

# Research on the Zhuang Zi's Aesthetic Thought of Naturalism

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**Abstract:** *As one of the representatives of Pre-Qin Taoism, Zhuangzi was amazed by the profoundness and mystery of his thought. Zhuang Zi's aesthetic advocacy of natural inaction and Confucianism's aesthetic attitude of pursuing realistic function form two basic clues for the development of Chinese classical aesthetics. In Zhuangzi's aesthetic thoughts, the mysterious experience of "Tao" and the transcendent attention to the "true beauty" of Tao must be based on absolute superutilitarianism. Back to the present real society, this kind of aesthetic pursuit beyond personal persistence and desire is the most powerful ideological weapon to get rid of the extreme utilitarianism caused by human greed. However, the extreme naturalism thought in Zhuangzi's aesthetic thought, which changed from advocating nature to pursuing the primitive state of existence of man "living with animals and beasts", completely violated the historical necessity of human and human society development, and also lost the practical value of subject initiative and creativity. It is necessary to hold a critical attitude towards this extreme naturalistic aesthetic tendency.*

**Keywords:** *Tao, True beauty, Things I assimilate, Extreme naturalism*

## 1. Introduction

The Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, in which Zhuangzi lived, was one of the most turbulent times in Chinese history. The traditional religious belief, feudal superstition and the budding rational thought had a violent collision. Reflected in the reality is the endless war and war between countries; In the field of ideology is the unprecedented activity and liberation of thought, just as the so-called "All schools of thought prosper together".<sup>[1]</sup> The individual transcendence formed by Taoism's advocacy of nature's inaction is in sharp contrast to the realistic character of Confucianism's active entry into the world. As one of the representative figures of Taoism, the core of Zhuangzi's thought is the recognition of nature's "Tao" and the pursuit of the "true beauty" of the way. It is precisely because of this idea with the core of naturalism that Zhuangzi's aesthetic thought is congenial with the color of superutilitarianism. This aesthetic and life pursuit beyond utilitarianism has important realistic value and historical significance for the development of human and society. But there is no denying that Zhuang Zi developed his naturalism to the extreme in some aspects. This extreme naturalism is reflected in denying the value of all unnatural things—including culture and art such as rites and music system—and even denying the development of human beings and society. To deal with this extreme tendency of naturalism, we should hold a critical attitude.

## 2. The "Tao" of doing nothing is the "True beauty" of observing the way

As the inheritor and developer of Lao Zi thought, the core of Zhuang Zi's thought is his respect for the natural inaction of "Tao". Zhuangzi also applied the idea of "respecting without doing" to the Tao to the pursuit of beauty. In Zhuangzi's opinion, "Heaven and earth have great beauty but do not speak, the four seasons have clear laws but do not discuss, and all things have great principles but do not speak" (*The Journey to the North*). The "true beauty" in Zhuangzi's words does not refer to the concrete image of beauty that people feel in real life, but to the beauty of the image of "natural", "adaptive" and "doing nothing without doing" of nature or "Tao". Therefore, Zhuangzi's "true beauty" is transcendental, which can only be experienced in the care of artistic conception, rather than understood from the real things. This aesthetic concept of artistic conception has brought great influence to Chinese classical aesthetics, and even shaped the unique character of Chinese aesthetics.

### 2.1. Zhuangzi's criticism of utilitarianism

It is precisely because of this naturalistic tendency of advocating "action through inaction" that Zhuangzi's aesthetic thought is endowed with the color of superutilitarianism. In Zhuangzi's view, nature is inherently free and self-oriented. "The six harmonies are huge and never leave them; The slightest is small, to be treated as a body. The world is full of ups and downs, life does not die; Yin and Yang run in four seasons, and each obtains its order" (*Heaven and Earth*). This kind of natural state of doing nothing and doing everything in its proper place is the best living condition for human beings. However, due to people's blind pursuit of "doing something", the original picture of harmonious coexistence of all things is destroyed, which leads to the tit-for-tat confrontation of interests between people, endless wars between countries and blind opposition between man and nature. Zhuangzi's criticism of "humanity" is comprehensive, including not only the "benevolence and justice", rites and music and other norms, laws and moral rules advocated by Confucianism to maintain social order, interpersonal relations and political rule, but also human judgment and rational cognition. What is called "too strict etiquette rules will destroy the natural nature of people".

