Chinese and American Anomalous Experiences: The Role of Religiosity*

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Random samples of dormitory residents at three colleges in Xi'an, People's Republic of China (N = 314), and at the University of Maryland (N = 214), were polled regarding frequency of déjà vu, night paralysis, extrasensory perception (ESP), contact with the dead, out-of-body experiences, and belief in ESP. American respondents were also requested to evaluate their self-perceived religiosity and religious affiliation. Chinese students, who have received no formal religious socialization, reported higher levels of anomalous experience (except for déjà vu), and greater belief in ESP, than did Americans. Frequency of American reports of anomalous experience and belief in ESP did not correlate significantly with self-evaluated religiosity or religious affiliation. The data tend to support the "experiential source" hypothesis, which suggests that elements within these experiences occur independently of culture.

This study compares data regarding frequency and content of déjà vu, night paralysis, out-of-body (OBE), extrasensory (ESP), and contact-with-the-dead experiences from random samples of students at three universities in Xi'an, People's Republic of China, and at the University of Maryland, College Park. Since anomalous experiences sometimes support religious beliefs, studies of the origin and function of these episodes are pertinent to the sociology of religion. Hufford (1982) described two hypotheses associated with the incidence of "Old Hag" experiences (night paralysis), one based on a "cultural source" theory. The present study extends his "experience-centered approach" to other anomalous accounts.

Cultural source theory is derived from an implicit set of understandings regarding the power of culture to shape experience. A person's culture is thought to determine the frequency and forms of anomalous experience the individual reports. An assumption is that the "supernatural is wholly housed in the subconscious" (La Barre, 1975:18), causing individuals holding specific religious beliefs to be more susceptible to the incidence of anomalous experiences coinciding with their beliefs. The theory also holds that the contents of these experiences will tend to reflect elements within the individual's faith. For example, belief in a soul and afterlife, and familiarity with the doctrines pertaining to these concepts, should increase the incidence, and affect the contents, of night paralysis, OBEs, and contact-with-the-dead experiences. Examples of scholars

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using this paradigm include Finucane (1984), Honko (1964), Marks and Kammann (1980), and Singer and Benassi (1981).

The cultural source paradigm supports the ethic of scientific skepticism regarding the supernatural. Reports of anomalous experiences are thought by those accepting this orientation to be either “fictitious products of tradition” or else “imaginary subjective experiences shaped (or occasionally even caused) by tradition” (Hufford, 1982:15). Those working within the cultural source tradition tend to attribute a lack of critical faculties to those believing in the paranormal, since belief is deemed irrational, a response to deprivations, anxiety, or other negative traits. The implication is that anomalous memorates (stories told as personal experiences believed by the respondent to be true) originate from lies, hoaxes, misinterpretations of ordinary events, failure to understand probabilistic relationships, psychological needs, or mental malfunctions.

Research supporting the cultural source orientation constitutes “normal science” in the Kuhnian sense, and findings supporting this paradigm are sometimes deemed equivalent to common sense. Although most researchers publishing cross-cultural studies regarding anomalous experiences have not purposely promoted the cultural source paradigm, their results may be interpreted as supporting it. The frequency of reports of telepathy, clairvoyance, and contact with the dead generally vary from country to country in a manner reflecting cultural values; for example, Iceland, a country with a history of alleged paranormal occurrences, reported the highest incidence of contact with the dead of any European nation in a recent survey (Haraldsson, 1985). The incidence of children seeming to remember “past lives” is greater in areas where the majority of the population accepts the doctrine of reincarnation, and the forms that these memories take tend to reflect cultural beliefs (Stevenson, 1970, 1977).

Various studies have found a relationship between the frequency of reported anomalous experiences and religious convictions. Typically, these studies are interpreted as supporting the cultural source orientation, although an alternative hypothesis suggests that experiences may cause changes in belief. For example, in his Bay Area sample, Wuthnow (1978:66-77) found that respondents with strong belief in God and in life after death were more likely to have ESP experiences. Those believing in survival after death within Greeley’s (1975) random American sample were more likely to have had contact-with-the-dead experiences. Protestants within his sample reported a higher rate of mystical OBE-type experiences (43%) than did Catholics (24%). Greeley (1975:57) interprets this result by quoting W. C. McCready speculating, “If you have Canon Law and an infallible pope, maybe you don’t need mystical experience.” Greeley also noted special characteristics regarding those scoring high on an index based on self-reports of déjà vu, ESP, and clairvoyance. These individuals were more likely to believe in human survival after death, to have certainty about fundamental religious beliefs, yet to consider themselves religious agnostics (Greeley, 1975:15; McCready and Greeley, 1976). Emmons and Sobal (1981b) present national survey data indicating that those with “no religion” or who state that religion is “not at all important,” were more likely to believe in ESP than religious respondents. This finding suggests that belief in ESP constitutes a functional alternative to religion.

