

**ARISTOCRACY FOR THE COMMON PEOPLE: CHINESE COMMODITIES  
IN OSCAR WILDE'S AESTHETICISM**

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*Abstract*

Oscar Wilde, who has international cultural influence, is a product of globalisation of the British Empire in the late nineteenth century. To gain an adequate understanding of this controversial writer, it is worthwhile exploring clearly the cultural resources that contributed to his aesthetic system. Most studies of Wilde have largely ignored his oriental influences. This essay focuses on Wilde's writings on Chinese commodities and demonstrates how these writings helped Wilde to formulate a consumerist aestheticism free from class distinction. Firstly, this essay briefly reviews the history of Chinese goods in Britain and highlights the changes in social conditions during the Aesthetic Movement. Secondly, through reading Wilde's writings on Chinese commodities, this essay discusses the relationship between Wilde and Chinese goods and the role of Chinese applied arts in his establishment of consumerist aestheticism for the Victorian public. Thirdly, this essay situates Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in the context of late-Victorian imperial culture, to draw attention to the binary oppositions in Wilde's aestheticism, and the dilemma of keeping the distinctive identity of the aesthetes amidst the democratisation of beauty. Dorian's collection serves both to recognise and resist the temptations of commodity fetishism. Dorian's endless search for sensations leads him to abuse Chinese opium, which parallels the destined fate of the decadent aesthetes and the correspondingly over-expanded imperial culture.

Oscar Wilde has been presented as a multi-faceted artist, who contributed to the development of artistic and cultural movements of his time. A leader of fashion as well as a social critic, Wilde promoted the slogan 'art for art's sake' and commercialised this credo for the public. He had great enthusiasm for various Chinese commodities and absorbed inspiration from them to establish his aesthetic theory. As an undergraduate at Magdalen College, he had his considerable collection of blue-and-white porcelain housed on the shelves. His remark 'I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china' brought him fame in the university.<sup>1</sup>

Wilde's interest in Chinese arts was nothing eccentric in 1870s England. As early as the thirteenth century, the empire of China had fired the imagination of the Europeans through Marco Polo's celebrated account of his travels in the East. Nevertheless, the Eastern trade remained small during the intervening centuries until the discovery of America. The silver from Mexico and Peru enabled the European East India Companies to extend importation of Chinese commodities.<sup>2</sup> The new phase

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987), pp. 43-44.

<sup>2</sup> The main demand in China was only for gold and silver, so the European nations had to pay gold or silver for Chinese commodities. See Oliver Impey, *Chinoiserie: the Impact of Oriental Styles on Western Art and Decoration* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 46-47. This is why the purchasing power of the West was limited before discovering the gold and silver mines in Latin America.

of trading with China encouraged the Europeans' taste for Chinese arts and handicrafts. In Britain in the mid-eighteenth century, the vogue for Chinese goods spread widely amongst the aristocracy, and a taste for objects in Chinese style became almost synonymous with nobility. For example, the Royal family collected Chinese arts, and some of the interior decoration of Buckingham Palace was inspired by Chinese aesthetic principles.<sup>3</sup>

Although the consumption of Chinese goods had a long history in Britain, it was a privilege monopolised by the aristocracy until the 1860s, when the British Empire finalised its early global expansion. The success of the colonial project greatly enhanced ordinary British people's interest in remote commodities. Chinese goods entered into the view of the public through exhibitions and the enlargement of Anglo-Chinese commerce from the 1840s, when a series of treaties were signed between China and Britain, which entitled the British to the most-favoured-nation treatment. These Anglo-Chinese trade agreements were the products of the era of early globalisation prompted by the desire of colonial powers to seek new markets for their manufactured goods as well as to conquer new colonies to obtain raw materials for industry. While a wave of British manufactured goods flooded Chinese shores, shiploads of objects from China (such as tea, silk, porcelains, ceramics, textiles, lacquers, furniture, wallpapers, silverware, prints and paintings) also flowed into Britain. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, Britain became the biggest importer of Chinese commodities in the West.<sup>4</sup> The advancement of navigational technology and the decrease of the cost of transportation after the Industrial Revolution greatly reduced Chinese commodities' price in the British domestic market.<sup>5</sup> Thus, not only the aristocracy but also the ordinary people, including a young student like the 22-year-old Wilde, had the ability to buy Chinese commodities. Meanwhile, the emerging bourgeoisie produced by industrialisation and urbanisation supplied a potentially enormous market for exotic goods as the growing middle classes indulged a passion for decorating their newly owned houses. Because taste, pleasure, and luxury are inseparable from the concept of use, yet ideally separate from necessity, the acquisition of goods that have symbolic values such as rich, romantic, trendy, avant-garde, etc. constitutes a self-confirmation of cultural identity. To these new middle class consumers, the most reliable route was to emulate the current aristocratic vogues. The Chinese goods, which had been popular among the Royal family and upper classes for nearly three centuries but became cheap in the Victorian age, made it possible for the middle classes to obtain an economical aristocratic identity. The Chinese commodities embodied the exoticism of the Chinese empire. When consuming the Chinese goods imported in large quantities,

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<sup>3</sup> C. Maxwell, 'Chinoiserie at Buckingham Palace in the Nineteenth Century', *Burlington Magazine*, 149 (2007), 383-92.

