

Eastern Ideology in Hollywood Movies: The Cases of Inception (2010), Interstellar (2014) and Oppenheimer (2023) by Director Christopher Nolan

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Abstract

The application of Eastern thoughts (Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.) has made impressive changes from the late 20th century to the early 21st century, through outstanding films such as *The Matrix* (1999), *Avatar* (2009), etc. Especially in recent years, Eastern ideas have been applied smoothly and clearly through films which won major awards such as *Everything everywhere all at once* (2022), *Avatar: The way of water* (2022), and most recently *Oppenheimer* (2023). This article studies Eastern ideology in three films *Inception* (2010), *Interstellar* (2014) and *Oppenheimer* (2023) by British director Christopher Nolan in the three aspects of story ideas, character inner development and the use of sound and image symbols in the films. The article compares these three works with each other to illustrate the progress in using Eastern ideology in the artistic creation of a Western director. In addition, it will attempt to demonstrate the work Nolan has done in establishing a milestone in the convergence of Eastern and Western ideology in world cinema.

Keywords: Eastern Thoughts, Hollywood Movie, Christopher Nolan

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Introduction

The issue of ideological exchange is a complex issue in world cultural history, and the clear separation between Eastern and Western thought can sometimes cause controversy. However, it cannot be denied that in some historical periods, the ideas of some countries have gained prominence and are consistently being actively or passively adopted in other countries.

From the 20th century onwards, with the development economic rise of numerous Eastern countries, as well as more positive and equal cultural exchanges between the East and the West, Eastern thought has also been continuously recognized, and to some extent influenced Western art, including Hollywood cinema.

This article illustrates how there is a meeting of East and West ideas in Christopher Nolan's films, with three specific examples: *Inception* (2010), *Interstellar* (2014) and *Oppenheimer* (2023), shown through the three aspects of story ideas, character inner development and the use of sound and image symbols in the films.

In recent years, the issue of how Eastern ideas are received in the West has received more and more attention among researchers and scholars. A typical example of the study of the history of the reception of Eastern ideas in the West would be the following:

In 2019, East China Normal University established a major interdisciplinary research project "Lao Tzu's Doctrine in a Global Perspective of History - Verification and Analysis of the Origin, Connotation, Future and Overseas Influence of Lao Tzu's Thoughts". As part of the project, Wu Zhiyong (武志勇)'s article "How the Tao Te Ching came to the Western world" points out that Lao Tzu's books began to be translated into French and Russian from 1823, into English from 1868, and into German since 1870. From then on, this work was translated into a multitude of different languages across the globe and had a great influence around the world (<https://www.ecnu.edu.cn/info/1425/63732.htm>).

Other research by Shao Zhihua (邵志华) suggests that Confucian and Taoist ideological works were partly translated and spread to the West as early as the 16th and 17th centuries, but at that time the West only paid attention to their unique features. Specifically their unique beauty in Confucian thought, without paying too much attention to Taoist thought. Taoist thought only really gained attention from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when people began to pay attention to the issue between humans and nature, as well as issues of the natural environment and the consciousness of mankind. From there began the "Taoist fever" in European countries, in particular, Germany (<http://www.nopss.gov.cn/n1/2019/0628/c219470-31201240.html>).

In addition, many other studies show that Indian classics such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, have also been translated into English since the early 19th century, (Klaus Karttunen, *Early Translation and the Impact of Hindu Text in Europe*) and have been continuously welcomed in Europe. It's also worth noting for the purpose of this essay that the subject of the eponymous film, Robert Oppenheimer, was in real life a reader of *Mahabharata*. He has quoted the *Bhagavad Gita* in interviews (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pqZqfTOxFhY>).

As a director with a solid background in literature, Christopher Nolan has repeatedly shown us his talent in telling a compelling story, presenting a complex narrative structure and portraying the profound nature of human psychology.

In films such as *Inception* (2010), *Interstellar* (2014) and *Oppenheimer* (2023), he also showed that though he is a Western director he has a deep understanding of Eastern culture and thought, and at the same time has the ability to find the perfect combination of thoughts and ideas between East - West thought in his works.

