



# Zhuangzi's "aesthetic mind" theory from the perspective of art theory

Qiuyue Chen

Henan University, Kaifeng, 475001, China

757347746@qq.com

**Abstract.** The thought of "aesthetic mind" originated from Taoism, deeply rooted in Chinese traditional culture, it has the significance of philosophical ontology and methodology, but also belongs to the research category of art, and the two are mutually external. It is precisely because of this point that the meaning of "aesthetic mind" is rich. The "mind zhai", "sitting and forgetting", "materialization" and "touring heart" in Zhuangzi's thought play a key role in the development of aesthetic mind theory. Explaining Zhuangzi's aesthetic mind theory from the perspective of art theory, exploring the modern value of classical art resources and demonstrating its modern significance can promote the development of art theory and enrich the discipline system of art science. It can provide inspiration and reflection for the study of art theory.

**Keywords:** aesthetic mind; Zhuangzi's artistic thought; Chinese classical art theory; Modern interpretation of art theory.

## 1 Introduction

In the pre-Qin period, hundreds of Confucians discussed culture and art more or less, and Zhuangzi, as the representative of the Taoist school, exerted a great influence on ancient Chinese art criticism and artistic thought. Mr. Ye Lang believes that Zhuangzi's discussion on the relationship between "freedom" and aesthetics established the theory of "aesthetic mind". In recent years, in the field of, most of the researches on the theory of "aesthetic mind" are carried out at the level of philosophy and aesthetics, but there are few researches to explain "aesthetic mind" from the Angle of art. As far as the field of art is concerned, art as a special spiritual practice, the artistic subject's aesthetic mood and aesthetic consciousness permeates all aspects, and plays an important role in the stage of artistic conception, artistic creation, artistic communication and artistic appreciation. This theory guides artists' artistic practice with a transcendent aesthetic realm. In this way, the theory of "aesthetic mind" is indeed an inescapable topic in art research. In view of the above thinking, this paper uses the knowledge system of art theory to take the "heart zhai" and "sitting and forgetting" in Zhuangzi's "aesthetic mind" theory; From the two aspects of "materialization" and "touring heart", this paper probes into the process, method and function of keeping the aesthet-

ic mind in the face of the aesthetic object, and how to carry on the free aesthetic creation. Finally, combining the classical art resource of Zhuangzi's "aesthetic mind" theory with the theory of Chinese art, this paper presents the value and significance of Zhuangzi's thought to the theory of Chinese modern art.

## 2 The Origin and Development of the Theory of Aesthetic Mind

The theory of "aesthetic mind" was first put forward by Mr. Ye Lang. The so-called "aesthetic mind" refers to the aesthetic subject's special aesthetic observation and aesthetic psychology to the aesthetic object. The aesthetic subject should keep the state of vacuity and quiet, and face the aesthetic object with an aesthetic attitude of no utility and no interest. Specifically in the field of art, that is, when the artist carries out aesthetic activities, his heart is a kind of clarity and emptiness. Lao-tzu's theory of "dispelling the metaphysical system" can be regarded as the origin of the theory of aesthetic mind. [1]In Lao Tzu's opinion, Tao is indescribable, and even if it is forced to be said, it is described by analogy. But on the other hand, Tao can also be comprehended, and Lao-Tzu pointed out the way of body Tao, namely, "eliminating the mysterious system" and "vacuous stillness". The proposition of "empty one and quiet" put forward in the four chapters of Guanzi is the continuation of the theory of "eliminating Xuanjian". Zhuangzi is between the four chapters of Laozi, Guanzi and Xunzi, which plays an important role in the development of the theory of aesthetic mind. The discussion of "heart Zhai" and "sitting and forgetting" in the book can be regarded as the real discovery of the theory of "aesthetic mind".

