in the dream as stupid and naïve but in relating the emotions leading up to the dream she’d made no mention of anybody being stupid or naïve.

Sometimes I feel I’m stupid and naïve and that I don’t know how to do things. Something will happen and I won’t even know what happened. Then I get angry with myself.

With the man I hate, it seems I want to argue something but he cannot understand. I am frustrated, discontent. No ending again. I want to kill.

Sometimes I feel I hate myself. If you have no one to hate then you hate yourself.

When I get frustrated and disappointed with myself I want to kill myself. For example: Riding bicycle, go into car.
I cannot bear the painful feeling so I do not want to feel it any more.

My mother was a beautician, she had a beauty salon. I played there when I was a little girl. So many people taking bath, people want me to get out. So angry. That feeling relates to hate.

The man [in the dream] represents a strong part. Should be strong one, active, initiative. But I think I'm such a coward.
So I think the man is a coward. I want to kill him. He cannot stand. He did not do what he should do. Then he just behaves like he doesn’t know anything.

I hate my cowardice.
I have to be so tricky all the time.
How come I cannot fight in the open?

Everyone is just being themself, so I have no one to hate. I can only hate myself.

I feel so hurt

I can only hate myself.

So I wish I was God. As God I would be – happy, – accepting every one just the way they are – I wouldn’t have to feel pain anymore.
I wish, I hope, I can be like the sky and contain everything. [No matter what happens] the sky is still the sky, it is O.K.

“When you mention the sky, is it in connection with the dream?” I asked Ching. There was no sky in this dream. But in the very first dream Ching did with us the previous semester, there was a chilling image of her being her mother on a dark sailing ship moving across the sky. She stood on the deck methodically peeling off the bright blue sky, strip by strip, to reveal the black underneath.

“I am not really sure whether it’s the dream or something I thought just now,” she said.

She went on with the playback:
I was surprised and very confused about the light and the smoke.

After I had the dream, I didn’t understand it at all. My eyes were half closed. I was afraid. I felt very frightened. The feeling was, ‘I want to get rid of my dreams, I don’t understand them.’ I hate that feeling.

I think the light is telling me I can see the whole thing in a different way but I don’t know what way.

Ching had been very open and poured out very intimate material. Strangely, she hadn’t said a word about being betrayed and abandoned by her husband, and locked in a litigation conflict with him – even though the dream dealt specifically with the conflict between a man and a woman. This put to the test the core premise of experiential dream group work – which always gives the dreamer control and limits the inquiry to what information the dreamer herself chooses to bring forward. Can the group still do good work with a dream in a case where the dreamer withholds crucial information?

I'd stayed in the apartment with the two bicycles, opened the cupboard to find two cups, two saucers, two plates, two bowls. This dream was about two individuals, a man
and a woman. The woman wanted to kill the man. For the life of me I couldn’t understand why Ching had poured forth such a flood of information about problems at work. I couldn’t see what relevance all that had to the dream.

We entered the final stage of the process, the orchestration. Members of the group, one by one, came forward to tell the dreamer their view of the dream. Several offered very interesting and intelligent ideas, which unfortunately never got recorded because the digital device malfunctioned. Myself, I couldn’t see a way to make sense of the material. I leaped back and forth through my notes for something that might jump out at me and give a clue as to how all this fit together.

Then, seconds before it was my turn to speak, Ching’s principal beef with life and with herself leaped up off the page at me, “If you have a menu and you follow the menu you should get the product.” Immediately I thought of the broken marriage. I wasn’t going to say anything about that because Ching herself hadn’t introduced the issue. But the same thing that had happened between her and her husband was happening between her and her colleagues at the job, and between her and her research. What was this menu she was following?

I flipped hurriedly through my notes grabbing a word here and a word there for what she wanted, what she was looking to get. The instant I began jotting these down on an empty page, I saw Ching wasn’t following one menu, but two:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Menu 1</th>
<th>Menu 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Head</td>
<td>Heart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td>God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hate</td>
<td>Love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get what I want (control)</td>
<td>Accent what I get (miracle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-rejection</td>
<td>Self-acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-hatred</td>
<td>Self-love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kill self</td>
<td>Birth self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlled by the menu (i.e. by society)</td>
<td>Free to be who I am</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alienated</td>
<td>Home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No purpose</td>
<td>Right purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditioned</td>
<td>Unconditioned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unloved</td>
<td>Loved</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two separate and different agendas were operative in her life at this moment. This explained why it was all so confusing, to Ching and to us, and made so little sense — the dream, the life, everything. Of course Ching felt frustrated and defeated and things fell apart in her hands no matter which way she turned. She was trying to do one thing with her left hand, another with her right. An example of this was the way she pushed forward to do her dream in the group and sincerely wanted to know what it meant but the moment we began working on her dream she seemed to do everything she could to tie our hands behind our back and blindfold us.