1. Story Ideas

Inception (2010) is based on three big ideas, and these three ideas are all align with familiar Eastern concepts or stories relatively closely:

First, the idea that dreams are something that can be created, and people can create one or more worlds in their dreams. Dreams can be shared with many people, and each person can enter the world created in someone else's dream, by being invited, or by intruding. The main character in the film, Dom Cobb (Leonardo Di Caprio) is a 'professional dream creator' who has the ability to break into other people's dreams to find information, and even plant original ideas in other people's heads to manipulate their psychology. In the film, Cobb father (Michael Caine) introduces him to Adriane (Ellen Page), who is even more talented than him in creating a dream world, to carry out a special mission together in the goal of altering the future in a more positive way.

This concept of modifying our world through dreams can be seen in Indian philosophy. A great example is the story of Vishnu creating this world while sleeping. Vishnu lies in a dream-like state on the snake Adishesha, which represents Time, without beginning or end. As if dreaming, Vishnu watched Brahma create the Universe. By his act of observing dreams, Vishnu sustains the universe. When Vishnu woke up from his dream, that cycle of creation ended and a new one would begin with another dream.

The second main idea, is that it is very difficult for people to distinguish when they are in the real world and when they are in the dream world, because the dreams in the film are created in such a realistic way. Even professional dream creators like Dom Cobb cannot distinguish which world they are in, so they always have to use a totem, an object with a certain weight, to remind themselves of the real world.

This idea is very similar to Chuang Tzu (庄子)'s famous idea about dreams and reality, presented in the chapter 2 of the Book of Chuang Tzu (南华经): Chuang Tzu once dreamed that he was a butterfly flying happily, but he didn't know he was himself (Zhuang Zhou) anymore, then suddenly woke up and was surprised. At that point he stated he didn't know if he was himself, dreaming about turning into a butterfly, or if he was a butterfly dreaming about turning into him. Chuang Tzu and butterflies are all different. That's called "materialization".

Materialization is a change in consciousness between reality and illusion. The continuous flow between dream and awakening makes the distinction between the two phenomena become blurred, and then it is no longer important, because in the end reality and dream are just one, not binary.

At the same time, the idea that dreams and reality blend together is also close to the idea of "this world is an illusion" or "grand illusion" (Maya) in Hinduism. "The word Maya is derived from the Sanskrit root words "ma", meaning "not" and "ya", meaning "that". So the meaning of maya is "that which is not" (Maya was also the name of the mother of Lord Buddha.) [...] Lord Krishna states that the whole creation is his leela (divine child's play), and that creation came from his maya (illusion). You and I suffer because we are part and parcel of that maya (illusion) (Ed Viswanathan: 150) Maya refers to the power of the divine to create the material world and make it appear real, while simultaneously being unreal or illusory. In other words, maya is the veil of ignorance that prevents us from seeing the true nature of reality.

Besides, in *Inception*, dreams can also be layered. The more layering, the deeper one goes into the world of consciousness, and it becomes more and more real, but at the same time it becomes more and more distant from the real world. This idea is very similar to Hindu ideas about meditation and yoga.

Meanwhile, in ancient Greek literature, the interference between dreams and the real world was mentioned in the *Iliad*, when the god Morpheus was sent by Zeus to create a false illusion in Agamemnon's dream, and when Morpheus was sent by Hera to meet Alcyone in a dream, in the form of her dead husband Ceyx, to inform his wife of her husband's death. This also illustrates the difficulty in distinguishing between dreams and reality, but leans towards the meaning of "incarnation" rather than "materialization", and is shown very clearly in the movie *The Matrix*, with the presence of the character named Morpheus.

Interstellar (2014) presents the idea that all phenomena in this world have a special connection with each other, from quantum particles, to human emotions and to the entire universe. This connection brings a special vibration that can pull the past, present and future into one, and create the co-existence of both space and time.

This idea is said to be very similar to the ancient Indian idea found in the Vedas of universal super-consciousness that transcends space and time, connecting all human life.

The film also brings up the idea of time elasticity, when one hour on the planet known as Miller's planet is equivalent to 7 years on Earth.

This story is very similar to the story of King Muchukunda's time travel (dilation) in Indian legend. King Muchukunda helped the gods in heaven fight the demons, but one year in heaven is equal to three hundred and sixty years on earth, so when he returned to earth, his entire kingdom and family were gone.

