

The Taoist Philosophy of Art: A Phenomenological Reading

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Ereignis is the law because it gathers mortals into the
Ereignen of their essence and there holds them.¹

It is well known that Chuang Tzu speaks of the music of Heaven. According to Lao Tzu, “Great music sounds faint.”² The Taoist emphasis on the music of Heaven seems to point to an undermining of music as an auditory art. This paper will argue that Taoism rather aims to trace the origin of music in the *Tao*. For Taoism, while the *Tao* itself is silent, it gives rise to auditory music. It is only when audible music is in accordance with Nature that it can become great music. And in great music, the essence of the *Tao* is revealed. However, corresponding to the profoundly mysterious nature of the *Tao*, silence is constitutive of great music. To this extent, the music of Heaven is toneless. Correlatively, in order to be able to hear the music of Heaven, it is necessary for us to empty our mind, and not just listen with our ears.

This, first of all, indicates that for Taoism a work of art is not to be primarily construed in terms of the schema of form and matter. Like the later Heidegger, the Taoist rather insists on understanding the essence of art in terms of the truth of Being/*Tao*. As the *Tao* loves to hide itself, the primacy of its self-concealing must be shown in music. That is the reason why the Taoist has to praise the “toneless” music. In general, the proper framework for the Taoist philosophy of art is a phenomenology of the inconspicuous (*Phänomenologie des Unscheinbaren*).³

My phenomenological reading will clarify in what sense “the music of Heaven” is the music of silence. Moreover, it will point to a refutation of Tsung Po-hua’s Romanticist and Mou Tsung-san’s subjectivist interpretations of the Taoist philosophy of art. Finally, it helps to appreciate the Taoist contribution in developing a non-subjectivistic account of creativity in art.

I. In expounding the idea of the “music of Heaven” as great music, Chuang Tzu tells us a story:

“Ch’eng of North Gates said to the Yellow Emperor, ‘When Your Majesty performed the Hsien-ch’ih music in the wilds around Lake Tung-t’ing, I listened, and at first I was afraid, I listened some more and felt weary, and then I listened to the end and felt confused. Overwhelmed, speechless, I couldn’t get hold of myself.’

‘It is not surprising you felt that way,’ said the emperor. ‘I performed it through man, tuned it to Heaven, went forward with ritual principle, and established it in Great Purity. Perfect music must first respond to the needs of man, accord to the four seasons and bestow a final harmony upon the ten thousand things. Then the four seasons will rise one after the other, the ten thousand things will take their turn at living. Now flourishing, now decaying, the civil and military strains will keep them in step; now with clear notes, now with dull ones, the *yin* and the *yang* will blend all in harmony, the

sounds flowing forth like light, like hibernating insects that start to wriggle again, like the crash of thunder with which I awe the world. At the end, no tail; at the beginning, head; now dead, now alive, now flat on the ground, now up on its feet, its constancy is unending, yet there is nothing that can be counted on. That's why you felt afraid.

'Then I played it with the harmony of *yin* and *yang*, lit it with the shining of sun and moon; its notes I was able to make long or short, yielding or strong, modulating about a single unity, but bowing before no rule or constancy. In the valley they filled the valley; in the void they filled the void; plugging up the crevices, holding back the spirit, accepting things on their own terms. Its notes were clear and radiant, its fame high and bright. Therefore the ghost and spirits kept to their darkness and the sun, moon, stars, and constellations marched in their orbits. I made it stop where there is no end to things, made it flow where there is no stopping. You try to fathom it but can't understand, try to gaze at it but can't see, try to overtake it but can't catch up. You stand dazed before the four-directioned emptiness of the Way [*Tao*], or lean on your desk and moan. Your eyes fall before you can see, your strength knuckles under before you can catch up. It was nothing I could do anything about. Your body melted into the empty void, and this brought you to an idle freedom. It was this idle freedom that made you feel weary.

"Then I played it with unwearying notes and turned it to the command of spontaneity. Therefore there seemed to be a chaos where things grow in thickles together, a maturity where noting takes form, a universal plucking where nothing gets pulled, a clouded obscurity where there is no sound. It moved in no direction at all, rested in mysterious shadow. Some called it death, some called it life, some called it fruit, some called it flower. It flowed and scattered, and bowed before no constant tone. The world, perplexed by it, went to the sage for instruction, for the sage is the comprehender of true form and the completer of fate. When the Heavenly mechanism is not put into action and yet the five vital organs are all complete---this may be called the music of Heaven. Wordless, it delights the mind. Therefore the lord of Yen sang its praises thus: 'Listen---you do not hear its sound; look---you do not see its form. It falls all Heaven and earth, enwraps all the six directions.' You wanted to hear it but had no way to go about it. That was why you felt confused.

