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The Eastern Echo of the Thinking of Being: A Study of Zao Wou-Ki's Painting from the Perspectives of Heidegger and Taoism

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Abstract

This study looks at Zao Wou-Ki's art using Heidegger's philosophy and Taoism. Old studies only focused on style and technique. That formal work was useful, but it had limits. Zao's paintings ask big questions about life, reality, and existence. Philosophy helps us answer these questions and changes how we see art. The first is Heidegger's concept of ontological difference. The second is the Taoist idea of mysterious unity. These two ideas provide a way to reconsider the philosophical foundations of Zao Wou-Ki's art. They also show how his paintings bring different traditions of thought into conversation. Through this comparison, the study shows how Zao Wou-Ki's art connects different philosophical traditions. It also suggests that fundamental questions in art and aesthetics can reach beyond specific cultural contexts.

Key Words: Art Aesthetics, Heidegger, *Tao Te Ching*, Zao Wou-Ki

Martin Heidegger challenged the foundations of Western metaphysics through a phenomenological approach. His later writings also reveal a sense of caution about the limits of human thought. He acknowledged that "Our thinking is not yet prepared to truly listen to the voice of Being." The *Tao Te Ching* had already anticipated this difficulty: "Those who know do not speak; those who speak do not know" (Chapter 56)—When art seeks to capture Being through form, Being may already have slipped away through the gaps between language and image. Heidegger's later engagement with Taoist thought is also significant. During his later years, Heidegger worked with Paul Shih-Yi Hsiao on a translation of the *Tao Te Ching*. The project was never completed. Yet the work introduced elements of Eastern thought into his philosophical reflections.¹ The German sinologist Rudolf G. Wagner argued that Heidegger's

engagement with Taoist thought reflected his deep awareness of the crisis facing Western philosophy.² The contemporary significance of this cross-cultural dialogue can be understood in one key way. Technological rationality often treats Being as something that can be calculated and controlled. The Taoist idea of the mystical mirror connects well with phenomenology. Both call for an open mind to see Being as it is. They do not fix Being into strict ideas. Instead, they let reality show itself naturally. This shared view helps Heidegger and Taoism talk to each other. Their dialogue leads us to a direct and real experience of life.

Zao Wou-Ki (1920–2013) was a Chinese-French painter. Zao Wou-Ki is a major modern artist who mixed Chinese and Western styles throughout his career. He began with realistic painting but later moved to abstraction. In this new phase, he brought Chinese ink techniques into Western modern art. His Untitled series and Homage to Cézanne show how he used color, shape, and space to explore deep ideas about nature and life. Taoism also shaped his work, partly through his close friendship with Henri Michaux as they translated the Tao Te Ching together. Zao himself spoke about this connection. He once said: “I have always loved Laozi. My grandfather also leaned toward Taoism. I do not paint to express something, but to let the painting speak for itself.”³ This statement offers a key. It unlocks his whole approach to painting. In a way, it also echoes Heidegger’s idea of “letting beings be.” Zao’s paintings make this idea visible. Color plays a role here. So does space. Empty areas matter most of all. Together, they keep meaning open. The viewer is not handed a single answer. Meaning stays in motion instead. This study takes up two lenses. One is Heidegger’s philosophy. The other is the Tao Te Ching. Both guide the reading of Zao’s art. A central question drives the analysis: how do these two traditions surface in his paintings? Three themes structure the discussion. Ontology comes first. Heidegger’s critique of modern technology follows. The role of emptiness and whiteness closes the discussion.

Zao Wou-Ki’s paintings serve this purpose well. East and West meet in his work, but they do not merge into one system. Each tradition keeps its own voice. His

paintings also reveal common ground between Heidegger's philosophy of Being and Taoist aesthetics. We can trace this connection in three places. First, in his abstract forms. Second, in his use of empty space and white areas. Third, in his interest in nature and existence. His paintings create a space in which viewers can encounter Being beyond language and fixed concepts. Cross-cultural philosophical dialogue has gained increasing attention in recent art scholarship. Western scholars have also emphasized the global significance of Zao Wou-Ki's art. The French scholar François Cheng, for example, examined the "poetics of the void" in his paintings. Cheng argued that Zao Wou-Ki transformed the Taoist principle of non-action (*wu wei*) into an abstract visual language. He also suggested that Zao Wou-Ki's work "establishes order within chaos, transcending the limitations of Western abstraction."⁴ In 1966, the French critic Jean Lescure began a printmaking collaboration with Zao Wou-Ki. Lescure later described their collaboration as follows: "The forms in Zao Wou-Ki's work are dazzlingly radiant, their substance profoundly rich, leaving an enduring impression. With an ever-increasing freedom and passion, they embody a seamless fusion of East and West, of strength and contemplation."⁵ The German phenomenologist Günter Figal applies Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* to his analysis of Zao Wou-Ki's paintings. Figal describes Zao Wou-Ki's canvases as a "clearing for the disclosure of Being."⁶ Based on these discussions, this study focuses on one central question. How do Zao Wou-Ki's paintings express the dialogue between Heidegger's ontological difference and the Taoist idea of mysterious unity (*xuan tong*)? This study examines how his abstract forms, use of void and whiteness, and reflections on nature contribute to this dialogue. This study also asks whether Zao Wou-Ki's paintings can help us think about the truth of Being in a world shaped by technology. The study takes a comparative approach. It puts Heidegger's philosophy alongside Taoist aesthetics. Two methods work together here. Close readings of philosophical texts form one part. Visual analysis of Zao Wou-Ki's paintings forms the other. This method traces something specific. It follows how these ideas appear in his use of form, color, space, and emptiness. A gap also comes into view. Ideas sit

behind his paintings. Something different often meets the eye on canvas. This study examines that gap too.