Although education correlates positively with belief in ESP (Greeley, 1975; Emmons and Sobal, 1981a), scientific training seems to create a culture that reduces the re-
porting of, and belief in, anomalous experience. Hufford (1982, 1983) notes that academic “traditions of disbelief” have distorted theorizing regarding night paralysis and other anomalous experiences. Wagner and Monnet (1979) found that social and physical science professors revealed significantly less belief in ESP than liberal arts professors. McClendon (1982, 1984) found that elite scientists reported less belief in ESP than did average scientists, and far less incidence of anomalous experience than ordinary American citizens (except for déjà vu). Elite scientists and physicians, listed in Who's Who in America showed far greater doubt regarding the possibility of contact with the dead and the validity of “near-death” experiences than did average citizens (Gallup, 1982).

In opposition to the cultural source paradigm, Hufford's (1982) experiential source hypothesis suggests that some forms of anomalous experience occur regularly without contact with a particular tradition and that these experiences contain elements that are independent of culture. This orientation has radical implications, suggesting that some apparently fantastic beliefs are empirically grounded. Neither Hufford (1982) nor the present author argue against the development and testing of cultural and psychological hypotheses regarding anomalous experience, since various traditions obviously affect people's experience and interpretation of these episodes. The goal of the experiential source theory is to replace excessively simple “culture-plus-psychology” explanations, so that a more complete theory of these episodes can be developed. The experiential source orientation allows greater consideration of the role that anomalous experiences play in modifying religious faith, rather than considering these incidents merely as products of belief. The experiential source paradigm corresponds, to a degree, with ideas expressed by Lang (1968), Lowie (1924), Otto (1953), and Tylor (1920).

Various studies support this paradigm. Data gathered by Hufford (1982) uphold the experiential source hypothesis with regard to night paralysis experiences. Emmons (1982) found seemingly common elements in both Chinese and Western reports of apparitional experience. Neppe (1983) evaluated déjà vu reports from many localities, finding commonalities. Rhine (1981) analyzed spontaneous ESP cases, finding clearly recognizable categories. Ring (1980) and Osis and Haraldsson (1977) gathered evidence regarding near-death experiences, supporting the experiential source hypothesis. Irwin (1985) reviewed studies regarding OBEs, noting that religiosity is probably unrelated to the incidence of these episodes. Haraldsson's (1985) and Stevenson's (1970, 1977) studies, cited previously as supporting the cultural source orientation, can also be interpreted as upholding the experiential source hypothesis, since they found a percentage of experiencers in all surveyed countries, even those lacking a strong occult tradition.

The present study extends previous research by comparing data from a random sample of American college students to Chinese student populations which have been exposed to vigorous attempts to extinguish their occult heritage. Since virtually all Chinese college students were reared during and after the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976, these individuals are extremely unlikely to be conservatives of cultural traditions. Authorities and Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution made great efforts to ban religious socialization during that ten year period. Modern Chinese students are virtually unaware of their nation's religious heritage. They live in a world where intellectual diversity is not encouraged and where a tight and widely diffused system of social control severely restricts individual thinking. During informal discussions with
students in Xi'an, the researcher found none who expressed even the slightest impulse toward religiosity or knowledge of supernatural folklore beyond puzzlement at the superstitious rituals still practiced by some rural peasants (Time, 1986). Xi'an, the city in which the Chinese research was conducted, is recognized as a bastion of “conservative” Maoist Marxist thought. Students stated that they never talk about paranormal experiences, since belief in such events might be regarded as “superstition.” Although some Chinese respondents, particularly those from rural areas, have probably been informally socialized regarding shamanistic practices, the events of China’s recent history suggest that Chinese students of Xi'an constitute a population which has had relatively little exposure to occult folklore, compared to equivalent student groups in the United States.