2. Character Inner Development

In *Oppenheimer* (2023), we can also find new interpretations of ideas that make the film capable of guiding viewers' emotions while helping "shape" the audience's understanding of the main character in the way the director wants:

First, the creation of an atomic bomb was considered inevitable given the world political context as well as the level of scientific development at that time.

Second, Oppenheimer's psychological process in creating the atomic bomb makes the audience sympathize with the character, instead of judging him.

Third, Although Oppenheimer created the atomic bomb, he was considered an “executor” rather than a creator.

The *Oppenheimer* film began with a line of black type appears: “Prometheus stole fire from the Gods and gave it to man. For this he was chained to a rock and tortured for eternity” (Christopher Nolan 2023: 3). In the understanding of the writers of Oppenheimer's work, the atomic bomb symbolizes "fire", and Oppenheimer is compared to Prometheus, who stole the fire of heaven to give to humanity, thereby suffering eternal punishment. When Christopher Nolan made this film, he went one step further, delving into Oppenheimer's psychological analysis especially during the creation of the atomic bomb. Christopher Nolan most likely relied on the philosophies of the *Bhagavad Gita* to establish the character's inner development.

The *Bhagavad Gita* is a sacred and great work for Indians as well as Hinduism, that can be read in many different ways. As a sacred metaphysical dialogue, as an emotional work with God as one anthropomorphic entity, or as a work of psychology, which is extremely skillful in analyzing and explaining the human mind. In the book *I am Gita*, Deep Trivedi wrote: “The first chapter of the Gita teaches us that every human being is grappling with his own battle of Mahabharata; this battle verily exists with him and simply manifests on the outside. And when the Mahabharata war exists within, then surely, its three principal characters, Krishna, Arjuna and Duryodhana that dwell within you, for, they are invariable present in each and every person in varying degrees.” (Deep Trivedi: 22) and then “Mind well, this war is verily a part of your psychology” (Deep Trivedi: 86).

An examination of the hero Arjun reveals similarities between him and Oppenheimer. Arjun was the most talented among the five Pandavas brothers, who always won battles. However, before the Kurushetra battlefield, he faltered when he saw that he was about to enter a deadly battle with his own friends, cousins, and uncles. He asked Krishna (incarnation of Vishnu) if there was any way to avoid this crime. “And, at present, that is exactly what Krishna is doing; administering psycho-treatment to Arjun to convince him to fight the war.” (Deep Trivedi: 38) Krishna's teachings then became a journey of spiritual guidance, as well as a journey of psychological transformation for Arjun.

That journey of psychological transformation can be divided into stages which we can compare to the modern film:

Firstly, Krishna told Arjun that if he withdrew, he would lose all his reputation and be laughed at. This was very important for a fierce and proud warrior like Arjun. Like Arjun, Oppenheimer was also a talented and proud man.

Secondly, Krishna showed Arjun the prospect that the people he loved would be killed if he retreated and did not protect them. At the same time, as a person of the Kshatriya, the warrior class, if he refused to participate in a war for righteousness, it would be a sin.

Likewise, as a Jew, Oppenheimer felt it was his responsibility to protect the Jews, who at that time were being oppressed and killed by the Nazis. At the same time, as an American,

Oppenheimer was also caught up in political issues between the United States, Nazis and the Russians.

Next, Krishna praised those who dared to fight, because heaven as well as glory on earth belonged to those people. He also stated that humans are neither creators nor victims, they need to do exactly what is their duty. Thus, man's job is not to choose right or wrong, but to do what he should do in the position that fate has placed him in. If people do exactly that with an impartial heart, without seeking anything for themselves, and without choice, then they do not commit a sin. In Oppenheimer, we can see a similar inner conflict being overcome by a single individual facing a great historical destiny.

Finally, Arjuna understood the core ideological principle of the *Bhagavad Gita*, and surrendered himself into the hands of fate. The *Amazing secrets of The Bhagavad Gita* wrote: "The actual verse has two parts: "Ahimsa paramo dharma; Darma himsa tathaiva cha." Which means: Non-violence is the ultimate Dharma. So, too, is violence in service of Dharma. In other words, to preserve dhama (righteousness) and eradicate adharma, a person can resort to violence if non-violent methods fail. Lord Krishna tried his best to avoid a war. But Duryodhana wanted a war so that he could kill all of the Pandavas, and thus war became unavoidable" (Ed Viswanathan: 51).

