

# Reassessing the Relationship Between “*Xu Jing*” in *Wenxin Diaolong* *Diaolong* and Daoist Thought in *Zhuangzi*

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This paper compares the concept of *xu jing* (虛靜) in Liu Xie’s (劉勰) *Wenxin Diaolong* (文心雕龍) with the ideas of *xinzhai zuowang* (心齋坐忘) and *xushi shengbai* (虛室生白) in *Zhuangzi* (莊子). It argues that *xinzhai zuowang* is Zhuangzi’s method for self-cultivation to attain the *Dao* (道), while *xushi shengbai* serves as the premise for the relationship between Liu Xie’s *xu jing* and Zhuangzi’s *xinzhai zuowang*. This study challenges the traditional view that Daoist thought is purely epistemological and that *xu jing* is merely methodological, suggesting that Liu Xie’s philosophical perspective is not inferior to that of Zhuangzi. By applying Zhuangzi’s concept of relativism, the paper proposes three levels of *xu jing*: artistic creation, anticipation of inspiration, and attaining the *Dao*. It asserts that Liu Xie’s *xu jing* can achieve the highest level of attaining the *Dao* and align with Zhuangzi’s philosophical essence.

*Keywords*: Chinese literature, Chinese philosophy, Daoism, *Zhuangzi*, Liu Xie, *Wenxin Diaolong*, *xu jing*

## Introduction

*Xu jing* (虛靜, openness and serenity), an important concept proposed by Liu Xie (劉勰, 465-520 CE) in *Wenxin Diaolong* (文心雕龍, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*), a masterwork written during the Southern Qi period (479-502 CE), holds a crucial place in Chinese literary history as the first comprehensive and systematic treatise on literary theory in the history of Chinese literary criticism (Chen, 2023; Lee, 2021, p. 527). While it is widely acknowledged in academia that *xu jing* originates from the Daoist thoughts of Laozi and Zhuangzi in the pre-Qin period (before 220 BCE), there remains room for further exploration regarding its relationship with Daoist philosophy and its philosophical depth (Chen, 2024; Yu, 2013; Huang, 2000, p. 94; Fan, 1958, p. 498).

In academic discourse, *xu jing* is commonly interpreted as a creative mental state free from distraction, or as a methodological approach distinct from epistemology (Wu, 2020; Zhou, 2013, p. 246; Zhang, 2010, p. 115). However, under Hegel’s linear historical framework, which views history as a unidirectional progression, Liu Xie—who synthesized Daoist, Confucian, and Buddhist elements—should theoretically surpass the philosophies of Laozi and Zhuangzi. This article reexamines Liu Xie’s *xu jing* by analyzing *xinzhai zuowang* (心齋坐忘, fasting of the heart and sitting in forgetting) and *xushi shengbai* (虛室生白, empty room generates whiteness) from *Zhuangzi* (莊子). By engaging Zhuangzi’s dialectical relativism, this study aims to clarify the connections between Liu Xie’s *xu jing* and Daoist thought, particularly Zhuangzi’s, while evaluating the philosophical significance of *xu jing*.

### Textual Interpretation of *Xinzhai Zuowang* and *Xushi Shengbai* in *Zhuangzi*

The concept of *xinzhai zuowang* comprises two significant notions: *xinzhai* (心齋, fasting of the heart) and *zuowang* (坐忘, sitting and forgetting). In the chapter “Renjian Shi”, Zhuangzi elucidates *xinzhai* through a dialogue between Confucius and Yan Hui:

Yan Hui asked, “What is *xinzhai*?” Confucius replied, “Focus solely on your goal. Do not listen with your ears, but rather with your heart; do not listen with your heart, but with your *qi*. The ear stops at hearing, the mind stops at resonance with the external, while *qi* is open and receptive to all things. Only the *Dao* can gather in a receptive heart, and receptivity is what we call *xinzhai*.”<sup>1</sup> (Cao, 2014, p. 66)

In this exchange, *xinzhai* is presented as a means to attain the *Dao* (得道). It involves fasting of the heart, bringing the body and mind into a state of *xu* (虛, emptiness), allowing one to become clean, empty, and prepared to receive the *Dao*. Listening with the ears or the heart involves engagement with the outside world, preventing one from reaching *xu* and from truly awaiting or attaining the *Dao*. When the ears stop at hearing and the heart stops at resonating with the external, one no longer relies on the senses to perceive external objects. This enables an absolute focus of body and spirit, a state known as *qi* (氣, vital energy), which also represents *xu*. Only when one has emptied oneself in this way can the *Dao* be welcomed.