'Music begins with fear, because of this fear there is dread, as of a curse. Then I add the weariness, and because of the weariness there is compliance. I end it all with confusion, and because of the confusion there is stupidity. And because of the stupidity there is the Way [*Tao*], the Way [*Tao*] that can be lifted up and carried around wherever you go."⁴

In this important passage, Chuang Tzu shows us that there are three major stages in listening to the music of Heaven. In the first stage, one feels afraid. In the second stage, one feels weary. In the final stage, one feels confused. In order to understand such a three-fold stage in listening to the Hsien-ch'ih music, it might be helpful to go back to Chuang Tzu's distinction among "the music of man," "the music of earth," and "the music of Heaven." According to Chuang Tzu, while "the music of man consists of sounds produced in a series of flutes," "the music of earth consists of sounds produced by various hollows."⁵ On the other hand, one can reach "the music of Heaven," only when one understands the following truth:

"The breath of the universe is called wind...At times it is inactive. But when active, angry sounds come from thousands of hollows....The wind blows in a thousand different ways...but the sounds are all produced in their own way. They do so by themselves."⁶

That is to say, in the case of “the music of man,” one can find the cause in the musical instruments. Likewise, in the case of “the music of earth,” one can find cause in the natural conditions. The *harmonicum mundi* in Kepler’s or Leibniz’ sense should belong to this category. However, in the case of “the music of Heaven,” one must give up finding any cause. For here there is no cause for the rise of “the music of Heaven.” Instead, “the music of Heaven” arises spontaneously.

Given such a three-fold distinction of music, it is natural that when one at first listens to the Hsien-ch’ih music, one feels fear. It is because this kind of music transgresses the boundary of human activity. In other words, when one first listens to “the music of Heaven,” what one hears is far beyond the sound of musical instruments. Since this is entirely unexpected, one feels fear. During the second performance, with the understanding that the cause of the music lies in natural conditions, one is able to calm down. By that time one approaches it primarily as “the music of earth.” However, one still feels weary. For it seems that the ultimate origin of the music is invisible. It is during the final performance that one can give up the search for the cause of the music and accordingly let the music run on its own course. Only then one is able to unify the music with the *Tao* and hence recognizes “the music of Heaven.” This is also the stage of feeling “stupid,” for now one gives up any search for rational explanation. In particular, no *why*-question would be raised. This indicates that it is only by virtue of transcending the dimension of the *raison d’etre* of things that one is able to reach the *Tao*. In general, the essence of the *Tao* is to let things run on their own course. And “letting things run on their own course” is the fundamental principle of “the music of Heaven.” As Kuo Hsiang remarked, “There is no formula for the music of Heaven... Such a lack of formula means *Tzu Jan* (Nature). Things arise in their way but we do not know their *raison d’etre*.”⁷ “The music of Heaven” has no cause. Its origin is beyond our rational understanding. In this sense, Kuo Hsiang adds: “Since its cause remains unknown, it is self-caused.”⁸

Further, as Chuang Tzu said, in the case of “the music of Heaven,” “Listen—you do not hear...” At this juncture, one recalls Lao Tzu’s thesis that “Great music sounds faint.”

Critically, one might raise the following challenge to the Taoist: Why it is necessary for the great music to be toneless?

Wang Pi gives the following explication:

“To call it faint means one does not hear it while listening. It is the tone beyond hearing. Wherever there is tone, there is division. In the consequence of the division, there is no *do*,’ while there is *re*. If there is division, then no unity of plurality can be achieved. Therefore what is audible is not great sound.”⁹

Likewise, Kuo Hsiang explains:

“Tone can not be exhausted. Therefore although there are multiplicity of tones in blowing flute and striking strings, many tones are neglected. When one holds the short flute and hits the string, the

goal is to produce tones. Whenever there is a tone, there must be other tones left. Only when there is no tone produced, then the tone can be complete.”¹⁰

Thus for the Taoist, if one is restricted to the tones, then one is never free from divisions. Both Wang Pi and Kuo Hsiang at the same time aim to expound Chuang Tzu’s following thesis:

“When the distinction between right and wrong became prominent, the *Tao* was thereby reduced. Because the *Tao* was reduced, individual bias was formed. But are there really production and reduction? Is there really no production or reduction? That there are production and reduction is like Chao Wen playing the lute. That there is no production or reduction is like Chao Wen not playing the lute.”¹¹