In her final words, Ching seemed content with these comments and with the orchestrations that various members of the group had come forward with and said she would think about these things. She thanked us warmly. The group energies quickly refoocussed on the critique of the student leader.

A few days later we received the following email from Ching summing up her experience of the dream work:

1. I am teaching at a university. The reason I attended the dream group leadership training programme is: I have benefitted very much from attending the previous dream groups, and wanted to continue attending dream groups, even to start my own in the future.
2. In three aspects, I have benefitted from this programme.
First, I learned a different way of holding and leading a group. There is a balance between structure and space. Members are free to explore, while the dreamer has the control. The key is about egalitarian, safety, freedom, and truthfulness, i.e. most importantly, the group encouraging and providing space for exploration, while respecting boundary and privacy. It’s a wonderful environment for self-exploration.

Second, the method of members making their own projections regarding feelings and metaphors is a good way of understanding metaphors, and of producing new perspectives and materials for exploration and discussion. Also, the method of connecting a dream with the context leading to it showed me how metaphors are formed from objects or events of daily life, and how complex a metaphor can be, i.e. there are layers and layers of meaning represented by a single metaphor.

Third, I learned that even dreams that frighten and perplex you are meaningful and precious as long as you accept and find a way to understand them. Now, I am more accepting of my experiences, even the ones I rejected and berated before. This gives me a different feel of life. It is such a wondrous journey of self-exploration and of being true to oneself. I am so lucky to be on it.

3. I believe I will utilise this manner of facilitating self-exploration, while I am teaching or doing my professional work. I am planning a group similar to the dream group but I am still thinking.

4. The dream groups accompanied me in my journey of recovery and evolution. I am grateful and touched. It was such a beautiful gift.

Shuyuan and Bill, there are more thank-you’s than I can express. My heart is now filled with your love and kindness. Thank you again.

Some six months later, I happened to be on the phone with Ching, arranging a dream group in her city. I mentioned I had thought of writing a paper about her dream. I didn’t know why, but felt it engaged me and might be significant.

“I don’t really understand that dream at all,” she remarked offhandedly. When a dreamer says this, it’s a cue there’s more to be done. When time presented itself, I set out on my own to do what Montague Ullman calls a “delayed orchestration.” It’s the same as an orchestration in the group, except that you have the luxury of time alone afterwards to go through the material again and again and try to locate any overlooked connections. I felt I owed this to Ching because she was a valued friend and also because of the seriousness of the suicide hint in the dream.

One dream, two stories

Anticipatory context

Montague Ullman uses the term “anticipatory context” when the factor precipitating a dream is not an event prior to the dream but one that is soon to happen and has roused the dreamer’s anticipatory feelings. In the group I felt we had failed to locate the event or feeling in Ching’s life that triggered the dream. When I went back and looked at my notes, though, I noticed that Ching told us right off what triggered it:

“I guess I must have had the dream sometime before the November workshop because it’s the dream I’d wanted to work on then.

In the group we’d made the classical mistake of digging around for more information when the dreamer has already given us the relevant fact.

Since first coming into our groups Ching had done very powerful work on her dreams, again and again. Yet each time there was always some further area into which we hadn’t quite penetrated. Some considerable cloud of mystery still remained for her when it came to her dreams. The feeling she gave was that she was desperate to throw some ray of light
into the very bottom of that cloud with one of her dreams. We’d confided to her that the funding for our workshops had dried up. After this leadership training, our programme of dream groups would come to an end. It was now or never for Ching. The situation begged a dream.

Ching knew she had scant chance to do another dream in the group as there were still many others who hadn’t yet had a chance. If she waited until December she would surely miss her opportunity completely. Everybody would be rushing forward then to do their dream. Ching needed her dream before the November workshop. Ching’s dream came, as dreams do, when needed, when wanted.

