

# The Influence of Chuang Tsu on Oscar Wilde's Literary Works

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Oscar Wilde, the renowned British writer, was deeply influenced by Eastern culture, particularly by Chuang Tsu's "Thought of Doing Nothing", a Taoist concept of human conduct. Wilde not only embraced this philosophy, but also incorporated it into his literary creations and art criticism, enhancing the steadfastness of his own value judgments.

*Keywords:* Oscar Wilde, Chuang Tsu, "Thought of Doing Nothing"

## Introduction

At the turn of the 19th century, Western cultural traditions started to undergo a significant transformation. The once unshakable foundations of Christian faith began to waver, and rationalism, which had long been held in high regard, gradually declined. In this era of uncertainty, people sought new perspectives and value judgments to reevaluate humanity and various cultural forms. They yearned to establish a spiritual haven outside the traditional value system, which was undergoing a process of upheaval and collapse. As a result, an increasing number of Western intellectuals and artists turned their gaze towards the East, in search of an ideal model that could provide guidance and inspiration. The decline of established Western cultural traditions created a void that needed to be filled. The erosion of Christian faith left many individuals questioning their beliefs and searching for alternative sources of meaning and purpose. Concurrently, the diminishing influence of rationalism led to a reevaluation of the role of reason in understanding the complexities of human existence. This period of cultural transition prompted a widespread exploration of new ideologies, philosophies, and artistic forms that could offer a fresh perspective on life. In this context, the East, with its rich tapestry of ancient wisdom and spiritual traditions, became an alluring destination for Western literati and artists. They turned to Eastern cultures, such as those found in China, India, and Japan, seeking insights and inspiration that could help them navigate the changing landscape of their own societies. The Eastern philosophies of Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, with their emphasis on harmony with nature, spiritual enlightenment, and the pursuit of inner peace, resonated deeply with those who sought a new spiritual home.

## Embracing Oriental Aesthetics: Oscar Wilde's Quest for Artistic Ideal

Oscar Wilde, an artist who resided in a country fascinated by and enamored with Oriental art, stood out among his contemporaries. He possessed a deep affinity for Oriental aesthetics, as evident in his fondness for various Oriental artifacts and his frequent discussions on Oriental sentiment. Wilde was captivated by a wide range of items, including Chinese vases, folding fans, peacock feathers, as well as exotic flowers and herbs, which he avidly collected. His appreciation for these objects extended beyond their material value; they served as gateways to experience the elegance of Chinese life. During his time at Oxford, Wilde became a collector of

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Chinese celadon, adorning his rooms with Chinese vases and constantly striving to align himself with their inherent grandeur (Zhou, 1996, p. 5). In his artistic pursuits, Wilde's affinity for Oriental aesthetics found expression through his collaboration with artist Aubrey Beardsley. Beardsley employed the lines and black-and-white techniques reminiscent of Oriental paintings to illustrate Wilde's renowned play, "Salome", infusing the production with an Oriental touch. Through his use of Oriental colors and motifs, Wilde constructed a living space and artistic realm that vividly and intuitively conveyed his aesthetic ideals. He saw Oriental art as a representation of a beautiful and vibrant surface, encapsulating his preference for "pure formal beauty". Wilde's admiration for Chinese art not only aligned with his aesthetic principles but also exemplified his adoration for exotic beauty. Through the incorporation of Oriental aesthetics, he sought to transcend reality and achieve the artistic ideal of aestheticism.

Through the incorporation of Oriental aesthetics, he sought to transcend reality and achieve the artistic ideal. In conclusion, Oscar Wilde's profound appreciation for Oriental art set him apart as an artist. His penchant for collecting Oriental artifacts and his discussions on Oriental sentiment showcased his fascination with Chinese culture and aesthetics. Collaborating with Aubrey Beardsley to infuse Oriental elements into his play "Salome", Wilde created a visual and artistic world that embodied his aesthetic ideals. Through his embrace of Oriental beauty, Wilde not only adhered to his principles of aesthetics but also transcended reality, embracing the exotic and achieving the artistic ideal of aestheticism.

