

ART FRONTIER

An Intemational Art Journal/Vol. 4 No. 2 Apr.-Jun.2026 Publlshed: 2026-06-30

Intoxication and Emptiness: A Comparative Study of Aesthetic Transcendence in Nietzsche and Zhuangzi

Nan Chuqiong

To cite this article:Intoxication and Emptiness: A Comparative Study of Aesthetic Transcendence in Nietzsche and Zhuangzi,

A rt Frontier 4, no.2, DOI:https://doi.org/10.64212/0z2jv736.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64212/0z2jv736

ISSN: 2835-5490
EISSN: 2836-841X

© 2025 Frontier Press.
This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). For full license details, please visit: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

This article has undergone double-blind peer review.

Website: https://www.cafrontierpress.org/
Email: editorial2023@artfrontier.org
Publishing Frequency: Quarterly (March, June, September, December)

Intoxication and Emptiness: A Comparative Study of Aesthetic Transcendence in Nietzsche and Zhuangzi

Nan Chuqiong

Abstract

Nietzsche’s Dionysian spirit and Zhuangzi’s mind of emptiness and stillness (虛靜之心) are two paradigmatic theories of aesthetic transcendence in Western and Chinese aesthetics. Both regard the loss of the subject as a prerequisite for attaining aesthetic freedom; however, in the process of experiencing them, the two reveal a profound distinction between the “beauty of strength” and the “beauty of emptiness”. The former regards “intoxication” as the typical state in which the principle of individuation collapses, enabling one to become one with the primordial One (太一) in ecstatic revelry; the latter, through “fasting of the mind” (xinzhai, 心齋) and “sitting and forgetting” (zuowang, 坐忘), allows the mind to enter a state of “emptiness”, thereby uniting with the Dao (道) through tranquil contemplation (靜觀). This article adopts a parallel comparative approach to explain the aesthetic thought of the two thinkers and then analyses the differences in their artistic spirits from three dimensions: the path, state, and destination of aesthetic transcendence, thereby seeking to identify the different attitudes of Chinese and Western aesthetics toward pain and the self.

Key Words

Dionysian Spirit, Mind of Emptiness and Stillness, Fasting of the Mind, Aesthetic Transcendence, Parallel Comparison

Introduction

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Western aesthetics underwent a transformation known as the “irrational turn.” Previously, Schopenhauer focused on will as the key point of aesthetic discussion, pointing out that only through “self-loss” and “self-forgetfulness” in aesthetic intuition could one break free from the constraints of the will. After the Franco-Prussian War, Nietzsche inherited Schopenhauer's ideological framework and restructured it: he transformed Schopenhauer’s passive “will-less contemplation” into a Dionysian experience of positive intoxication, and transformed the negation of pain into an aesthetic affirmation of pain itself. As Nietzsche said, “Only as aesthetic phenomenon ， existence and the world are always reasonable.” Thus, the Dionysian spirit emerged, marking the birth of a brand-new aesthetic paradigm centred on the self-affirmation of the will to life.

In the distant East, more than two thousand years ago, Zhuangzi developed an approach to aesthetic appreciation that recognises the Dao through the mind of emptiness and stillness and transcends the limitations of the individual. The essence of this lofty artistic spirit lies in finding the subject’s “mind of emptiness and stillness” through “sitting and forgetting” and “fasting of the mind,” achieving the realm of individual transcendence and freedom. There is no actual relationship of influence between the two systems of thought, yet they display striking comparability in the basic structure of aesthetic transcendence: the subject reaches a higher degree of freedom through a form of “loss.” The appeal of comparative philosophy lies precisely in asking why two distant and independent cultural traditions develop aesthetic transcendence theories with similar temperaments but distinct foundations, and what are the differences in the development context and interpretation of the connotations of the two theories? The following analysis compares Nietzsche’s “intoxication” with Zhuangzi’s “emptiness” and seeks to provide a useful perspective for addressing these questions.

1.Nietzsche: The Affirmation of Life in “Intoxication”

In 1871, the German Empire was established and its political form was unified. Nietzsche turned his critical gaze to the cultural crisis behind the empire's prosperity. The following year, Nietzsche published *The Birth of Tragedy*, whose aesthetic spirit was closely related to the ideological context of 19th-century Germany.

In Nietzsche’s view, the military victory in the Franco-Prussian War of 1871 served to mask

the deep-seated crisis of the national spirit with an illusory frenzy; German culture at that time was nothing more than a banal imitation of French-style "modern culture," mired in the withering of the life instinct and cultural fragmentation brought about by the excessive inflation of Enlightenment reason. On the one hand, the Romantics retreated to medieval fatalism in search of solace; on the other hand, the "Young Germany" generation wavered between ideals of freedom and the hardships of the present, while national culture oscillated between euphoria and despair.[1] Nietzsche believed that the fundamental malady of the Zeitgeist lay in the lack of a solid, sacred foundation for the national will at that time; culture was in a state of tension and stagnation, confined to a shallow admiration for "mediocrity," "democracy," and "modern ideas," which might ultimately lead to the extinction of the German spirit.