She’d jumped at the chance to do her dream in November, but was beaten out, as expected, by others who hadn’t done one yet. She came back with it in December, a whole month later, and would certainly have been beaten back again; except for a mistake on the part of the trainee leader. Out of inexperience, the leader seized on Ching’s dream the moment Ching offered it, instead of leaving the floor open longer for others to also come forward.

I couldn’t understand why Ching had dumped a month old dream on the group like this, when we asked for recent dreams that might better demonstrate the process to the trainees. But this was the dream she needed done, not some more recent or vividly remembered one. This dream had come to her specifically to be worked on in this group. It was the one that shone the light into the cloud.

**The dream as self-representation**

The dream is exactly what Ching wanted, needed, and looked to find. It was a self-representation. “I was in a room,” it begins. The room is the place where Ching is “at” in her life. It is her situation. “I’m not really sure the woman is me.” The woman in the dream is one aspect of herself. The man represents another. The two parts of her are not at peace “The woman is arguing with the man.”

Little suspecting what an impacted knot of violent emotion lurks there, one part of her is naively trying to discover its love, find its feelings, or get in contact with its own true and deepest self. “The man try to find the woman.” The other part of her purposefully keeps itself hidden, operates under cover, and aims to destroy the first part. “She wants to kill him. So she, (here is not clear) try to hide in the room. There is some kind of smoke. She take a position and try to hide from the man sight.”

There are several ways to look at the dream, all fruitful and all, upon close examination, related. It is in the complex relational field between them that the dream’s true thrust can be discerned. It is useful to represent this as a vector. A dream’s vector helps us to see it as a story. We get a sense of a beginning, a middle, and an end. Is there a vector in this dream? Is there any directional movement? And, if so, where is it?

It doesn’t at first glance seem to be in the dynamic of dysfunction between the man and the woman. That is more on the order of a knot that keeps going around and around and describes the self-destructive opposition to herself at the root of Ching’s identity. This is particularly ominous in light of Ching’s confessed suicidal thoughts in waking life “When I get frustrated and disappointed with myself I want to kill myself. For example: Riding bicycle, go into car.”

Is suicide indicated in the dream? Of her daily life Ching said, “Cannot bear painful feeling so I do not want to feel it any more” and “Sometimes I can feel I hate myself.” All in all, we get a picture of how deadly serious this dream is. Can we find in the dream a
prognosis or a further understanding of the situation? Is there a vector? What is the story here?

The moment Ching told the dream I felt the story was the one between her and her husband. The dream seemed to hit the nail right on the head. Finally, I thought, this dream has brought her around to the situation she’s been keeping secret from the group for almost a year. All that material will finally emerge into the open where it can properly resolve itself. These ideas of mine got squarely in the way of what the dream was saying. Pre-conceived notions do. The dream is always about something much deeper than we can imagine or know beforehand. Montague Ullman’s experiential dream group method is most sensitive to this feature of dreams and its stages are designed expressly to keep our bothersome ideas out of the arena long enough for the dream to speak for itself. The dream and dreamer really say everything we need to know if we just let them speak.

In the dream, “The room was circular,” Ching tells us. A circle is a geometric shape that is described around a centre. Ching goes on to tell us “There was a round table in the middle of the [round] room.” And so the dream reinforces this motif of the circle, and of the centre — and of being authentically centred. The table was “made of wood,” a substance that’s real, not artificial. This room in the dream doesn’t just present some situation that happens to be occurring in Ching’s life at the moment — but the situation central to her life, central to who she is.

Her problems at the university and in her relationships with colleagues there give a clue to what may have undermined her marriage and are at the root of the crisis in her research. At issue is her relationship with herself — the dynamic, deep down, of an antagonism against herself (Figure 1) that contaminates all aspects of her life. Ching is looking for a way out of this.

“I’m trying to find a way to feel life, to feel good living, to feel that my life is worth living and that living feels good.” and “I want to feel ‘at home,’ to feel comfortable. I want to feel that no matter what happens, it doesn’t matter.”

Ching wanted a dream that would tell her what she needed to know and the dream came. Ching knows far more about the ins and outs of her own psychological makeup than any of us in the dream group could ever possibly arrive at. She’s not coming to the dream group for therapy. The group is not giving it. An experiential dream group is not psychotherapy.

