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Dreaming the Late Beloved: A Comparative Reading of Su Shi's "Jiang Cheng Zi" ("For Ten Years We are Set Apart by Life and Death") and Milton's Sonnet "Methought I Saw my Late Espoused Saint"

Fusheng WU

The University of Utah

中文摘要：在中、英诗歌中，有两首催人泪下的记梦悼亡诗，即苏轼的《江城子·十年生死两茫茫》和弥尔顿（John Milton）的十四行诗“Methought I Saw my Late Espoused Saint”。本文通过对这两首诗的比较分析，对它们之间在构思、修辞和体式之间的异同及其文化意义进行了探讨。

At the age of nineteen, Su Shi (苏轼, 1037—1101), one of the greatest poets, men of letters and statesmen in China, married a sixteen-year old young woman named Wang Fu (王弗). She was said to be beautiful and tender hearted, and the couple loved each other dearly. But their happy marriage was not to last long, for eleven years later, Wang Fu died at the age of youthful twenty-seven in the capital Bianzhou (汴州, present-day Kaifeng in Henan Province), where Su Shi was taking up a post in the government. She was first buried in Bianzhou, and a year later her body was transferred back to their hometown in Sichuan. Her death dealt a traumatic blow to Su Shi, as is evidenced in the following poem that he wrote ten years later, in the eighth of Xining (熙宁) or 1075 of modern calendar; by then Su Shi had been transferred to serve as the Magistrate of Mizhou (密州) in the current Shandong Province:

江城子

Jiang Cheng Zi

乙卯正月二十日夜记梦 In Memory of a Dream on January 20, in the year of Yimao (1075)

十年生死两茫茫, For ten years we have been set apart by life and death.

不思量，	Though not thinking of you,
自难忘。	I naturally can't forget you.
千里孤坟，	In the lonely grave thousand miles away
无处话凄凉。	you have nowhere to tell of your sorrow.
纵使相逢应不识，	Even we met now you wouldn't recognize me,
尘满面，	with dust-covered face,
鬓如霜。	frost-like sideburns.
夜来幽梦忽还乡，	At night I suddenly returned home in a deep
dream.	
小轩窗，	By the window in our small room,
正梳妆，	you are combing your hair,
相顾无言，	we look at each other, speechless,
惟有泪千行。	letting our tears fall in thousand lines.
料得年年肠断处，	I now know each year our broken hearts will meet
明月夜，	in the moon-lit night,
短松冈。	by the pine-covered mound. ^[1]

The poem's subtitle states that it was written "in memory of a dream" (记梦), but the first stanza begins with a description of present reality, that the poet and his late wife have been "set apart by life and death for ten years" (十年生死两茫茫). Ten years is apparently a long time in one's life, and with the passage of time our memories of the past inevitably become blurry, even with regard to those that are dearest to us. For Su Shi, who was a government official like most other men of letters in ancient China, this was particularly true. Although he was just forty years old when this poem was written, he had gone through all kinds of turmoil in his career and life, and had been transferred, in punishment for his political stance, from place to place. This hectic, and oftentimes dangerous public life must have left him frustrated, disillusioned, and exhausted, so when he says that, having been separated from his late wife over this long period, he sometimes becomes forgetful of her (不思量); he is both stating a fact in his life and expressing a remorse in his heart. Rhetorically, this also prepares for the next line, for despite what has just been said of the poet, he "naturally" (自, 自) cannot forget his beloved late wife. It must be noted, that *zi* (自, naturally), this disarmingly simple, innocent-looking adverb carries with it a wealth of meanings. It tells us that the poet's love and affections to his late wife are such that they have become an

integral part of himself; external circumstances may weaken and diminish them sometimes, but they can never be taken away from him because they have become a part of his natural self, and, as we shall see, when they are given the slightest opportunity, when the poet can be *himself* (*zi*) again, they will burst out in a spontaneous manner.