Zhuangzi's aesthetic thought is based on the comprehensive critique of "humane". Zhuangzi first affirmed that there is real beauty in the world, and this "true beauty" exists in the "Tao" of natural inaction. It cannot be expressed by words, nor can it be understood from limited concrete things, but only in the artistic conception of "swimming" in the "Tao". The most essential difference between "Great beauty" and "universal beauty" (the pleasure and aesthetic feeling people feel in real life) is that "true beauty" is "natural inaction" and "indifferent infinity", which has no utilitarian purpose or cognitive boundary, that is, "indifferent infinity and universal beauty follows it. The way of heaven and earth is the virtue of the sage" (*Deliberately*). It is precisely because of the "true beauty" of being at ease, indifferent and transcendent attribute, so that people must grasp and pursue beauty must be transcendental. This transcendence is manifested in two aspects, one is the transcendence of personal desire, the other is the transcendence of all kinds of solid and rigid logical concepts and judgment of right and wrong, also known as "superficial knowledge", that is, "rigid mind of right and wrong caused by binary opposing thinking".<sup>[2]</sup> The first is the transcendence of personal utility, while the second is the transcendence of right and wrong, good and evil utility from a higher perspective, namely the human perspective. The transcendence of individual desire, that is, the pursuit of value and aesthetics beyond individual utilitarianism, is the key requirement for individuals to achieve all-round development and embody individual value. In Zhuang Zi's opinion, the pleasure and aesthetic feeling brought by material, utility and temporary desire satisfaction are temporary, and they will disappear with the continuous expansion of human desire. The blind pursuit of material desire and sensory stimulation will make people fall into endless drudgery, and the final result is "lose oneself". In other words, the original man with subjective initiative has become the puppet of "foreign things", and the original pursuit of beauty has become the root of evil, and beauty has turned its reverse into the ugliness of human nature.

### 2.2. People's cognitive abilities are limited

Zhuang Zi's negation of "superficial knowledge" is profound, which not only has profound epistemological value, but also has unique aesthetic judgment value. Since "superficial knowledge" includes all judgments of right and wrong, the judgments of "beauty" and "ugliness" as well as the judgments of right and wrong of "superficial knowledge" must also be included. In this way, Zhuangzi's description of "true beauty" and his opposition to "superficial knowledge" may cause confusion. To understand its meaning, it is necessary to interpret it from three aspects. First of all, from the perspective of Zhuangzi's role in language and characters, just like the "Tao" expressed in the "North Tour", that is, "those who can speak, things are rough" (*Autumn Water*). Lao Zi believed that "The way that can be explained is not the unchanging way. The name that can be named is not the unchanging name", Zhuangzi also believed that the finite expression of language and characters cannot be used to grasp and understand the infinity of "Tao". Therefore, we should not be obsessed with the expression of words, but we should understand the infinite "Tao" through the limited language and words. Zhuang Zi's view on the limitation of language in conveying ability is similar to the phenomenology born in the West in the 20th century. Secondly, in Zhuangzi's opinion, the judgment of right and wrong and rational cognition based on human beings are limited. They all contain personal subjective bias to a greater or lesser extent and are all relative. So they are not "true knowledge". Therefore, if you want to break personal beliefs, you must put down all the logical concepts and judgments of right and wrong in your heart. Back to the question of beauty and ugliness, Zhuang Zi's opposition to beauty and ugliness is not to deny the existence of beauty (on the contrary, he gives the answer of "true beauty" of Tao at the beginning), but to warn people not to judge the beauty and ugliness of things with limited knowledge and subjective beliefs, that is, to oppose the

selfish and narrow 'human beauty'.<sup>[2]</sup> Finally, in Zhuangzi's world view, there is no opposition between subject and object. Everything is the natural biochemistry of "Tao". As Lao Tzu said, "Tao spawns one, life two, two three, and three all things. Therefore, the opposition of subject and object is the destruction of "Tao", that is the wholeness of nature. From Zhuangzi's opposition to "superficial knowledge", we can see that Zhuangzi's aesthetic pursuit of opposing utilitarianism is resolute and thorough. He not only explained from the perspective of individuals, but also gave answers from the perspective of the integration of human and nature.

As for Zhuangzi's idea of asking people to take care of "true beauty" in the transcendent artistic conception, the "beauty" Zhuangzi pursues is not the temporary satisfaction of human desire, nor is it the judgment of beauty and ugliness made easily based on people's limited knowledge and subjective opinion, but the "true beauty" of "Tao" that transcends individual "belief" and has the "heavenly voice". This kind of aesthetic pursuit of super utilitarianism has great practical value for changing the actual situation that individuals have abundant material needs but lack spiritual needs.

### **3. Be one with nature**

For the pursuit of the beauty of human nature, Zhuangzi made such statements as "heavenly release", "real person", "travel" and "materialization". Zhuangzi's theory of the beauty of human nature is also based on the pursuit of the "great beauty" of Tao, which explains the possibility and method of seeking "great beauty" from the perspective of human beings.

