

A Mind of Emptiness and Tranquility: Zhuangzi's Theory of "Fasting of the Mind" and the Formation of Aesthetic Perception

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Abstract: The theory of "Xin Zhai" (Cultivation of the Mind) proposed by Zhuangzi in "The World of Mortals" is one of the central tenets of Daoist theory on the cultivation of the mind and nature. This paper attempts to explore the theoretical significance of the "Xin Zhai" philosophy by examining the mechanisms underlying the generation of aesthetic perception. The cultivation of emptiness and stillness advocated by "Xin Zhai" represents a transformation of subjective perceptual patterns. In this process of transition, the individual moves from a state of superficial sensory perception and utilitarian subjective reasoning to a state of "listening with the breath" and an open-minded acceptance of all things, the state of the original mind. This disregard for the utilitarian value of things enables the aesthetic subject to confront the authentic form of things directly, this is the state of emptiness and stillness that "Xin Zhai" seeks to attain. By setting aside external objects and returning to the original mind, this state of emptiness and stillness opens a unique path for the generation of aesthetic perception: a path that leads from spiritual cultivation rooted in self-sustained emptiness and stillness to the aesthetic realm of absolute freedom of the mind.

Keywords: Xinzhai; Void and Stillness; Aesthetic Perception; Zhuangzi; Listening with the Breath

Online publication: April 26, 2026

1. Introduction

When people are immersed in a sunset, a piece of music, or an ink painting, they often experience a sense of "forgetfulness of self." Time seems to slow to a standstill, the boundary between the self and the external world gradually dissolves, and only a sense of pure joy remains within the heart. Such experiences represent the process of aesthetic perception at the level of the mind. The theory of "heart-fasting" (xin zhai) proposed by Zhuangzi in "The World of Mortals" offers a profound explanation of the inner mechanisms that give rise to this experience. "Heart-fasting" is neither a mystical religious experience nor a simple emotional relaxation, but rather a fundamental transformation of the mode of perception. Through the words of Confucius, Zhuangzi points to a path leading from the ear to the heart, and from the heart to the breath, ultimately reaching a state of "emptiness in readiness for things." While many interpreters view this emptiness and stillness as a form of self-cultivation, it simultaneously serves as the best explanation for the generation of aesthetic perception. Only when preconceptions, desires, and cunning no longer occupy the mind can the inherent beauty of things

as they are truly manifest. It is in this sense that “emptiness and stillness” itself constitutes an active mental process, carving out a clear and luminous inner space for aesthetic experience. Centered on Zhuangzi’s theory of “heart-fasting” and integrating the conceptual essence of “listening with Qi,” this paper traces the three progressive stages of aesthetic perception, aiming to explore how a state of emptiness and stillness constitutes a necessary prerequisite for the formation of aesthetic perception. The tranquility of mind advocated by Zhuangzi is not a lifeless stillness, but rather one brimming with vitality. This path of cultivating emptiness and stillness can enhance people’s daily aesthetic experiences, thereby establishing a lasting spiritual foundation for the individual’s inner life.

2. The transformation of perception as seen through “Listening with Qi”

The concept of “mental purification” appears in a dialogue between Yan Hui and Confucius in “The World of Human Affairs”. When Yan Hui inquired about “mental purification,” Confucius replied: “If you focus your mind, do not listen with your ears but with your heart; do not listen with your heart but with your breath. Listening stops at the ears; the heart stops at the symbols. The breath is that which is empty and awaits things. Only the Way gathers in the void. The void is mental purification” ^[1]. This passage progresses in layers, outlining a three-stage transition in the state of perception. Traditional commentaries have largely focused on the theory of spiritual cultivation, but viewed from the perspective of aesthetic perception, it precisely describes how, when faced with an object, we gradually ascend from the crudest sensory reception to a state of pure aesthetic contemplation. The first stage is “listening with the ears,” that is, the level of sensory perception. The ears hear sounds, and the eyes see forms and colors; these are the initial gateways through which humans engage with the external world. Yet Zhuangzi, speaking through the voice of Confucius, immediately adds, “Do not listen with the ears, but listen with the heart” ^[1], urging people not to become fixated on the direct stimuli of the senses. This is not to deny the senses themselves, but to recognize that if one remains at this level, the mind becomes entirely subject to the pull of external sensory material, either sinking into passive reception or drowning in sensual desires, and the true nature of things is easily obscured by the clutter of sensory appearances. In aesthetic experience, if we blindly follow our ears and eyes, what we hear may be merely the physical vibrations of musical notes, rather than the charm of the melody; what we see may be merely colors and outlines, rather than the spirit of the landscape.