In the rest of the first stanza, the poet continues to elaborate on the first line, that he and his late wife are separated by life and death over a long period. He first gives a description of his late wife's whereabouts, the "lonely grave thousand miles away" (千里孤坟), and further imagines, in a heart-wrenching manner, her emotional and mental state, that she "has nowhere to tell of her sorrow" (无处话凄凉). Then, as if to let her know that he too is suffering because of their separation, the poet presents a portrayal of himself: though still alive, at the mature age of forty, when one like Su Shi is expected to have "established" himself according to Confucius (不惑之年), he has changed so much, that with his "dust-covered face, frost-like sideburns" (尘满面, 鬓如霜), she must have difficulties of recognizing him if they met! Yes, he is still alive, but it is a life in death.

It is in this context, where death and mutability reign and wreak havoc, that the most intense, lyrical moment of the poem occurs. If in reality the poet and his beloved late wife are inevitably sundered apart, they can be reunited in dream, for dream, in addition to fulfilling our deepest desires, can defy and annihilate reality and its barriers or restrictions. Thus, at the beginning of the second stanza we find the poet flies on the wings of "a deep dream" (幽梦) and returns to his hometown where he and his late wife had spent the happiest time of their lives. The poem's most intense episode coincides with the most intimate moment in the couple's life: in their inner chamber or boudoir (小轩窗), the poet sees his late beloved wife engaged in her most routine, most feminine, and perhaps also one of the most sensual and arousing moments of her life: combing her hair and putting on make up (正梳妆), in preparation for the start of a fresh day. As is widely recognized both in China and the West, the most profound feeling and thought often cannot find adequate expression in human language, and in such circumstances the only effective way to convey one's feeling and thought is to remain silent. This is what Keats meant by that famous line from his "Ode to Grecian Urn": "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter." On the Chinese side we have Bai

Juyi's (白居易) equally famous description of the situation in his "The Song of Everlasting Sorrow" (《长恨歌》): at this moment silence surpasses sound (此时无声胜有声). Thus, we see Su Shi and his beloved late wife "looking at each other, speechless, / only tears falling in thousand lines" (相顾无言, 惟有泪千行). This kind of speechless communication, though, can only exist between two parties who are *zhiyin* (知音), or friends who have got to know each other thoroughly, so between them a gesture and a look are enough to reveal their innermost hearts to each other. Thus, instead of telling us more about this dream encounter, Su Shi here merely leaves us with a visual scene, where he and his late beloved staring at each other, in surprise, happiness, and grief. We are left to imagine, to fill up the rest of this intimate, loving and poignant scene.

A visual scene is static; it halts the flow of time and narrative, and by freezing a particular moment of life it endows it with a special kind of intensity, thereby providing a momentary intoxication and forgetfulness to the parties involved. However, this defiance of time can only last a moment; reality inevitably intrudes. Thus, having cast a quick glance at his late beloved wife, Su Shi is immediately brought back to his own world. Still dazed, perhaps, he desperately wants to cling to the vision that he has just seen, but cannot but realize that it is only a dream. In grief and resignation, he ends the poem by counseling himself and his late beloved that their undying love would surely often bring them together again, only not in their intimate inner chamber where they just met, but "in the in the moon-lit night, / by the pine-covered mound" (明月夜, 短松冈), namely in another dream, or in death.

Six hundred years later, another great poet, man of letters, and statesman from another part of the world, John Milton (1608 – 1674) composed a sonnet to commemorate a similar dream encounter with his late wife, Katherine Woodcock. Katherine was Milton's second wife, and by the time she died, Milton had had a long and frustrating public career in the tumultuous years of English Civil War. The Puritan Republic, to which he had devoted much of his life, was defeated; due to long and oftentimes overly strenuous work he had lost his eyesight, hence had to rely on his family members in reading and writing. Although we do not know as much about the relations between him and his late wife in question, we can assume that these circumstances in Milton's own life would certainly have added poignancy both

to his writing and to our understanding of this one of the best known sonnets in the English language:

Me thought I saw my late espousèd saint
Brought to me like Alcestis from the grave,
Whom Jove's great son to her glad husband gave,
Rescued from death by force though pale and faint.
Mine as whom washed from spot of child-bed taint,
Purification in the old Law did save,
And such, as yet once more I trust to have
Full sight of her in Heaven without restraint.
Came vested all in white, pure as her mind,
Her face was veiled, yet to my fancied sight,
Love, sweetness, goodness, in her person shine
So clear, as in no face with more delight,
But O, as the embrace me she inclined,
I waked, she fled, and day brought back my night.^[2]