*Zuowang* represents the highest state achievable through *xinzhai*. The purpose of *xinzhai* is to ultimately reach a state of *zuowang*, or selflessness. Confucius and Yan Hui affirm this notion: “Yan Hui said, ‘Before I learned *xinzhai*, I felt myself to be real; after learning *xinzhai*, I felt as though I had never existed. Can this be called emptiness?’ Confucius replied, ‘Indeed!’”<sup>2</sup> (Cao, 2014, p. 67).

Prior to learning *xinzhai*, Yan Hui perceived himself as possessing a concrete existence. Upon mastering it, he experienced the feeling of never having existed. It is essential to clarify that “attaining the *Dao*” does not mean seizing it but rather becoming immersed in or assimilated with it (Li, 2013, p. 201).

If *xinzhai zuowang* addresses the means of “attaining the *Dao*”, what then is the *Dao* itself? This leads us to the concept of *xushi shengbai* (虛室生白). The *Dao* is inherently indescribable—not because it is forbidden to speak of it, but because language is inadequate to fully articulate it. Zhuangzi employed *xushi shengbai* to convey an abstract, metaphysical vision of the *Dao*.

In the same chapter, Zhuangzi illustrates: “Confucius said, ‘Look at that vacant spot—the empty chamber generates whiteness, and auspiciousness resides there.’”<sup>3</sup> (Cao, 2014, p. 67).

Zhuangzi paints a scene of profound ambiance: the heart, serene and quiet, gives rise to pure whiteness; as this purity emerges, auspiciousness settles within. The “emptiness” is akin to the *xu* of *xinzhai*, as in “only the *Dao* gathers in an empty heart.” The “whiteness” symbolizes beauty and purity, serving as a metaphor for the *Dao*. While *xushi shengbai* is a philosophical concept Zhuangzi used to describe the *Dao*, its strong aesthetic resonance has led to its application in Chinese art history, where it holds a prominent position. Liu Xie’s concept of *xu jing* in literary creation theory is closely tied to it.

<sup>1</sup> Chinese original text: 回曰：“敢問心齋。”仲尼曰：“若一志，無聽之以耳而聽之以心；無聽之以心而聽之以氣。聽止於耳，心止於符。氣也者，虛而待物者也。唯道集虛。虛者，心齋也。”（《莊子·人間世》）。

<sup>2</sup> Chinese original text: 顏回曰：“回之未始得使，實自回也；得使之也，未始有回也，可謂虛乎？”夫子曰：“盡矣！”

<sup>3</sup> Chinese original text: 夫子曰：“瞻彼闕者，虛室生白，吉祥止止。”

### *Xushi Shengbai and Xu Jing*

The notion of *xushi shengbai* serves as the premise for the connection between Liu Xie’s *xu jing* and Zhuangzi’s *xinzhai zuowang*. This article emphasizes *xushi shengbai* as the foundation for this connection, countering claims by numerous scholars that the myth-like tales of artistic creation (神話技藝創造故事) in *Zhuangzi*, such as the story of *paoding jieniu* (庖丁解牛, Cook Ding’s Butchering of an Ox), are primary sources for Liu Xie’s *xu jing* in the “Shensi” chapter of *Wenxin Diaolong*. For instance, Zhang Shaokang states:

Zhuangzi applied the notion of *xu jing* to the “mythical skill of creation”... In later literary theory, the notion of *xu jing* was essentially inspired by Zhuangzi’s stories of mythical creative skill and was vividly developed... The theory of *xu jing* in literary criticism came through the intermediary of Zhuangzi’s discourse on skill. (Zhang, 2010, pp. 116-117)

This article contends that such interpretations oversimplify the issue. *Xu jing* in the “Shensi (神思)” chapter is closely associated with Zhuangzi’s thought due to the concept of *xushi shengbai* as it extends into art, rather than merely drawing inspiration from “skill creation” stories in *Zhuangzi*. Scholars who reduce Liu Xie’s concept of *xu jing* to an idea inspired by Zhuangzi’s creative skill stories have oversimplified the problem, equating *xu jing* with a mere “methodology of literary creation” and conflating Cook Ding’s carving skill with “artistic creation”, thereby creating a superficial link between *xu jing* and Zhuangzi’s thought.

Similar to how Cook Ding’s carving skill embodies not merely a “craft” akin to writing but an act intimately connected with attaining the *Dao*, *xu jing* possesses philosophical complexity and transcends the notion of undistracted concentration for writing. The concept of *xu jing* reaches its aesthetic application through *xushi shengbai*, rather than through mythic stories of creative skill.