Therefore, “listening with the ears” must be transcended in order to attain “listening with the heart.” This is the second level. Listening with the heart signifies that perception has entered the realm of reason and intention. The heart is capable of synthesizing, judging, and associating sensory material, thereby unifying scattered impressions into a meaningful whole. The phrase “the mind stops at symbols” precisely highlights this cognitive characteristic of the mind. “Symbols” refer to correspondences or objects of correspondence; that is, the mind always measures external objects through its own conceptual framework, making them conform to a pre-established cognitive structure. At this level, humans are no longer passive, but their perception still carries a strong intentionality, as the “preconceptions” in their minds constantly name objects as specific things and classify them into specific categories. In terms of aesthetics, if one remains confined to the mind, then upon viewing a pine tree, what immediately surges to the mind might be botanical knowledge, the uses of the wood, or some fixed symbolic meaning. While these certainly enrich the object’s significance, they also tend to obscure the form, aura, and spirit that the pine tree directly presents in this very moment. The subject’s tendency toward conceptualization ensures that a veil of reason still separates the object from the self.

Zhuangzi then goes on to say, “Do not listen with the mind, but listen with the ‘Qi,’” and defines “Qi” as “that which is empty and open to all things.” This leads us into the third level: the intuitive state of “listening with the ‘Qi.’” Here, “Qi” is not a material primordial force, but rather a spiritual atmosphere that is ethereal and free from attachment. Unlike the ear, which clings to specific sounds, or the mind, which strives for conformity to concepts and principles, it maintains a state of emptiness, openness, and readiness. It is like a cleanly polished mirror that presumes no image, yet when all things come before it, they are reflected exactly as they are. This “emptiness awaiting things” is precisely the aesthetic state achieved through the transformation of perception: the subject’s intentionality is temporarily suspended; it no longer strips the object

of its essence through utilitarian or conceptual means, but allows the object to speak for itself. At this moment, the pine tree is no longer a collection of names and materials, but rather the swaying of each branch and leaf in the breeze, the lustrous texture of its bark, and the proud, unyielding bearing of the whole. Such perception is neither a crude sensory reflex nor a rational conceptual definition, but rather a direct revelation of the object and a direct acceptance by the mind, in which the judging “I” in the conventional sense is almost entirely absent.

We can take a closer look at the negative structure of this process. “Do not listen with the ears” suspends sensory attachment, while “do not listen with the mind” suspends intellectual attachment. Each instance of “do not” represents a form of withdrawal, a form of emptying. Only through this dual emptying can the mind be liberated from the fixed patterns of the “ear” and the “heart,” revealing the ethereal state of “Qi.” The consequence of this negative negation is, however, profoundly positive: it opens a field where things may manifest as they are. As Zhuangzi states elsewhere in “The World of Mortals”: “Behold that void space: the empty room gives birth to whiteness, and auspiciousness abides ^[1].” Only an empty heart can give rise to light and whiteness, and all that is beautiful and authentic will naturally dwell there. Aesthetically, this “auspiciousness” can be understood as the dwelling place of beauty’s form, charm, and spirit.

3. Emptiness and stillness as conditions for aesthetic contemplation

Since “Xin Zhai” achieves a state of emptiness and readiness to receive the world by clearing away the clinging of the senses and the constructs of the mind, this state of emptiness and stillness itself constitutes the fundamental condition that makes aesthetic contemplation possible. The “aesthetic contemplation” referred to here is not mere observation, but rather the unobstructed manifestation of a thing’s intrinsic aesthetic form, its lines, hues, rhythm, and atmosphere, to the mind. To achieve this, one’s everyday, utilitarian attitude must be temporarily set aside, and this is precisely the function of the practice of emptiness and stillness in removing veils.

In our daily lives, we tend to view things primarily from a utilitarian perspective: a forest is seen first and foremost as a source of timber or a target for development, and the song of a bird is merely labeled as a signal. While this pragmatic attitude is certainly necessary for survival, it obscures the “original beauty” of things. Although Zhuangzi’s caution against “calculating minds” is expressed through the words of the Old Man with the Jar in the “Heaven and Earth” chapter, its spirit resonates with that of “purifying the mind”: “Those who employ schemes must have schemes to carry out; those who have schemes to carry out must have calculating minds. When calculating minds dwell within the heart, purity and clarity are not fully present” ^[1]. “Calculating mind” refers to an intentionality of calculation and exploitation; it prevents the mind from maintaining “purity” that clarity is capable of making space for beauty. The practice of emptiness and stillness aims precisely to wash away this calculating mind, or rather, to peel away the layers of obscurity laid down by utility, concepts, and habits, allowing the sensuous forms of things themselves to emerge unimpeded.