The cultural and experiential source theories allow relatively clear predictions regarding the incidence and content of anomalous reports. For example, various Chinese “experts” in Taiwan as well as college and Communist officials in the People's Republic of China, interviewed by the researcher, unanimously predicted that Chinese students would report extremely low frequencies of anomalous experience. They noted that Chinese students had been selected, in part, for their adherence to Marxist doctrines, an orientation which denies the existence of nonmaterial forces. These individuals based their predictions on the “common sense” associated with the cultural source orientation. Predictions can also be based on previous Western research findings (Greeley, 1975; Emmons and Sobal, 1981a; McClenon, 1982; Wagner and Monnet, 1979). The following hypotheses are derived from the cultural and experiential source orientations, using prior empirical results as a guide:

1. The incidence of anomalous experience among Chinese student populations in Xi'an should be less than that of the American student population. Verification of this prediction would support cultural source theory, assuming expert analysis of Chinese students' heritage to be correct. The hypothesis can be analyzed using one-tailed difference of proportions tests.

2. The empirical findings relating religious affiliation, as well as religiosity, to anomalous experience are not completely consistent (Greeley, 1975; Emmons and Sobal, 1981b; Wuthnow, 1978). The evidence does suggest that a relationship exists. Cultural source theory would predict that religious preference and religiosity should interact significantly with frequency of anomalous experience. Two-tailed difference of proportions tests regarding percentage reporting the various experiences among religious groups and among those reporting high and low religiosity are applicable. Through interviewing respondents volunteering information, it is hoped that the degree to which religious beliefs influence experiences or experiences influence religious beliefs can be estimated.

3. The findings of Gallup (1982), McClenon (1984), and Wagner and Monnet (1979) suggest that a “scientific culture” restricts the reporting of anomalous experiences (except for déjà vu). Chinese and American students majoring in scientific or technical curricula are predicted to report a significantly lower incidence of anomalous experience (except for déjà vu) and less belief in ESP than those studying other fields, such as economics. Replication of this differential effect would support the cultural source theory. One-tailed difference of proportion tests, comparing students majoring in scientific and nonscientific majors, are applicable.

4. The experiential source hypothesis predicts that Chinese student populations will demonstrate “recognizable” anomalous experiences, harboring “primary” elements,
equivalent to those within the American population. If an equivalency exists between American and Chinese memorates, the experiential source theory will be supported. The cultural source hypothesis would predict that experiences classified within the American culture should occur among Chinese students with no more frequency than any other dream, misperception, or hallucination.

**METHODS**

A questionnaire was devised, with the assistance of Chinese graduate students, that asked respondents to supply their sex, age, and answers to questions regarding frequency of déjà vu, night paralysis, ESP, contact with the dead, OBE, and belief in a "sixth sense" or ESP (see McClenon, 1988, for questionnaire format). Déjà vu, ESP, and contact-with-the-dead questions were used in a similar form to those of Greeley (1975). Although the Chinese have no exactly equivalent concept to the Western notion of ESP, they understand the suggestion that humans have a "sixth sense" (Emmons, 1982).

Chinese assistants recommended that the questionnaire not be translated into Chinese but administered in English. They stated that all Chinese university students are capable of reading English and that administering a questionnaire in English would stimulate curiosity, indicate that a foreign scholar was associated with the research, and increase the response rate. Respondents were encouraged to reply in Chinese to a final open ended question requesting reports of "very unusual" experiences.

Three universities in Xi'an were surveyed. Three hundred and six questionnaires were distributed at Northwestern Polytechnic University (NPU). At the time of the questionnaire administration (April 1986), 5,661 students were attending. Two hundred questionnaires were distributed at the Xi'an University of Medical Science. At the time of this questionnaire administration (May 1986), 3,606 students were attending. Students at Shaanxi Finance and Economic Institute received 280 questionnaires. At the time of the survey (June 1986), slightly more than 3,000 students were attending. Samples from each university were polled by randomly selecting dormitory rooms and supplying a questionnaire for each occupant in the room. Each student had an approximately equal probability of being included in the final sample of his or her college. Students were instructed (in Chinese) to return their questionnaires inside stamped, preaddressed envelopes. Those administering the questionnaire stressed the importance of responding honestly.