![Diagram](image)

Figure 1. The dynamic between the man and the woman in the dream.
The work we do in the experiential dream group isn’t about shining the light of our concepts down into the murky depths of consciousness. It’s about finding the light that shines of its own accord, pure and radiant, out from those depths into every single human heart. In the hurly burly of existence, each of us necessarily gets caught up in the agenda of the outside world, often to the extent that we lose sight of our own inner light, with its very different agenda. All the experiential dream work does is uncover this light. This is why the process, while not therapy, can be highly therapeutic, deeply healing. The light itself accomplishes the healing, in a way we ourselves could never presume to do.

All this is evident in Ching’s dream. Although the death dance between the man and woman would seem to be what this dream is “about,” in the end there’s a twist and the dream is shown to have another dimension entirely. Movement does happen, but it’s on a different plane than the man/woman opposition. “Then the end of the dream is that the smoke becomes some kind of light.”

The vector of the dream

The dynamic between the smoke and the light, unlike the one between the man and the woman, does involve directional movement. This is the dream’s vector (Figure 2). We look here for the story. This is what really happens in the dream and is perhaps one reason Ching was so insistent to bring this particular dream to the group, even a month after she dreamt it. “It is a bright white shiny light. A little bit like the magical kind of light...the light give me relief.” Ching added, “I think the light is telling me I can see the whole thing in a different way, but I don’t know what way.” The light in the dream was the “answer”
Ching was searching for. To find it was the reason she took so much interest in her dreams and came to the dream groups. The question “What is the light?” outweighed in Ching’s mind the whole issue of the antagonism between the man and the woman in the dream. It took over the dream, and outshone everything else. This is not surprising. We don’t go to dreams to find out what’s wrong with us so much as what’s right. We work with dreams to tease a bit of the light that can be found in every dream out into the areas of darkness that exist in every life. There isn’t always some big outcome. But there is usually some sense of illumination.

As can be seen in Figure 3, the dream is a palimpsest. It doesn’t present one picture, but two — one superimposed upon the other. The elements of the one cease being what they are and turn into the elements of the other. When the smoke turns into the light, everything else in the dream vanishes and there is just the light. In this sense the dream is like one of those ancient parchments where some scribe erased the text so as to write some other text in its place. The pictures, or texts, of the dream have very different internal dynamics. The action even proceeds on entirely different planes.

In the case of the man/woman dynamic, we’re looking at a knot or an impasse that goes around and around, consuming energy, without conclusion or solution. One outcome we can envision, which may or may not be implied in this dream, is that the woman succeeds in killing the man. In real life, this outcome might take the form of Ching one day actually turning her bicycle into that oncoming car and putting an end to her life. If we look at the dream this way, the movement from the smoke to the light might be seen as an extinction, the pleasant extermination of a nasty irresolvable problem. The “magical” light in this case would be akin to that at the end of the tunnel in the near-death experience. The light would be death. “It seems the light gives me relief. You can only see light.” The dream would be the picture of a powerful suicide impulse.

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**Figure 3.** The dream is a palimpsest. It is composed of two pictures, superimposed, one on top of the other, or two stories, mixed in, one with another. The two have very different internal dynamics. The action even seems to be proceeding on entirely different planes.
Vector as metaphor

If we look at the totality of what Ching actually said, though, we see a more hopeful and positive outcome mixed confusedly in with the dismal and tragic one. I’m not sure it’s possible to say, from the material at hand, which way the situation will go. The important thing brought out by the dream work is that the dreamer is presented with two clearly different choices. Her life as she knows it has come to its end. This is evident from the sad breakup of her marriage. But even if we didn’t know about that, it’s still evident because increasingly nothing in her life is working. The issue before her is how to deal with this. This is the crisis. It’s a question of whether she will succumb to the danger (suicide) or benefit from the opportunity (let the old pattern die). The dream work can help her by showing her that there is this choice. It does this by teasing apart the two mangled and jumbled directionalities at work in her life at this time (Figure 4), all mixed-up, confused, and operating at cross purposes — and giving her a clearer picture of the crossroads where she now stands, illustrated schematically by the dotted line in Figure 4, and paraphrased, in terms of the kinds of things she told us during the course of work on her dream, in Table 1.