Milton begins his poem in a somewhat hesitating manner; the phrase “Methought” (I thought) indicates that the poet, perhaps just awoken from his dream and still dazed, is not quite sure that he indeed actually “saw” his “late espousèd saint” or his late wife, who is now a soul in Heaven (saint). An erudite scholar, Milton’s poetry is often dense and allusive. Even in this sonnet, which recounts a most emotional and personal moment of his life, he cannot forgo this stylistic habit. Thus, in describing the appearance of his late wife in his dream, he uses an allusion to Greek mythology. In Euripides’ *Alcestis* the namesake woman sacrifices her life to save her husband, but Hercules, “Jove’s great son” in line 3 of Milton’s sonnet, manages to bring her back to life from grave. Hercules stands for power and might in Greek mythology; by alluding to him, Milton is indicating that his late wife is brought to him by those mythological titans via their supernatural power, or “rescued from death by force” (Line 3). Here it is worth noting that in the previously analyzed poem by Su Shi, the appearance of the late beloved in his dream seems to have been the result of his intense longing for her (不思量, 自难忘); no external or supernatural force is involved there.

In the second quatrain, the “late espousèd saint” of the poet, who now has become “pale and faint”, perhaps as the result of this forceful rescue, now

appears in front of the poet as a heavenly figure in “full sight”, “without restraint”, because she had been “washed from spot of child-bed taint”. This is where we learn of the identity and the death of his late wife, the “late espousèd saint”. Katherine Woodock died after giving birth to a child; hence critics believe that she must be the heroine to whom the poem is addressed. Lines 5 and 6 refer to the ancient belief asserted in the Bible (“old Law”), that a woman’s body is tainted after childbirth and must go through a period of “Purification” before she can fully return to society (Leviticus, 12. 4–8). The implication of this biblical allusion is that Katherine Woodock has now been cleansed of all her worldly “taint” and is now appearing in front of the poet as a sanctified “saint”. This is the reason why in the beginning of the poem’s third part, where the sestet begins (line 9), she is described as “vested all in white, pure as her mind”, and that

Love, sweetness, goodness, in her person shined
So clear, as no face with more delight,
[.]

In Christian belief, the death of a virtuous person is both a liberation from worldly sufferings and a “purification” of the dusty world’s stains on him or her. In another word, such a person, having ascended the Heaven, is a “saint”. Precisely for this reason, Milton’s late beloved here appears to him in all her “Love, sweetness, goodness”, and “Shined / So clear [.] ” These two lines build up to the most intense moment of this intense lyric poem. His late beloved, now a purified saint, is described by the poet as wanting “to embrace” him and “enclined” (inclined, or leaning toward) toward him. The poet’s ecstasy finds expression in the exclamation word “O” in Line 13. However, this ecstasy is compromised from the very beginning because it is presented together with a “But”, which points toward an opposite direction. This is precisely what happens in the poem; as the poet comes forward to meet the embrace of his late beloved, “she fled”, and with that “day brought back my night”. At this critical juncture, the use of the word “fled” is highly significant. It indicates the gulf that now exists between Milton and his “late espouse saint”. While he remains in this world of suffering and stain, his late beloved has already been accepted to the realm of Paradise. Consequently, Milton’s world has become unworthy of her, and as much as she loves him,

she can no longer stay with him in his world; she must, to the poet's agony, "flee" from it, lest she should be stained by it again and lose her sainthood.

Her fleeing also ends Milton's dream encounter with his late beloved: "[...] day brought back my night." Milton, we must remember, was already blind when he wrote this poem. Night is light to him because it allows him to dream and see his late beloved. As the day brings an end to his dream, he is brought back to darkness in this dusty world again. So, like Su Shi in his poem, Milton is called back to reality in the end. Su Shi, as we have seen, ends his poem with another imagined dream encounter between him and his late beloved, whereas Milton simply ends his with him, a blind old man, facing the darkness on his own. He may join his late beloved in the purified Heaven someday in the future, but at the moment he must confront his destiny in this world. Heaven and its promise of bliss seem to be offering little comfort to the poet in this poem; it makes him feel deserted instead.

