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From the Meeting of Chuang Tzu, Franz Kafka and Van Cam Hai

Van Cam Hai

Panel: Imagination/Fantasy/Reality

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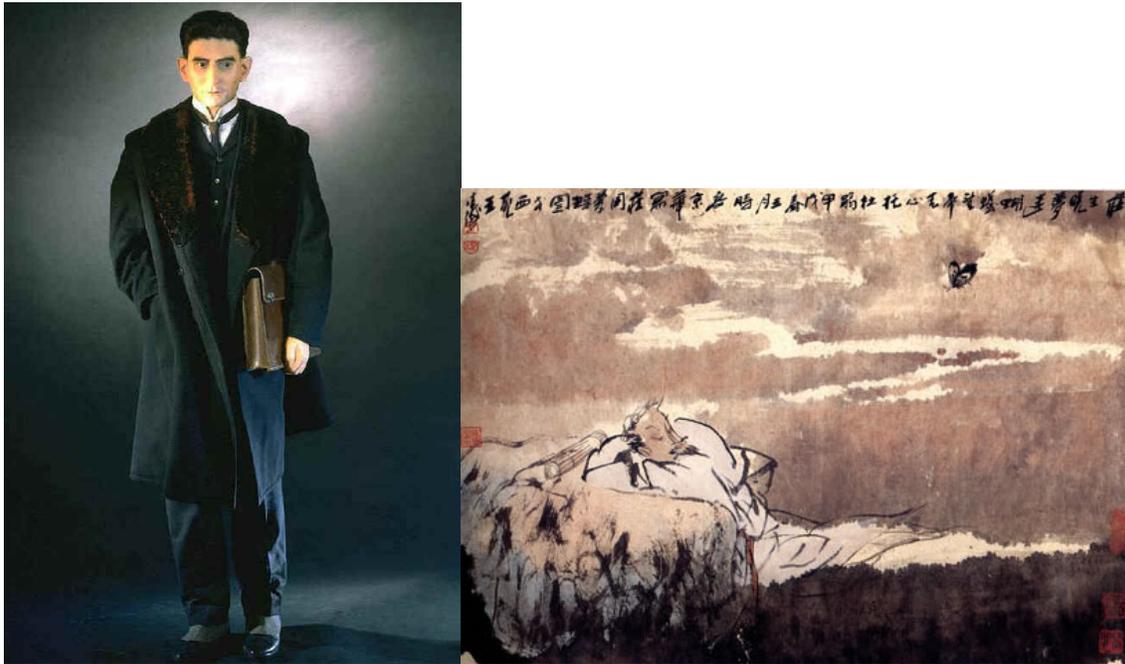
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Van Cam Hai (Vietnam)

FROM THE MEETING OF CHUANG TZU, FRANZ KAFKA AND VAN CAM HAI



Strolling along the bank of the still and silent Iowa River in the dead of night, all of a sudden, I discovered the familiar silhouettes of two figures, two friends of mankind sitting on the threshold of the Iowa House Hotel. On approaching these two people, I was startled to realize who they were: Chuang Tzu, the Far Eastern philosopher, and Franz Kafka, the author of "The Metamorphosis."

- I am so depressed when people, especially Easterners, keep accusing me of plagiarism. They say the idea of Samsa turning into a bug is not my idea; they accuse me of copying yours: butterflies transforming into humans and human's souls into butterflies', your thousand-year-old brainchild. It had been born long before I was!—sighed Kafka.

- Oh, well, forget it! My butterfly is nothing like your cockroach. You must know the later-born writers Edgar Allen Poe, and especially so-called "magic realists" like Gabriel Garcia Marquez. They have their own inventions in their writings.

- Actually, when writing "The Metamorphosis," I didn't know if it was real life or just imagination. Then, all my care was simply focused on writing—what I wrote was what I had in mind, in my writer's mind. That's all.

- Excuse me! I must say you have brought new realities to this life, the realities created by writers like you, making this life more and more diverse and colorful!—I interrupted.

Chuang Tzu and Kafka both sent me a surprised but welcoming look. They said:

- We both had to say goodbye to this life long long ago, guy. You are young, tell us what is going on in this world. Anything new?

And the following is what I told them by the bank of the Iowa River that night.

AN EVIL ACT

Hijacked airliners plunged into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001, claiming thousands of innocent lives and leaving a horrifying haunting image for the US and the world.

Was the consciousness of the hijackers irrationally blurred so that fantasy and reality merged and, in the moment of that act, they in their imaginations believed they were accomplishing God's mission? Or did their actions simply come out of a hatred for the US?

A MYSTERIOUS HOLY BOOK

When I was in Tibet, a senior Lama told me that when a person died, one Lama would sit beside the departed to show him or her the way to say goodbye to life by reading out loud the Thodol Badol, a holy book completed in the eighth century by Padmasambhava, a high ranking monk. All the spiritual images in the Tibetan book come from a fantastic world which vividly depicts the stages in one's life from one's last moments to the moments one's soul is greeted by the spirits above and soothed in the supernatural world.

Such a fantastic world may be peculiar to almost everyone, however, for the Tibetan people, it is nothing strange. In fact, it is this "lively spiritual reality" that has nurtured the people, generation after generation.