Figure 4. Two kinds of agendas, two kinds of suicides.

Vector as metaphor

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Agenda 1 represents an advancement of the individual according to conventional societal criteria, such as is instilled into Taiwan’s youth from the earliest age by its ambitious parents, demanding schools and competitive society. Agenda 2 represents the developmental need of the organism to advance in the direction of authenticity. It comes about not from the outside, but from inside — from being human and having a developmental requirement to unfurl the higher reaches of one’s nature.
Agenda 1 belongs to the self-concept. Agenda 2 belongs to the self. In the early part of life there doesn’t seem to be any difference between the two, except that the self-concept seems so superior to the actual self. The young person does everything in her power to make the self measure up to the concept. Towards mid life the picture changes. The self – and its agenda, really, of selflessness and transcendence – come increasingly to the fore. As the individual’s developmental maturation proceeds to term, the self throws off the straightjacket of the concept and its puny agenda, much in the same way a sprouting seed does its seed coat. Anatomically, the seed ceases to define itself as a seed by shedding that which is holding it into this definition. It bursts open. Its metabolism changes radically. It finds itself launched into the process of becoming a tree.

The seed concept, in a sense, has to die if the tree concept is to be born. It is like this in human life also. In a very real sense, the person that Agenda 1 intends to create is NOT an individual who can go on and on farther than anybody else excelling in Agenda 1. Rather, it’s one who reaches the point of maturation where she can segue into Agenda 2.

As is true for every developmental sequence, there are multiple points where it can all go awry. Ching told the group she’d felt tempted to turn her bike into oncoming traffic so as to put an end to her life. Figure 4 illustrates the confusion that can result when the dreamer looks at what is happening to her in life solely from the vantage point of Agenda 1. It may indeed come to seem, from that perspective, like suicide is the only way out. In a society like Taiwan, where Agenda 1 is so unrelentingly pushed on individuals at

Table 1. The kinds of things Ching told the group during the course of work on her dream, paraphrased.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agenda 1</th>
<th>Agenda 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I want to win. I want social rewards (to get the benefits). I want to get what I want. I want to know how to get what I want. (i.e. In my life I want outside rewards)</td>
<td>I want to feel happy. I want to have a purpose in life. I want to know the way “home.” (i.e. I want the quality of my life to be its own reward)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I want to be the one in control. (i.e. I want to run the show. I want power.)</td>
<td>I want to find my place. I want to feel I belong (to feel at home, to feel comfortable with people, for things to be OK interpersonally with people) (i.e. I want to enjoy the show, feel and be an integral part of it. I want love.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I want to go directly to the person and fight (to be aggressive, not to hide and pretend) (i.e. I want to be a successful fighter)</td>
<td>I want to feel peaceful (i.e. I want peace.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I don’t want to suffer (i.e. primarily I need to avoid suffering.)</td>
<td>I want to feel my life is worth living. I want to see myself as a good person (i.e. primarily I need to feel my life, even the suffering, has meaning.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I want to be able to perform. (i.e. I want to operate to perfection according to external specifications)</td>
<td>I want to do things right. (i.e. I want to do things in such a way as honours and refines my deepest sense of who I am. I want in my actions to do what is right for everyone)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To the extent the dreamer can look at her current life events from the vantage point of Agenda 2, however, she sees a completely different picture. Suicide isn’t in the picture at all. Rather it’s a question of being bumped rudely up into a higher developmental stage. It’s not about death and decay, but freedom and growth.

A baby stops crawling. She starts walking. Immediately she falls. She cries. It’s more that sort of picture. New injuries are being sustained because the individual is rising to a higher level of functioning.

Alternately, it might be looked at as a little chick that had been snugly sequestered in her egg when all of a sudden everything starts going to pieces. The little chick is hatching. It’s like that. It’s not negative at all. It’s positive. It’s not about failure, but success. To commit suicide would be the silliest thing in the world. It would amount to taking an exquisite and subtle metaphor only in its most vulgar and literal sense and ignoring the vast bulk of its real meaning. The picture of death is there in the thinking, yes, but it is a picture like in a dream – a metaphor, the death and rebirth of transformation. What dies is not the self but the self-concept. It doesn’t even really die, because that death is a metaphor too. It merely stops being mistaken for the real centre. It’s just something off on the edge, necessary at a certain stage, like the training wheels of a child’s first bicycle. After a while, those things are not needed.