Figure 1. Zao Wou-Ki, *Homage to Cézanne 06.11.05-Diptych*, 2005, oil on canvas, 162×260cm.

1. Ontological Difference and Mysterious Unity: Visual Manifestations in Zao Wou-Ki's Paintings

Heidegger's critique of Western philosophy centers on one key distinction. This is the distinction between Being and beings. In *Being and Time*, he questioned some basic ideas of traditional metaphysics. He also asked how Western philosophy had understood Being. He argued that Western philosophy had often treated Being and beings as if they were the same. Heidegger therefore drew a clear distinction between Being (Sein) and beings (Seiendes). This distinction shaped much of his later thinking about the question of Being.⁷ This confusion can be compared to mistaking a source of light for the light it produces. Such a mistake shifts attention away from the more fundamental question of philosophy. Heidegger argued that Western philosophy had gradually forgotten the question of Being. He traced this tendency from Plato in ancient Greece to Hegel in the modern period. Plato placed the Form of the Good at the highest level of his theory of Forms. Hegel later used the concept of Absolute Spirit to explain the development of beings through dialectical movement. Heidegger

saw a common problem in these two approaches. Both remained concerned with beings and with the grounds of their existence. In his view, neither one fully addressed what Being means.⁸ Heidegger argued that traditional metaphysics often treats Being as the highest being. Sometimes it treats Being as an abstract essence instead. Some thinkers identify Being with God, reason, or spirit. These views focus on particular things that exist. They do not ask what Being itself means. They also leave aside a more basic question. How do beings appear to us? And how do we understand them? Heidegger approached this problem through the question of Being (Seinsfrage). He asked philosophy to move beyond its usual focus on beings. He wanted philosophy to return to the question of Being itself. This shift gave philosophy a new task. It called for a new way of thinking about human existence. It also called for rethinking how existence relates to the world.⁹ A similar concern appears in Taoist thought. Laozi raises this issue at the very start of the Tao Te Ching: "The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao." Here, Laozi points to the limits of language. Words cannot fully define the Tao. Language can point toward the Tao. But it cannot explain the Tao completely. This idea has some similarities with Heidegger's view of Being. Heidegger also argued that Being cannot be reduced to fixed concepts. He looked for ways to speak about Being beyond ordinary conceptual language. He saw poetic language as one possible way to do this. Zhuangzi develops a related idea in the story of "Cook Ding Butchering an Ox." Cook Ding does not rely only on what his eyes see. He also does not depend on careful calculation. He uses a natural feel to follow the ox's body structure. Zhuangzi calls this "using the spirit instead of the eyes." Cook Ding reaches this high skill level in his work. Ordinary perception no longer guides him. His actions follow the movement of his spirit. His knife follows the natural structure of the ox's body. His movements become effortless and precise. The story presents a state in which action follows the natural course of things. The conscious subject no longer stands apart from the world. This state reveals the Tao through direct engagement with reality.¹⁰ This state shares some similarities with Heidegger's concept of Dasein in the disclosure of Being. Taoist thought, however, goes further.

Through the loss of the self (*sang wo*), it seeks to dissolve subjectivity itself. In this state, the disclosure of Being no longer depends on a subject who receives or interprets meaning.

In the exhibition catalogue for *Zao Wou-Ki* at the Grand Palais in Paris, François Cheng noted: “Through the rhythmic movement of the brush, the Chinese artist immerses their entire being into the act of writing, enabling each character to carry both the cosmic breath (*qi*) and the inner principles of all things. This art uses core Chinese ideas like void and solidity, or yin and yang. It goes beyond simple beauty to create a bridge for real life. In this way, painting becomes a way of living.”¹¹ The void is a key idea in Chinese cosmology that connects writing with life. It shows that art should follow the natural rhythms of living. Zao Wou-Ki used this idea deeply in his work, using nature, space, and movement in his paintings. The French writer Alain Jouffroy noted that Zao brought Chinese cosmology into modern global art as a deep way of thinking. Jouffroy also saw that other painters like Paul Klee, Mark Tobey, and Henri Michaux used this same tradition in their own ways.¹²

Zao Wou-Ki’s abstract painting 10.01.68 (Fig. 2) turns deep philosophical ideas into visual art. Bright colors and floating shapes mix together so that subject and object blend into one. Moving lines and shifting colors create a raw feeling of real existence, like mist or moving air. He avoids showing real objects and uses space, color, and movement to give viewers a direct view of Being. Zao said his art is part of nature rather than a copy of it, which fits both Heidegger’s thought and the Taoist idea of letting go of self. When the artist steps back, the painting becomes free to grow on its own terms.



Figure 2. Zao Wou-Ki, *10.01.68*, 1968, oil on canvas, 82×116.5cm.