Regarding this cultural crisis, Nietzsche believed that the modern scientific rationality that prevailed at the time—namely, the "theoretical culture" or "scientific optimism" that originated with Socrates led to the demise of mythology and the withering of life's creative power. He believed that a culture devoid of myth would lose its healthy, primal natural forces; faced with the atrophy of vital instincts brought about by the expansion of rationalism, the revival of the spirit of ancient Greek tragedy became the path to rebuilding the core of German culture.[2]

Nietzsche's practice of aesthetic reconstruction was profoundly shaped by both Schopenhauer's metaphysics of the will and Wagner's conception of music drama.

Within Schopenhauer's framework of a "dichotomy of art," art is divided into "general art as a copy of the Idea," that is, the "world of appearances," and "music as the direct expression of the will," that is, the "world of the will." He held that the will to life itself is a free, self-existent entity, whereas human beings, as phenomena of the will, are not free. Nietzsche rejected Schopenhauer's pessimistic conclusion, interpreting the Apollonian spirit, which represents the "principle of individuation," as the "beautiful illusion of a dream" that alleviates the terror of existence, and interpreting the Dionysian spirit, which represents the source of life, as the "ecstasy of intoxication" that dissolves individuation and returns to the torrent of the primordial One.[3]

The Dionysian spirit embodied in tragic art, a primal, unrestrained will to life that transcends the individual, liberates the life instincts long suppressed by reason, enabling people, through a state of "intoxication," to confront the pain of existence directly and imbue it with metaphysical significance. Nietzsche therefore believed that the will to life enables one to attain a state of freedom; this aesthetic realm of transcendence through "intoxication" is the realm of human freedom.

Wagner advanced the concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk ("total work of art"), advocating the integration of poetry, music, drama, and stage design into a unified art form, together with the use of endless melody (unendliche Melodie) and leitmotifs to intensify dramatic situations. During the period in which Nietzsche wrote *The Birth of Tragedy*, he linked this conception to the Dionysian spirit of Greek tragedy, arguing that music in music drama could express primal suffering and ecstasy, while mythical figures provided outward form and embodied the interplay between the Apollonian and Dionysian.

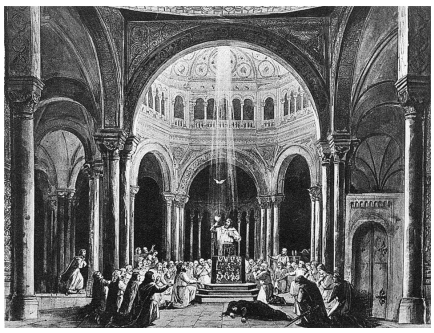


Figure 1. Paul von Joukowsky, *Stage Design for Act III of Wagner's Parsifal*, ca. 1882. Richard-Wagner-Museum, Bayreuth. Image source: Stanley Sadie, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 4: 119.

In particular, the chromatic harmonies and endless melodies in *Tristan und Isolde* had a profound influence on Nietzsche's early philosophical thought, enabling him to see how music transcends the boundaries of individuality and immerses one in the metaphysical solace of the primordial One. Wagner's revival of mythology and the ritualistic nature of his theatre also inspired Nietzsche's early conviction that "art is a metaphysical activity": existence is justifiable only as an aesthetic phenomenon.

On the philosophical level, Wagner regarded mythology as an eternal subject transcending temporal limitations and sought to revive Norse mythology as a means of resisting modernity's conception of art. In terms of musical technique, Wagner employed devices such as leitmotifs, endless melodies, and chromatic modulation to create aesthetic effects characterised by tension, conflict, and dissonance.[4] Based on this, Nietzsche once saw in Wagner's "total work of art" a modern incarnation of the Dionysian spirit and sought to foster a new tragic spirit through the unification of German music, German philosophy, and the spirit of ancient Greek tragedy.[5]

Tragedy does not teach us to be pessimistic or to withdraw; rather, through aesthetic activity, it realises a "profound aesthetic theodicy that affirms life," thereby lending rationality to existence itself. Therefore, the revival of tragedy involves employing the Dionysian spirit to counter the rigid rationalist zeitgeist and to instill a robust core into German culture.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche distinguishes between the Apollonian and Dionysian spirits. These two impulses correspond to two deities in ancient Greek mythology: Apollo, the sun god, represents the principles of order, appearance, and individualisation; Nietzsche likens him to a dream, a world in which everything has clear contours, moderate restraint, and serene form, and where the beauty of appearances allows people temporarily to forget the horror of existence. In contrast, Dionysus, the god of wine, represents another, more ancient and primordial artistic impulse. Under the Dionysian spell, the boundaries between people, between people and nature, and between people and the gods completely dissolve; the principle of individuality crumbles in "intoxication," and the subject enters a state of ecstasy.[6]



Figure 2. *Dionysian Procession with Satyrs*, Attic red-figure bell-krater, c. 420 BCE. Terracotta, height 33 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Image source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art Open Access.