In April 1987, 500 questionnaires containing the same items, along with preaddressed envelopes, were mailed to a computer-generated, randomly selected sample of dormitory residents at the University of Maryland, College Park. At the time of the survey, 7,154 students lived in these dormitories. The questionnaire contained additional items asking for the respondent's academic major, religion, self-evaluated degree of religiosity, as well as name and telephone number, in order that the recipient might be interviewed by telephone (McClenon, 1988). Six days after the original mailout, a reminder letter was mailed to all 500 students, thanking them for their cooperation and requesting those who had not returned their questionnaires to do so. Since late responders' attitudes might be considered more similar to those of nonresponders than those of early responders, a comparison of these two groups supplies an estimate of the effect nonresponse had on the sample statistics.
RESULTS

Selective response constitutes a source of error within all mail surveys. Variation in the sex ratio of respondents as compared to target populations increase this concern. Of the American respondents, 58% were female, while only 50% of the target population were. Within the NPU sample, 31% of the responders were female, compared to 13% of NPU student population. The sex ratio of responding students within the two other Chinese samples closely approximated the target populations.

No statistically significant differences were apparent between the University of Maryland students requiring the stimulation of reminder letters and those responding more promptly. Although this result reduces the concern that the American data are severely biased due to nonresponse, this does not negate the possibility that some respondents inflated or concealed the extent of their unusual experiences.

Table 1 compares the results of Chinese and American groups. The American students reported significantly higher rates of déjà vu ($p < .001$), a finding which supports the cultural source hypothesis (prediction 1). The Chinese students reported significantly higher levels of night paralysis ($p < .001$), ESP ($p < .001$), contact with the dead ($p < .001$), OBE ($p < .001$), and belief in ESP or sixth sense ($p < .05$), than did the American student sample. These later findings are directly opposite of predictions derived from the cultural source hypothesis.

Of the ten statistical tests regarding Chinese students' academic major and frequency of anomalous experience (prediction 2), six attained significance (no predictions were made regarding déjà vu). The Chinese polytechnic group's percentage reports differed significantly from the economic group's percentage with regard to déjà vu (not associated with prediction 2: $p < .05$), night paralysis ($p < .01$), ESP ($p < .05$), contact with the dead ($p < .01$), and out-of-body experience ($p < .001$). The percentage of medical students reporting ESP differed significantly ($p < .05$) from percentages associated with the economic group; differences in percent reporting out-of-body experiences were also significant ($p < .01$). Ironically, the NPU students, who reported a lower frequency of paranormal experience, claimed a higher level of belief in a sixth sense. The American data demonstrated no significant differences between those majoring in fields associated with science (social sciences, natural sciences, computer science, math, engineering, and architecture) and those majoring in fields less related to scientific studies (liberal arts, education, recreation, business).

Table 2 compares American students' religious preference and self-reported religiosity to frequency of experience and ESP belief; it pertains to prediction 3. Data from eight students who reported Hindu, Moslem, or Buddhist beliefs were not included in this analysis. Those reporting “none” for religious preference were grouped with those supplying no answer to this question, since these individuals might be predicted to report a higher incidence of anomalous experience than those choosing a traditional faith (based on Emmons and Sobal's, 1981b, findings). Of the 30 two-tailed statistical tests comparing proportions among religious groups, only one achieved significance at the .05 level (75% of Catholics believed in ESP as contrasted to only 55% of Jews). Since we would expect a difference of this magnitude to occur by chance due to the large number of statistical tests, this result cannot be deemed remarkable. None of
### TABLE 1
PERCENT REPORTING ANOMALOUS EXPERIENCES AMONG CHINESE AND AMERICAN STUDENT SAMPLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percent Reporting Experience Once or More</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percent Responding</th>
<th>Déjà vu</th>
<th>Night Paralysis</th>
<th>ESP</th>
<th>Contact with Dead</th>
<th>Out-of-Body Experience</th>
<th>Belief in ESP*</th>
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<td><strong>Chinese Student</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>314</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>64$^a$</td>
<td>58$^a$</td>
<td>71$^a$</td>
<td>40$^a$</td>
<td>55$^a$</td>
<td>76$^b$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Northwestern Polytechnic</td>
<td></td>
<td>98</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>53$c$</td>
<td>49$d$</td>
<td>64$c$</td>
<td>31$d$</td>
<td>34$^e$</td>
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<td>University</td>
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<td>Xi'an University of</td>
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<td>90</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>68$c$</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>53$d$</td>
<td>72</td>
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<td>Medical Science</td>
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<td>Shaanxi Finance</td>
<td></td>
<td>126</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>73</td>
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<td>and Economic Institute</td>
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<td><strong>American Student</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>214</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>89$a$</td>
<td>37$a$</td>
<td>44$a$</td>
<td>25$a$</td>
<td>27$a$</td>
<td>66$^b$</td>
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<td><strong>Academic Major:</strong></td>
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<td>Science and Tech. Oriented Majors</td>
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<td>89</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>61</td>
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<tr>
<td>All Other Majors</td>
<td></td>
<td>120</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>69</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

$^a p < .001$ (2 tailed difference of proportions test comparing equivalent American and Chinese percentages).