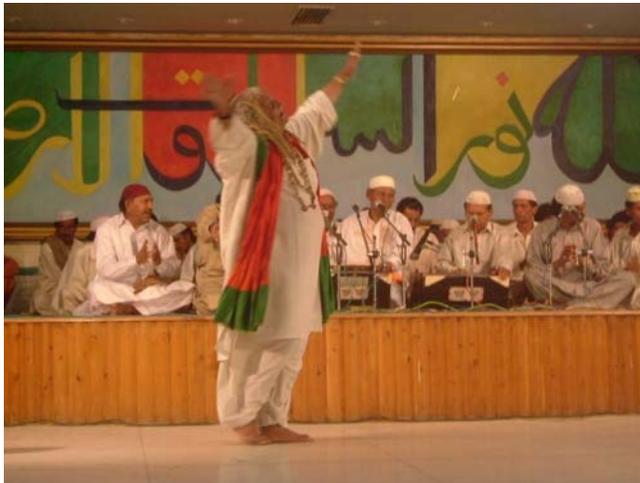
The lively spiritual images found in the above-mentioned book are associated with holy transformations, while the spirits of Vice and Virtue embody the unification between life and death, between the rational and irrational, which are all the properties of this existential life.





A MUSIC OF SALVATION

While participating in a Sufi Muslim music performance in Pakistan, I myself saw people act peculiarly when the tune was played. They were dancing as if they were flying over all the limitations of time and space. They were filled with ecstatic joy for, via music, they saw their God.



Similarly, Vietnamese people have "medium dancing" or "spirit possession rituals," called "len dong," in which they dance and sing to be metamorphosed. Here, in a trance, people say it is even possible that an illiterate woman can compose a few excellent lines of verse if

she is the reincarnation of a talented poet. If Freud had a chance to turn up in this life again, would he ever believe this?



Obviously, some invisible souls were borrowing her body in order to speak. All in all, does fantasy spring from some mysterious feelings, or from some supernatural realities that exist in this world in the form of a supernatural appearance?

Supernatural phenomenon reflects the fantasy, which may appear irrational but still exists in real life. If so, should we still call it a fantasy? Should it be considered a meta-reality or an in-depth psychological phenomenon? And finally, does human imagination play the role of a link between reality and the so-called meta-reality?

A WANDERING TONGUE OF LANGUAGE

- Do you mean that all those things have been going around in the sunlight?—asked Chuang Tzu and Kafka.

- Which sun?—I asked Chuang Tzu and Kafka—Do you two mean the wandering tongue in the universe?

Observing the two surprised faces, I read aloud, instead of providing an explanation, some lines of verse from the poem "The Rivers Have Not Only Me," which I composed:

*Vietnamese rives are often contemplative
Cloud levels of memories
Slurp the sad grass a mouthful of blue river
On the body convulsed with laughter bomb craters reflect back at the sun
From high above a tongue wanders
Her language is a tireless light spread evenly, in spite of the sleepwalking
rain, the roof of a church, a pier, a dry log like death leaning against your porch!*

- Oh, Dear!—said the astonished Chuang Tzu and Kafka—we thought that the industrial civilization was already submerged in the imagination. It has turned out that, in this respect, young people now are much better than us. The image of the sun has been so familiar to us, but it has become the wandering tongue in their imagination. Is this the way of thinking in your postmodern or new postmodern poem?

- Like Kafka, I simply put what I was thinking in my mind down onto paper. And you two gentlemen, you and I, with our imagination and fantasy, could create everything in literature, even leading the rich to Heaven through a needle's eye!

A NEW REALITY OF CREATIVITY

The relation between reality, imagination and fantasy has always been dialectical. They at the same time are separate from one another and are so closely interrelated that the boundaries are often very vague. It is this vagueness that fosters the so-called Dionysian "bacterium," revitalized from Greek tragedy by Nietzsche. Dionysian refers to the intuition in creation, the vagueness and the unreasonableness, which contradict the concepts of rational ability, lucidity and the reasonable represented by the Apollonian.

More than 2,500 years ago, counting by the Buddhist calendar, Buddha said he could imagine in a bowl of clear water eighty-four thousand items of bacteria. I wonder if he could then see HIV, which has been relentlessly causing the AIDS epidemic. However, what he found is enough to make me feel grateful, and I feel even more grateful that he left the other bacteria for mankind to continue to discover. That is why Nietzsche still had a job to do.

"Eighty-four thousand items of bacteria in a single bowl of clear water," I think, is a thoughtful message that teaches me that reality is not only the things I can see with my naked eyes, but also the things I can feel with the eyes of my soul. Those things have turned into my imagination and fantasy, which bring me a novel dimension of time in which to approach reality. This is, I think, the fourth dimension apart from the so-called "natural" ones: past, present, and future.

As discussed above, imagination and fantasy are not only the experience of real life, but also of the spiritual world becoming reality and adding some new truths beyond the usual reality we have been witnessing.

Based on the thorough combination of inner truth, objective reality, imagination and fantasy, and on the special command of language he possesses, one artist can create a very colorful and delicate symphony of words, which can welcome and satisfy sometimes very different tastes. With an almost untellable joy, Chuang Tzu, Kafka and I noticed that human

imagination and fantasy could walk beyond the boundary of abstract thoughts to become a part of reality, once they had been embodied by words. The words, as effectively as they can, materialize the two above-mentioned misty concepts. It is what we often call the life of an art work, or at least the life of Chuang Tzu's Butterfly, Kafka's Bug or my Sun's Tongue. Because in the world of creation, they all deserve a real life without the burden of reason.

Before we three parted, Chuang Tzu and Kafka wondered if American people would believe my stories about imagination and fantasy. I told them that to find the answer, they should walk along the Mississippi where they would find a marvelous truth, an immortality of the imagination and fantasy created by the Native Americans at the Effigy Mounds Monument.



- Thanks Hai, they said, we will start right now in order to get there and feast our eyes on that miracle you describe, which is bathing itself in the light of a new dawn when the Sun, or by your words, the "Wandering Tongue," utters its shining language to communicate with this sweet world!