The solace derived from the sun god's beautiful appearance is, after all, an "illusion." The Greeks needed the resplendent Olympian gods precisely because they were confronted with the brutal power of nature and the irresistible force of fate. Beneath the sun god's joy lies a deep concealment of the terror of existence; in the Dionysian state, the senses of time and space are transformed, human senses are refined to an extreme degree, enabling the perception of the most subtle and fleeting things, and the entire vitality of life is expanded to an unprecedented degree.

Nietzsche interpreted this sense of intoxication as "a heightened sense of power." It is precisely in this "intoxication" that he reverses Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer's "self-forgetfulness" is a flight from the will—a temporary escape from the torment of desire through aesthetic intuition; Nietzsche's "intoxication," by contrast, is an embrace of the will—through the collapse of the principle of

individualisation, the creative power at the source of life is awakened. Suffering is no longer an object to be negated; on the contrary, it is the deepest proof of life. The core of the Dionysian spirit lies in this paradoxical affirmation: through the destruction of the individualised self, the highest affirmation of life itself is realised. It is worth emphasising that Nietzsche's Dionysian spirit is not merely an aesthetic state; it is, above all, a metaphysical solace. Nietzsche wrote, "Everything that exists must be prepared for an exceptionally painful decline," but in a fleeting moment, a person "truly becomes the primal life force itself, feeling an irrepressible will to live and the joy of existence."[7]

In a state of intoxication and ecstasy, people can experience the joy that wells up from the very source of life; even suffering or ugliness, within this complex state, can be affirmed by the subject as meaningful and regarded as objects of aesthetic appreciation. It is precisely this aesthetic sense of desire and impulse that Nietzsche viewed as the key to saving the German nation's flagging spirit. Aesthetic action invigorates the spirit, but for art to truly progress toward perfection, it cannot rely solely on Dionysian intoxication. Only through the union of the Dionysian and Apollonian spirits can art maintain composure amid its wildness and allow the individual to experience a lasting tension in aesthetic practice.

2.Zhuangzi's Mind of Emptiness and Stillness: "Fasting of the Mind," "Sitting and Forgetting," and Spiritual Freedom in the Dissolution of Subjectivity

2.1 Zhuangzi's Realm of Freedom

The emergence and development of Zhuangzi's aesthetic thought were rooted, first and foremost, in the turbulent and brutal social realities of the mid-to-late Warring States period. This was an era of the "collapse of ritual and music" (禮崩樂壞) and widespread disorder throughout the land. The tradition of moral education through rites and music, established during the Zhou dynasty, faced a severe crisis; the norm that "the beauty of form lies in its completeness; virtue is perfected through ritual" had become a means of constraining human natural dispositions, while society at large was mired in utilitarian pragmatism that treated "usefulness" as the sole criterion. Faced with a cruel and ever-changing environment, Zhuangzi felt deeply disillusioned with the reality of society.

Zhuangzi deeply inherited and internalised Laozi's conception of "inaction and uncarved simplicity" (無為素樸). Whereas Laozi emphasised the cosmological and political dimensions of the Dao, Zhuangzi turned to the inner experience of individual spiritual cultivation, aiming to construct a sanctuary deep within the mind to settle the spirit. However, a purely individual turn alone could not yield sufficient power to confront the secular spiritual crisis of his time. Thus, Zhuangzi created images of "ugliness," such as deformed persons and useless trees, and put forward the propositions of "crippling one's body" (支離其形) and "crippling one's virtue" (支離其德). This historical "inward retreat," which countered utilitarian aesthetic practices through the imagery of "ugliness" and "uselessness," constituted the core temperament of Zhuangzi's aesthetics of "emptiness and stillness." In practice, this subversion of the mainstream value system expressed itself as "fasting of the mind" and "sitting and forgetting."

The cultivation of "emptiness" ultimately gives rise, through spiritual sublimation, to the realm of "wandering" (遊), a state of absolute freedom. Within Zhuangzi's aesthetic perspective, "wandering," as the pinnacle of freedom, enables the subject to transcend the finite constraints of physical reality and the body; through communion with all things and the experience of "transformation of things" (物化), it dissolves the divide between subject and object, allowing the spirit to attain a transcendent and joyful sense of life's delight.[8] From the real suffering of the turbulent Warring States period, through the profound purification of "fasting of the mind" and "sitting and forgetting," to the lofty freedom of wandering without reliance,

Zhuangzi employs the logic of "uselessness–emptiness and stillness–transformation of things–wandering" to transform suffering into an aesthetic mode of existence. "Wandering" is a transcendent path through which the individual, amidst the suffering and constraints of reality, pursues existential inquiry and self-redemption.

This psychological approach to the image of "ugliness" and to suffering bears similarities to Nietzsche's "ecstatic" aesthetic transcendence. However, Zhuangzi's construction of the aesthetic state of mind followed a path that was entirely different from Nietzsche's.