$^b p < .05$ (2 tailed difference of proportions test comparing equivalent American and Chinese percentages).

$^c p < .05$ (1 tailed difference of proportions test comparing % to equivalent % of non-scientific Chinese group: Shaanxi Finance and Economic Institute).

$^d p < .01$ (1 tailed difference of proportions test comparing % to equivalent % among Shaanxi Finance and Economic Institute).

$^e p < .001$ (1 tailed difference of proportions test comparing % to equivalent % among Shaanxi Finance and Economic Institute).

*percent considering ESP "a fact" or "a likely probability."

the tests comparing proportions between those reporting high or low religiosity revealed statistical significance. T-tests, computed on ungrouped data, revealed equivalent results. Data pertaining to religious preference or religiosity fail to support predictions derived from the cultural source orientation.
### TABLE 2

ANOMALOUS EXPERIENCES, RELIGIOUS PREFERENCE, AND SELF-PERCEIVED RELIGIOSITY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent Reporting Experience Once or More</th>
<th>% of total sample</th>
<th>Déjà vu</th>
<th>Night Paralysis</th>
<th>ESP</th>
<th>Contact with Dead</th>
<th>Out-of-Body Experience</th>
<th>Belief in ESP*</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religion</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>66</td>
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<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>75*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>55*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None or Missing</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>59</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Perceived Religiosity</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;Extremely&quot; or &quot;Somewhat&quot; Religious</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Slightly&quot; or &quot;Not at all&quot; Religious</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>35</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*a p < .05 (2 tailed difference of proportions test comparing these two percentages).

*percent considering ESP "a fact" or "a likely probability."

Belief in ESP and reports of experience of it within American and Chinese samples correlated positively (Americans: Spearman rho = .3087; Chinese: Spearman rho = .1975) and significantly (p < .001, 2 tailed tests on Spearman rho values). Although these findings have no direct bearing on the listed predictions, they indicate that belief and experience are related.

**OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS**

Of the Chinese students, 53 described 73 experiences, while 37 Americans described 44 different events. The nature of these responses suggests that virtually all writers attempted to answer questions sincerely. In a few cases, Chinese students reported anomalous experiences when answering fixed response questions, yet wrote in the space for "open" response, that they had "no unusual experiences," an action that might indicate that they misinterpreted the question or that they do not regard these experiences as "unusual."

Example cases of Chinese and American response are compared in the Appendix. About two thirds of the Chinese reports, and all but eight American experiences, can be classified within the "natural" categories listed in this appendix. The ability
to classify, without difficulty, a large percentage of responses supports the experiential source hypothesis (prediction 4).

Narratives not exemplified in the Appendix portray basic differences between the Chinese and American students' interpretation of the concept of "unusual." Two American miscellaneous reports contained religious testimonies associated with born-again experiences, unrelated to the events surveyed on the questionnaire. No Chinese students reported equivalent mystical events. Almost one quarter of the Chinese reports consisted of what might be labeled "unusual dreams" that the respondent considered noteworthy (repetitious dreams, dreams of monsters, or dreams which seemed particularly frightening or fantastic). Other Chinese miscellaneous narratives were concerned with extreme emotions (grief, fear, or disappointment). Some Chinese apparently use dreaming in formulating a philosophy at variance with Marxist materialism (for example, a student reports "I dreamed that I had died, but my soul was still living").

Three Chinese and three American students reported dreams of deceased loved ones. The Chinese writers considered these dreams psychologically disturbing, an undesirable aspect of the grieving process. All American dreamers described therapeutic aspects. For example, one woman, who dreamed of a conversation with her deceased grandfather wrote, "It felt for the first time in 18 years that he was alive. To this day I'll never forget it."

Differences in Chinese and American reports of "apparitions of the dead" and "unidentified apparitions" reveal cultural interpretation and the probability that elements within narratives evolved from cultural sources. For example, the Chinese writer, whose "unidentified apparition" is reported in the Appendix, became sick the day after the incident, an event that coincides with Chinese folklore granting ghosts the ability to cause health problems. Yet this writer states elsewhere on his questionnaire that "I don't believe in superstitions, such as ghosts." Apparently, he does not consider the experience a form of contact with his dead grandfather.