Few considered why the philosophically rooted concept of *xushi shengbai* ultimately links to the aesthetic theory of *liubai* (留白, artistic reserve) in painting and poetry. What is the relationship between the *Dao*, the philosophical *xushi shengbai*, and the aesthetic concept of *liubai*? Typically, when discussing *xushi shengbai* in art, it is connected to the beauty of *liubai* in Chinese landscape painting, where empty spaces reveal meaning beyond the immediate image or evoke an overarching ambiance (Zong, 1981, pp. 82-83).

This article argues that Zhuangzi’s *xushi shengbai* conveys the abstract, metaphysical, and ineffable *Dao* through concrete scenes. Unexpectedly, Zhuangzi’s portrayal offers such profound aesthetic effects that it becomes a lifelong pursuit of later artists. This medium is where the philosophical *xushi shengbai* and the aesthetic *liubai* converge.

The relationship among the *Dao*, the philosophical *xushi shengbai*, and the aesthetic *liubai* resembles the relationship between the *Dao* and *De* (德, virtue). The *Dao* remains elevated, abstract, and intangible, while *De* is a tangible manifestation of the *Dao*, exemplified by sincerity, kindness, and fairness. Similarly, *xushi shengbai* is a concretized expression of the *Dao* that, while remaining within the philosophical domain, surpasses art. Its final entry into aesthetic discourse represents another level of realization, providing the foundational premise for Liu Xie’s application of *xu jing* to his theory of literary creation.

### *Xinzhai Zuowang and Xu Jing*

*Xinzhai* and *zuowang* are inherently intertwined, both addressing the attainment of the *Dao*. *Xinzhai* focuses on the process of reaching the *Dao*, while *zuowang* emphasizes the final result. Similarly, *xu jing* is a concept encompassing both process and result; it can be understood as a cultivation process akin to *xinzhai* or envisioned as a state of cultivation similar to *zuowang*.

If we consider *xu jing* solely as a writing method, we will not fully grasp Liu Xie’s intellectual depth. Hegel’s linear view of history posits that Liu Xie, who integrated Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, should possess a philosophical framework that surpasses those of Laozi and Zhuangzi. Therefore, we will examine three possible levels that Liu Xie’s *xu jing* might achieve.

### **Lowest Level: Pure Artistic Creation**

The first interpretation of *xu jing* is as a mental state of unwavering focus during literary creation. This conventional understanding of *xu jing* within artistic creation limits Liu Xie’s philosophical level. If *xu jing* merely facilitates good writing, it cannot achieve the highest states of *zuowang* or *Dao*. Within the supreme state of *zuowang*, complete oblivion encompasses many layers of “forgetting”, such as forgetting benevolence, rites, form, and age—each contributing to self-cultivation with varying degrees of elevation. Thus, *xu jing* also necessitates “forgetting” certain aspects, like one’s location, the passage of time, and the pursuit of success or fame. As long as we cannot forget the act of writing itself, we will not reach Zhuangzi’s level of *zuowang*. Therefore, if Liu Xie’s *xu jing* is simply a writing method, it falls short of Zhuangzi’s philosophical depth.

### **Intermediate Level: Inspiration—A Transition Between Artistic Creation and the Dao**

The journey from the *Dao* to the aesthetic realm of *liubai* involves a process of concretization, similar to the transition from the *Dao* to *xu jing* in artistic creation. This paper proposes an intermediate level—namely, inspiration—where *xu jing* transforms from a focused writing state to a quiet waiting for inspiration, resembling a form of *xinzhai*.

*Xinzhai* is a continuous process, and we cannot expect the *Dao* to manifest all at once; encountering inspiration during early practice is plausible. Just as the “whiteness” in *xushi shengbai* signifies pure entities emerging from emptiness, inspiration, though less pure, is a mysterious phenomenon dwelling in this state.

Inspiration is serendipitous and cannot be actively sought; it approaches the void of the *Dao*, allowing us to align with it by achieving concentration while waiting in a state of detachment from writing.

Thus, while *xu jing* may lead to inspiration, three points must be clarified: the arrival of inspiration is temporary, it is subordinate to the *Dao*, and it represents a state achieved after *xinzhai*, but not the highest state.

### **Highest Level: Dao**

Can *xu jing* reach the highest level—*Dao*? Initially, this seems unlikely, as maintaining absolute selflessness throughout literary creation appears impossible; otherwise, our actions would be classified as “writing” rather than a form of *xinzhai*. However, multiple paths exist to attain the *Dao*, and *xu jing* can lead to its realization.

If only *xinzhai* could lead to the *Dao*, the example of *paoding jieniu* would be challenging to explain. In *Zhuangzi*, Cook Ding transforms the butchering of an ox into an artful performance, harmonizing with the rhythm of nature, indicating he has attained the *Dao*. However, this attainment results not from consciously practicing *xinzhai*, but from a method of butchering that “meets with spirit rather than through sight,” adhering to natural order—challenging conventional reasoning (Cao, 2014, p. 53).