At the opening of *Discussion on Making All Things Equal*, Ziqi of South Wall "sat leaning on his armrest, staring up at the sky and breathing," while his disciple Yan Hui asked in perplexity, "Can you really make the body like a withered tree and the mind like dead ashes?" Ziqi replied, "Now I have lost myself."[9] The so-called "loss of self" (喪我) entails shedding the empirical self that clings to preformed prejudice, right and wrong, and preferences; it temporarily sets aside the "preformed mind" (成心) and the "calculating mind" (機心) that obscure one's original nature, thereby enabling the mind to access a more primordial, pure state of existence. Seen thus, "losing oneself" is indeed the gateway to understanding Zhuangzi's mind of emptiness and stillness. It is precisely this psychological dissolution of the subject that opens up space for the mind to enter free aesthetic contemplation.



Figure 3. Lu Zhi, *Zhuangzi Dreaming of a Butterfly* (《庄周梦蝶图》), ink and colour on paper, 29.4×51.4 cm, mid-16th century. Asian Art Museum, San Francisco. Image source: Wikimedia Commons.

Such a transcendent state can only be attained when consciousness relinquishes its fixation on the purity of the soul; only then can the spirit enter a state of eternal transcendence, "the light of the present." To attain this "dormant" state, we must, like Yan Hui, free the soul from the shackles of self-consciousness: liberate it from the rigid pressures of ritual and music, righteousness and virtue, and duty; transform these into objects controllable by the subject's will; and ultimately attain completeness through formlessness, even utter formlessness, in the "Dao" or the *Abgrund*; only at that moment does the self become the soul.[10]

Building on the concept of "loss of self," Zhuangzi puts forward two key concepts: "fasting of the mind" and "sitting and forgetting."

In the World of Men (《人間世》), Confucius admonished Yan Hui: "Make your will one! Don't listen with your ears, listen with your mind. No, don't listen with your mind, but listen with your spirit. Listening stops with the ears, the mind stops with recognition, but spirit is empty and waits on all things. The Way gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind."[11]

This passage is of central importance. "Fasting of the mind" is not merely a matter of quieting the mind or mental purification, but a progressive deepening of perception through successive stages: from sensory "listening with the ears," through cognitive "listening with the mind," and ultimately to "listening with the spirit" (气). Here, "qi" is not a material entity, but rather a purely ethereal state of existence that transcends the subject-object dichotomy. "Emptiness that waits on all things" means that emptiness is not voidness, but openness; not incapacity, but an all-embracing receptivity. Only in emptiness can one wait on all things; and only by waiting on all things can one realise the Dao.

In *The Great and Venerable Teacher* (《大宗師》), "sitting and forgetting" is even more

thorough: "I smash up my limbs and body, drive out perception and intellect, cast off form, do away with understanding, and make myself identical with the Great Thoroughfare. This is what I mean by sitting down and forgetting everything." Only by forgetting the body, casting aside cleverness, and shedding knowledge, relinquishing all external and internal attachments, can one "become identical with the Great Thoroughfare" (同於大通).

At this point, we must return to the common core of the philosophies of Laozi and Zhuangzi, the Dao. As the core of Zhuangzi's thought, the Dao embodies a worldview and a spirit of transcendence that go beyond the mere realm of aesthetics. He deepened Laozi's philosophical propositions, directing his inquiry toward the fundamental question of how the individual might find inner fulfilment, that is the fundamental issue of finding repose in life.

By comparison, the state of mind achieved through "fasting of the mind" bears an intrinsic affinity to aesthetic intuition: both require the temporary suspension of utilitarian cognition and desire, allowing one to enter a state of pure, purposeless contemplation. Yet Zhuangzi's sense of fullness is attained through a mind characterised by emptiness and stillness, and thus remains distinct from the Dionysian sense of force and intoxication. This difference reveals the fundamental divide between the two forms of aesthetic transcendence: Zhuangzi's path reaches spiritual clarity through subtraction, whereas Nietzsche's reaches the efflorescence of vital force through addition.

2.2 The Image of "Ugliness" in Zhuangzi and the Aesthetic View of Emptiness and Stillness

Introducing the imagery of "ugliness" is essential to a comparative study of aesthetic transcendence in Zhuangzi and Nietzsche. At the core of Nietzsche's Dionysian spirit lies the affirmation of suffering; tragic art stimulates a more intense pleasure of life precisely through the ugly and the disharmonic, wherein ugliness is transformed into a testament to vitality. Similarly, Zhuangzi's philosophy abounds with depictions of deformed persons, scrap trees, and useless trees, images of "ugliness" that serve as active mediations leading toward "emptiness and stillness" and "wandering" . In comparison, Zhuangzi uses "uselessness" to nuetralise the negative connotations of ugliness, whereas Nietzsche employs "power" to transform ugliness into an object of affirmation. Both endow ugliness with a transcendent aesthetic function, yet their approaches differ fundamentally, and this difference constitutes a significant divergence in the underlying logic of these two theories of aesthetic transcendence. The following discussion will focus on Zhuangzi's perspective.

