

DeLillo's Taoist Writing and Counterculture in *Great Jones Street*

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1. Introduction

Don DeLillo is one of the most accomplished writers in the United States. Before *White Noise* (1985) brought him a widespread reputation, He had published several novels and *Great Jones Street* (1973), his third novel, is one of them. It describes the seclusive life of rock legend Bucky Wunderlick. Bucky's career is in full swing, bringing him remarkable fame and fortune. Despite that, tired of the entertainment world, Bucky retreats to a three-story apartment on the Great Jones Street in Manhattan. Upstairs lives a middle-aged novelist Edward Fenig, and downstairs a mother called Mrs. Micklewhite and her twenty-year-old son.

Although the novel has been studied from the perspective of its connection with Tibetan Buddhism, this presentation explores its intertextuality with Taoism by placing it in the context of the counterculture movement in America during the 1970s. In referring to Taoist concepts including the butterfly dream, the transformability of opposites and inaction, I argue that it is possible to draw a parallel between *Great Jones Street* and Taoism and that this has something to do with the counterculture of the 1960s in America.

2. The Counterculture of the 1960s and the Spread of Taoism in America

Great Jones Street was written against the backdrop of the counterculture movement of the 1960s in the United States. Between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s, the counterculture movement developed and swept throughout the Western world. It was an anti-establishment cultural phenomenon in which the youth rose against traditions. In the United States, the counterculture generation experienced lifestyle changes. For instance, hippies tended to build their communities, listen to psychedelic music, embrace the sexual revolution, and advocate drug use as a method of raising consciousness. Many hippies were happy to absorb indigenous and Eastern beliefs instead of Western mainstream religions. The 1960s was also an era of rock music, which played a crucial role in spreading the counterculture across the US.

The translation of *Zhuangzi*, one of the two foundational texts of Taoism, had begun before the counterculture movement, but it enjoyed a boom during the 1960s. In 1963, titled *The Sayings of Chuang Tzu*, the first complete translation of *Zhuangzi* in the 20th century was written by James R. Ware; Burton Weston published *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings* in 1964 and *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* four years later; then Gia-Fa Feng and Jane English's *Chuang Tzu: Inner Chapters* were printed in 1974. This boom of *Zhuangzi* translation may have caught DeLillo's attention considering his mention of Yin and Yang in the other two works written in the 1960s. Here, I will explore how Taoist concepts are reflected in the novel.

3. A Taoist Interpretation of *Great Jones Street*

Among the Taoist allusions in *Great Jones Street*, the most eye-catching one is Bucky's dream, which resembles the butterfly dream in *Zhuangzi*. Once Zhuang Zi dreamed that he was a butterfly, fluttering about joyfully and knowing nothing about Zhuang Zi, but suddenly he awoke and could not realize if Zhuang had been dreaming he was a butterfly, or if a butterfly was now dreaming it was Zhou. In *Great Jones Street*, Bucky has a similar dream, feeling that "the bed [was] having a dream and that the dream [was him]" (142). The boundary between illusion and reality is blurred in Bucky's dream, just like in Zhuang Zi's. According to Toshihiko Izutsu, the butterfly dream touches the core of Taoist thinking, which is "the state of chaos" (311), and in a Taoist view, chaos is "the reality of Being" (310).

In addition, Zhuang Zi's butterfly story also indicates the transformation of opposites. At the end of the story of the butterfly dream, Zhuang Zi stressed that "just this is what is meant when we speak of the transformation of anyone being into another—of the transformation of all things" (21). To illustrate the transformability between usefulness and uselessness, Zhuang employed a story, in which a disabled man was exempted from military service due to his disability. Although the man was too useless to be recruited in the eyes of the government, the man had outlived those who were enlisted into the army. In this sense, what is considered useless becomes useful. Zhuang stated at the end of the story, "everyone knows how useful usefulness is, but no one seems to know how useful uselessness is" (43).

This transmutable relationship between uselessness and usefulness is perceived in *Great Jones Street* through a close examination of Bucky's down-stair neighbor the Micklewhite boy. The son is so deformed and retarded that his father's attempt to sell him to a circus for entertainment has been frustrated. However, the useless boy frightens robbers away with his terrible appearance when Mrs. Micklewhite is robbed at home.

Since there exists no distinction between opposites, any action seems unnecessary to Taoists, which is called inaction. The Taoist doctrine of inaction, according to Lao Zi, means "the surrender of personal ambition and all selfish strivings" (17) and is considered as "being without desire" (19). In *Great Jones Street*, Bucky adopts a strategy of inaction when dealing with rumors. During Bucky's seclusion, rumors about his whereabouts spread and there is also a scandal that his band officially breaks up. Tabloids are not the only rumor-makers. Bucky's manager, Globke also intends to exploit Bucky's comeback by fabricating a rumor that an incurable disease has shortened Bucky's life to one year. However, no matter how absurd the rumors are, Bucky never tries to correct them. Fully aware of the overwhelming power of scandals, he claims that he wants no accuracy and even allows reporters to write whatever they want, instead of clarifying their news. Moreover, DeLillo's depiction of Bucky as a character who shuts himself away contrasts with other characters who always run around America or across the world. Given that stillness is regarded as a synonym for inaction, this motionlessness indicates the stillness of Bucky's mind. Meanwhile, the tranquility distinguishes Bucky from Fenig, the novelist obsessed with becoming famous. He has a habit of pacing around his study nervously when he gets stuck with his writing. He is desperate to regain his reputation again after years of being unproductive. To achieve this goal, he decides to pander to readers' tastes. However, the market is so unpredictable that he is frustrated more than ever. The more he struggles to write a best-seller, the more uneasy he becomes. His yearning tortures him so much that he cannot even live a normal life. In this way, Fenig fails to understand the significance of inaction. In contrast, Bucky manages to live an untroubled life by staying calm and desireless. Although he does nothing but stays out of sight of the camera, neither his influence over fans nor his dominance in the music industry has faded away; instead, it grows up unexpectedly. In this sense, fame, which Fenig painstakingly endeavors to earn, has been achieved by Bucky effortlessly. Such coincidence corresponds to the Taoist perspective on the result of inaction. However, the increase in popularity is not what Bucky seeks; it's nothing but a byproduct of his withdrawal. Thus, Bucky continues to escape from the outside world. At the end of the novel, rumors still take wing as usual, but Bucky enjoys his peaceful life by pursuing his philosophy of inaction.

4. Conclusion

The counterculture youth began to develop an interest in Eastern religions and Taoism was one of the Eastern wisdoms that caught their attention. Taoist texts were translated into English, and Taoist philosophy attracted a wider American readership. To examine *Great Jones Street* from a Taoist perspective, several key concepts of Taoism are introduced, including Zhuang Zi's butterfly dream, the transformability of opposites, and inaction. Embedded in the story of the butterfly dream, the Taoist belief of the undifferentiation of reality and illusion parallels Bucky's dream. Meanwhile, the Taoist insight into the transformability of opposites is congenial to Bucky's perception of the transmutable relationship between usefulness and uselessness. Furthermore, the Taoist philosophy of inaction is embodied in Bucky's way of living: putting rumors aside and staying still-minded. By providing a Taoist understanding of DeLillo's novel, this presentation unveils DeLillo's endeavor to bridge American popular culture and Chinese philosophy.

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