<sup>4</sup> Jerry L. S. Wang, 'The Profitability of Anglo-Chinese Trade, 1861-1913', *Business History*, 35.3 (1993), 39-65.

<sup>5</sup> Kevin O'Rourke and Jeffrey Williamson, 'When did Globalisation Begin?' *European Review of Economic History* 6 (2002), 23-50. They argue that it was the nineteenth century transport revolution that precipitated the 'decline in the international dispersion of commodity prices'; quotation from p. 26.

they were also consuming the brand of 'China' simultaneously. In Wilde's time, the taste for Chinese commodities was not necessarily associated with an elite identity. Besides the upper classes, the ordinary British middle class family also showed interest in Chinese goods and were able to afford the prices. The consumption of Chinese commodities was not limited to any specific social class or economic position during the period of the aesthetic movement in Britain.

### I. Oscar Wilde's Consumption of China: Porcelain, Tea and Textiles

During Wilde's Oxford days, John Ruskin and Walter Pater were his most prominent spiritual supervisors. Ruskin was Professor of Fine Art at Oxford. Wilde, having attended Ruskin's lectures, determined to participate in the practical beautification of the countryside. He wrote to Ruskin, 'from you I learned nothing but what was good' (Ellmann, p. 48). Pater, less interested in social reformation but more attracted by the artistic senses, also had a lasting influence on Wilde. In *De Profundis*, Wilde recalled Pater's *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* as 'a book [which] had strange influence over my life' (Ellmann, p 46). This is similar to the scene in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* where Dorian cannot refuse the allure of the poisoned perfection of a novel that Lord Henry gives him. 'Ruskin and Pater competed for the soul of the young "Dorian Wilde"', and both men were customers of Liberty & Co. in Regent Street, London, a shop that enjoyed the greatest reputation for the retail of decorative artefacts from China and other oriental countries in the late nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Many members of the aesthetic circle collected oriental applied arts, such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris, E.W. Godwin, and James McNeil Whistler. In this respect, Wilde's enthusiasm for blue-and-white when he was in Oxford was a confirmation of his identity as an aesthete.

The success of the American lecture tour in 1882 first established Wilde's reputation in the aesthetic movement. Styling himself as 'professor of aesthetics', Wilde took on the role of spokesperson for the British aesthetic movement in America.<sup>7</sup> He prepared three lectures during this tour. The first was 'The English Renaissance', but he soon found what interested the Americans was not the history of European thought, Hellenism or the birth of the aesthetic movement in the French Revolution, but rather what the new world should do about its own arts and how the lecturer would advise them to decorate their homes. Therefore, Wilde changed the topic from artistic theory to artistic practice: that is, 'The Decorative Arts' and 'The House Beautiful', which sounded more practical and more appealing to his American audience. He toured triumphantly with these two lectures for nine months, adding appropriate anecdotes as he arrived in a new city.

The 1882 American tour was a significant event in the development of Wilde's aestheticism. This was the first time that Wilde made profits from the commodification of the aesthetic movement and, more significantly, the

<sup>6</sup> *The Wilde Years: Oscar Wilde and the Art of his Time*, ed. Tomoko Sato and Lionel Lambourne (London: Barbican Art Galleries & Philip Wilson, 2000), p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> Mary W. Blanchard, *Oscar Wilde's America* (London: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 7.

commodification of himself. The timing of Wilde's tour had everything to do with Gilbert and Sullivan's opera *Patience*, which satirised the aesthetic movement and the popular stereotypes of an aesthete. In this opera, aestheticism was signalled by visual displays: long hair, knee breeches, silk stockings, lilies and sunflowers. Instead of denying such materialisation, Wilde tried to give the audiences what they expected, making himself a show for the public. These lectures to American audiences, and the series of lectures on his impressions of America to British audiences when he returned to England, represented the successful interaction between the ivory tower of aestheticism and the beautification of ordinary living. The Aesthetic movement could be widely participated in regardless of social position, material fortune or aesthetic knowledge. In such an engagement with the public, it is interesting to notice that Wilde often took Chinese commodities as references to support his aesthetic ideas. This seems to begin with his visit to Chinatown in San Francisco in April 1882. He showed great admiration for Chinese artefacts and his interest in things Chinese was extensive, including blue-and-white porcelain, China tea, Chinese silks, and the textiles and costumes of Chinese theatre, all of which were popular icons of China in the Western world.