But from a factual standpoint, “Chao Wen played the lute. Master K’uang wielded the stick to keep time.”¹² To this extent, in the eyes of Chuang Tzu, they were not yet great musicians. Chuang Tzu particularly condemns Master K’uang while saying:

“He who is overnice in hearing will be confused by the five notes, bewitched by the six tones, by the sounds of metal and stone, strings and woodwinds, the *huang-chung* and *ta-liü* pitch pipes---am I wrong? So we have Music Master K’uang.”¹³

Clearly, these so-called great masters were still not yet free from the confusion caused by “the five notes” and “the six tones.” Chuang Tzu hence concludes:

“He who applies his nature to the five notes may go as far with it as Music Master K’uang, but I would not call this good hearing.”¹⁴

Here one might recall Lao Tzu’s warning: “The five notes cause one’s ears to be deaf.”¹⁵ As an antidote, Chuang Tzu suggests, “Discard and confuse the six tones, unstring the pipes and lutes, stop up the ears of the blind musician K’uang, and for the first time the people of the world will be able to hold on to their hearing.”¹⁶ For Chuang Tzu, “When I speak of good hearing, I do not mean listening to others; I mean simply to yourself.”¹⁷

At first glance, Taoism seems to urge us not to produce any tone in performing music. If this is the case, then audible music would be of no value. This would point to the elimination of all music. However, as we have seen above, even “the music of Heaven” such as the Hsien-ch’ih music has to be concretely performed. This indicates that the great music should also have an audible dimension. But the point of Taoism is that if one is purely restricted to the audible music, then one can merely reach “the music of man.” Indeed, even a great music master such as Master K’uang fails to break such a limitation. In order to transcend the dimension of “the music of man,” it is necessary for us to promote our hearing by learning how to properly listen. Now however the problem is: If such a kind of transcendence only results from discarding and confusing of the six tones as well as unstringing the pipes and lutes, then what can one hear? According to Chuang Tzu, good hearing is hearing of oneself. But at the same time he insists, “the Perfect Man has no self.”¹⁸ Then how can such hearing of one’s own self be possible, if

there is no self? In order to settle such a puzzle, it is necessary for us to turn to Chuang Tzu's following thesis:

“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 [*Tao*] gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind.”¹⁹

This indicates that without emptying oneself, no one is able to listen to “the music of Heaven.” So “hearing of oneself” is coincident with “emptying oneself.” In this sense, Chuang Tzu points out: “The man who has forgotten self may be said to have entered Heaven.”²⁰ As Kuo Hsiang further explained, the Taoist concept of “no self” is linked to the idea of “letting things run on their own course.”²¹ This is also the reason why Chuang Tzu says: “To act through letting-be is called Heaven.”²²

Therefore, when Chuang Tzu speaks of discarding and confusing of the six tones as well as unstringing the pipes and lutes, he does not aim to destroy music and musical instruments. In reality, his goal is to lead us back to the dimension of the *Tao*. Since the *Tao* is not a thing, it is neither audible nor visible. Accordingly, it is necessary for us to go beyond the audible music in order to reach the *Tao*. Nevertheless, this does not imply any elimination of the audible music. In down playing the audible dimension, the major point is to reach the toneless *Tao*. In justifying the necessity of such a procedure of bracketing, Chuang Tzu further writes:

“What you can look at and see are forms and colors; what you can listen to and hear are names and sounds. What is a pity!--that the men of the world should suppose that form and color, name and sound are sufficient to convey the truth of a thing.”²³

That is also the reason why he says that “Great music is lost on the ears of the villagers, but play them ‘The Breaking of the Willow’ or ‘Bright Flowers’ and they grin from ear to ear.”²⁴

On the other hand, he also reminds us of the following fact:

“The music of Heaven is not an entity existing outside of things. The different aperture, the pipes and flutes and the like, in combination with all living beings, together constitute Heaven.”²⁵

That implies that “the music of Heaven” is also audible. At this juncture, what the *Tao* tries to emphasize is the idea that apart from the *Tao* there is no audible music. Chuang Tzu therefore states:

“The Way [*Tao*]---how deep its dwelling, how pure its clearness! Without it, the bells and chiming stones will not sound. The bells and stones have voices but, unless they are struck, they will not sound.”²⁶

More importantly, as Kuo Hsiang declared: “Sound must be produced in virtue of silence.”²⁷ As he further explained, “Pipes and flutes differ in length and the various notes differ in pitch.

Hence the multiplicity and complexity of long and short, low and high, tones. Although tones vary in a thousand ways, the principle of their natural endowment is the same.”²⁸

All this indicates that apart from the *Tao*, no music is possible. To be sure, what is characteristic of the relation between the *Tao* and music is generally true for the essence of art. In brief, for Taoism, art is grounded in the truth of the *Tao*.