The Sign of Virtue Complete (《德充符》) in the Zhuangzi focuses on portraying a group of grotesquely deformed persons: Crippled Shu (支離疏), Wang Tai (兀者王駘), Shen Tujia (申徒嘉), Shushan No-Toes (叔山無趾), Ai Taitao (哀駘它), and others.

Ai T'ai-t'o was "ugly enough to astound the whole world"; yet "when men were around him, they thought only of him and couldn't break away, and when women saw him, they ran begging to their fathers and mothers, saying, 'I'd rather be this gentleman's concubine than another man's wife!' There were more than ten such cases and it hasn't stopped yet."[12] His repulsive outward appearance in no way hinders his inner fullness of virtue. From this, Zhuangzi puts forward the proposition that "when virtue is preeminent, the body will be forgotten": when spiritual virtue is fully manifested, physical ugliness becomes a touchstone testing whether ordinary people can transcend physical prejudice and reach authentic virtue.

Crippled Shu presents an exaggerated physical form: "chin stuck down in his navel, shoulders up above his head, pigtail pointing at the sky, his five organs on the top, his two thighs pressing his ribs." Yet he possesses remarkable capability: "By sewing and washing, he gets enough to fill his mouth; by handling a winnow and sifting out the good grain, he makes enough to feed ten people. When the authorities call out

the troops, he stands in the crowd waving good-by; when they get up a big work party, they pass him over because he's a chronic invalid. And when they are doling out grain to the ailing, he gets three big measures and ten bundles of firewood." Zhuangzi therefore exclaims: "With a crippled body, he's still able to look after himself and finish out the years Heaven gave him. How much better, then, if he had crippled virtue!"[13]

The essence of "crippling one's body" among deformed persons, in terms of spiritual cultivation, lies in "fasting of the mind" and "sitting and forgetting." The core of "fasting of the mind" lies in "emptiness"—not listening with ears (ridding oneself of sensory perceptions), not listening with mind (ridding oneself of preferences), but listening with spirit (气) (waiting on all things in an ethereal state of being). The deformed persons crippled their bodies physically, which amounts to "smashing up limbs and body"; on the level of spiritual cultivation, one must further "drive out perception and intellect." In *The Great and Venerable Teacher*, "I smash up my limbs and body, drive out perception and intellect, cast off form, do away with understanding, and make myself identical with the Great Thoroughfare. This is what I mean by sitting down and forgetting everything." Sitting and forgetting requires discarding intellectual attachments alongside physical form. Fasting of the mind purges emotions and preferences, while "sitting and forgetting" dissolves intellectual obscurations; together, they guide the mind into a state of pure awareness characterised by emptiness, stillness, and clarity (虚,靜,明). This "mind of emptiness and stillness," freed from bodily desires and rational illusions, provides the very ground upon which aesthetic contemplation is established.

Under the preservation of "emptiness and stillness", "ugliness" ultimately leads to the absolute freedom of "wandering".

In *Free and Easy Wandering* (逍遙遊), we find a concrete formulation: Huizi tells Zhuangzi that a large tree is considered "useless" and therefore ignored by carpenters, but Zhuangzi replies: "Now you have this big tree and you're distressed because it's useless. Why don't you plant it in Not-Even-Anything Village, or the field of Broad-and-Boundless, relax and do nothing by its side, or lie down for a free and easy sleep under it? "[14] Because the scrap tree is "too ugly to be of any use," axes will never shorten its life, allowing it to avoid self-consumption in utilitarian exploitation, preserve its nature, and live out the years heaven gave it.

Likewise, the chapter *In the World of Men* states: "The mountain trees do themselves harm; the grease in the torch burns itself up. The cinnamon can be eaten and so it gets cut down; the lacquer tree can be used and so it gets hacked apart. All men know the use of the useful, but nobody knows the use of the useless!"[15] Utility invites felling, whereas uselessness brings preservation. This state of unconditioned independence attained through "uselessness" opens up a vast sanctuary for life—that is, planting the tree in "Not-Even-Anything Village, or the field of Broad-and-Boundless," while human "relax and do nothing by its side, or lie down for a free and easy sleep under it." Here, "relaxing" (彷徨) and "wandering" do not denote idle passivity, but an ultimate realm of freedom in which the spirit thoroughly casts off real-world fetters, assimilates with all things, and returns to the Way. *Discussion on Making All Things Equal* (《齊物論》) asserts: "Heaven and earth were born at the same time I was, and the ten thousand things are one with me." This represents the highest realisation of "wandering".