The moment the dreamer can look out at her life through Agenda 2 she herself can see all this. This is why the dream comes, at this time in her life, with that agenda. The dream is a lifesaver.

Agenda 1 is not “bad.” As depicted in Figure 5, it is needed much in the way an airplane needs to speed horizontally down the runway before reaching the point of vertical lift-off. The airplane can get to its destination so much faster by taking to the air than it ever could speeding along the ground on its wheels. And this is the case with our

Figure 5. The two agendas in real life.

**THE PRIMACY OF AUTHENTICITY**

- It’s not a question of relinquishing Agenda #1 for Agenda #2. The real life vector is necessarily inclusive of both agendas. The emphasis of the dream serves to compensate for a skewed one-sided emphasis in the present life, which caters almost entirely to Agenda #1’s outside criteria of achievement and success (“hell-bent on F, at whatever cost”).

- The dream is suggesting Path 4 over Path 1. In other words, a goal of F + F’ instead of merely F alone.

- Agenda #2 thus needs, at this stage in life, to move to the fore. The dreamer can only truly advance along Agenda #1 to the extent she advances along Agenda #2. (i.e., in order to be more effective in work and in love, she needs to become more real and true as a person.)

- Thus the real-life path would become the diagonal vector shown.
The vector of the life

The difficulty here is that the dream was never written down and it’s only a remembered synopsis. All the little hints and leads that would configure our thinking and guide us along our way have long since vanished from the dreamer’s memory. This key image of the dream, that we’re looking to tell the dreamer’s past and present situation, consists of only six words, “the smoke becomes some kind of light.”

The smoke-to-light directionality is all we have to work with. It shows the current predicament of the dreamer, but does so in terms of an “image language” from the dreamer’s past. Thus it contains the story of “now,” but also of “then.” In it we see the current situation, but also how that came to be.

But where is all this information in the dream? Smoke becomes light. That’s all we’ve got. Or is it?

There is a holographic quality to anything, like a dream, that is metaphor-based. Each image is contained in the whole dream and the whole dream is contained in each image.
The smoke to light directionality sprang forth in the dream from everything else in the dream. It can thus be envisioned as another way of configuring that same material. We have no idea what it is, where it’s pointing. But what we can do is look at the whole to see if we can find elements that might forge themselves into directionality.

What we find is that the dream is an amazing collection of such elements. There are two doors. One is open, one is closed. There is a closed cabinet at the edge of the room, an open table at the middle. Every part of the dream has its opposite (Figure 7).

If we were to give a personality to these two oppositional groupings of characteristics in Figure 7, that is, to say if we were to personify them, what story would we come up with? Who would the two people be?

**A little girl escapes into her mind**

Except for the individuals she’s having conflicts with at her job, and a brief reference to having spent the night with her sister, the only real person Ching mentioned during the course of work on this dream was her mother. She mentioned her mother twice and each time in connection with a powerful feeling – once in terms of the hatred she felt as a little girl when her mother shooed her out of the beauty salon, and once in terms of the betrayal she felt when her mother wasn’t there to pick her up after the first day of school. The mother also figured prominently in a previous dream Ching worked with in the group. That dream connects with the sky image Ching mentioned when working with this dream.

If we plug “mother” and “daughter” into the formula at work in configuring the two oppositional columns in Figure 7 we come away with an interesting story – not just about the mother–daughter relationship, but also about the way a little girl learns to relate to herself and the world.3

Story: A sensitive and intelligent little girl had a mother towards whom she had feelings of hatred and betrayal. When she started in at school she found a way to escape from the painful situation by running away into her head. She withdrew progressively from those “womanly”
realms of experience dominated by her hairdresser mother ("closed door, closed place, woman [body or feeling], arguing, devious and underhanded, trying to hide, smoke, wants to kill") into the [in Chinese culture, masculine] intellectual realm where her hairdresser mother couldn’t reach her and where she felt safe ("open door, open place, man [mind or thinking], frightened, naïve and straightforward, trying to find, light, not knowing"). She grew up to live more and more exclusively in the cognitive realm. She went on to graduate school in America to earn a Ph.D. She returned to Taiwan to become a university professor.