#### **3.1. Zhuangzi's understanding of returning to nature**

Zhuang Zi first put forward the proposition of "Heaven is free", he believed that people have normal natural nature: "These people have constancy, weaving clothes and farming and eating, which means that they are of the same virtue, but not party, and order Heaven to be free" (*Horse's Hoof*). This is the natural and unrestrained nature of human beings, namely "Tianfang". In Zhuangzi's opinion, the nature of "heaven free" is not only the natural nature of human beings, but also the nature of doing nothing in accordance with the nature of "Tao". Therefore, only by returning to the nature of "Heaven free" can one truly perceive the "Tao" and its "great beauty". But Zhuang Zi also stressed that although the nature of "heaven free" is the natural nature of human beings, not everyone can recognize it or live according to the nature naturally, thus causing various contradictions and conflicts in real life. This is also the reason why Zhuangzi tried to deny "humanity" and "action". In Zhuang Zi's opinion, people's greed for external things and their obsession with all kinds of right and wrong judgments and limited knowledge are against the natural nature of human beings, which will not only kill the true nature, but also play a negative role in the perception of "Tao". The proposition corresponding to "heaven and Earth" is "real person". "What is a real person? Real people are those who conform to the existence law of nature's inaction and act in full accordance with the nature of "heaven and earth". In Zhuang Zi's opinion, only "real people" can truly feel the mystery of "Tao" and the "great beauty" of the Tao. Zhuang Zi believed that "Tianfang", as the natural nature of human beings, is the embodiment of the natural inaction of "Tao" and "true beauty" in human nature, so the natural beauty of "Tianfang" of human beings is also the existence of the highest beauty in the same body as "Tao" and "great beauty", and "real person" is the person with the highest beauty.

Zhuangzi regarded the beauty of man's natural nature as the existence of the highest beauty. The point of the will is not to emphasize the beauty of man, but to emphasize the natural beauty of natural inaction and spontaneous nature. From this point of view, the natural nature of everything is the highest beautiful existence. It is not difficult to see from this that Zhuangzi introduced the core of beauty into truth (the natural nature of things). Therefore, the most "beautiful" human nature is also the most "true" human nature. Zhuangzi established his unity theory of truth and beauty in his aesthetic pursuit of the truth of nature. This unification theory of truth and beauty made theoretical preparation for Zhuang Zi's idea of "unifying things", but also laid a hidden danger for his later tendency of extreme naturalism.

#### **3.2. Find the true beauty in nature**

It is precisely because Zhuangzi's "beauty" is based on the "truth" of natural nature, so in order to seek or feel the real "great beauty", we must return to the most "true" state, that is, the state of nature. Zhuang Zi's thought of "unifying things" is based on this, aiming to construct a "great beauty" artistic conception of "assimilating with things", "harmonizing with Tao", and "forgetting things". Zhuang Zi's

idea of "harmony of things" is thorough. He not only requires people to eliminate the opposition between things and I in cognition, but also to forget "self" in consciousness, which is the "loss of self" mentioned in "Harmony of Things". In Zhuangzi's opinion, only when we reach the state of "forgetting things and selves" and "traveling without waiting", can we truly appreciate the infinite mystery of "Tao". As for Zhuangzi's thought of "uniting things", its connotation can be summarized from three aspects. First of all, asking people to reach the state of "all things are one with me" (*Theory of Qi Wu*) is still warning people not to be trapped in the greed and desire of external things, not to be burdened by external things. Just as the saying goes, "Those who have deep appetites, have shallow opportunities" (*The Grand Master*). People still want to seek the real spiritual enjoyment in the realm of transcendence. Secondly, it is because of the opposition between human and things in reality that all kinds of judgments of right and wrong, people's erroneous views and subjectivity understanding lead to an endless series of contradictions and conflicts, which not only hurt people's natural nature of "heaven and earth", but also hinder people's understanding of the way of heaven and earth. Therefore, "harmony of things" is also aimed at eliminating the harm of human's erroneous view to the natural way of doing nothing. Finally, Zhuangzi expressed a very broad concept of tolerance and equality in his interpretation of "Qi Wu". "Homogeneous Wu" means to "make the dishomogeneous", that is, to recognize and respect the individual significance and unique value of each thing, which is also the basic premise for making everything in its proper place and suitable for its own. As an individual, only under the guidance of this concept, in the equal and inclusive real world, can we achieve spiritual transcendence, so as to "swim" in the wonderful artistic conception of "unity with the Tao" in the realm of "free and easy". As Mr. Guo Qiyong commented, "This kind of equal value affirms and tolerates various relative value systems, recognizes their significance, and never oblates the interests and pursuits of others, or the space for the existence of other schools and trends of thought. In this way, every life can extricate itself from tension and paranoia and seek a way of self-transcendence."<sup>[3]</sup>This ideological pursuit emphasizing inclusiveness, integrity and diversity is of great significance to the diversified development of contemporary aesthetics.