From deformed persons in their ugliness to the mind of emptiness and stillness, and onward to free and easy wandering, Zhuangzi charts a trajectory of "uselessness-fasting of the mind-sitting and forgetting-wandering," transforming superficial ugliness into the starting point and foundation for spiritual settlement and absolute freedom. This philosophical system

refutes social utilitarianism: the confusion and anxiety of the human mind are liberated into freedom rather than being eroded by failing to conform to utilitarian demands, thereby bestowing a deep sense of steadfast composure.

3. Comparison and Distinction: Similarities and Differences between "Intoxication" and "Emptiness"

The analyses in the preceding two sections show that Nietzsche and Zhuangzi both ground aesthetic transcendence in a common premise: the subject must undergo a profound form of "loss", Nietzsche's Dionysian dissolution of the *principium individuationis*, and Zhuangzi's "loss of self" and "sitting and forgetting". Such loss is not self-destruction but self-transformation: the individual breaks free from the self of everyday experience and enters a state of unity with a larger whole, the Great Unity or the Way. Yet beneath the similarity of these paths lies a fundamental divergence. The distinction can be examined along three dimensions.

3.1 The Path of Transcendence: the Outpouring of Force and the Sedimentation of Stillness

Nietzsche's Dionysian state is an explosive and physical experience. Inspired by music and dance, one's vitality surges forth like a torrent, and the senses are heightened to such an extent that they are able to perceive a multitude of "extremely subtle and fleeting things". Zhuangzi's "fasting of the mind" is precisely the opposite: it is not the display of power, but its restraint. Every step in "Listening with the Breath" involves letting go, simplifying, and sinking into a deeper silence. The former surges outward; the latter turns inward.

In the same way that the two share a common understanding of the "enrapturing" nature of aesthetics, they understand it differently. For Zhuangzi, the self-forgetting state in which body and spirit become fully integrated is not induced by an external force such as alcohol; rather, it consists in a condition of being kept whole by Heaven. It is therefore a deeper and more primordial form of absorption: tranquil, serene, and unfathomable. Nietzschean intoxication, by contrast, is turbulent, exuberant, and ardent, marked by an irrational, frenzied character and by a surrender of self and emotion to the larger process of becoming.[16]

3.2 The State of Transcendence: Revelry in Unity with the Great Unity and Clarity through Union with the Way

In Dionysian "intoxication," the principle of individuality collapses completely, and the individual becomes immersed in a state of self-forgetting revelry. As Nietzsche describes it, in the gospel of universal unity, each person feels united, reconciled, and at peace with others, even becoming one with them. This state is accompanied by an intense sense of pleasure and power. In "fasting of the mind," by contrast, the state is expressed as "the empty chamber where brightness is born," with good fortune and blessing gathering in stillness. The self is not overwhelmed by passion, but observes all things with clarity.

Taking their differing perspectives on play as an example to illustrate the differences in states of transcendence, some scholars have summarised this as "wandering and dice-throwing." Zhuangzi's "wandering" does not refer to a specific game, but rather to the wandering of the mind. The *Free and Easy Wandering* is the ultimate form of wandering, which requires, first, breaking free from the shackles of benevolence, righteousness, and morality, and secondly, freeing oneself from the constraints of fame, fortune, and material gain. Nietzsche, on the other hand, regards the throwing of dice as an aesthetic game, comprising two moments: the moment the dice are thrown and the moment they come to rest—the act of throwing the dice affirms chance, whilst the combination formed by their landing affirms necessity; the act of throwing dice is an affirmation of the fleeting moments of diversity.[17]

Zhuangzi's "view of play" is, rather, an approach to the wandering of the soul and the experience of nature under the guise of play. It is

a condition that transcends vulgar desire and the boundary between thinghood and action. Although Nietzsche's dice-throwing is intended to clarify the relations among chance, necessity, and multiplicity, its imaginative form as an aesthetic game is already closely associated with the modern vocabulary of play and entertainment, and thus enters a more secularised semantic register.

3.3 "Impaired Form, Complete Virtue" and "Dissonance": Divergent Uses of Ugliness in Chinese and Western Existential Redemption

The most significant difference between Zhuangzi and Nietzsche in their accounts of aesthetic transcendence concerns their treatment of suffering and human fate. For Nietzsche, suffering is one of the deepest confirmations of life; the significance of the Dionysian spirit lies precisely in affirming the suffering and value of life. To confront and embrace suffering is itself an expression of strength. Nietzsche regards the decadent person as ugly because of an impoverishment of the will to life, an impoverishment produced by the constraints of truth, science, reason, and related metaphysical enterprises. He therefore attacks Christianity for its negation of human nature and takes the abundance or impoverishment of vital force as a measure of value.[18] Zhuangzi takes a different path. He states that, if one is content with one's time and follows along with the course of things, "grief and joy have no way to enter in"; rather than confronting suffering directly, he seeks to see through life and death and transcend grief and joy, thereby removing suffering's "sting" at its root.