Once these veils are gently lifted, the aesthetic essence of things quietly reveals itself. An old wooden table is no longer merely a piece of furniture for holding objects; its grain, the marks left by touch, and its subdued luster begin to speak for themselves. The sound of the wind is no longer a signal of changing weather, but transforms into a pure, flowing tapestry of sound. The stillness and tranquility attained in the “Heart’s Retreat” does not mean staring blankly at an object, but rather liberating the object from the prison of the “known,” allowing it to become a fresh and complete presence once again. Zhuangzi said in “The Way of Heaven”: “Still water is clear; how much more so the spirit? The mind of the sage is still! It is the mirror of heaven and earth, the mirror of all things” ^[1]. Still water can clearly reflect heaven, earth, and all things precisely because it does not actively stir up ripples. Similarly, a mind of emptiness and stillness is like a mirror unclouded by preconceptions and desires; it does not define things, but rather allows them to be reflected with the utmost clarity and richness. This mirror-like contemplation is precisely the ideal state of aesthetic contemplation.

This naturally brings to mind theories of the “aesthetic attitude” in Western aesthetics, particularly Kant’s concept of “disinterested pleasure” and Bloch’s theory of “psychological distance.” A brief comparison with these theories helps to clarify the unique aspects of the Xinzhai theory. In *Critique of Judgment*, Kant states unequivocally that aesthetic

judgment is “disinterested”; our pleasure in beautiful things does not depend on whether the object actually exists or is useful to us ^[2]. This does indeed bear a superficial resemblance to the Xinzhai doctrine’s aim of eliminating utilitarian attachment. However, Zhuangzi’s Xinzhai does not merely involve creating a layer of “distance” within consciousness. Kant’s disinterestedness is primarily a transformation of conscious activity; it does not require a fundamental alteration of the subject’s own existential state. Bloch further proposed the concept of “psychological distance” in aesthetics, arguing that we need to create a distance between things and our actual needs and purposes, placing ourselves outside of them to appreciate them better aesthetically ^[3]. If one is too close to external objects, one cannot help but associate them with utilitarian goals and desires; if too far, one cannot experience true aesthetic beauty or have a meaningful aesthetic experience; when the distance is just right, one focuses precisely on the form and appearance of the aesthetic object, thereby achieving an excellent aesthetic experience. Xinzhai, however, delves into the very foundation of the subject’s perceptual structure; it appeals to the entire mode of existence of the mind. “Emptiness in anticipation of things” is not merely adopting an impartial attitude toward a specific object, but rather transforming the entire mind into a void, a state of clarity. It implies that the subject no longer seeks to encompass the object through any pre-established framework, nor does it cling to a “self” that stands in opposition to the object. This state is closer to the openness Heidegger described as “letting beings be,” but it goes even further, dissolving even the will to “let.” Precisely for this reason, the aesthetic contemplation opened up by Xinzhai is not a deliberate, distanced contemplation, but a primal encounter that precedes the division between subject and object. Chinese landscape poetry and painting often exude an aesthetic realm where the self and the object are forgotten, becoming one with nature; this is precisely the direct expression of such a tranquil and empty mind. Wang Wei’s verse, “In the empty mountains, no one is seen; only the sound of human voices is heard,” does not construct a sense of distance, but rather a state where, after reaching the utmost stillness, all things reveal themselves spontaneously.

Therefore, the reason why emptiness and stillness can serve as the conditions for aesthetic contemplation lies not only in their ability to shed utilitarian attachments, but also in their capacity, through a kind of self-emptying of the self, to allow things to encounter us in their true nature. This is an ontological transformation more primordial than the “aesthetic attitude”; it provides the aesthetic experience with a spiritual foundation that cannot be further interrogated. This aesthetic paradigm, rooted in the calm and emptiness of the mind, completely breaks free from the constraints of Western aesthetic theory, relying not on deliberate psychological adjustments or attitude changes, but on returning to the clearest state of life’s original essence. Secular perception always judges all things based on the self, whereas the empty realm of the heart-temple dissolves the cognitive barrier between subject and object, making aesthetics no longer the observation of objects by the subject, but the natural fusion of all things with the true heart. At this moment, the aesthetic experience is unrelated to deliberate pursuit, but is a natural gift emerging from the tranquil mind. This pure aesthetic realm is precisely the essence of classical Chinese aesthetics, creating the unique spiritual undertone of Chinese aesthetics: ethereal and profound, in harmony with nature and humanity.