Untitled (1972) (Fig. 3) shows this idea with dark ink, light ink, and open white space. White space shows emptiness, while black ink shows real things, like yin and yang in Taoism. The ink moves from heavy on the left to light on the right using a dry brush style called *fei bai*. These marks look like clouds or mountains, creating a natural feel or *yi jing*. Zao paints freely without planning every stroke, which fits the Taoist idea of *wu wei*. The open space lets viewers think and find their own meaning. This open style fits both Zen ideas about letting go of self and modern ideas that invite people to enjoy art in their own way. As art historian Gao Minglu observed, “Zao Wou-Ki’s painting seeks traces of existence within nothingness.”¹³ This idea of non-being does not simply refer to emptiness. It also has a philosophical meaning close to Heidegger’s concept of *das Nichts*. For Heidegger, *das Nichts* opens a space in which beings can appear. It makes the experience of Being possible. Zao Wou-Ki gives this difference between Being and beings a visual form. His abstract paintings do not present specific objects. They use color, space, and form to create a more basic sense of existence. The viewer does not encounter a particular being. The viewer encounters a space in which Being can gradually emerge.



Figure 3. Zao Wou-Ki, *Untitled*, 1972, paper, India ink, 69×119cm.

Taoist self-loss and Heidegger's concept of Dasein approach the disclosure of Being in different ways. Heidegger describes Dasein as a particular way of being-in-the-world. Dasein remains closely tied to the world around it. It seeks to understand Being through its own existence. This approach still leaves room for subjectivity. Dasein opens the space in which meaning can appear. It also remains the point from which Being is encountered. Taoist thought takes another path. This view places more emphasis on letting go of the self. This practice asks the subject to loosen its fixed position. It also reduces the distance between the self and the world. Being can then appear without relying on a fixed subject or object. Art offers a similar contrast. Heidegger takes up this theme in *The Origin of the Work of Art*. His example is Vincent van Gogh's *A Pair of Shoes*. He sees more than just a pair of shoes in the picture. The worn surface and rough texture show the life of the peasant woman who wore them. Dirt and marks on the leather reveal her hard daily work. Through these small details, the painting shows the real struggles of everyday life.¹⁴ This idea shows that art can reveal Being through human experience, but Taoist art takes a different path. The story of the archer Hou Yi explains this through the idea of "shooting without shooting" (bu she zhi she). When Hou Yi reached top skill, he forgot about the target and himself. He put down his bow because he no longer needed hard effort.

Instead, he entered a quiet state of mind that matched the natural Tao. This state breaks the wall between the person and the world. Being does not come from hard planning, but grows naturally on its own.

A deeper link shows up in how Heidegger and Taoism view nothingness. In *What Is Metaphysics?* Heidegger says nothingness (das Nichts) is not just empty space. It creates the space where Being can appear. He also questions the limits of modern science. Science can explain many things that exist. Yet science cannot fully answer the question of what Being means. He argues that science seeks to know beings while leaving nothingness outside its field of inquiry. This focus makes it difficult for science to recognize the role of nothingness in the disclosure of Being. For Heidegger, nothingness makes the appearance of beings possible. It allows beings to emerge from an undifferentiated state and enter human experience.¹⁵ This understanding of nothingness has a strong connection with the thought of the *Tao Te Ching*. In Chapter 11, Laozi writes: “Clay is molded to form a vessel, yet it is the emptiness within that makes it useful. Doors and windows are cut to form a room, yet it is the emptiness within that makes it usable.” Laozi explains this idea through familiar examples. A wheel can turn because of the empty space between its spokes. A room is useful because of the space inside it. A vessel is useful because it can hold something within its empty space. These examples show that nothingness means more than the absence of something. Empty space gives things room to function. It also makes their functions possible. Heidegger’s concept of nothingness and Laozi’s concept of nothingness point to a similar insight. The truth of Being does not come from the accumulation of beings. It emerges within the spaces where fixed concepts and distinctions fall away. These spaces create room for Being to disclose itself. The Japanese philosopher Kitaro Nishida develops a related idea in *An Inquiry into the Good*. He brings together elements of Heideggerian and Taoist thought through his concept of the “place of absolute nothingness” (zettai mu no basho). Nishida argues that Being does not depend entirely on the intentional activity of the subject. It also does not depend on fixed qualities assigned to the object. Instead, Being emerges

spontaneously within a primordial encounter. In this encounter, the distinction between subject and object has not yet been fully established.¹⁶ Nishida's concept of absolute nothingness seeks to move beyond the Western division between subject and object. This view returns to a direct and basic experience of Being. It also creates a point of contact between Eastern and Western philosophy. At the same time, it gives a different meaning to nothingness. Nothingness means something more here than just simple absence. It also does not mean plain negation. It leaves room for new possibilities. In this open space, Being can appear in its own way.

Heidegger develops this discussion further in his analysis of Dasein in *Being and Time*. He approaches the question of Being through Dasein. Heidegger sees Dasein as different from other beings because Dasein is always already *In-der-Welt-sein*, or being-in-the-world. Dasein exists within the world and stays connected to its surroundings. It also lives with the people and things around it. Heidegger examines this condition through ideas such as "Sorge" and "Sein-zum-Tode." These ideas show that Dasein is closely tied to time. Being is not fixed or complete. Dasein exists through time. Its past, present, and future remain connected. Through this movement, Dasein's understanding of Being continues to develop.¹⁷ This view of time also brings to mind the image of the Roc spreading its wings in Zhuangzi's *Free and Easy Wandering* (Xiao Yao You). Zhuangzi describes the Roc as a being that moves beyond the limits of its physical form and its surroundings. The Roc achieves freedom through its unity with the Tao. Its freedom does not come from deliberate effort. The Roc does not pursue freedom through its own will. Freedom comes through the natural movement of the Tao. The Roc follows this movement and moves beyond the limits of its own existence.¹⁸ This freedom reflects the spontaneous movement of Being. It does not come from the conscious will of an individual self. Heidegger develops a similar idea in his discussion of the Greek temple. For Heidegger, the artwork creates a clearing in which Being can appear. The temple is more than an architectural structure. Through its presence upon the earth, the temple reveals the world of ancient Greece. This world brings together the divine, nature, and human

existence.¹⁹ Similarly, the Taoist principle of “non-action, yet nothing is left undone” (wu wei er wu bu wei) expresses a similar idea. True action does not impose itself upon the world. It follows the natural movement of the Tao. Through non-action, things can unfold and reach their own completion. This attitude toward Being creates an important point of connection between Eastern and Western thought. It also offers a meaningful way to reconsider the relationship between human action and the world.