Likewise, Oppenheimer did what he had to do in his time. The creation of the atomic bomb was both due to him and not due to him, nor was the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki of Japan. He may have lived with a degree of guilt, but he was not roundly condemned for what he did.

3. The Use of Sound and Image Symbols in the Films

In Christopher Nolan's films, whether intentionally or unintentionally, there are often symbols of images and sounds that are oriental, or that often make people think of Eastern ideas.

The film *Inception* opens with a scene of waves crashing against the shore, then Cobb was found on the beach and taken to a castle built in Japanese architecture to meet a Japanese man named Saito (Ken Watanabe). This scene of waves crashing on the shore is repeated many times in the film. This image may remind viewers of Japanese artist Hokusai's timeless painting masterpiece "Under a wave off Kanagawa" (神奈川沖浪裏 – Kanagawa oki nami ura) painted in the famous Ukiyo-e style. Hokusai had been obsessed with waves for quite a long time, and painted a series of wave paintings between 1803 and 1834, the most prominent of which was "Under a wave off Kanagawa" (also known as "The Great Wave"). In the painting, Hokusai depicts an image of a giant wave off the coast of Kanagawa town (now the city of Yokohama, Kanagawa Prefecture), boats trying to escape the big wave, and in the distance is Mount Fuji. This painting is considered one of the iconic images of Japan, with a modern spirit in it that is considered more progressive than the Western art of the same period. It brings the rhythm of the sea, both fierce and heavy, reflecting the difficulties that human life must go through, but also expressing a discreet depth, facing dangers with a more sober Eastern perspective. In addition, the white foam surrounding the wave is a contrast to the weight of the wave, showing both the poetry of the scene and the impermanence of being there and then disappearing. The spirit of the picture is very similar to the film's message about the elusiveness of dreams, the ambiguity and difficulty of distinguishing between

dreams and reality, as well as man's desperate attempt to become a creator of the (dream) world.

Cobb's spinning top in *Inception* (2010) is also an important symbol, as it represents the distinction between reality and dreams. Only the owner of the top can truly know whether his spin top is real or not, thanks to its weight. The spinning top belonged to Cobb's wife, Mal (Marion Cotillard), and she locked it in the closet to refuse to leave her dream world. After her death, Cobb continued to use the spinning top, and the image of the spinning top continuing to spin at the end of the film is one of the things that caused speculation, even controversy, among moviegoers. This spinning top also reminds viewers of Eastern thoughts, because Eastern thoughts is often visualized as a constantly rotating wheel (in Indian thinking) or as a constantly moving tai chi map (in Chinese thinking).

In the movie, when people go deep into the dream and can lose themselves in it, setting up a song to help wake up the dreamers plays an important role. Many times, when people were lost in their dreams they would hear the music playing, and know they needed to wake up. This music may have been inspired by the awakening bell in Hinduism and Buddhism.

We might note an uncanny similarity between the way the film uses music to awaken people in different levels of their dreams, and the way Plum Village, a school of Buddhist practice (according to the teachings of famous Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh), explains the bell of mindfulness: “Sometimes we need a sound to remind us to return to conscious breathing. We call that sound the ‘bell of mindfulness’. In Plum Village, whenever residents hear the clock ring, the phone ring or the monastic activity bell, they stop. Those are the bells of mindfulness. When such bells ring, all talking and activities cease. A resident described it this way. [...] That is the method we practice in the monastery. The bell can help us return to ourselves, return to the present moment. The bell is considered a friend, a Bodhisattva who helps us awaken” (<https://langmai.org/thien-duong/tt-can-ban-lang-mai/nghe-chuong/>).

In *Interstellar*, the notable symbols are the door frames that separate people from the outside world. When Cooper (Matthew McConaughey) was on the spacecraft, he frequently saw images of Earth and planets outside the window. He also received video messages from the Earth through a very small screen with large frame borders as dividing lines.

The most emotional scene in the movie is when Cooper returns to the spaceship after nearly dying on Miller's planet, and discovers that more than 20 years of time have passed on Earth. He turned on the video to follow his children's messages, and for the first time saw his daughter Murph (Jessica Chastain), who was the same age as he was when he left. The girl sent an emotional message to her father, saying that he once said maybe when he returned, he would see her again at his age, so this was the best time for him to come back. Her face appeared full of pain behind the black and white frame. The message ends, and the scene switches to her colorful real world in the laboratory, clearly demonstrating the spatial contrast between the video message and reality.