Blue-and-white is one of the hallmarks of the British Aesthetic Movement and Wilde showed great appreciation of it in his lectures. This commodity played a significant role in the foundation of European chinoiserie, for it had been the major import among the 'art objects' since the time when China-mania arose in Europe from the sixteenth century onwards. These porcelains were simultaneously functional wares, treasured possessions, and assertions of magnificent power. Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603) possessed several china pieces, while King Charles II had a larger collection. After the Glorious Revolution of 1688, William III and Mary II brought several hundred pieces of porcelain from the Dutch republic to England, along with a new continental fashion.<sup>8</sup> The taste for porcelain became the currency of social emulation among the aristocracy and gradually spread down the social ladder to the prosperous bourgeoisie. The popularity of porcelain throughout Britain stemmed not only from its practical use in dining but also from its incorporation into the new consumer vogue for interior decoration, a trend that grew as the elite built increasingly spacious homes.

During the Victorian period, Chinese porcelain continued to be adored. It was much easier for the Victorians to get access to and obtain a greater understanding of Chinese porcelain than their ancestors. There were oriental shops selling Chinese porcelains in London, and we can detect how this Chinese artefact was favoured by observing how much of the Chinese collection in the museums in Britain was made up of blue-and-white, purchased from China during the latter half of the nineteenth century. For example, in 1883 the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert) employed Stephen Bushell, a member of the British legation in Peking, to buy ceramics from China in large quantities. The 240 pieces he bought not only covered the highly decorative and colourful ceramics which the West was already quite

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Finlay, 'The Pilgrim Art: The Culture of Porcelain in World History', *Journal of World History*, 9.2 (1998), 172-73.

familiar with, but also included objects made for the imperial court and the scholar's table that had not been seen in the West. To collect blue-and-white porcelain was a wide fashion among the Victorian society. A watercolour painting titled *Lady Betty Germain's China Closet, Knole*, drawn by Ellen Clacy in 1880, depicted this cult. This picture showed the subject's Elizabethan house of Knole, where she formed a large collection of Chinese porcelain with a tall cabinet full of blue-and-white china, and a young woman in blue garments appreciating the beauty of them.

Wilde was also very fond of blue-and-white. Besides his famous remark in Oxford quoted at the beginning of this essay, Wilde said in a letter to William Ward on 3 March 1877 'I enjoy your room awfully. The inner room is filled with china, pictures, a portfolio'.<sup>9</sup> He praised his friend's room decoration because it displayed china and other works of art. The collection and consumption of Chinese porcelain demonstrated William Ward's aesthetic credentials. Walter Hamilton, the first historian of the aesthetic movement, gave a notion of fashion believed by Wilde's time:

Chippendale furniture, dadoes, old-fashioned brass and wrought iron work, medieval lamps, stained-glass in small squares, and old china are held to be the outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace and intensity (Sato & Lambourne, p. 24).

Owning china, in the eyes of fashion, was one of the necessary material pre-conditions to ensure one's aesthetic identity. This idea was widely accepted by the Victorian Aesthetic circle. The blue-and-white collectors included almost all the significant members in the Aesthetic movement. In Wilde's aesthetics of house decoration, blue-and-white china, because of its beautiful colour, noble shape and proportioned form, was one of the best objects to bring an aesthetic sense to a room. For instance, in *The House Beautiful*, Wilde described Whistler's breakfast room in London as a 'marvel of beauty'. He said 'the shelves are filled with blue and white china', and 'the breakfast-table is laid in this apartment, with [...] its dainty blue and white china, with a cluster of red and yellow chrysanthemums in an old Nankin vase in the centre'.<sup>10</sup> Whistler used blue-and-white in his room decoration. These porcelains were decorated with enamel in the shape of Chinese ink-paintings. The themes were usually natural landscapes or noble beauties, describing a peaceful and leisured life of the aristocracy in ancient China. These pictures used a very different method of perspective from Western realistic paintings, and brought distinctive quality and design value to blue-and-white china through simple lines and colours, giving the Western consumers fresh artistic enjoyment. The Nankin vase that Whistler put in the centre of this room belonged to the school of blue-and-white of the Ming dynasty. Wilde explained why this was 'a charming room' by the standards of

<sup>9</sup> *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 40. Further references to this book are cited in the text, and abbreviated as *CL*.

<sup>10</sup> *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 916. Further references to this book are cited in the text, and abbreviated as *CW*.

aestheticism; he described it ‘catching all the warm light and taking on of all surrounding beauty, and giving to the guest a sense of joyousness, comfort, and rest’. Moreover, ‘nothing could be simpler, it costs little, and it shows what a great effect might be realised with a little and simple colour’ (CW, p. 916). The simplicity and elegance of blue-and-white fitted the taste of the Victorian aesthetes and supplied an alternative to the dominance of the neo-classical style in the domestic interior.

In some respects, the Aesthetic movement is an inheritor of early nineteenth century Romanticism. The romance of blue-and-white also attracted the Aesthetes because it provided them with ‘poetic space’, an extra use-value of this commodity. During the Renaissance, when Europeans did not know the materials of porcelain, they shared a popular view that porcelain from China had something magical; as Impey suggests, ‘it was widely believed that porcelain was corruptible by poison, if poison was placed in a porcelain, the bowl would break’ (Impey, p. 54). The ‘marvellous’ china persisted in stimulating the Victorian Aesthetes’ imagination, too. As Andrew Lang’s poem *Ballades in Blue China* (1880) eulogised:

Of china that’s ancient and blue,  
Unchipped all the centuries through.  
It has passed since the chime of it rang,  
And they fashion’d it, figure and hue,  
In the reign of the Emperor Hwang (Sato & Lambourne, p. 27).