Turning to Zao Wou-Ki’s 1968 work *18.3.68* (Fig. 4), the limited canvas space suggests a much wider inner landscape of nature. Zao Wou-Ki creates a mysterious space through the movement of color and form. The painting draws the viewer into its artistic conception. The scattered forms may suggest falling cherry blossoms. Petals fall down to the waiting earth and slowly disappear. This simple movement brings nature, space, and human life together. A quiet feeling of peace settles over the scene.



Figure 4. Zao Wou-Ki, *18.3.68*, 1968, oil on canvas, 95×105cm.

Zao Wou-Ki’s art developed through several stages over time. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, he painted realistic landscapes and still lifes. During the mid-1950s to early 1960s, his work slowly shifted toward soft abstraction. By the late 1960s, he

built a fully mature abstract style. His paintings from this period mix color, space, and brushwork into a smooth and balanced picture. Zao Wou-Ki painted 18.3.68 in 1968. This painting is quite small compared to many larger works from the same time. However, the artist carefully organizes its composition. Layers of color and brushwork give the surface a rich texture. Zao Wou-Ki uses relatively few forms to create a strong sense of space. The composition suggests the vastness of mountains and oceans. During this period, Zao Wou-Ki's paintings moved further away from specific landscape images. His works began to suggest an inner landscape. The forms no longer refer clearly to particular places or natural scenes. They point instead toward a mental and spiritual space. Zao Wou-Ki once remarked, "Every painter's creation is realistic to themselves; it is only abstract to the viewer."²⁰ Zao Wou-Ki turns images of natural space into an independent world within the frame. The painting contains traces of the sun, stars, and moon. His work also begins with a very simple visual element: the point. Zao Wou-Ki used round and filbert brushes to make his lines. The brush creates a point when it first touches the canvas. The point then extends into a line. The line can develop into a larger plane. In this way, simple marks gradually form a complex spatial structure. 18.3.68 differs from many of Zao Wou-Ki's paintings from the early 1960s. Those works often relied on a central ridge as the main structure. 18.3.68 has no clearly defined central ridge. The composition remains more open. Its different areas also connect with one another more freely.²¹ The basic structure of the painting comes from the meeting of loose and rapid brushstrokes. Zao Wou-Ki uses sharp and broken strokes to bring together the forms in his mind. On the right side of the canvas, a strong blue-black horizontal stroke crosses thin layers of pale blue oil paint. The pale blue layers recall the colors of a rainbow. Deep washes overlap with fine strokes that resemble ink. These different marks create a tense and unsettled surface. This tension leads toward the circular form at the center. The circle becomes the main focus of the composition. It also brings the many lines into close view. Some lines overlap. Others merge or disappear. Some are cut off by other strokes. Moving lines gather near the center and push outward to

build a large circle, leaving the center empty while the edges stretch past the frame. This movement gathers and spreads like nuclear fusion, showing how the energy of qi works in the painting. Lightweight strokes set a clear rhythm, moving freely between gathering and dispersing. In works like 18.3.68, Zao uses open space instead of a fixed central line, so viewers can see the art from many angles. Unlike Sam Francis, whose work *Untitled* (Fig. 5) uses regular brushstrokes across the canvas, Zao creates a smooth flow between full and empty spaces through the natural movement of qi. This continuous movement, in the end, gives the painting its sense of unity.

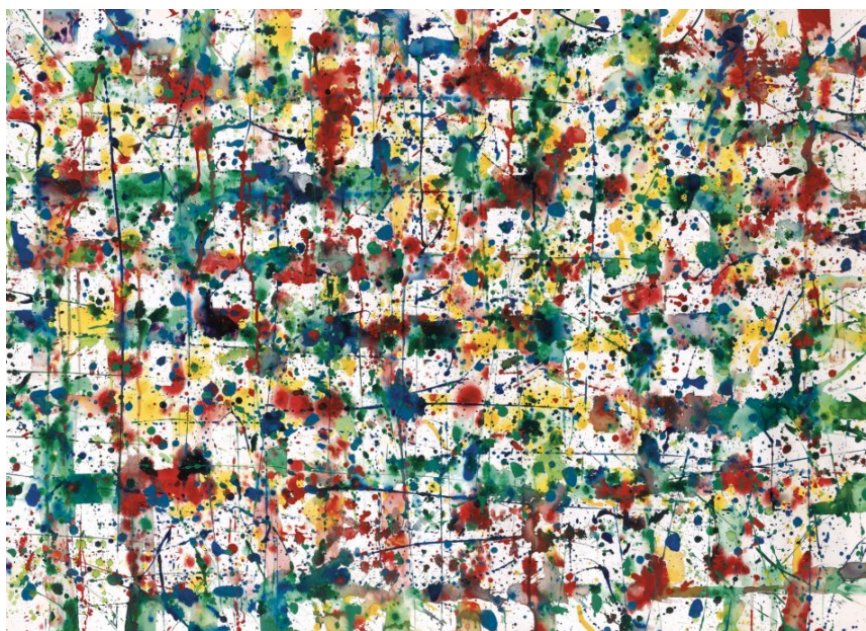


Figure 5. Sam Francis, *Untitled*, 1977, acrylic and oil on paper, 75×104.1cm.