II. In order to justify the Taoist philosophy of art, particularly in solving the seeming conflict between the possibility of audible music and its thesis that “Great music sounds faint,” it is helpful to turn to Heidegger’s phenomenology.

As is well known, the Heideggerian philosophy of art starts with a critique of Western aesthetics. Traditionally, the essence of a work of art is understood in terms of the form-matter schema. As Heidegger writes:

“The metaphysics of the modern period rests on the form-matter structure devised in the medieval period, which itself merely recalls in its words the buried natures of *eidōs* and *hylē*. Thus the interpretation of ‘thing’ by means of matter and form, whether it remains medieval or becomes Kantian-transcendental, has become current and self-evident. But for that reason...it is an encroachment upon the thing-being of the thing.”²⁹

In contrast, when Taoism undermines the sensible dimension of music, its primal goal is to get rid of the form-matter schema. In particular, Lao Tzu’s thesis “Great music sounds faint” primarily aims to prevent us from being trapped into the dimension of *Dingsein*. Furthermore, Heidegger points out: “European art is in its essence characterized by the character of *re-presentation*. Re-representation is ‘*Eidos*,’ making visible. The work of art, the structure, brings into picture and makes visible.”³⁰ In his eyes, such a commitment to the idea of full presence signifies a major limitation of Western aesthetics. Heidegger’s position helps us to appreciate that the point of Lao Tzu’s saying that “Great music sounds faint” is to transcend the idea of *re-presentation*.

In overcoming the forgetfulness of Being shown in Western aesthetics, Heidegger turns to the double movement of *a-letheia* for help. As he pointed out, the truth (*a-letheia*) of Being is at the same time unconcealment and concealment. In particular, it is only in terms of such a double movement that one can properly clarify the essence of art and hence the origin of the work of art. In his eyes, “The nature of art would then be this: the truth of being setting itself to work.”³¹ He concludes: “*Art then is the becoming and happening of truth.*”³² In brief, from a phenomenological standpoint, “Beauty is one way in which truth occurs as unconcealedness.”³³

Given the affinity between the *Tao* and Being in the Heideggerian sense---both are nothing but letting-be, the essence of art must be understood as the becoming and happening of the *Tao*. As a consequence, since the truth (*a-letheia*) of Being, as the double movement of lighting and

concealing, constitutes the essence of art, it is fruitless for the artist to pursue full presence. Instead, it is necessary for art to overcome the idea of re-presentation.

Heidegger further points out, “self-concealing, concealment, *lethe* belongs to *a-letheia*, not just as an addition, not as shadow to light, but rather as the heart of *aletheia*.”³⁴ Likewise, when Lao Tzu claims: “Great music sounds faint,” he tries to reaffirm the primacy of self-concealing of the *Tao*. There is a correspondence between the “toneless” moment of great music and the self-concealment as the heart of the truth of the *Tao*.

In Heidegger’s philosophy of language there is an emphasis on silence or stillness. For Heidegger, silence is not the opposite of language, but rather its primal mode. At this juncture, he speaks of “the mystery of Saying.”³⁵ He told the Japanese partner Tomio Tezuka in *On the Way to Language*, “As Saying, the nature of language is the appropriating showing [*das ereignende Zeigen*] which disregards precisely itself, in order to free that which is shown, to its authentic appearance.”³⁶ For Taoism, music is also a mode of appropriating showing [*das ereignende Zeigen*]. That is to say, music, as showing, “is the most proper mode of Appropriating [*die eigenste Weise des Ereignens*].”³⁷ Accordingly, it must disregard “precisely itself, in order to free that which is shown, to its authentic appearance.” This is another implication of Lao Tzu’s thesis that “Great music sounds faint.” As Heidegger pointed out, language is “a self-manifestation of things which comes from the mystery that shelters itself back into itself.”³⁸ Analogically, since the *Tao* remains mysterious, “the music of Heaven” must include a moment of silence. To this extent, the Taoist has to affirm the “toneless” character of great music. Great music is also “a self-manifestation of things which comes from the mystery that shelters itself back into itself.”