Written at the height of the fashion for blue-and-white, this ballad expressed the emotion of porcelain fetishism. Lang admired these fragile objects as they had survived for centuries. The mythical representation of nature is traced to the ‘reign of the Emperor Hwang’, four thousand years ago when China was united as a country under a legendary king. Therefore, the taste for blue-and-white was not only consumption of a piece of exotic commodity, but also a poetic experience of an ancient civilisation of glory and romance free from the pollution of modern industrialisation. The aesthetic movement was a reaction against high art and a renewal of interest in eighteenth-century taste. The oriental romance attached to blue-and-white contributed to the Aesthetes’ rebellion against religious morality and neoclassicism. The Victorian aestheticism of room decoration abandoned the rules of ‘heavily carved furniture, large mirrors in gilt frames’: instead, blue-and-white Chinese porcelain, with its relatively simple decoration, intelligent design, balanced form, graceful colour and romantic imagination, became one of the hallmarks of an enlightened home.<sup>11</sup> Wilde summarised this aesthetic taste and advocated it in *The House Beautiful*, saying ‘the beauty [...] depends upon the quality and appearance of the china and glass; for a good permanent dinner set have Japanese or blue-and-white china’ (CW, p. 921).

Chinese tea was another major commodity in Anglo-Chinese commerce during the nineteenth century. Liberty & Co. once gave a pack of tea to their clients for free as long as they bought artefacts in the shop, and there was a shop near London

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<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Aslin, *The Aesthetic Movement* (London: Ferndale, 1981), p. 64.

Bridge where a piece of china was given away free with every pound of tea bought.<sup>12</sup> The East India Company first brought Chinese tea to England from Canton in the period of Cromwell's rule, and for a long time drinking tea was confined to the Royal family and the wealthiest class because it was too expensive for normal British people to afford. However, the monarchy and nobility's consumption established the fashion for tea. So in the nineteenth century, when large amounts of Chinese tea were imported and Britain planted tea in its Indian colony (which greatly reduced its price), it soon became the national drink. When Wilde gave his lecture in San Francisco, he went to Chinatown to drink tea. In *The Decorative Arts*, he said, 'when I was in San Francisco, I used to visit [...] the Chinese restaurants on account of the beautiful tea they made there' (CW, p. 935).

Chinese culture regarded drinking tea as an enjoyment of leisured life as well as an effective means of social intercourse. As early as the Tang Dynasty (780 A.D.), the activity of drinking tea had already become fashionable in China. Through the etiquette of tasting manners, the Chinese people used tea to show respect to their guests or express their appreciation. The appropriate manner of drinking tea could demonstrate one's education and social class. Wilde seemed quite interested in the cultural implications of Chinese tea. When he gave a lecture on his *Impressions in America* (1883) around Britain, he talked about Chinese tea to amuse his audiences. The London newspaper *The Era* (14 July 1883) reported that 'the lecturer (Oscar Wilde), dwelt upon the beauties and peculiarities of Chinese theatricals in San Francisco, where the audiences show their approval, not by applause, but by taking a little cup of tea'. Every time, as *The Era* recorded, this witty story of Chinese tea would arouse laughter.

However, in Britain, Chinese tea played a similar role in the social life of the upper classes. In the first scene of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Algernon asks the servant to make afternoon tea for his aunt (CW, p. 359). However, as Jeremy Lalonde has argued, Lady (Augusta) Bracknell was actually a middle class woman.<sup>13</sup> Because of its mass consumption in the Victorian era, tea drinking gained a double social identity: being consumed by both the elites and the popular classes, enabling gracefulness and nobility to be achieved economically. In other words, Chinese tea became a meeting point for the various classes of Victorian Britain. Elegant Chinese teacups also attracted Wilde. In *The House Beautiful*, he described 'a most beautiful cup as delicate as the petal of a flower' (CW, p. 921), and in *The Decorative Art* he made an analogy between 'the tiny porcelain cups' and 'the petals of a white rose' (CW, p. 935). In contrast to the pleasure of drinking Chinese tea and enjoying the teacups in Chinatown, when Wilde used 'common delft cups about an inch-and-a-half thick' in 'the grand hotels', he thought 'I have deserved something nicer' (CW, p. 935). The experience of drinking tea in Chinatown gave Wilde a strong impression of what 'artistic life' should be.

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<sup>12</sup> Bernard Denvir, *The Late Victorians: Art, Design and Society, 1852-1910* (New York: Longman, 1986), p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Jeremy Lalonde, 'A Revolutionary Outrage: *The Importance of Being Earnest* as Social Criticism', *Modern Drama* 48.4 (2005), 659-76.