The light and open quality of Zao Wou-Ki's paintings is closely related to the restrained expression of emotion in Eastern art. His connection with Chinese ink painting also shaped his approach to abstraction. His close observation of nature played an important role as well. These experiences influenced the way he organized space in his paintings. Zao Wou-Ki once remarked, "The rhythm created by the interplay of void and substance in Chinese painting—a dynamic interplay where one element pushes another in continuous movement—lends the composition a sense of weighted lightness. If my paintings differ from those of Western artists, it is likely due

to this distinct approach to spatial composition.”²² 18.3.68 creates a balance between movement and stillness. Its atmosphere goes beyond the depiction of a landscape. The painting also suggests a reflection on the order of the cosmos. It gives the viewer a sense of a moment of insight into the cosmic order (*da xiang*). Zao Wou-Ki’s abstraction offers another way to think about painting. His work does more than provide a new way to depict nature and objects. It also changes the way painting can create and organize experience. In the late 1960s, Zao Wou-Ki began to draw more from traditional Chinese painting. He studied traditional techniques and forms. He later used them in his abstract paintings. These elements give his work a sense of openness and lightness. They also connect his inner experience with the quiet rhythms of nature. The misty atmosphere of 18.3.68 recalls the landscape tradition of the Five Dynasties painter Dong Yuan. His *Clear Weather After Snow in the Flat Woods* (Fig. 6) has a similar sense of changing atmosphere. The painting evokes “rivers and lakes of mountains and waters, winds and rains in valleys, peaks now dim now bright, woods and clouds veiled in mist.” Dong Yuan’s landscapes were often described as having “seemingly casual brushwork.” His treatment of light and shadow, however, shows close observation of nature. His compositions also have a strong sense of spatial unity.²³ The atmosphere of 18.3.68 recalls the landscape tradition associated with Dong Yuan. The composition also reflects the scattered perspective found in traditional Chinese landscape painting. Zao Wou-Ki divides the pictorial space into three horizontal sections. He leaves large areas of the upper and lower sections relatively empty. This use of negative space creates a greater sense of depth. It also gives the painting a broad and expansive spatial quality. The canvas can therefore suggest the vastness of the natural world and create a strong lyrical atmosphere. Zao Wou-Ki drew from the techniques and ideas of traditional Chinese freehand ink painting. Western Abstract Expressionism shaped his visual language too. Zao combined this language with elements from Chinese art. A wider sense of space results from this combination. Something else survives in his work as well: the openness and quiet quality of Chinese aesthetics. Moving lines gather near the center

and push outward to build a large circle, leaving the center empty while the edges stretch past the frame. This movement gathers and spreads like nuclear fusion, showing how the energy of qi works in the painting. Lightweight strokes set a clear rhythm, moving freely between gathering and dispersing. In works like 18.3.68, Zao uses open space instead of a fixed central line, so viewers can see the art from many angles. Unlike Sam Francis, whose work *Untitled* (Fig. 5) uses regular brushstrokes across the canvas, Zao creates a smooth flow between full and empty spaces through the natural movement of qi. So do clouds and mist. These forms no longer serve only to depict nature. They shape the viewer's experience of the painting. The viewer encounters nature through the movement of color, space, and form.



Figure 6. Attributed to Dong Yuan, *Clear Weather After Snow in the Flat Woods*, Five Dynasties-Song Dynasty, ink and color on silk, 37.5×150.8cm.

2. Critique of Technology: The Harmony between Nature and Being in Zao Wou-Ki's Art

In his later philosophy, Heidegger paid increasing attention to modern technology. In *The Question Concerning Technology*, he introduced the concept of *Gestell* to describe the way modern technology reveals the world. The term is often translated as “framework” or “framing.” Heidegger gives the term a broader meaning. *Gestell* describes a way of seeing and ordering the world. It determines how things appear within modern technological thinking. Under *Gestell*, the world is no longer encountered as an open and varied whole. Modern technology treats things as *Bestand*, or “standing reserve.” Natural resources become materials that can be stored, measured, calculated, and used. Rivers, forests, land, and even human labor can all be viewed in terms of their usefulness. This way of thinking changes how people

understand their relationship with the world.²⁴ Heidegger uses the Rhine River to explain this change. In the poetry of Johann Christian Friedrich Hölderlin, the Rhine is closely tied to nature and the divine. Modern technology gives the river another role. Power plants use the Rhine as a source of energy. The river then appears as a resource that can be measured and put to use. Its poetic and cultural meanings become less visible. Heidegger sees this change as an example of how Gestell conceals other ways of encountering nature.