4. Vitality and creativity amidst tranquility

Some people mistakenly interpret the “emptiness and stillness” described by Zhuangzi as a state of lethargy and lifelessness. However, when viewed within the context of his overall philosophical system, stillness is not the opposite of vital energy; rather, it serves as the very source from which vitality springs. Just as a calm water’s surface can reflect all things in the world like a mirror, when one resides in this clear and transparent state of mind, the myriad aspects of the world can fully reveal their inherent vitality. From this, we can see that the state of “emptiness and stillness” attained through the cultivation of “mental fasting” inherently contains abundant vitality and leaves ample space for the spirit to roam freely and gain profound insights. The saying, “When water is still, it is clear; how much more so the spirit,” can be understood in this way: the water’s ability to clearly reflect external objects does not stem from its isolation from the outside world, but rather from its retention of a keen sensitivity to all things even while at rest. When the water’s surface

settles, the shadows of clouds and the flight of birds are clearly reflected upon it; if the water churns into waves, the various images become chaotic and gradually fade away. The tranquility of mind advocated by Zhuangzi is, by its very nature, a fusion of clarity and perceptual acuity. This state does not lead to dulled senses or a scattered mind, but rather a lucid state formed through the concentration of the spirit. When applied to aesthetic experience, this clarity allows the aesthetic subject to clearly capture the various details of objects. The role of stillness is merely to help people cast aside chaotic thoughts; it does not diminish one's inherent perceptual abilities. Rather, it frees the senses from the constraints of fixed patterns of thought, rendering them both agile and precise.

More importantly, emptiness and stillness do not end with mere contemplation, but intrinsically point toward a freedom of "letting the mind roam." In the same chapter of *The World of Human Affairs*, Zhuangzi, speaking through the voice of Confucius, articulates the proposition: "Let us ride upon things to let the mind roam" ^[1]. "Riding upon things" does not mean resisting things, but rather conforming to their natural nature; "letting the mind roam" refers to the unimpeded, carefree ease of the mind. Through the practice of "heart-purification," the mind is cleansed of the obstructions of self-attachment; it no longer stands in opposition to things nor is it bound by any fixed notions. Thus, it can flow with things and transform alongside them, this is a form of playful, free activity. The "roaming" referred to here does not involve the physical movement of the body through space, but rather the spirit wandering among various aesthetic objects, forming a state of free movement unhindered by external things. This concept is similar to Kant's "free play" between imagination and reason; however, in Zhuangzi's philosophy, the foundation of this free interaction lies in emptiness and stillness. Only by maintaining a state of inner emptiness and stillness can the spirit break free from all constraints and thus roam freely at will.

This transformation from stillness and tranquility to a free-flowing mind is vividly reflected in Chinese artistic creation. What artistic creation requires is precisely this kind of inner preparation, akin to the practice of "heart-purification." When Su Dongpo inscribed a poem on Wen Yuke's bamboo painting, he remarked that before painting bamboo, one must have "a clear vision of the bamboo in one's mind." However, this "clear vision" is not a fixed concept, but rather the natural result of prolonged contemplation in stillness and communion with the spirit of the bamboo. A passage from the "Dasheng" chapter of the Zhuangzi that serves to illuminate this is the story of "Ziqing carving a ritual vessel from wood." Before beginning his work, Ziqing "must first purify himself to calm his mind": after three days of purification, he dared not forget the rewards of rank and salary; after five days, he dared not dwell on praise or criticism of his skill or lack thereof; after seven days, he had completely forgotten that he possessed a physical body with four limbs ^[1]. This process of quieting the mind is precisely a concrete practice of "mental purification." When he finally entered the mountains and forests to observe the natural qualities of the trees, the most suitable materials would present themselves before his eyes, what is known as "uniting heaven with heaven." This creative process is neither a purely rational design nor an unconscious impulse, but rather the "effortless mastery" that arises naturally after a state of profound emptiness and stillness. Emptiness and stillness may seem like inaction, yet they are precisely the deepest source of free creation. The highest state of artistic creation is often not the result of the artist's deliberate effort, but rather, following "emptiness and stillness," it is as if some inner force were taking shape through the artist's hands, this is the vital energy flowing from stillness into motion.