Many students noted that their experiences were at variance with popular opinions regarding reality, an aspect of the data that supports the experiential source hypothesis. For example, the single Chinese student describing a "contact with the dead" commented that, "When I told people, they all say it is impossible, but I believe myself."

It was possible to interview eighteen of the twenty-five American students who supplied their names and telephone numbers. The American respondents were queried concerning the authenticity of claimed experiences and the impact that these incidents had on their lives. All but two of the interviewed students (89% of those interviewed) were able to provide anecdotes supporting each of their claims of anomalous experiences. The two unverified claims were seemingly a result of misinterpretations of questions.

Only four of the interviewed students (22% of those interviewed) indicated that their experiences had affected them religiously. More typically, students reported uncertainly regarding the meaning of their reports, and some expressed a degree of doubt regarding the experience's authenticity. For example, various students stated that they merely "felt" that their deceased grandparent was present at a particular instant, even though no objective event occurred to signify that a visitation actually occurred. These interviews suggest that experiences do not always produce belief and that belief in the paranormal contributes to increased reporting of borderline experiences. Not only

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are those believing in life after death more likely to report a subjective “feeling” of a relative’s visit, but a student’s cultural preconceptions seem important in setting the stage for certain experiences to be regarded as “unusual.” For example, a nonpracticing Catholic student described an experience that affected her religiously even though she had abandoned her previous faith. She told a friend that she did not believe in God and that “there was as much a God as there was a little man in her watch.” As she observed her watch’s face, it stopped. Her labeling of this event as paranormal makes her feel special. “God has not given up on me,” she explained. Without previous religious socialization, she would not have interpreted the malfunctioning of her watch as miraculous.

**DISCUSSION**

Although the possibility exists that Xi’an students have been informally socialized regarding their society’s occult heritage, the level of Chinese student anomalous experiences is surprisingly high. The Xi’an students claim a frequency of ESP experience equivalent to that of a national American sample surveyed by Greeley (1987) in 1984 and greater than that of all European surveys (Iceland reveals the highest European level, and Denmark and Norway demonstrate relatively low incidence of ESP [Haraldsson, 1985; McClenon, 1988]). It is the researcher’s strong impression that the typical Chinese student in Xi’an harbors far less “religiosity,” in any sense of the term, than the average University of Maryland student. Those desiring to retain the cultural source theory might argue that Chinese anomalous reports are derived from a modern manifestation of previous occult traditions, and that official attempts to extinguish these “superstitions” have failed. This argument would suggest that the “experts” consulted by the present researcher were unaware of the degree that Xi’an students are influenced by occult traditions and that these students concealed their knowledge from the researcher. The present study cannot resolve this issue.

Of the 10 formal tests of significance regarding relationships predicted by cultural source hypotheses regarding effects of “scientific culture” among Chinese students, 6 achieved statistical significance. The “scientific culture” surrounding Chinese polytechnic students seems to have decreased the incidence of their reporting anomalous experiences but has not reduced their belief in a sixth sense. These findings are difficult to interpret. Some students may associate psychic phenomena with the Chinese concept of qi, or “vital energy,” a concept that constitutes a unifying principle in traditional Chinese medicine (Eisenberg, 1985). Qi gong exercises, thought to aid in harnessing this energy, were banned during the Cultural Revolution, but are presently allowed.

Among the American students, no significant differences were found in frequency of anomalous experience between those majoring in science-related fields and those choosing other curricula. It may be that these potential American scientists have not been fully socialized within the “scientific culture” regarding skepticism toward the paranormal. Previous studies (Gallup, 1982; McClenon, 1982; Wagner and Monnet, 1979), upon which prediction 3 was based, surveyed mature individuals.

Only one of the 36 statistical tests derived from the cultural source hypothesis, pertaining to religion and religiosity among the American students, attained significance.
at the .05 level. Greeley's (1975) finding that Catholics reported less OBEs than did Protestants or Jews was not replicated. (It should be noted that Greeley's question differed from the one used in the present survey: his refers to a “powerful spiritual force that seemed to lift you out of yourself.”) The response of American students reporting “no religion” or failing to signify their religion was within the range of their mainstream colleagues, a finding which fails to replicate conceptually the results of previous researchers. Self-reported religiosity was not associated with significant differences of frequency of reports of any of the reported anomalous experiences. These findings fail to support the cultural source orientation. It may be that the questionnaire items were not sophisticated enough to demonstrate the relationship between culture and anomalous experience. Questions reflecting specific beliefs within a particular religion might confirm this relationship. (For example, Catholics might be expected to report visions of females, associated with the Virgin Mary, more frequently than Protestants.) A detailed analysis of the influences of phenomenology, inferences, and language on experiential reports is beyond the scope of this study. An evaluation of such factors might aid in differentiating the impact of culture on experience and the effect of experience on belief.