Chapter 28 of the Tao Te Ching makes a similar point: “When the Uncarved Block (pu) is divided, it becomes useful vessels.” The Uncarved Block means wood in its natural state. It represents the original state of the Tao. It also suggests a whole that has no fixed form or use. When people carve the wood, they give it a set shape and purpose. The original unity is then divided. This idea can be compared with Heidegger’s concept of Gestell. Both ideas show how an open world can become organized around fixed uses. Gestell puts things into a system of use and calculation. The carving of the Uncarved Block also gives things fixed forms and functions. In both cases, people may lose sight of a more open relation to existence. The German sinologist Günter Wohlfart also writes about Heidegger and Laozi. He notes that both thinkers question technological thinking in different ways. Such thinking can distance people from a direct experience of existence.

Heidegger and Taoist thought have some similarities, but they view technology in different ways. Heidegger does not reject modern technology. He sees both danger and possibility in it. Technology becomes dangerous when Gestell becomes the main way of seeing the world. Gestell turns beings into resources. People can then measure, organize, and use them. Other ways of seeing the world become harder to find. Heidegger therefore asks us to examine the essence of technology. This examination may open a different way of relating to Being. It can also help people move beyond technological thinking. It may allow a freer relation to the world. Taoist thought takes a different path. Chapter 40 of the Tao Te Ching says that “reversion is the movement of the Tao.” This idea shows that things turn into their opposite when they reach an

extreme. The Uncarved Block also shows how split parts can return to wholeness. Instead of fighting technology, people should change how they live with it. Heidegger finds Being through technology, while Taoism focuses on balance and return. Both paths question a world driven only by practical use.

Zao Wou-Ki shows nature through energy and movement rather than direct pictures. In 10.03.83 (Fig. 7), mineral colors and flowing paint layers create strong motion like wind over water. He leaves out clear outlines, yet the painting still feels full of life. He lets paint and color move freely on the canvas instead of fixing nature into static objects. This way of letting materials move on their own fits Heidegger's idea of *Gelassenheit*. He does not try to control every form or movement. The painting can therefore retain an open relation to nature. It also leaves room for Being to appear beyond the ordering logic of *Gestell*.²⁵ The deep blue and purplish-black tones merge without clear boundaries. The colors recall the idea of the indistinct and elusive, yet containing form (*huang xi hu xi, qi zhong you xiang*). The blurred colors leave space for the vitality of the cosmos to appear. The warm white area below creates a strong contrast with the darker colors. Its light seems to rise from the depths of the earth. The light does not appear to illuminate anything directly. It still brings a sense of clarity to the composition. This effect recalls the idea of emptiness awaiting substance (*xu er dai wu*). The empty area therefore has an active role. It gives form and vitality room to appear. Simple black lines suggest mountains and trees without showing full details, showing the Taoist idea of non-action. Dark spots and moving colors create rhythm, turning the canvas into a live space where nature shows itself freely. This style matches Yuan painter Ni Zan, whose dry ink and empty space in *Rongxi Studio* show "true emptiness and wondrous existence" (*zhen kong miao you*), using direct feeling rather than exact copies to fit Zen ideas like "the mind itself is Buddha" (*ji xin ji fo*). Zao Wou-Ki's 10.03.83 uses mineral colors, mist, and white spaces like Taihu rocks, keeping forms minimal so raw energy shines through. Like Qing painter Shi Tao, who saw art as a flow from heart to wrist, brush, and ink, Zao lets oil paint move naturally on the canvas. By stepping back from total control, Zao

creates art through natural flow rather than cold, technical planning (Gestell).



Figure 7. Zao Wou-Ki, *10.03.83*, 1983, oil on canvas, 200×322cm.

Zao Wou-Ki's work also connects to the Taoist idea of the Uncarved Block, seen in *Grey and Yellow Mountain* (Fig. 8). Simple shapes and bold colors capture nature directly without making it an object for human use. Like Ming Dynasty craftsmen who worked with the natural grain of wood, Zao guides his brush along nature's vital rhythm, or *qi yun*. This approach offers a fix for modern tech problems by showing that art can follow nature instead of controlling it. His painting points to a balanced bond between people and the world, matching philosopher Klaus Held's call for openness and cooperation.²⁶ This idea shows how Heidegger's *Gelassenheit* works in practice. It is not passive acceptance, but an active way of letting things stay as they are. Strict control loosens, and attention grows so things can develop on their own. Zao Wou-Ki reflects this same attitude in how he handles ink and space, guiding the medium while letting it flow freely. But he resists controlling every detail. The ink keeps its own movement. It keeps its own character too. Instead, he works with its material qualities and movements. His own actions become part of this process. The viewer also becomes part of the unfolding work. In this way, technique does not stand apart from nature. It becomes a means through which the movement of nature can appear in the painting.



Figure 8. Zao Wou-Ki, *Grey and Yellow Mountain*, 1950, oil on canvas, 81×100cm.

3. The Aesthetics of Void and Whiteness: Negative Manifestation in Zao Wou-Ki's Paintings

As mentioned earlier, Heidegger explored the disclosure of Being through Vincent van Gogh's *A Pair of Shoes* (Fig. 9). He argued that an artwork does more than represent an object. The work reveals the world in which the object exists. Through the painted shoes, viewers can encounter the life, labor, and world that surround them. Art therefore opens a deeper understanding of existence through the appearance of things.²⁷ In his analysis of *A Pair of Shoes*, Heidegger uses a phenomenological approach to reveal the lifeworld of the peasant woman. The shoes carry traces of the soil and the labor of everyday life. They also reflect the hardships of her existence. Through these details, Heidegger shows how the artwork can disclose a world through an ordinary object.²⁸ However, Heidegger's interpretation can become overly conceptual. He turns the peasant woman's shoes into an object of philosophical reflection. In doing so, he may give the shoes more symbolic meaning than the painting itself suggests. His interpretation draws attention away from the shoes as ordinary objects. Their material presence becomes less clear as a result. This problem stems from how Heidegger uses philosophical language to explain the truth of art. His reading does reveal important parts of the work. His concepts create a risk, though. They can limit the work's own meaning. We end up seeing the painting through his