Nietzsche and Zhuangzi both attach importance to the apprehension of nature through lived experience, but they construe the nature to which human beings return differently. For Nietzsche, the nature to which one returns is the will to power of the cosmic matrix of life, expressed in the so-called Apollonian and Dionysian spirits inherent in human nature. His conception of the unity of Heaven and humanity therefore refers to the integration of the Apollonian and Dionysian forces within the human being with the will to power of the cosmic matrix of life. The "nature" to which Zhuangzi sought to return is the innate, primordial and authentic disposition that humans perceive in nature; when one's perception of nature reaches a certain level, one acts without striving yet accomplishes all things, thereby achieving harmony with the Way of Heaven. One stands tall and resolute amidst suffering, whilst the other dissolves peacefully amidst it.[19] Here we can see a convergence in Nietzsche's and Zhuangzi's understanding of the end of aesthetic freedom: aesthetic freedom entails an affirmation of one's value in the world.

In Zhuangzi, ugliness is often represented through bodily deformity and the uselessness of the "useless tree." The loosening of bodily form becomes a medium through which the subject approaches a realm of emptiness and stillness. By eliminating sensory desire and intellectual contrivance, the mind returns to an unadorned emptiness and, through "fasting of the mind" and "sitting and forgetting," accepts the transformations of nature. This experience of dissonance dissolves the boundaries of individuality, leading the subject, through suffering, towards the primordial existence of the One.[20] Nietzsche regarded dissonance as proof of the abundance of the will to life, and through the experience of suffering, he affirmed the phenomenon of life.

Zhuangzi uses "uselessness" to neutralise the negative value of ugliness and finds peace of mind in the midst of tranquillity and harmony. Nietzsche chooses dissonance to affirm suffering and, in an intoxicated state that resists the dominance of reason, to affirm the power of will. These two approaches to suffering and bodily deformity reveal two different tendencies in Chinese and Western aesthetics: contraction and stillness on the one hand, and expansion and purposeful activity on the other.

These three differences stem from the two civilisations' differing conceptions of the "Dao" or "ontological essence". Nietzsche's spirit is

imagined as a torrent of will, a vortex of force; Zhuangzi's Way is a primordial ground of emptiness and stillness, the point of return for the ten thousand things. Under these ontological premises, "intoxication" leads toward affirmation and creation, whereas "emptiness" leads toward clarity and freedom.

4. Conclusion: The Cultural Implications of Two Aesthetic Spirits

The emergence of "intoxication" and "emptiness" is related to their respective historical cultures and temporal circumstances. These two systems of thought, born in different times and spaces, converge unexpectedly in the structure of aesthetic transcendence yet diverge at the level of their underlying spiritual dispositions. Nietzsche's Dionysian question is: How are we to have the strength to confront this world? Zhuangzi's question through "fasting of the mind" is: How are we to find repose within this world? Together, they reveal two orientations at the foundations of the artistic spirit in Chinese and Western aesthetics.

From the perspective of the history of aesthetics, this comparison carries a further implication. Kant, whose central tenet was "aesthetic disinterestedness"—which serves the purity of aesthetic judgement—distinguished aesthetic experience from utilitarian concerns. Comparing Nietzsche's and Zhuangzi's aesthetic transcendence from this perspective may offer some insights into the contemporary question of aesthetic appreciation and discernment.

First, let us examine a comparison of the aesthetic concepts of Kant and Nietzsche. Nietzsche took a clearly critical stance towards Kant's non-utilitarian contemplation: whilst Kant detached the aesthetic experience from desire, concepts, and practical concerns, thereby establishing aesthetic autonomy, he also severed art from the foundations of the will to life. Nietzsche consequently re-anchored the aesthetic within the realm of life, emphasising the intrinsic unity of ecstasy, suffering, and creation; the aesthetic, he argued, should not be practised solely through detachment, but should constitute a direct affirmation of life. Kantian aesthetic disinterestedness, by contrast, presupposes the continued presence of a contemplative subject, whereas Zhuangzi's non-instrumentality points toward the dissolution of the subject itself. After the "loss of self," there is no longer a spectator standing over against an object. Kantian aesthetic freedom is a freedom of subjectivity; Zhuangzi's freedom is the freedom that emerges when subjectivity is dissolved and connected with Heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things. Zhuangzi's "fasting of the mind" can indeed be interpreted as a more radical form of disinterestedness: it requires not only freedom from sensory desire but also release from intellectual attachment, even extending to the dissolution of consciousness of the self itself. This, however, also indicates a limitation in Xu Fuguan's interpretation of Zhuangzi as embodying a "pure artistic spirit," insofar as such a formulation may simplify other complex dimensions of Zhuangzi's thought. Zhuangzi is concerned not only with an aesthetic state of mind but also with the fundamental question of how human beings are to live and establish themselves in the world, a question that the modern concept of "artistic spirit" may not fully encompass.

From a comparative perspective of the histories of Eastern and Western aesthetics, aesthetic transcendence is a multifaceted subject: it can involve the pursuit of an uplifting and resolute impulse towards rapture; it can generate the strength to engage with the world; and, above all, it must embody a serene demeanour that allows for a sense of peace and self-forgetfulness. At the same time, aesthetic transcendence remains a contemporary issue.