Textiles, a Chinese commodity imported into Europe since Roman times, also stimulated Wilde's interest. They were still one of the most competitive Chinese goods for export in the nineteenth century. Liberty & Co. in London sold silks and dress fabrics from China. According to Elisabeth Aslin, the Victorians described Chinese silk as 'diaphanous, exquisite, being suitable in every case for drapery' (Aslin, p. 82). Chinese fabrics were used in the stage costumes for *Patience* and *The Colonel and the Cup*. Liberty first referred to Chinese textiles as 'art fabrics' in 1876, and soon this laudation spread, being widely accepted in the 1880s. Wilde recommended Chinese textiles for floor decoration to his American audiences. In *The House Beautiful*, he criticised modern carpets as 'unhealthy or inartistic', because 'carpets absorb the dust, and it is impossible to keep them as perfectly clean as anything about us should be'. He suggested 'it is better to use a parquetry flooring around the sides and rugs in the centre', and had the floor 'laid with pretty matting and strewn with those very handsome and economical rugs from China, Persia, and Japan'. In this case, 'art and sanitary regulations go hand in hand' (CW, p. 918). Wilde's taste for Chinese textiles was not his patent; instead the use of Chinese silks and textiles in room decoration was common in his time: for example, an essay on 'Liberty Stuffs, Blue China, and Peacocks Feathers' in *The Pall Mall Gazette* (14 November 1885) introduced rooms decorated with Chinese textiles: 'The walls are hung with the richest embroideries and glow with the most brilliant colours. Here are ancient Chinese tapestry, with golden dragons [...] the state robes of a Chinese mandarin [...] hangings from Chinese temples, embroidered with dragons and beasts and birds'.

Chinese textiles usually have decorative motifs rooted in Chinese myths, legends and traditions. Most of these motifs on embroideries, woven silks and printed cottons appear as balanced, spontaneous forms rather than as exaggerated expressions. The traditional technique places high emphasis on the productive procedure of tinting the textiles. Wilde showed his appreciation of Chinese colouring in *The Truth of Masks*: 'the fine Chinese blue, which we all so much admire, takes two years to dye, and the English public will not wait so long for a colour' (CW, p. 1171). He satirised the consumption of art in a market economy, highlighting the conflict between the production of traditional crafts and the demands of mass consumption in a commercial age, as well as the differing attitudes towards time and efficiency in the traditional Chinese agricultural society and British industrial capitalist society.

The costume in Chinese operas displayed the beauty of Chinese textiles. When Wilde was in San Francisco he visited the Chinese theatres 'for their rich dresses' (CW, p. 921). The costumes in Chinese opera are dazzling, various and colourful. The functions of costume are complex: they provide visual enjoyment, indicate the theme and type of a play, display the social status of a character. The beautiful colours, exotic designs and decorative accessories of the costume showcased the high level of Chinese embroidery and woven skills. Wilde wrote a letter to Norman Forbes-Robertson on 27 March 1882 to share his excitement: 'tonight I am escorted by the Mayor of the city through the Chinese quarter, to their theatre and joss houses and rooms, which will be most interesting' (CL, p. 159).

## II. Dorian Gray's Consumption of China: Consumerism, Fetishism and Decadence

Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) comprehensively displayed the cultural implications of Chinese commodities in the context of aestheticism. Richard Ellmann notes that Walter Pater 'was delighted with the book', but objected to the portrayal of Lord Henry Wotton, who regurgitated many of Pater's sentiments from *Studies in the History of Renaissance* (Ellmann, p. 299). This *fin de siècle* Gothic fantasy novel, as Anne Varty argues, is 'an extraordinary anthology of styles, dovetailed to express the central ethical idea that art, serving as a repository for the conscience of a culture, extends or constrains the perceptual range of humanity'.<sup>14</sup> Richard Ellmann names the 1880s' aestheticism 'the age of Dorian' (Ellmann, p. 289), as Dorian supplied the reader with a model of the Aesthetic lifestyle. Dorian is a dandy, who represents a retreat from politics and history into art and commodity culture. He indulges in the pursuit of beauty, pleasure and style through collecting a wide range of strictly Aesthetic commodities from the Orient: perfumes, musical instruments, jewels, embroideries, tapestries, porcelain, antiques and cultural relics. In the famous chapter eleven, Wilde gives an inventory of the resultant objects of Dorian's evolving passions for collecting, which Regenia Gagnier describes as 'a textbook of *fin de siècle* economic man'.<sup>15</sup>

Among Dorian's collection there are arts from China: 'for a whole year, he sought to accumulate the most exquisite specimens that he could find of textile and embroidered work, getting [...] elaborate yellow Chinese hangings' (CW, p. 105). Wilde depicted Dorian's thirst for these decorative oriental luxuries as the external manifestation of this hero's inner artistic superiority. By collecting arts of different nations and historical periods 'he sought to elaborate some new scheme of life that would have its reasoned philosophy and its ordered principles, and find in the spiritualising of the senses its highest realization' (CW, p. 99). Chinese hangings, due to their artistic freedom, sound artisanship and genuine good taste, contribute to Dorian's realisation of the senses. In this novel, Wilde tried to sell the Aesthetic living style to his readers. Almost all the Chinese commodities that Wilde was interested in appeared in the novel. For instance, Lord Henry's Mayfair house library in the fourth chapter:

It was, in its way, a very charming room [...] some large blue China jars and parrot-tulips were arranged on the mantelshelf, and through the small leaded panels of window streamed the apricot-coloured light of a summer day in London (CW, p. 45).