A grown woman moves beyond her mind

If that’s the story of “then,” how do we arrive at the story of “now”? There were undoubtedly many places in the dream that pointed to this but the dream was never written down and in the month between when it was dreamt and when it was told to the group, these all slowly faded from memory. They wouldn’t be felt to be as powerful as the primal material, the “idiom” of the dream itself – which was, amazingly, retained in memory all this time. They’re gone. How can we arrive at them now? What do we have to go on, when the dreamer didn’t even remember exactly what day she had the dream and had no memory of what was going on the day before?

Quite simply, we look at what Ching told us was going on in her life prior to the dream. She talked almost entirely about problems at work. It wouldn’t, at first glance, seem like we could find directionality in this material. She is going around and around in circles with the same kinds of problems, over and over again. And yet, when we glance through everything she said, what jumps out at us is that she seems to want two different things, her life seems to be going in two different directions. Just like in the dream, we find in this material a pattern of opposites. These are the two “menus” mentioned earlier. If we personify these two oppositional groupings (Figure 8), we arrive at a sequel to the above

Opposites expressed or implied during the dreamer’s discussion of her current life:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Head</th>
<th>Heart</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td>God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hate</td>
<td>Love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control (get what I want)</td>
<td>Miracle (accept what I get)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self rejection</td>
<td>Self-acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-hatred</td>
<td>Self-love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kill self</td>
<td>Birth self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlled by society’s menu</td>
<td>Free to follow my own menu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alienated</td>
<td>Home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No purpose</td>
<td>Right purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditioned</td>
<td>Unconditioned</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Can we “personify” these two clusters?

The “Colonizer” Self

The “Colonized” Self

The original relationship with the mother has been internalized and becomes the Dreamer’s way of relating with herself

A Grown Woman Moves Beyond Her Mind

Outside her intellect, in the area of feeling, body awareness, intuition, sensation, etc. she remained less developed. She encountered problems with colleagues and in intimate relationships that she had no way to understand. She was increasingly traumatized by these. Again in life, she had to move forward by rising to another level. She was propelled now beyond the merely intellectual and into a mode of functioning that challenged and engaged her womanhood, her deep emotions, her sensation and bodily awareness, her intuition and even her transcendental and spiritual awareness. A highly-developed intellectual was becoming a fully-developed and whole person.

THE LIGHT REPRESENTS
MOVEMENT BEYOND A LIFE THAT IS MERELY OF THE MIND

The Smoke becomes integrated and whole

Figure 8. The vector in the dream also serves as a metaphor for what is now happening in the dreamer’s life.
story – the original relationship with the mother has been internalised and becomes Ching’s way of relating with herself:

Sequel: Outside her intellect, in the area of feeling, body awareness, intuition, sensation, etc. she remained less developed. She encountered problems with colleagues and in intimate relationships that she had no way to understand. She was increasingly traumatised by these. Again in life, she had to move forward by rising to another level. She was propelled now beyond the merely intellectual and into a mode of functioning that challenged and engaged her womanhood, her deep emotions, her sensation and bodily awareness, her intuition, and even her transcendental and spiritual awareness. A highly developed intellectual was becoming a fully developed and whole person.

These positive new developments in her life have begun to unfold spontaneously but from centres outside her awareness or control. The way she experiences them is that something is going wrong with her life and things have flipped out of control. Overwhelmed on all fronts, she’s overrun with primal and incapacitating feelings of hatred and betrayal she thought she’d laid to rest long ago. Against it all, she feels depressed, helpless – at times suicidal.

Figures 9 and 10 illustrate the story and its sequel. Figures 11 and 12 suggest the effects on Ching’s pattern of interpersonal relationships.

In summary, Ching escaped into freedom the first time by moving into the intellect. Now she is poised to escape a second time, into a higher freedom, by moving beyond it.

The danger
That she sometimes thought of killing herself was the most alarming thing Ching said during the work on her dream. It’s natural someone would feel this way when their

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ONE IMAGE, TWO MEANINGS

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Figure 9. One image, two meanings – a summary.
Figure 10. Control and freedom in the life journey of a Chinese woman.

Figure 11. The inner dynamic replicates itself in outer relationships. The other person is denigrated into a thing to be manipulated and controlled in order to achieve one's own aims. The individual reproduces onto others the original damage done to her in childhood.
conceptual illusions come tumbling down all around them. It seems like the end of any reason to go on living. But it’s only the end of illusion.