If Cook Ding attained the *Dao* while butchering, his mind must be empty. If he recalls that he is butchering, he is not truly *xu*; if he forgets he is butchering, how can he execute the act with such grace? This highlights the limitations of conventional logic.

Both butchering and writing are human actions, suggesting similarity. If *paoding jieniu* can lead to the *Dao*, could Liu Xie’s *xu jing* in writing also attain it? Yet Zhuangzi states that only *zuowang* can lead to the *Dao*, which implies forgetting everything, including the act itself.

In *Zhuangzi*, Confucius’s evaluation of *zuowang* is *tong ze wuhao, hua ze wuchang* (同則無好，化則無常). *Zhuangzi* aims to convey that once one has merged with the *Dao*, individual preferences and aversions should cease to exist; since one has followed the *Dao* in transformation, all things, including the self, should be regarded as impermanent (Li, 2013, p. 201). This encapsulates the concept of relativism that runs throughout the entirety of *Zhuangzi*.

### A New Exploration of *Xu Jing* Through *Zhuangzi*’s Concept of Relativism

What is the concept of relativism? *Youren youyu* (遊刃有餘, to have enough room to maneuver) of *paoding jieniu* is perhaps the best example. In *Zhuangzi*, Cook Ding describes his method of butchering an ox: “The joints of the ox have spaces, while the blade is without thickness; entering the spaces with a blade that has no thickness, there is ample room for the blade to move freely.” (Cao, 2014, p. 53). *Zhuangzi*’s reference to “without thickness (無厚)” does not deny that the blade has a thickness; rather, it indicates that, in relation to the gaps within the ox’s body, the thickness of the blade is negligible (Li, 2013, p. 155).

Similarly, the concepts of *xu* and *wang wo* (忘我, forgetting oneself) can also be understood as relative concepts. In other words, *Zhuangzi* believes that the necessary process of “falling away from the body, rejecting cleverness, and abandoning form and knowledge (墮肢體，黜聰明，離形去知)” required to attain the *Dao* does not literally mean we must destroy our physical bodies or lose our subjectivity (Cao, 2014, p. 130). *Zhuangzi* does not deny the existence of the body and consciousness; instead, he suggests that, in relation to the *Dao* in which one has immersed and assimilated, the body and subjective consciousness become so weak that they can be considered negligible.

Both the process of *paoding jieniu* and the state of *xu jing* experienced during writing can achieve the highest realm of “attaining the *Dao*”. This is because when a person wholeheartedly engages in an activity, their body and subjective awareness become weak and can be ignored. In this state of oblivion, the individual completely follows the natural guidance and the principles of the universe. In such circumstances, we can reasonably explain how Cook Ding attained the *Dao*.

We can further conclude that the state of *xu jing* during writing can also lead to the attainment of the *Dao*. Although few individuals can reach the highest realm of the *Dao* through writing, we should not dismiss the possibility simply because it is rare. Therefore, Liu Xie’s *xu jing* theoretically has the potential to reach the highest level of attaining the *Dao*.

### Conclusion

Through a comparative analysis of the concepts of *xu jing* (虛靜) in Liu Xie (劉勰)’s *Wenxin Diaolong* (文心雕龍) and *xinzhai zuowang* (心齋坐忘) and *xushi shengbai* (虛室生白) in *Zhuangzi* (莊子), this paper argues that *xinzhai zuowang* is the method proposed by *Zhuangzi* for self-cultivation to attain the *Dao* (道), while *xushi shengbai* represents the state that can be achieved through this practice. *Xushi shengbai* serves as the premise for the relationship between Liu Xie’s *xu jing* and *Zhuangzi*’s *xinzhai zuowang*, indicating a deeper and more intricate connection between Liu Xie’s thought and *Zhuangzi*’s philosophy than previously understood.

This paper challenges the traditional view that Daoist thought is epistemological and that *xu jing* solely belongs to a methodology, which implies Liu Xie’s philosophical perspective is inferior. By creatively applying *Zhuangzi*’s concept of relativism, this study proposes three potential levels that *xu jing* might reach: pure literary artistic creation, the waiting for inspiration, and attaining the *Dao*. It asserts that Liu Xie’s *xu jing* can

theoretically achieve the highest level of attaining the *Dao*, thus suggesting the possibility that Liu Xie’s philosophical realm can align with that of Zhuangzi. This study furthermore emphasizes the significance of *Wenxin Diaolong* in the history of Chinese literature and philosophy, broadening the horizon for the exploration of the philosophical ideas within this seminal work.

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