Both blue china and the tulips were Aesthetic symbols. This description of Lord Henry's library was based on the composition of Wilde's own room at Oxford, which

<sup>14</sup> Anne Varty, *A Preface to Oscar Wilde* (Essex: Longman, 1998), p. 115.

<sup>15</sup> Regenia Gagnier, 'Is Market Society the Fin of History?', in *Culture and Politics at the Fin de Siècle* ed. Sally Ledger and McCracken Scott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 302.

was decorated with fashionable blue-and-white vases and other oriental artistic treasures. In fact, Wilde offered numerous and elaborate descriptions of the rooms in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Almost every chapter is situated within a different closed space. Wilde took full advantage of his talent in room decoration. Dorian is very popular with London aristocratic society. Chinese tea as a sociable means appears in Chapter 17, as Dorian talks to the pretty Duchess of Monmouth at teatime, and in Chapter 2 a tea tray is set down upon a small Japanese table and ‘globe-shaped china dishes were brought in by a page’ (CW, p. 35). On these occasions, the consumption of Chinese tea identifies the character as educated, graceful and superior.

The consumption of Chinese commodities had a long history before the Aesthetic movement. However, in Dorian’s age, the consumption of ‘China’ was part of the practice of nineteenth century imperialism, in which the products of ‘past’ or ‘primitive’ cultures (which referred to both those ‘dead or dying’ oriental cultures and European civilisation in the previous centuries) were fetishistically consumed. The cultural capital gained by consuming oriental objects resided specifically in the evocation of an aristocratic yet simpler past, a time characterised by effortless aesthetic cultivation rather than industrial, capitalist striving. Elisabeth Aslin observes that the aesthetes of 1870s and ’80s developed ways to ‘pass on to others the aesthetic standards discovered in past ornament’ (Aslin, p. 14). In treating the eighteenth century as a golden age in art, which was remote from the shapeless vulgarity of the late nineteenth century, the highly self-conscious Aesthetes found resources to conduct their offensive against established artistic notions represented by neo-classicalism. As Malcolm Haslam points out, designers and consumers tried every other style known to them, whether from ancient times or from distant places.<sup>16</sup> Through the rebellion against neo-classicism, the Victorian Aesthetes rediscovered ideas of form and artistic freedom. The elegance, abstraction and simplicity suggested by eighteenth-century’s Chinese fashion provided the Aesthetes with a release from the sinuous intricacies of Victorian medievalist design and the insistent pictorialism of its painting. To reshape Victorian culture, John Ruskin recommended a return to pre-industrial methods of production and craft workshops. He questioned whether anything made by machine could really be called art. Ruskin’s theory contributed to the popularity of Chinese handicrafts and other handmade goods among Victorian consumers. As a disciple of Ruskin, Wilde was very familiar with Western art history. When he described Dorian’s consumption precisely in order to show the hero’s elitist character, he searched for inspiration from the authority of traditional aristocratic taste, among which the consumption of Chinese commodities and other oriental luxuries separated the nobility as culturally superior to the common people.

Thus Dorian’s acquisition of goods from China and other oriental nations secures his ‘aristocratic’ distinction. The relationship between consumers and commodities has been reversed. The consumption of commodities is no longer the consumer’s individual choice: instead it is the commodities that decide who the consumers are. As Thorstein Veblen points out, the facet of conspicuous or honorific

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<sup>16</sup> Malcolm Haslam, *In the Nouveau Style* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), p. 1.

consumption is fundamentally an effort to discriminate not between commodities, but between classes.<sup>17</sup> That is to say, the customers not only consumed the practical use-value in a general sense of these commodities, but also gained a certain reputation and cultural power through obtaining the symbolic values (such as romance, wealth, fashion, nobility, modern, elegance) which were associated with these commodities. On many occasions the specific symbolic values of a commodity were created by corresponding social aesthetics. Meanwhile, people's aesthetic superiority was socially recognised when they purchased commodities with an attendant fashionable or cultural implication. As a result, by collecting oriental handmade objects that were distinguished by their beauty, uniqueness and rarity from Victorian machine production, Dorian creates an aesthetic consumption above the mass market. He consumes both the use-value in practical life and the symbolic value in social fashion of Chinese commodities and finalises his self-definition of aesthetic identity through such consumption.