These frames are like the way people separate themselves from the entire outside world, in accordance with the idea of Atman and Brahman in Hinduism. Because people are so small, no matter how great their pain is, it is only contained within the narrow frames. The way the spaceship floats in the galaxy can also remind us of the records in the *Tao Te Ching* (道德经) of Lao Tz (老子): “There was something all murky shadow, born before heaven and earth: o such utter silence, utter emptiness. Isolate and changeless, it moves everywhere without fail:

picture the mother of all beneath heaven. I don't know its name. I'll call it *Way*, and if I must name it, name it *Vast*. *Vast* means it's passing beyond, passing beyond means it's gone far away, and gone far away means it's come back. Because *Way* is vast, heaven is vast, earth is vast, and the true emperor too is vast. In this realm, there are four vast things, and the true emperor is one of them. Human abides by earth. Earth abides by heaven. Heaven abides by Way. Way abides by occurrence appearing of itself" (Lao Tzu 2022: 31-32).

Additionally, on Miller's planet, the sound in the movie is always accompanied by ticking sounds, each ticking sound on that planet is equivalent to 1 day on earth, demonstrating the minuteness of humans before the universe.

In *Oppenheimer*, what is interesting is that the symbol of water is repeated many times through many different images: raindrops falling on the ground, raindrops flowing on the window frame, tears in people's eyes, the surface of the lake where Einstein picked up pebbles to throw into the water (to observe the ripples), and even drops of water rolling on the apple that Oppenheimer wanted to use to poison his professor.

Although the image of Oppenheimer looking at raindrops falling on the ground, or Einstein picking up pebbles and throwing them into the water, can all be explained as the act of observing a physical phenomenon by physicists, they can also be explained according to Eastern thought. Specifically in the sense of the relationship between the finite and the infinite, and the expression of the small human ego before the great universe. Similarly, the image of a drop of water rolling on an apple can symbolize the selfish and petty ego of people, originating at some evil time. When he was young, Oppenheimer was able to snatch the apple that the visiting professor was holding to his mouth to save him, but later he was unable to snatch the bomb back from the hands of the US government to save innocent people in Japan.

The hot scenes performed by the actors in the movie also have their own meaning. In it, there is a hot scene that is uniquely combined with slokas from *Mahabharata*: "And now I become Death, destroyer of the worlds." That was when Robert Oppenheimer (Cillian Murphy) was making love to Jean Tatlock (Florence Pugh), when Jean suddenly stopped, walked to Robert's bookshelf, picked up the book *Mahabharata* and asked him to read it. The two slokas rang out at the same time as Jean continued to make love to Robert. It was a combination of danger and satisfaction, which later, every time the sound of the two slokas resounded in Oppenheimer's head, was accompanied by danger, anxiety and even a guilty conscience, at the very same moment of satisfaction. However, it was no longer the pleasure of sex, but the pleasure of success and power. Meanwhile, along with the light and sound of exploding bombs are recurring symbols, representing people's ambition and inevitable suffering due to their lives of excessive ambition and continuous struggle.

Conclusion

We can see many examples of Eastern ideas being skillfully integrated into Christopher Nolan's films. These may be separate Hindu ideas, or they may be wide range of Eastern ideas that are difficult to identify as truly belonging to a certain individual thought.

This is my initial experimental research, and I have begun to notice that contemporary Hollywood movies tend to use Eastern ideas and images more and more. This could be a milestone in East-West cultural exchange.

In the past, when talking about the exchange of ideas, we often talked about the influence of ideological spheres, such as Indian ideology on Southeast Asian countries, or Chinese influence on other countries in East Asia, the influence of ancient Greek thought on Europe, or the influence of Western thought on the East in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, etc. But from the 21st century onwards, perhaps the Eastern thoughts will make a big impact on the West in return, and perhaps in the 22nd century there will no longer be any distinction between East and West. Therefore, I think a case like Christopher Nolan is very remarkable, because it firmly and systematically establishes the influence of Eastern thought in the style of a Western director, whether he is aware of it or not.

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