It can be seen that although the Taoist school represented by Lao Zhuang did not explicitly put forward the theory of aesthetic mind, their philosophical thoughts all laid the ideological foundation of the theory of aesthetic mind over utility and over cognition, provided methodological guidance for it, and endowed it with the characteristics of "vacuity and stillness". Its theoretical gene has been continuously improved and enriched in later generations, so there have been many references and names. [2]For example, in Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, the theory of aesthetic cardiothoracic theory was directly quoted to the field of literature and art. In the Preface of Landscape Painting, Zong Bing put forward the ideas of "clear thinking and taste image" and "clear thinking and view Dao", which are the inheritance and development of Laozi's "cleansing", Zhuangzi's "heart Zhai" and "sitting and forgetting". After Zong Bing, Lu Ji and Liu Xie also expounded on "aesthetic mind" successively. Lu Ji said, "In the central district, you can learn from the mystery and enjoy your feelings at the temple." Liu Xie, on the other hand, quoted directly from Zhuangzi Zhibei You to emphasize the importance of quiet in literary conception. After Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, the theory of "aesthetic mind" was constantly enriched. Guo Xi, a painter and calligrapher in the Northern Song Dynasty, put forward "the heart of Forest and spring"; In the Ming and Qing dynasties, Li Zhi put forward "childlike heart" and so on. Although they differ in aesthetic dimension and emotional color, their core meaning remains the same.

### 3 Zhuangzi Aesthetic Mind Theme

The essence of Zhuangzi's thoughts of "heart Zhai" and "sitting forget" is closely related to "Tao", which directly inherits Lao Zi's theory of "eliminating Xuanjian" and gives it more rich and detailed content. As the true discoverer of "aesthetic mind", Zhuangzi's thought pointed to individual life experience, focusing on the spiritual world of people, the subject must achieve the mental state of "heart zhai" and "sitting and forgetting", in order to realize the observation of "Tao". This point has a profound impact on the artistic conception structure of Chinese classical art. From the perspective of art theory, having an "aesthetic mind" is the premise of artistic creation, and how to achieve "aesthetic mind" needs to go through "mental fasting" and "sitting and forgetting", which is exactly the pure and beautiful artistic spirit pursued by artists.

If the "heart Zhai" obtains the psychological freedom, then the "sitting forget" obtains the spiritual independence, both of which jointly lay the ideological foundation for the theory of "aesthetic mind". For artists, in the process of artistic creation, the creators should pay attention to the following two points, one is "adduction", that is, the aesthetic subject needs to exclude "the perception of eyes and ears" and "logical thinking", and not be disturbed by the external environment and inner emotions. The second is "external release", that is, the aesthetic subject should explore the heart, discard utilitarian thoughts, maintain inner tranquility and mental stability, and only allow "qi" to regulate and control itself. In order to achieve a high degree of creative freedom, there are many links in the middle, which is extremely difficult. For how to achieve this, Zhuangzi proposed "materialization" and "touring the mind".

The aesthetic mind is the premise and spiritual condition of aesthetic observation and aesthetic creation. Within this limit, how to carry out aesthetic creation depends on "materialization" and "wandering mind".

Zhuangzi's "materialization" has two meanings, the first meaning is the unity of object and self, that is, "contemplation". In Zhuangzi's *Treatise on Qi Things*, there is a vivid explanation: "Once Zhuangzhou dreamed a butterfly, just like a butterfly, which refers to himself as an ideal idea! I do not know Zhou Yu. Russia sense, then you dun dun zhou also. Do not know Zhou's dream is Hu Die and, Hu Die's dream is Zhou and? Zhou and Hu die, there must be a difference. This is called materialization." Mr. Chen Guying explained "materialization" as: "The boundary of the object and self disappears, and all things melt into one." He believes that Zhuangzi's "materialization" and "butterfly transformation" is a kind of artistic observation, which uses aesthetic experience to observe the changes of things, so as to eliminate the boundary between things and I, and achieve the aesthetic realm of the integration of things and I, the unity of subject and object, and the unity of heaven and man. Mr. Li Zehou also believes that the state of "materialization" is a state of unity of things and I, and calls this kind of life experience a kind of artistic spirit of selflessness and materialization. From the above, we can see that this kind of "materialization" is not the extinction of self and the extinction of thinking, but as a body or aesthetic, it is precisely to achieve the mysterious environment of being in harmony with all things, that is, "things and things are not in things".