Having read these two poems in comparison, we now may offer some comments on their commonalities and differences. In addition to the obvious similarity in theme, we may note that both poems were short lyrics, and both focus on an intense and intimate moment of their authors' private lives. Su Shi's piece is cast in the *ci* or "song lyric" mode. This type of poetry originated from the entertainment quarters of the Chinese society. In its early stage *ci* tended to focus on performance, and because of this it often sounded impersonal, unlike the mainstream *shi* poetry which is expected to express the poet's feeling and thought. Su Shi was one of the crucial figures that helped to integrate *ci* poetry into the mainstream Chinese poetic tradition; his "Jiang Cheng Zi" analyzed in this essay is a prime example of this effort. Milton's poem adopts the form of Petrarchan sonnet. This form, since its introduction into English language by Wyatt and Surrey in the sixteenth century, had also had a strong dramatic tendency in the beginning. Many of the sonnet sequences during the earlier period, such as the famous ones by Sidney and Shakespeare, were cast in the personae that are different from the poets themselves; these personae, often wearing the mask of an infatuated lover, act out their dramas in a highly stylized and fictional manner. In the hands of Milton, though, this poetic form acquired a strong personal, biographical and historical inclination; "Methought I Saw My Late Espoused Saint" well illustrates this point.^[3]

Another similarity between the two poems, probably too obvious to

notice, is the figure of expression and presentation. Both poets choose to use dream to convey their visions of encounter with their late beloved. In our post-Freudian world this seems to need little explanation. But it is certainly worth repeating that Su Shi and Milton both adopt dream as a means to transcend reality and to express their deepest desires and longings. Dream, with its pleasure principle, allows the poets to overcome, although for a brief moment, their respective worlds where reality principle dominates and oppresses, thereby gaining a momentary liberation from them. And it is precisely this momentary liberation or release that we seek in art and literature. These two poems by Su Shi and Milton demonstrate that the East and West share a common vision and understanding for the fundamental function of poetry in human experience.

Of course, there are differences in these two poems. In Su Shi's poem, the dream encounter between the poet and his late beloved takes place on this earth, by the "window in our small room" (小轩窗), and the dreamed late beloved is described as being engaged in the most mundane activity for a woman, namely "combing her hair" (正梳妆). In Milton's poem, however, the late beloved is portrayed as a "saint" or soul in Heaven, having been purified of all her worldly "taint", and their dream encounter seems to take place somewhere between Earth and Heaven. What these differences reflect are the secular and religious characteristics of Chinese and Western cultures. They attest to a statement made by the eminent Chinese scholar Qian Zhongshu's, that Chinese poetry often leads to history, whereas Western poetry tends toward religion (一诗而史, 一诗而玄).^[4] Nevertheless, both poems end with a feeling of melancholy and loss caused by the abrupt disruptions of their authors' dream reunions with their late beloved; they thus indicate that despite the above-mentioned cultural differences between the East and West, they share, at least at some intense lyrical moments, some common human experiences and expectations that may defy or transcend their respective cultural traditions.

Notes:

[1] 胡云翼选注:《宋词选》,上海:上海古籍出版社,1962年,第60页。My translation.

[2] *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, New York: Longman, 1999,

Volume One, p. 1746.

- [3] This deserves some elaboration. In both *ci* and sonnet, especially at their early stages, the poets tended to speak in the personae of someone else, be it a singing girl or an infatuated lover. In other words, the lyric self, or the “I” in these poems is often not the poet or the biographical author. This gap or feature endows a fictionality to these poems: the singing girl or the infatuated lover are actors putting on a show for the reader, and the reader is aware of that. In the present two poems, however, there is no such gap between the lyric self in the poem and the biographical author; we know the speaking voices are those of Su Shi and Milton, and that the experiences described in the poems are their personal lives. This common practice, however, may have different implications for their respective traditions. If in Su Shi brought the *ci* back into the mainstream Chinese *shi* poetry, which is supposed to be personal, Milton opened up another possibility for the sonnet in English poetry, in which fictionality and dramatic performance are the norm.
- [4] 钱钟书:《谈艺录》,北京:中华书局,1984年,第231页。