The data in the Appendix seem to indicate the Chinese and American memorates of anomalous experience harbor common elements, transcending culture, an observation supporting the experiential source hypothesis (prediction 4). Most of these groupings are consistent with categories established by previous researchers. Those familiar with previously cited research regarding déjà vu, night paralysis, waking ESP, out-of-body experience, precognitive dreams, synchronistic events, and apparitional experiences will note that the Chinese students reveal clearly identifiable memorates falling within these categories. Considering the radically different cultures from which these memorates arose, this correspondence is surprising. Elements associated with death or danger to loved ones are frequently found within psychical research cases. The argument is not that this evidence supports belief in the authenticity of such events, but that these incidents may be a source of cultural beliefs, and consequently of interest to sociologists of religion.

Other qualitative evidence allows us to note the effects of culture as a contributing source. Even the idea of “unusual” is culturally determined, and the data reveal various situations where cultural “uniqueness” has entered into the respondent’s memorate. For example, the American student who heard about the relationship between birds’ flying into windows and death considered a concurrence in his own life as possibly anomalous. If he had not heard this story, the event would probably have been forgotten. Cultural source theorists might regard the “tension” or “religious conflict” within the student whose watch was stopped by God as factors “producing” her anomalous report. Although this incident provides an example of an experience affecting religious belief, the interview evidence indicates overall that most anomalous episodes puzzled experiencers rather than affected them religiously.

CONCLUSIONS

These findings lead to qualified conclusions. It would seem that although cultural
conditioning affects the interpretation of anomalous experiences, some episodes harbor elements transcending culture. The surprisingly high incidence of anomalous reports among Chinese student samples, who have had no formal religious socialization, coupled with the tendency for the content of their memorates to coincide with elements in American reports, support the experiential source hypothesis. The failures to confirm the cultural source hypotheses focus additional attention on the need for further theoretical development regarding the sources of anomalous episodes. The experiential source hypothesis creates a new dimension to theorizing within the sociology of religion. Those supporting the cultural source theory tend to ignore the possibility that some aspects of supernatural beliefs may have rational experiential foundations. The notion that occult beliefs are inevitably related to tension, anxiety, deprivation, or similar negative attributes may require revision. Although this study presents no conclusions regarding the origin of seemingly universal elements within anomalous experiences, it suggests that some episodes may act as a source of, rather than merely be a result of, cultural and religious beliefs.

REFERENCES

CHINESE AND AMERICAN ANOMALOUS EXPERIENCES


APPENDIX

A COMPARISON OF CHINESE AND AMERICAN ANOMALOUS EXPERIENCE*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese Example Cases</th>
<th>American Example Cases</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Déjà vu (3):</strong></td>
<td><strong>Déjà vu (3):</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I often have this experience: something happened today. I knew clearly this had never happened before or could never have happened, but I felt as though I had once had such an experience. This experience was not from a dream. This phenomenon often makes me puzzled. I can’t understand this.</td>
<td>Very often I have the feeling that I’ve been to places that I’ve never been to before. . . . The feeling of remembrance is strong, but not until just as, or after, I do or say something do I realize it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Night Paralysis (2):</strong></td>
<td><strong>Night Paralysis (2):</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>I dreamed of an old friend who had died several years ago . . . [in the nightmare] a dog bit me but my friend escaped; I was woken up. I felt I couldn’t move though my mind was awake. I tried to take up my hand but it was futile.</td>
<td>The most unusual experience I have had was waking up one night, and being terrified and unable to move, I felt there was someone in the room with me. It seemed to last a long time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Waking ESP (11):</strong></td>
<td><strong>Waking ESP (16):</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During my study in the university I am far away from my family and have no relatives here. But quite a few times I have had the premonition that something wrong had taken place in my family. I felt very upset and eager to go home. When I was actually at home, I found either my parents had been ill or [that] there had been something wrong with them.</td>
<td>Sometimes I can tell when things are wrong back home without coming in direct contact with them. I call home when I have a “feeling” and Mom tells me something bad has happened such as the time my grandfather died, my sister broke up with her serious boyfriend, and Dad was very sick.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The number in parenthesis following each category signifies the number of reports falling within that classification.*

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APPENDIX (continued)

A COMPARISON OF CHINESE AND AMERICAN ANOMALOUS EXPERIENCE*

Chinese Example Cases

*Out-of-Body Experience (2):*

Often I thought as if I were not me. I am another person who is looking at "me." I can feel what "she" or "he" feels. I don't know what was the reason of this sense. . . . I don't want to describe it. I don't think it is possible, perhaps, it is better to say that I don't wish it is possible.