What’s happening to Ching is not about death. It’s about the journey to a deeper life.

**Suicide as metaphor**

For Ching’s life to move forward and constellate itself on a higher level of organisation, one that includes more variables and elements and thus is more subtle, authentic, and stable – it is necessary that the lower level comes undone. Its elements “unglue” themselves so as to recombine in a higher more complex way. Unprepared by her education, professional training, and general culture for a stage in which everything comes so completely undone like this – Ching is left to flounder on her own into a most dangerous psychological territory that is very much about death but not about suicide. What seems to her like such a total life catastrophe, and leads her to thoughts of suicide, is really the wonderful mess of birth.

Ching has received outward professional training in a healing profession. Now she is undergoing the churn and turmoil of one whose inner calling it is to be a healer. This doesn’t just involve the mind, but the whole person. It’s not easy to go through, especially in a setting that doesn’t even recognise its necessity. The rewards are considerable, though. Draining interpersonal tangles (Figure 11) stand to vanish away (Figure 12), freeing up energy for productive purposes. The one who can negotiate the difficult process will find great success – not just in terms of helping clients, but in the areas of personal life and professional research.

Ching’s life in the interim subsequent to work with the dream has moved forward. She looks much more attractive. She seems more alive. She’s productive. What we see in this dream of hers is not pathology but a healthy process. The dream informs her of the healthy development and so enables her to move forward through the difficult transition.

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**Figure 12.** The authentic inner dynamic discovers itself everywhere in the outer world. When self can be self, then other can be other. Person can be person. Manipulation and control gives way to relationship. Intimacy becomes possible. The individual shines upon others all around the healing that has been brought about in her.
Discussion and conclusion

When the personal crisis of an individual, such as Ching, shunts her forth (Figure 9) from a life of mere conformity to one of actual authenticity, then she must invent, create, and discover a totally new culture (Figure 13). The culture she knew before, which still exists all around her, no longer suffices (Figure 14). Of course, the new culture she creates and discovers is the same living culture as has always been there. It hides latent in the ossified conventional existence of those all around. Only now, through her creative resuscitation, it is given new life.

Figure 13. The authentic individual invents/discovers/creates the flip side of Chinese culture.

Figure 14. The flip sides of Chinese culture.
A dying culture is one that can no longer mediate this re-creation of the whole of itself and instead devolves into a sad caricature of its more undeveloped aspect. A living culture is one (Figure 15) that can still facilitate the breakthrough of the individual to the culture’s flip, or creative and regenerative, side. In this flip side, the culture and the individual become, in a sense, indistinguishable. They form one fused and vibrant living creative entity. Thus the culture keeps re-creating individuals capable of re-creating the culture.

In these basic essentials, the Chinese individual and culture certainly do not differ from individuals and cultures the world over. Much of what, in ancient and modern times, has been appreciated in every culture, as regards the transitions an exceptional adult goes through in life, the Chinese culture has been aware of for some 2500 years or more. The material presented in this paper, from this one Taiwanese woman at this one stage in her life, suggests that what we call Chinese culture, and even what the Chinese call Chinese culture, may be only a part, arguably the smallest part, of a construct that goes much deeper, is much more interesting, and certainly has more relevance to us in the West, and more to teach us and the Chinese, than until now we have supposed.

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Notes

1. Adjunct Assistant Professor, Department of Social Policy and Social Work, Taiwan’s National Chi Nan University.
2. The dreamer is fluent in English, but even most educated Taiwanese use an English much choppier than what a native speaker is accustomed to. I kept the dreamer’s exact language in the dream and in her subsequent answers to questions about the dream. Later on, when the dreamer speaks at length about her life, the irregularities of expression become overwhelming. I felt an obligation to the reader in some places to edit that material into a more concise and idiomatic English, as recommended by William Zinsser in his classic guide “On Writing Well.”
3. This story, of course, is my own projection and, as such, reflects something that happened in my own life. Another person, looking at the same material, might come up with a different story. But the point is, there is something there in this material, there is a story. The dreamer, in the end, will have to be the one to arrive at the real story. The story anyone else comes up with can, at best, only be seen as an approximation.

References