5. The Empty and Tranquil Mind and the Refinement of Everyday Aesthetic Experience

Amid the rapid development of modern society, the ever-increasing flood of fragmented information continues to scatter people's attention. It has become difficult for the mind to focus on a single object for any length of time, and as a result, aesthetic experiences tend to remain superficial, confined to the outward forms of things. When viewing calligraphy and

paintings or listening to music, the general public often merely glances at them in a hurry, their gaze moving on to the next image before they can truly immerse themselves in the aesthetic experience. The crucial role of “Xin Zhai” cultivation lies in nurturing one’s ability to concentrate. When one sets aside distracting thoughts, calms the mind to watch drifting clouds, sips a cup of tea, or reads a book, the details of beauty that were once overlooked in daily life re-enter one’s field of vision. Through the tranquil and serene state of mind advocated by “Xin Zhai,” one’s mode of perception transforms—not only in creative endeavors and philosophical reflection but also in everyday life. What were once ordinary aesthetic experiences become more pure; external distractions no longer interfere with the experience, and those in this state gain a relaxed and profound sense of aesthetic pleasure.

During the era in which Zhuangzi lived, wars raged year after year. He was deeply pained by the plight of the common people, who were struggling to make ends meet, but he was unable to alleviate their suffering in the real world. He therefore proposed the practice of “mental fasting” to help people find freedom and peace within their spiritual realm. When one maintains a space of spiritual openness within the heart, the emotional turmoil caused by external disturbances such as war, illness, and the ups and downs of life can be alleviated and healed. Through “Heart Fasting,” Zhuangzi sought to temporarily detach people caught in the turmoil of war from their reality of constant conflict, allowing them to forget the suffering brought by external warfare and granting their minds rest and solace. This spirit of inward seeking, while appearing outwardly detached and serene toward all external matters, was in fact rooted in a steadfast commitment to his own state of being and represented a proactive stance in confronting life’s hardships.

Cultivating a calm and serene state of mind in daily life can be reflected in taking a moment to reflect on the day’s tasks before starting work, strolling through a park to appreciate the surrounding scenery, or gazing up at the night sky to admire the stars. These activities continuously purify one’s thoughts, ensuring that there is always room for beauty within the heart. “Heart Cultivation” provides a profound spiritual foundation. When one possesses a serene and tranquil mindset, the inner world becomes rich and fulfilling, and even the simplest daily tasks can evoke a unique aesthetic experience. Though we face the hustle and bustle of daily life, reminding ourselves to stay grounded ensures these trivialities do not sweep us away. This tranquility allows those immersed in the clamor of the world to preserve inner clarity, facing the minutiae of daily life with composure. It enables one to navigate the turmoil of the world with clarity while capturing tenderness and poetry in the ordinary moments of life. With a peaceful heart, everything within sight becomes a landscape, and days pass in serene tranquility, rich and fulfilling. There is no need to seek out secluded mountains and forests deliberately; one may cultivate this emptiness and tranquility amid the ordinary bustle of daily life. While boiling water and brewing tea, watch steam rise slowly, fingertips brushing the warm cup wall, casting aside tangled trivial thoughts to focus solely on the wisp of tea fragrance before you. When tidying the desk, arrange stationery and sundries unhurriedly, without rushing for quick results, untangling jumbled feelings as you straighten your belongings. When interacting with others, curb the urge to argue hastily, and embrace quiet listening with tolerance, refusing to let others’ anxieties stir your own mood.

The fasting of the mind, or xinzhai, never means escaping from reality. It refers to the capacity to settle inward even amid mortal chaos. When weariness or restlessness creeps in, do not chase noisy distractions for relief. Sit quietly for a while, letting random thoughts drift by without clinging to them. Over time, a gentle barrier forms within your heart, shielding its peace from the rush of the outside world and trivial worries over gain and loss.

Living with this inner stillness teaches discernment, freeing you from obsessing over insignificant disturbances. Every meal, every dawn and dusk holds a unique poetic charm all your own. Embrace all mundane days with a clear and pure heart. No matter how loud and restless the world grows, your soul shall always possess a peaceful haven, unburdened and full.

6. Conclusion

Zhuangzi’s “heart-fasting” is a path that leads people from stilling the mind and gathering one’s spirit toward spiritual

elevation. When people can set aside the chaos brought by external senses and the constraints of subjective thoughts, allowing things to return to their original form and embracing their current state, they attain a mindset capable of embracing all things, and aesthetic perception begins to emerge at that moment. When discussing aesthetics, people often focus on the aesthetic qualities of an object's external form, yet rarely reflect on the cultivator's own inner character. Zhuangzi's philosophy of emptiness and stillness shifts the perspective of aesthetic contemplation back to the level of the aesthetic subject's inner cultivation. As one undergoes the process of "heart-fasting" through reflection and refinement, the mind becomes open and focused, and beauty quietly emerges in the natural, harmonious coexistence between humanity and all things.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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