*Precognitive Dream (6):*

Once I had a terrible nightmare at night [that I would be hit by a car]. I was hit by a running car the next morning.

*Dream of Deceased (3):*

Last year a friend of mine lost her life in a traffic accident. During those days, I was always thinking about her and wanted to write and visit her. . . . During the half year after this I always felt that she was still alive and I often met her in my dreams. I was very afraid, so I tried not to mention her at all. Gradually this phenomenon disappeared.

*Synchronistic Event (2):*

Two days before my mother's death, in the morning, a lot of flies flew into the kitchen of our house. There were very many. I felt very curious . . . two days later my mother passed away. I feel this was very strange.

American Example Cases

*Out-of-Body Experience (2):*

I was mentally “out of it” and saw myself standing with two friends. I felt I was seeing this several feet off the ground — not “in my body.”

*Precognitive Dream (5):*

Two days before my boyfriend died in a car accident, I dreamed the whole thing. . . . I had also “seen” an accident my little sister had been in.

*Dream of Deceased (3):*

I dreamed about talking to my Grandmother who had just passed away. In it she was telling me that she had to leave me soon. Before the dream ended I felt a sharp jerk around my stomach and she had said everything would be okay. When I woke up I knew that a baby girl was born to my cousin. Funny thing about it was that about 2 minutes later the baby was born and it was a girl.

*Synchronistic Event (3):*

One morning a couple of years ago, a bird flew into (hit the glass of) our bathroom window. I mentioned to my parents that a teacher I had in high school once stated that an old myth says that when a bird hits your window a relative is supposed to die. Later on that day we received a phone call telling us that one of my father's uncles had died that morning. I know this doesn't sound like an extraordinarily unusual experience but at the time it seemed like a rather interesting (if not weird) anomaly of probability. Have many other people had a similar experience?

*The number in parenthesis following each category signifies the number of reports falling within that classification.
A COMPARISON OF CHINESE AND AMERICAN ANOMALOUS EXPERIENCE*

Chinese Example Cases

Contact with the Dead (1):
My whole family moved to a new place where many people died in battles were laid. . . . One night in summer, my whole family lay on the floor. The other people were fast asleep. . . . I saw a female standing in the door. I looked at her for a long time. Afterward, my father got up to go to closet; when he opened the switch, the female evaded quickly. When my father closed the switch, the female appeared again. This is a very special thing in my life; I couldn't forget it. When I told people, they all say it is impossible, but I believe myself. It isn't an unreal image. It is a real fact.

Unidentified Apparitional Experience (7):
When I was small, grandfather passed away. My grandmother was alone, so I stayed with her everyday. One night, I woke up and looked at the oil lamp on the table. (We kept the oil lamp on at night to embolden ourselves and to save the trouble to look for a match in the dark.) I saw a big black hand take up the lamp and then put it down. At that time I was trembling with fear. Simultaneously, I felt as if I heard a bell ringing at the front gate. The second (next) day I was ill. There was no bell at our front gate.

Occult Practices (5):
In 1974, I visited a fortune teller and he told me about my future life. Twelve years have passed now and what he told me seems to have been true.

American Example Cases

Contact the the Dead (4):
My father died 4 years ago. Two years ago on the anniversary of his death I was very busy and could not visit his grave until very late that evening. I prayed at his grave for a few brief moments and as I turned, I saw him sitting in my car. The closer I got the less I saw and when I was close enough the vision disappeared. I have often felt his presence around me, however, that was the only time I really have surely seen him.

Unidentified Apparitional Experience (3):
One day I took a nap and I had the covers over my head. I woke up but still left the covers over my head. I heard someone come towards me and shake me. I quickly threw the covers off to discover there was no one present. To this day I am still trying to explain it.

Occult Practices (3):
I have developed friends in different spheres of consciousness with the use of an ouija board.

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