### **Wilde's Affinity for Chuang Tsu's Philosophy of Inaction**

When the English translation of Chuang Tsu<sup>1</sup> by British Sinologist Charles Ellis was published in 1889, it was immediately paid attention to by Western academic circles. In the following year, Wilde, who admired Oriental culture, read the English translation of the works of Chuang Tsu, an ancient Chinese philosopher who was more than 2,000 years away from him, and published an article entitled "A Chinese Philosopher", especially praising Chuang Tsu's philosophical thought of "doing nothing". The metaphysical speculative color, skeptical spirit, and rebellious critical power embodied in Chuang Tsu's philosophy fit with Wilde's deviant thought, which made Wilde consciously accept the philosophical thought of Chuang Tsu in the far East. In the second year after Wilde came into contact with Chuang Tsu's works, he made a special comment on the importance of doing nothing in his famous literary essay "The Critic as an Artist", "God's chosen people, to live is to do nothing. Action is finite and relative, but the imagination of those who sit idly and watch, wandering in solitude and dreams, is infinite and absolute" (Zhao, 2000a, p. 431). In his eyes, Chuang Tzu, like the obscure philosophers of early ancient Greece, believed in the identity of opposites. In his "The Critic as an Artist", he advocates the idea of no feeling, a pure inner imagination of contemplation and inaction, which is the recognition of Chuang Tsu's thought in the deep spirit. By affirming the existence of Christ God, he denies the finiteness of human life in order to free human life from the bondage of the senses and to reach infinity in the world of the imagination.

### **The Tragedy of Aestheticism and Chuang Tsu's "Spirit of Inaction" in *The Picture of Dorian Gray***

What a stark contrast exists between this Wilde, who finds hope in inaction and seeks eternity in silence, and the earlier secularist who penned *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In his masterpiece, he said through Henry,

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<sup>1</sup>Chuang Tsu. Outer part. Heaven luck.

“You have only a limited number of years in which to truly, completely, and fully enjoy life” (Zhao, 2000b, p. 26). “Live! Let the wonderful flower of life bloom in you! Don’t let anything go. Keep exploring new sensations. Don’t be afraid of anything... A new hedonism—this is the need of our time” (p. 26). He seems to have denied the other side of life, placing life only in the sensory world of this world, and the pleasure of this world is already the main theme of his life. What should we make of this contradiction in Wilde’s thinking? Oscar Wilde has long been regarded as a writer who is full of contradictions and consciously embodies his contradictions. Another aesthete writer and critic of his time is Arthur. Arthur Symons once remarked that Wilde’s “constant expression of sharp and opposing views confirms to us that the opposite can also be true” (Beckson, 1970, p. 96). In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde declares through Henry’s mouth that “the purpose of life is self-development. The full development of one’s nature is the purpose for which each of us is here on earth” (Zhao, 2000b, p. 22). This is in line with the rich connotation of Chuang Tsu’s theory of non-doing, eliminating human beings and being a “supreme person” who is observing the universe quietly. Wilde learned from others and saw the practical significance of Chuang Tsu’s thought of inaction. Dorian is the protagonist of the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Gray can be said to be a typical embodiment of the aesthetic view of life art, and his portrait can be said to be a kind of materialized image of the universal moral concept in society. What Dorian is most concerned about is how to get rid of moral constraints in order to freely engage in sensory experience and adventure. The novel reproduces the tragedy of aestheticism’s artistic life, which profoundly reveals the embarrassment and destruction of aestheticism’s personality when moral consciousness permeates every corner of society. The actions of modern people are sadly reflected in Chuang Tsu’s “spirit of inaction”. With the help of this philosophical thought, Wilde sharply criticized the utilitarianism prevailing in Britain at the end of the 19th century and the restriction of the government’s autocratic behavior on the individual.

### Conclusion

Wilde’s profound grasp of Chuang Tsu’s philosophy became a significant component of his artistic philosophy, offering a rational explanation for the apparent contradictions in his views on literature, art, and creation. However, it is essential to acknowledge that Wilde found Chuang Tsu’s advocacy for a return to the original state of nature surprisingly monotonous. The absolute rawness of such conditions was sufficient to strip away individuality. This realization shattered Wilde’s ideal of individuality in real life and nature, leading him to embark on a new pursuit: to view art and beauty as a “wordless temple” where individuality could be celebrated. Wilde opposed the mere imitation of reality in art and instead championed the creative imagination as an integral part of the artistic process. He rejected the direct expression of emotion in artistic creation and advocated for conscious human control. In doing so, he established a realm detached from the world, where the freedom of personality and the realization of subjectivity could flourish. Art became an independent form, created for its own sake, and the artist could no longer be preoccupied with social life or even their own inner emotions. Their focus shifted solely to the pure form of art. In this absolute transcendence of real life and self, the artist ultimately discovered the freedom of their own personality within a purely formal world. While Wilde may not have fully appreciated Chuang Tsu’s concept of the “beauty of the sound of nature”, which emphasizes not hearing its sound or seeing its form but being enveloped by the vastness of heaven and earth (Chuang Tsu), nor fully embraced the idea of “doing nothing” as a means to align with nature and achieve the unity of heaven and man, he still drew inspiration from the distant and ancient philosophy of the East. He found some insights and believed he had discovered a key to solving his own artistic dilemmas, even if it meant borrowing a stone from another mountain

to attack jade, so to speak.

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