However, despite resisting bourgeois or mass styles of consumption, Dorian's collection also serves as a recognition of the temptations of commodity fetishism. Influenced by William Morris's socialist theory of art, Wilde did not reject the utilities of Chinese commodities. For example, the yellow Chinese hangings in Dorian's collection are pieces of art, but also commodities with practical use-value as furniture. The utilisation of artistic commodities was another aspect of the Aesthetic Movement which used to be neglected by some Victorian scholars, but which took a significant position in Wilde's writings. For instance, Wilde reconstructed the relationship between art and life in *The Decay of Lying*, pointing out that Rossetti's paintings were not just popular visual arts but could be taken as the guide for women's dress fashion. In other words, the beauty of Rossetti's art could be realised in a woman's practical life. For Wilde, to create a piece of art does not mean the refusal of the market. He encouraged his audience to 'use arts'. For example, he argued in *The House Beautiful* that 'you have to use delicate things to accustom your servants to handle them securely; it will be a martyrdom for a long time at first, but you may be content to suffer in so good a cause' (CW, p. 921). In *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young*, he declared 'one should either be a work of art or wear a work of art' (CW, p. 1245). Each individual might become an artist by following fashions or consuming the arts. Therefore, Dorian's ceaseless search for sensations, in another aspect, shows the obsession driven by commodity consumerism. Lord Henry's aphorism, 'the only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it', best explains Dorian's (or Wilde's) art-consumerist ideology. While Wilde depicted Dorian's collection in order to show this hero's spiritual or aesthetic ascendancy, the logic of the dandy becomes assimilated into the logic of commodity culture. At first glance, it might seem that Dorian's collection represented a kind of extinct European nobility, but the imperialism of Victorian Britain and the Industrial Revolution made all these oriental goods easily available.

The Victorians witnessed a rapid democratisation of the decorative arts. Books and periodicals on decorative arts appeared in large quantities in the 1870s and 1880s.

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<sup>17</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: A. M. Kelley, 1965), pp. 160–61.

Entertainment, decoration and fashion formed cultural industries. The Victorian public lived in an era of wealth and prosperity, enjoying the products of new modes of manufacturing and distribution in a vastly expanded world of commodities. While Dorian views native, coloured races and their arts as a remote, sealed, pre-industrial civilisation from the past that stands in opposition to modern technology and commodity culture, these objects, in fact, had already been involved in the world capitalist system. Handmade, beautiful but cheap Chinese commodities supplied the Victorians with a 'unique' but economical aesthetic experience. Elisabeth Aslin argues that Philistines, a term which in the context of the Aesthetic movement meant one deficient in liberal culture whose interest was bounded by material and commonplace things as opposed to the high-minded spiritual and artistic values of the Aesthetes, referred more to those whose sensibilities were not so well cultivated, rather than acting as a definition of a certain economic status (Aslin, p. 15). The Victorian middle classes were eager to display their affluence by establishing collections in imitation of the aristocracy and by emulating their upper class purchasing habits. The Aesthetes did much to set up the standards of beauty in bourgeois society and to cultivate public tastes. An article in *The Burlington*, which was a mouthpiece of the Aesthetic movement in 1881 and 1882, described how:

This improvement is rapidly spreading through all classes of society. Good taste is no longer an expensive luxury to indulge in. The commonest articles of domestic use are now fashioned in accordance with its laws and the poorest may have in their homes at the cost of a few pence cups and saucers and jugs and teapots, more artistic in form and design than were to be found twenty years ago in any homes but those of the cultured rich (Aslin, p. 15).

It showed that in practice an ordinary Victorian family could emulate Dorian's 'aristocratic' collection, so long as they had an interest in these objects.

Wilde's Aestheticism assimilated consumerist economics. He tried to sell his audience an economical Aestheticism that everyone was able to consume. The room decoration he talked about was in 'the simplest and humblest of homes' (CW, p. 926). Wilde adjusted his Aestheticism to the model of using the smallest money to get the biggest enjoyment. A person's aesthetic taste did not depend on how much money he squandered on collecting expensive arts, but relied on the actual effects of his artistic devotion. In *The House Beautiful*, Wilde explained this idea by illustrating the example of Whistler.

Mr. Whistler has recently done two rooms in London which are marvels of beauty. One is the famous Peacock Room [...] It cost £3,000; the other room [...] only £30 (CW, p. 916).

The cost did not determine the artistic value, because both rooms were successful aesthetic works. Rather, it realised an ideal economic model. A common person could spend £30 to get as equal artistic enjoyment as those who spent £3,000. This

picturesque advertisement appealed to middle class audiences because it created a possibility for them to share an equal aesthetic identity with those who had superior economic power over them. As Wilde argued in the same lecture, 'art is not given to the people by costly foreign paintings in private galleries' nor is it a 'luxury for the rich and idle'; instead 'the art I speak of will be a democratic art made by the hands of the people and for the benefit of the people' (CW pp. 926-27). The idea of aesthetic democracy advocated by Ruskin and Morris, 'aristocracy of everyone', obtained its feasibility through Wilde's consumerist Aestheticism.<sup>18</sup>

The descent of the cultural identity of consuming arts from the aristocracy to the common person was an achievement born of the missionary aspect of the Aesthetic movement in the social context of Victorian capitalism. John Ruskin believed a learned aristocracy had the task of guiding the poor toward the appreciation of art, to 'educate the people to know what was beautiful and good for its moral and social benefits'.<sup>19</sup> As a disciple of Ruskin, Wilde was also concerned about how to enhance the aesthetic taste of the Victorian public. Nonetheless, the popularity of art-consumption in this commodity culture also brought the Aesthetes a dilemma. This philanthropy raised another question: if everyone were educated to have good taste, the object of Aesthetes' taste would be less valuable, and their spiritual superiority could no longer be demonstrated.