Another connotation of "materialization" is "unity of mind and hand", which is different from "materialization" as the unity of the object and the aesthetic state of contemplation. [3]In this sense, "materialization" is a free activity at the level of creation. Zhuang Zi has explained in Dasheng: "Gong Chui spinning and covering rules refers to materialization but not to the mind, so its spiritual table is not fastened. Forget enough, shoes is suitable also; Forget right and wrong, the heart is also suitable; Do not change inside, not from outside, things will be appropriate. Those who have not tasted discomfort since the beginning of the right, forget the right also." Work 倕 is a skilled craftsman in Yao times, Zhuang Zi called it "pointing and materialization", that is to say, the finger and the object of creation have been one, there is no separation between the two. According to Mr. Xu Fuguan, "materialization" is the source of the power of aesthetic appreciation and creation, and it is the ability and skill of expression (pointing). There is no intermediate distance between the finger and the object of expression. This shows the mastery of the highest skill. Zhuang Zi repeatedly emphasized the cultivation mode of "not to distinguish one's will, but to concentrate on the spirit" and the environment of the way of technology and the "forgetting the right", so as to show that the "materialized" people have achieved mental concentration and psychological comfort, and in this absolute self-sufficiency, the free "wandering mind" becomes possible.

Zhuangzi's "wandering mind" is a self-contained and unwaiting leisure tour. This kind of "wandering" has no place for materialism, and has nothing to do with human's material knowledge. It is not the cognitive exploration of human being as the master of nature, but the natural generation of aesthetic creation of the integration of mind and matter. In *The Great Master*, it is said: "Therefore, the sage will swim in things, and wherever he may be, he will not escape but remain... And where all things are tied together and integrated!" Guo Zhu said: "The husband sage swim in the path of change, put in the flow of the new, all things, also with it, with it, who has to escape the zai!" . "Wanhua" is the movement of the Tao, and "Wanhua" is of course the "materialization" of the Tao. And "swimming in the place of things can not escape but exist" is materialized in all things to obtain unfettered freedom. Zhuangzi summed up this absolute freedom of being completely free from restrictions by "swimming". For example, "traveling by the object with the mind", "traveling by the mind at the beginning of the object", that is, "traveling by the mind" is the integration of mind and object; "Touring the heart in the firm white with" that "touring the heart" no longer visible name of the cognition involved; "Touring the mind to infinity" means "touring the mind" to the infinity of time and space; "To obtain the beauty and to travel to the utmost happiness", that is, "to travel to the mind", is a happy aesthetic journey. It is only after the "mind Zhai", "sitting and forgetting" and "materialization" that we can say that Zhuang Zi has constructed a complete "aesthetic mind". This kind of aesthetic mind is not only indispensable for aesthetic appreciation, but also contains infinite aesthetic creativity.

To sum up, Zhuangzi constructed a complete monastic process from the two aspects of "mind fasting", "sitting and forgetting", "materialization" and "touring the mind". Through this series of processes, he achieved "aesthetic mind". "Heart Zhai" and "sitting and forgetting" are implemented into the individual's spiritual world, and

"turn inward" is realized, which is the crucial premise for the transformation from body Tao spirit to aesthetic mind; "Materialization" realizes the high degree of freedom of the unity of object and self and the unity of heart and hand; "Wandering mind" is the natural generation of aesthetic creation. It is worth noting that this process is not an accumulative construction, but a continuous "unmasking" process, which is to return to the original mind-object integration after eliminating the interference of cognition, utility and self-centeredness. This empty and clear state of mind, for the aesthetic subject, is an infinite "empty basket" of the mind. Thus, it can be seen that Zhuangzi's discussion of "aesthetic mind" is not intentional, but it is of great importance. Although there are many terms to refer to the aesthetic mind of later generations, they all achieve convergence with Zhuangzi's "aesthetic mind" in different aspects.

#### **4 The Aesthetic Dimension of Zhuangzi Lies in the Realistic Significance of the Theory of Art**

It is an indispensable way for the development of art theory to sum up the artistic experience and thoughts of the ancients for the present. Mr. Li Zehou believes that the Taoist school, represented by Zhuang Zi, captures the basic characteristics of art, aesthetics and creation better than Confucianism or any other school. Indeed, although Taoists were not interested in the kinds of art we call today, their practice and theory of "Tao" contained important laws from artistic creation to artistic appreciation, from aesthetic form to constituent factors.