#### 4. The deficiency of Zhuangzi's naturalistic aesthetic thought

Throughout the whole vein of Zhuangzi's thought, explore the essential characteristics of his thought. In fact, Zhuangzi's advocacy and pursuit of nature is actually his advocacy and pursuit of freedom. "Exploring the freedom of life through aesthetic transcendence is a very important and valuable basic spirit in Zhuangzi's aesthetics".<sup>[4]</sup>Therefore, the core of Zhuangzi's "great beauty" and the beauty of human nature in "Tianfang" both point to the beauty of nature and the beauty of the whole, that is to say, "Tao" is free and self-centered as a natural whole. It can be seen from this that the beauty in Zhuangzi's view is super-utilitarian, which not only surpasses individual utilitarianism, but also surpasses man's utilitarianism to nature at the height of "all things". This profound aesthetic pursuit of super-utility not only plays an important role in the all-round development of individual people, but also promotes the harmonious symbiosis between man and nature to a large extent, and brings a positive promoting effect for the development of human society.

It is precisely because of the importance attached to nature that Zhuangzi established a kind of unity theory of truth and beauty. All "beauty" in Zhuangzi's opinion must have the basis of "truth", but he also ignored the understanding and grasp of "good" (purpose), or denied the value of all "good" (namely, people's various purpose, also known as "positive"). This changed the worship of nature into an extreme naturalism of "only nature". This is fully demonstrated in Zhuang Zi's proposition that human beings "live with animals and animals, and the race and all living things are in harmony". In essence, the extreme naturalism tendency in Zhuang Zi's thought was due to a lack of comprehensive and profound understanding of freedom. He believed that when people return to the "primitive state" of natural inaction and reach the state of "forgetting things", they can get rid of all constraints and thus reach the state of absolute freedom. However, the real freedom is not to blindly get rid of negative or arbitrary self-expression, but to carry out reasonable and legal self-expression under the premise of fully understanding the laws of nature and society. Secondly, real freedom is not the escape from the real world, not to turn a blind eye to practical problems, because escape itself is not the embodiment of freedom. Therefore, in terms of the natural law of "the law of the jungle" alone, it is not a state of freedom for people to return to the original state of getting rid of all constraints and doing nothing naturally. In addition, it is precisely because of the one-sided pursuit of the freedom of nature that Zhuangzi ignores the development of human beings, that is, the "goodness" of human beings. In fact, the natural nature of man's unrestrained nature, or the natural state of natural inaction, are not abstract, static and eternal existence. They are historical and developmental living concrete expressions. It is a natural state of development for people to meet their reasonable needs and realize their all-round development, rather than a "man's ambition"

that destroys the "way" of heaven and earth. It is for this reason that man can never return to the primitive society where he lived in his nest and drank nothing but blood, for such a return would be a false fantasy contrary to the nature of nature and the law of development.

## 5. Conclusion

Generally speaking, Zhuang Zi's naturalistic aesthetics has its unique value and significance in surpassing utilitarianism. His unique aesthetic thought of "artistic conception" not only profoundly influenced the development of late Chinese aesthetics, but also had an important impact on modern Western aesthetics. The aesthetic pursuit of superutilitarianism can not only make individuals get rid of greedy desire satisfaction, but also promote the formation of correct world outlook and values of individuals, which has a positive role in promoting the development of individuals and human society. In Zhuangzi's naturalistic aesthetic thought, individuals reach the suddenly enlightened freedom through the transcendence of realistic utilitarianism, which is also the aesthetic realm of true beauty of "Tao" in Zhuangzi's words, which "is not only a phenomenon felt in aesthetic experience, nor a means of temporary liberation, but a fundamental requirement for human survival and development."<sup>[5]</sup> However, it is undeniable that the extreme naturalism tendency in Zhuangzi's aesthetic thoughts needs to be vigilant and criticized. While respecting nature, we cannot ignore the all-round development of human beings. From Marx's materialist view of history, the all-round development of human and society towards a higher level is the inevitable trend of history, which is the internal expression of the natural nature of the objective world. Therefore, the study of Zhuangzi's aesthetic thought needs to hold a scientific attitude of seeking truth, not groundless slander, let alone praise the metaphysical, but under the rigorous academic research, scientific criticism and inheritance.

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