Wilde tried to solve this paradox in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by describing the hero's endless reconstruction of his collection of oriental arts, never stopping at one point but persisting in seeking for the secret of some new joy. In Chapter Eleven, readers are given an inventory of Dorian's evolving passions for collecting. In fact, this solution was taken from an idea in the Conclusion to Pater's *The Renaissance*. Pater demonstrated the transience and relativity of all things and the need, therefore, 'to be forever curiously testing new opinions and counting new impressions'.<sup>20</sup> Dorian's evolving passions for collecting, which could be seen as an analogy of the thriving expansion of the British Empire across the world, serves as recognition of the temptations of commodity fetishism. Nevertheless, it leads to the abuse of opium, the symbol of decadence, magic, joy and inspiration since Coleridge's time. In Wilde's description of the opium den in Chapter Sixteen, Dorian 'knew in what strange heavens they [opium-eaters] were suffering, and what dull hells were teaching them the secret of some new joy' (CW, p.136). The hero is attracted by the opium den, where 'the memory of old sins could be destroyed by the madness of sins that were new' (CW, p. 134). His thirst for opium is driven by the same psychology as that operating in the reconstruction of his collection. The opium addiction is the transmogrifying form of commodity fetishism.

In the aestheticisation of opium, Wilde employs the symbol of 'China' to bridge consumerism and decadence:

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<sup>18</sup> Linda Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art: The Victorians and Aesthetic Democracy* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1996), p. xii.

<sup>19</sup> Diana Maltz, *British Aestheticism and the Urban Working Classes, 1870-1900* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Raby, *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* (Shanghai: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 83.

At last he got up from the sofa on which he had been lying, went over to it, and, having unlocked it, touched some hidden spring. A triangular drawer passed slowly out. His fingers moved instinctively towards it, dipped in, and closed on something. It was a small Chinese box of black and gold-dust lacquer, elaborately wrought, the sides patterned with curved waves, and the silken cords hung with round crystals and tasselled in plaited metal threads. He opened it. Inside was a green paste, waxy in lustre, the odour curiously heavy and persistent (CW, p. 133).

In this scene in the fifteenth chapter, the hero anxiously unlocks an ornate cabinet, which holds a secret stash of Chinese-boxed opium. Here, the Chinese box, which is an aesthetic object as well as an oriental commodity, contains dangerous opium and acts as a medium for Dorian's decadence. The inspiration here might come from Wilde's visit to the opium den during his trip to Chinatown in San Francisco, but is more likely to be based on Victorian perceptions of Orientalism, in which the Chinese Empire was a symbol of mystery, hedonism and decadence due to its extravagant lifestyle. The depiction of Chinese opium culture was part of the Victorian construction of an Oriental "Other" governed by its addiction to immoral sensual pleasure. The decadence of Dorian's abuse of dangerous opium in order to gain extraordinary sensual experience implies his inevitable trajectory from the indulgence of commodity fetishism to decadence, a trajectory reflected in the Victorians' perception of Chinese culture.

In conclusion, Wilde's writings on Chinese commodities show his view of a consumerist aestheticism, one that recommended 'applied art' to the public and sensual experiments to the elites. The Aesthetic movement was a revival or renaissance of the decorative arts. Artists and designers worked enthusiastically to improve the taste of the public. Aestheticism was not just an elite debate limited to the academy; it also served as a way of materially improving society. Wilde did not reject consumerist culture, but connected it with aristocratic tastes, creating a new economics of beauty, which mixed commodity logic and aesthetic pursuit, ordinary living and artistic utopia. The consumption of Chinese commodities, which initially appeared as luxurious markers of class distinction, spread from the aristocracy and the social elites to a much broader market in the late nineteenth century. It was driven by the forces of consumerism, industrialisation and the new middle classes' ambitions of social mobility. The Aesthetic movement was both an expression of aristocratic sensibility and a plea for social transformation. Chinese commodities, from their noble heritage in classical times and democratic price in the Victorian age, became the point of contact between interior spiritual superiority and exterior cultural consumption. They served as the memory of aristocratic glory and the everyday enjoyment of the common family, thus entering the philosophy of Wilde's consumerist aestheticism. However, during the democratisation of beauty, Wilde tried to keep the superior cultural identity of the aesthetes. The collecting of oriental arts became a form of commodity fetishism, and 'China' mirrored the inevitable decadence of the Aesthetic movement and the over-expanded imperial culture.

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