The Dreams of Self Cultivators: Comparing a Daoist and a Buddhist Text for Practitioners

What roles did dreams play in disciplines of self-cultivation in early medieval China? In this talk, Dr. Campany seeks to answer this question by mapping the “dreamscape” of late classical and early medieval China, focusing on two texts located in two zones of this dreamscape. Records of Master Zhou’s Communications with the Unseen World, the fascinating dream records left behind by a Daoist practitioner named Zhou Ziliang, recovered, compiled, and annotated by his teacher, the famous Tao Hongjing, is part of what Campany calls the spillover paradigm, in which the dreamer is a self-cultivator of some sort and his or her dreams are a direct continuation of daytime cultivational pursuits. Conversely, the Buddhist Sutra on the Explication of Dreams for Bodhisattvas, which presents an extensive system for dream-based karmic self-diagnosis by practitioners on the bodhisattva path toward Buddhahood, falls within the diagnostic paradigm, in which dreams are interpreted as comprising symbols indicating the dreamer’s progress on the path toward the goal of cultivation.

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