ideas, losing its own true presence along the way, while Taoist aesthetics takes a completely different approach. Non-action matters in this view. Naturalness matters too. So does the mutual generation of being and non-being, known as *wu xiang sheng*. Truth needs no direct explanation from this perspective. It needs no detailed description either. Truth can simply remain in emptiness. This emptiness has a name: void-whiteness, or *xu bai*. Meaning grows through a different route instead. Suggestion carries it. So does resonance. Zao Wou-Ki's paintings make this idea visible. His empty space never pins absence to a fixed meaning. The void stays active within the painting. It gives forms room to appear. It lets meaning emerge through perception, not description. Emptiness keeps the painting open, in this sense. And through what it leaves unsaid, the work still manages to speak.

East Asian artistic and philosophical traditions gave rise to the aesthetics of void and whiteness. This aesthetic shapes an image through empty space. Blank areas do the same work. Something spiritual lies beyond these visible forms, and the tradition reaches for it. Ideas like “simplicity within complexity” (*yi jian yu fan*) and “presence through absence” (*yi wu han you*) show how empty spaces and blank surfaces let viewers imagine hidden meanings. This use of void links to the Taoist idea that “an empty room produces light” (*xu shi sheng bai*) and Zen meditation on emptiness, building an art style based on quiet openness. This paper calls this method “negative manifestation” (*fu xing xian xian*), where artists show things by hiding, reducing, or withholding them directly so presence grows through the surrounding space. East Asian painting, calligraphy, and garden design have used this strategy for centuries to shape how people feel without forcing a fixed meaning. By resisting what Heidegger called “interpretive violence,” negative manifestation keeps art open and lets truth appear naturally without force.



Figure 9. Vincent van Gogh, *A Pair of Shoes*, 1886, oil on canvas, 38.1×45.3cm.

In 6.10.1985 (Fig. 10), thick layers of oil paint cover old strokes and lines, but clear calligraphic lines still show in front to keep a link to Chinese art. The three-panel triptych format comes from Western religious art, bringing a formal and serious feel. Making a painting this large requires careful planning from start to finish. This happens before the brush ever touches the canvas. Structure needs attention. Brushwork needs attention. Color needs attention too. All of it comes together in advance. Zao Wou-Ki needed a clear vision of the entire work, in other words, before he began. And the sheer size only made that harder. The painting stretches 10 meters wide and stands 2.8 meters high. Its width is roughly two to three times the span of a human body. Its height is about twice that of an adult. Zao Wou-Ki worked on a scale far removed from that of ordinary painting. The physical size of the canvas changed the conditions of painting itself. Each movement of the body covered a much larger area. The work required sustained physical effort as well as intense concentration. Its completion depended on patience, endurance, and determination.



Figure 10. Zao Wou-Ki, *6.10.1985*, 1985, triptych, oil on canvas, 280×1000cm.

6.10.1985 was created at the invitation of the renowned architect I. M. Pei. Pei and Zao Wou-Ki first met at Galerie Pierre Loeb in Paris in 1952. They soon became close friends, and their friendship lasted for more than six decades. In 1980, Pei received the commission for Raffles City in Singapore. He invited Zao Wou-Ki to create a large mural for the lobby of the main tower (Figs. 11, 12). Zao Wou-Ki returned to France to work on the project. He spent five months completing the painting and finished it in October of the same year. *6.10.1985* was unveiled when Raffles City opened in 1986. It remained on public display until the complex underwent major renovation and reconstruction in 2005. This painting shows the main features of Zao Wou-Ki's mature style. We might call this style boundless abstraction. The composition spreads across the whole surface. The center has fewer dense shapes, creating a strong feeling of movement. The edges hold the painting together and give it structure while the center stays open. This setup removes a single fixed viewpoint, offering viewers a sense of freedom and a movement beyond the self.

Different shades of blue dominate most of the work here, changing in strength, transparency, and thickness across the canvas to build a smooth, connected flow. Void meets substance through this link. Emptiness meets fullness too. Small touches of other colors move through the blue field. They add depth to the whole. They do this without disturbing the field's quiet atmosphere. The overlapping brushstrokes and interwoven lines may appear chaotic at first. Their movement, however, follows an internal order. Each element responds to the others across the surface. The painting therefore holds freedom and structure in tension. Its openness comes from this

balance. Its apparent disorder therefore becomes part of a larger visual system. As Tong Zhenguo recalled: “Watching Zao Wou-Ki revise his paintings, I noticed he rarely completed one section before moving to another. He always worked jumping and skipping, yet no matter how far apart two strokes might be, the second always had an essential connection to the first—and so did the third and fourth. Every hook and sweep, every movement back and forth, up and down, was interconnected. Despite their myriad variations, the brushstrokes were always tightly linked in momentum.”²⁹