In the complex social phenomena and life conditions, Zhuangzi was contrary to the Confucian concept of active official life, and he completely subverted the life standards and values such as purpose and utility in the Confucian theory. Only in terms of artistic creation and appreciation, it is completely different from Confucius's "perfection", but seeks to avoid the world and avoid the disaster, and in the empty quiet of "heart zhai" and "sitting and forgetting", it turns out spiritual freedom and personality independence. In this way, the individual life is no longer burdened by the world, and the bitterness of life seems to be relieved. What remains is the character without utility, or the persistent pursuit of a character without utility. This thought of Zhuangzi deeply influenced the Chinese traditional art concept. Many artists in the past dynasties pay attention to their character, painting and poetry. "Calligraphy and painting are pure and lofty, the first importance of human character", Chinese painting is mostly plum, orchid, bamboo, pine, lotus and other images as the theme of artistic creation, that is, the character, painting and literary image of a vivid integration, to express aspirations, borrow scenery to express feelings. [4]In the long feudal period of China, all kinds of hypocritical ethics ran counter to the laws of art, and restricted the artists' creation. Many artists used "heart Zhai" and "sitting and forgetting" to free themselves, and spent their whole life being quiet and empty, detached from the secular world, and pursuing a noble and holy spiritual realm. Therefore, they can cling to art without being rushed, and integrate the artistic spirit with their personal character.

Zhuangzi's theory of "aesthetic mind" not only deeply influenced artistic creation and artistic appreciation, but also had profound enlightenment in aesthetic form and constituent factors.[5] In a sense, the understanding of modernity in modern art is consistent with that of Taoism thousands of years ago. If Western art is good at exploring certain phenomena and shapes, Chinese art is good at overall observation and technique transformation. These two different attitudes and methods of expression lead to the formation of two different art systems, which can not be said to be a direct reflection of their respective cultural foundations and philosophical concepts. Zhuangzi once vividly depicted many artists with superb skills, such as cutting cattle, manipulating people's boats, collecting buildings and carrying silk, and chipping wood for engraving. The reason why they can be called artists is not only their superb skills, but their high aesthetic creation displayed in the state of concentration and self-absorption. This high freedom of aesthetic creation, is a very typical Oriental aesthetic consciousness. Compared with the western aesthetic pursuit of truth and realism, it is ethereal, clear and rich in imagination space and spiritual meaning. These are precisely what modern art loves and strives for.

## 5 Conclusion

Zhuangzi's "heart Zhai", "sitting and forgetting" and "materialization" and "touring heart" provide theoretical support for the theory of "aesthetic mind". The four do not exist in isolation, but complement each other. Among them, "heart Zhai" and "sitting and forgetting" make people return to nature and have the spiritual conditions beyond cognition, utility and self, which runs through the whole theory. "Materialization" and "Youxin" open up the gap between things and self, and realize the happiness of aesthetic creation. It is in the sense of these two aspects that the spiritual transcendence of the phenomenal world is achieved, and thus the aesthetic state of mind is generated. Through Zhuangzi's theory of "aesthetic mind", this paper deeply discusses the method, mood, process and condition of art subject in creation, which has a profound inspiration for artists. In the theory of "aesthetic mind", people can realize the importance of the inner calm of the subject. Whether it is to create art or appreciate art, the aesthetic subject should eliminate the distractions in the heart, keep the empty and quiet mind, and achieve the integration of mind and object. It should be noted that people should also see the contradictions of Zhuangzi's aesthetic mind theory, the first is about vacuity and knowledge. According to Zhuangzi, in order to realize the observation of the Tao, we must abstain from sanctification and become wise, which is actually impossible. The key reason why an artist becomes an artist, lies in his own long-term artistic cultivation and knowledge accumulation. Works of art are the embodiment of this cultivation and knowledge. Secondly, Zhuangzi regarded "mental fasting" and "sitting and forgetting" as the realm of life freedom. He thought that by eliminating the consideration of profit and loss in his heart, he could achieve the freedom of life. This view denies the subjective initiative of man. Xunzi's comment on Zhuangzi's "hiding in heaven and not knowing man" is very profound. These questions still need to be further thought and argumentation.

## References

1. Chen Guying. Four Interpretations of Guanzi [M]. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2021.
2. E. D S, H. D S. Zhuangzi's ethical nihilism[J].Asian Philosophy,2024,34(1):87-97.
3. Wang Y. The Ethical Dimension of Forgetfulness:Engaging the Daoist Zhuangzi in Studies of Cultivated Forgetting[M].Taylor & Francis:2024-03-30. DOI: 10. 4324/ 978 1003303367.
4. XU Fuguan. The Spirit of Chinese Art [M]. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2010.
5. JIA Tao. Zhuang Zi's Aesthetic Thought and its Artistic Value Orientation [J]. Journal of Henan University (Social Science Edition),2002(05):39-41.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