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Hybridization in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's “Kubla Khan”

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中文摘要：塞缪尔·泰勒·柯尔律治 (Samuel Taylor Coleridge) 在创作于 1797 年的《忽必烈汗》(Kubla Khan) 的前两个名句中提及中国元朝的夏都，“忽必烈汗在上都曾经/下令造一座堂皇的殿堂”。如今，距北京正北方向 270 公里处的上都已成为考古遗址。古往今来，关于《忽必烈汗》一诗的研究不计其数，它也一直受到浪漫主义研究专家们的关注。然而，学者们主要研究诗中的虚幻景象和诸多典故。这一点在约翰·利文斯顿·洛斯 (John Livingston Lowes) 的《通往上都之路》(ⓉThe Road to XanaduⓉ, 1927) 中得到了很好的证实。该书在对柯尔律治的创作源泉作了冗长的分析后，最终用心理学术语对其进行界定。作为近期的另一流派的文化批评家们考量了始于 18 世纪的中英知识交易关系，但却没有从中国历史的维度考察《忽必烈汗》中的意象。本文将该诗重置于后现代语境，希冀利用弗雷德里克·詹姆逊 (Fredric Jameson) 的著作《政治无意识》(ⓉThe Political UnconsciousⓉ) 对其进行全新的解读，进而说明具有历史意义的上都里蕴含的多元文化因素也应该成为阐释的重要内容。本文最终得出如下结论：在某种程度上，与其用心理批评等传统理论流派分析《忽必烈汗》，不如用杂糅化 (hybridization) 分析更为贴切。

For 200 years, “Xanadu” has been used to describe the ethereal and exotic, the long ago and far away, and particularly the imagination in its moments of most spectacular grandeur. Although the spelling of Xanadu itself is almost certainly a poetic rendering by Samuel Taylor Coleridge for his famous 1797 poem “Kubla Khan” —based on a much earlier permutation or downright misunderstanding of the Mandarin “shang du” for “upper capital”—the word nonetheless refers to an actual historical place that is situated 270 kilometers due north of the old primary capital in Beijing. In its heyday,

Xanadu was one of the most glamorous cities in the world, sufficiently impressing the Italian adventurer Marco Polo in the thirteenth century so that he immortalized the palace in his famous book of travels. And though neither palace nor capital survived the dynasty of the ethnic Mongolian rulers of China, visitors today can walk among the ruins and stand on the very ground where Marco Polo once beheld the opulence of the Chinese emperor in awe.

Thus, Xanadu may represent 200 years of British Romantic tradition, but for the past 750 years it has been both a real place and a metaphor. As an actual place, Xanadu has depended upon an intercultural context for its significance, given that the emperor Kubla Khan, himself of Mongolian extraction, willingly chose to amalgamate the best of Chinese, Islamic, and other cultures in both the construction of his summer capital and in its very essence. For Marco Polo, Samuel Purchas, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and for many of today's visitors, Xanadu is also ultimately a place that demonstrates the hybridization of cultures in situations where the individuals in control occasionally possess the good will to promote eclecticism, and a solemn reminder that such hybridizations can disappear rather quickly when the requisite good will ceases to exist.

Although I wish to pursue "Kubla Khan" in the context of cultural hybridization, it is first necessary to discuss the conventional psychological view that has now dominated critical commentary on the poem for decades. This interpretation, which usually regards Xanadu as a changeable quantity analogous to the dream content which mutates to provide a varying manifestation of the dream thought, is familiar to those who have read John Livingston Lowes' classic 1927 book *The Road to Xanadu*. Because Coleridge clearly stated that his poem was the transcription of a dream that was stimulated by his reading before falling asleep, Lowes rightly sought for the sources of the stimuli that were compressed into the poem. The Lowes program, then, is a sort of "reverse engineering", where imagery is analyzed by breaking it into components of a word or group of words, and then comparing them with the vast catalogue of items that Coleridge was known or presumed to have read by the time he dreamed his dream. As a result, an allusion such as "Alph the sacred river" is demonstrated to be a rich tapestry of cultural and literary artifacts embodying the Classical as well as other traditions.^[1]