For instance, the interlacing lines and colors in the lower right corner evoke the forms of mountain rocks and water sources found in traditional landscape painting. Zao Wou-Ki transforms traditional ink-painting techniques such as texture strokes (*cun*), dotting (*dian*), and washing (*ran*) into the movements of an oil brush. The twisting, lifting, and pressing of the oil brush recall the physical gestures of ink painting. The centered-tip and side-tip techniques of ink painting also find new forms in the hooking, pushing, sweeping, and scrubbing movements of the oil brush. The thick and thin lines move freely across the surface. Some lines resemble the contours and texture strokes used to depict mountain rocks. Others break away from recognizable forms. The brushstrokes respond to one another across the canvas. They appear connected in some places and interrupted in others. Broken lines confront each other, yet their scattered parts keep a smooth flow. It creates a sense of movement across the surface. The strokes remain carefully controlled, yet they retain a strong rhythm. Their different directions and lengths connect with one another and form a unified visual movement. Zao Wou-Ki translates the cadence of calligraphic brushwork into oil paint. The lifting, pressing, pausing, and turning of the brush become visible in the movement of the lines. These gestures also produce effects similar to those of ink wash. The paint varies in density, dryness, and moisture. The lines often appear dry and fragmented. Their edges remain sharp and restrained. At the same time, the brushwork retains a sense of fluid movement. The contrast between fluidity and rawness creates a strong visual tension. This tension gives the painting a distinctive force and vitality.



Figure 11. Zao Wou-Ki (right) and I. M. Pei, 1976.



Figure 12. 6.10.1985 exhibited at Raffles City, Singapore.

In his *Huaguo Monk's Treatise on Painting* (Ku Gua He Shang Hua Yu Lu), the early Qing painter Shi Tao proposed that “the One-Stroke is the foundation of all existence and the root of all phenomena” (yi hua zhe, zhong you zhi ben, wan xiang zhi gen). Shi Tao regarded brush and ink as a direct expression of the life of the cosmos. His theory also offers a useful response to Heidegger’s critique of modern technology. Western technology tends to treat nature as Bestand. Chinese painting

takes a different view. It treats brush and ink as part of nature itself. The artist therefore needs only to speak on behalf of mountains and rivers (dai shan chuan er yan). Zao Wou-Ki's calligraphic brushwork can be understood as a modern development of Shi Tao's One-Stroke Theory. His use of dragged and dripping oil paint does not aim to control every form. The paint retains its own movement on the canvas. The material develops its own visual logic this way. Zao Wou-Ki also treats negative space differently from traditional Chinese ink painting. Traditional ink art ties empty space to real nature scenes, but Zao gives the void total independence instead. Combined colors, lines, and space build a new visual style while keeping the Chinese idea that being and non-being create each other. Dense brushmarks record time and show the painting's past, since older layers sit under newer marks that stay visible. This matches Heidegger's view on time and human existence (Dasein), where past, present, and future shape how we live. By keeping marks of its creation on the canvas, the painting makes time a live part of what viewers experience.

Zao Wou-Ki brings traditional Chinese ink painting into a modern space by giving emptiness its own active power. Traditional art uses blank space to highlight real objects, but Zao lets empty areas stand completely on their own. This simple, open style skips heavy technical tricks and leads to Heidegger's big question about how Being reveals itself. By stripping away extra details, the empty spaces without clear forms gain new weight and become the main focus. They become active parts of the viewer's experience. Non-being, in effect, creates space for being to appear. We can understand this process as negative manifestation. Through his use of emptiness, Zao Wou-Ki gives visual form to Heidegger's idea of letting beings be. His paintings let forms appear without pinning them to a fixed meaning. They leave room for things to show themselves in their own way. Being can stay open within the painting. Interpretation never fully closes it down. Zao Wou-Ki's art, in the end, offers a visual response to Heidegger's search for the truth of Being. His paintings locate that truth in the shifting relation between form and emptiness. They connect presence with absence. And what the painting shows stays closely bound to what it leaves unseen.

When Heidegger questioned the essence of things, he saw something important: concepts alone could never fully explain Being. Shi Tao reached a similar insight through his One-Stroke Theory. For Shi Tao, painting begins at a specific moment. Brush meets ink. Meaning grows directly as ink meets the canvas, without following a fixed plan. Zao Wou-Ki brings this idea to life through abstraction, empty space, and nature forms, opening room for Being to appear. In a modern world driven by technology, his paintings show that art does not need tight control or strict explanations to work. Color, form, and space carry meaning beyond words, so viewers can experience the depth of existence without fixing the work to one exact reading.

Heidegger and Taoism show that Zao Wou-Ki's art does more than mix shapes and colors; it creates an open space where nature shows its movement and energy rather than fixed forms. By resisting the technological control Heidegger calls *Gestell*, Zao keeps his work unresolved like the "Uncarved Block" (*pu san wei qi*), exposing brushstrokes and leaving forms unclear so no single meaning hardens. This style relies on "negative manifestation," where empty space and absence suggest strong presence, matching Heidegger's idea of *Gelassenheit* and Laozi's view that emptiness has real use (*wu zhi yi wei yong*). By choosing simple restraint (*da qiao ruo zhao*) over grand tricks, Zao lets the viewer slow down, embrace uncertainty, and experience deeper existence, opening doors for future studies to compare how painting, calligraphy, and garden design use presence and absence across cultures. They can also further clarify the differences and connections between Eastern and Western thought at the ontological level of artistic creation. More fundamentally, future studies can continue to ask how art can remain a form of poetic dwelling in an age of globalization and digitalization. This question concerns the capacity of art to resist the forgetting of Being and to preserve a space for authentic existence.

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