Nietzsche represents an "aesthetics of power": the value of art lies in stimulating the intensity of life, in enabling people to confront the absurdity and suffering of existence without evasion, whilst aesthetics is imbued with the vitality of life; Zhuangzi, on the other hand, represents an "aesthetics of emptiness": the value of art lies in purifying the mind, enabling

people to attain spiritual freedom in a state of clarity, free from desire and attachment. Yet even with such a distinction, research must not simply rely on their cultural character and interpretative approaches to judge whether the artistic spirit of the two is "inward-looking" or "outward-looking"; the artistic spirit of both is one of steadfastness, possessing both an outward-reaching impulse and an inward-turning return. Nietzsche's philosophical reflections are better suited to the fundamental spiritual issues faced by individuals in a goal-oriented society; they emphasise how, in the absence of external foundations, the self can establish its own laws and enter a steadfast, grounded spiritual state to salvage the will. Zhuangzi's aesthetic transcendence, on the other hand, is better suited to addressing the spiritual attrition and physical and mental imbalances caused by information overload, an excessively utilitarian environment, and the accelerating pace of life. The core of this approach lies in dissolving fixations and discriminatory consciousness, thereby enabling the individual to detach from the constant preoccupation with external evaluations and short-term goals, and to restore the stability of their inner order.

In an age such as ours, characterised by ongoing global cultural exchange and in which many people feel bewildered by cultural trends, aesthetics remains an important intellectual path capable of saving the soul. An individual's practice of selecting and discarding aesthetic experiences should be guided by the issues arising from the contemporary context and be in accordance with the demands of one's own will. The differing answers offered by Nietzsche and Zhuangzi to the question of aesthetic transcendence still resonate today.

Sichuan University

Nan Chuqiong,an undergraduate student in Fine Art (Art Theory) at the School of Art,Sichuan University,Chengdu,China.

REFERENCES

1. Li, Tiange 李天鸽. "A Comparison of Nietzsche's Dionysian Spirit and the Wei-Jin Drinking Culture Represented by Ji Kang" [尼采酒神精神与以嵇康为代表的魏晋酒文化的比较]. *Journal of Jilin Provincial Institute of Education*, 35, no. 9 (2019): 147–150.

2. Luo, Shiping 罗仕平. "The Echo of the Tristan Chord: Wagner and Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*" [特里斯坦和弦的回响：瓦格纳与尼采《悲剧的诞生》]. *Journal of Tongji University (Social Sciences)*, 35, no. 1 (2024): 12–23.

3. Lü, Dong 吕东. "Negation of Life: Reconsidering Schopenhauer's Influence on Nietzsche's Early Metaphysics of Art" [对生命的否定：重估叔本华对早期尼采艺术形而上学的影响]. *Studies in Literary Theory*, 38, no. 2 (2018): 207–216.

4. Luo, "The Echo of the Tristan Chord," 5.

5. Yin, Fei 尹菲. "The Nirvana of Greek Tragedy" [希腊悲剧之涅槃]. *Xue Lilun* [学理论], no. 19 (2009): 86–87.

6. Nietzsche, Friedrich 弗里德里希·尼采. *The Birth of Tragedy* [悲剧的诞生]. (Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 2021).

7. Ibid., 106.

8. Huang, Lu 黄璐. "'Wandering' and 'Intoxication': Mutual Interpretation of the Aesthetic Spirits of Zhuangzi and Nietzsche" ["游"与"醉"——庄子与尼采审美精神之互释]. *Theory Monthly,* no. 7 (2017): 50–55.

9. Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*. (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1968), 36.

10. Zhuo, Dawei 卓达维, and He Jinli 何金俐. "Diving Through Water and Drifting with the Current: Zarathustra and Zhuangzi's Expansive Souls" [蹈水穿流：查拉斯图特拉与庄子洋溢的灵魂]. *Modern Philosophy*, no. 5 (2010): 111–120.

11. Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 90–91.

12. Ibid., 72–75.

13. Ibid., 66.

14. Ibid., 35.

15. Ibid., 43, 67.

16. Li, Man 李满. "Similarities and Differences between Nietzsche's and Zhuangzi's Theories of Aesthetic Realm" [尼采与庄子的审美境界论之异同]. *Inner Mongolia Social Sciences*, 32, no. 6 (2011): 36–41.

17. Cai, Xi 蔡熙. "A Comparison of Zhuangzi's and Nietzsche's Views of Literature and Art" [庄子与尼采文艺观比较]. *Chinese Literature Research*, no. 3 (2011): 67–71.

18. Cai, "A Comparison of Zhuangzi's and Nietzsche's Views of Literature and Art," 16.

19. Li, "Similarities and Differences between Nietzsche's and Zhuangzi's Theories," 17.

20. Lü, "Negation of Life: Reconsidering Schopenhauer's Influence," 17.

Editor: Yixuan Yang