Meanwhile, Heidegger points out: “Appropriation is by way of saying [*Das Ereignis ist sagend*].”³⁹ In parallel, for Chuang Tzu, the *Tao* is musical. This justifies the possibility of music for Taoism. According to Heidegger, “Language is the house of Being because language, as Saying, is the mode of Appropriation [*die Weise des Ereignisses*].”⁴⁰ Similarly, in speaking of the “the music of Heaven,” Chuang Tzu aims to disclose that the *Tao* is also musical. This implies that one should not merely be restricted to “the music of man.” As Heidegger also observes:

“To be sure, speaking is vocalization. Also, it can be considered a human activity. Both are correct views of language as speaking. Both will now be ignored... for the phonetic-acoustic-physiological explanation of the sounds of language does not know the experience of their origin in ringing stillness, and knows even less how sound is given voice and is defined by that stillness.”⁴¹

Likewise, for Taoism, it is necessary for us to go beyond “the music of man,” in order to reach “the music of Heaven.” If this is not the case, then one might lose the sight of the ringing stillness that is the origin of all music. In reality, in undermining the sensible dimension of music, Taoism primarily asks us to step back to the primordial dimension of the ringing stillness, and hence discovers “how sound is given voice and is defined by that stillness.”

Furthermore, Heidegger declares: “Language speaks... not man.”⁴² This can reinforce Chuang Tzu’s emphasis on the necessity of “losing oneself” in the Hsien-ch’ih music. All this indicates that the performance of a great musician is more than a human activity. Correlatively, those who are ego-centric are never able to hear the music of Heaven. In this way, *pace* Heidegger, one can say that in its essence, music “is neither expression nor an activity of man.”⁴³

All in all, Taoism does not want to eliminate the auditory quality of music. In undermining the sensible dimension of music, it only aims to remind us of the existence of great music: the music of Heaven. As Heidegger observes:

“To say and to speak are not identical. A man may speak, speak endlessly, and all the time say nothing. Another man may remain silent, not speak at all and yet without speaking, say a great deal.”⁴⁴

It is also the case with music. In fact, as silence is the primal mode of language, silence is constitutive of any music. It is in terms of hearing the silence in “the music of Heaven” that one can return to the ringing stillness of the *Tao*. Only then can music echo the primacy of self-concealment of the *Tao*. This explains why Lao Tzu says: “Great music sounds faint.” That is to say, such a thesis is a consequence of the Taoist phenomenology of the inconspicuous (*Phänomenologie des Unscheinbaren*).⁴⁵ But the possibility of great music also indicates that the *Tao* itself needs art. Only when art returns to its proper place that it can let all things return to their proper places.

As a matter of fact, Heidegger himself shows great admiration to the Taoist philosophy of art. He particularly points out: “in the East-Asian world re-presentation is a hindrance, the pictorial, the visible-making picture means an obstruction.”⁴⁶ Such a thesis helps us to understand why Chunag Tzu warns us not to listen to music with our ears only.

III. In modern China, Tsung Po-hua is a pioneer in doing research on the Taoist philosophy of art. According to him, there is an essential affinity between the Taoist and the Romanticist philosophy of music. He says, “I think the paragraph on the Hsien-ch’ih music in the chapter ‘The Turning of Heaven’ of the *Chung-tzu* is extremely important. It is a work representing our ancient thought of Romanticism.”⁴⁷ Justifying this thesis, while commenting on Chuang Tzu’s text concerning the first reaction in listening to the Hsien-ch’ih music, Tsung Po-hua maintains:

This is exactly the stage-horizon of ‘unending melody’ shown in Wagner’s music.⁴⁸

Secondly, regarding Chuang Tzu’s description of the second reaction, he says:

This addresses the reaffirmation of the active spontaneity of the subject, so that it can merge into the objective laws of nature.⁴⁹

When Chuang Tzu addresses the final reaction in listening to the Hsien-ch'ih music, Tsung Po-hua argues, the point is to achieve a unification of subject and object. In the eyes of Tsung Po-hua, the rise of the non-discrimination of mind is the key result in listening to "the music of Heaven." Accordingly, the stage reached by "the music of Heaven" represents the transcendence of the distinction between the outer and the inner. It is in this way that "Both man and music enter the *Tao*."⁵⁰ All this indicates that for Tsung Po-hua, the Hsien-ch'ih music is full of Romanticist spirit.

Mou Tsung-san is another major figure in contemporary Chinese philosophy of art. In developing a new philosophy of art, Mou Tsung-san starts with a critique of Kant's aesthetics. At this juncture, he identifies himself as a modern successor of the Taoist philosophy of art.

According to Mou Tsung-san, Kantian aesthetics remains imprisoned in the analytic approach. From an analytic standpoint, beauty must be separated from truth and good. However, in reality beauty subjectively represents a principle of relaxation in life. It signifies the freedom and authenticity of life. It is only when one is able to live freely and authentically that he/she can exist productively and relaxedly. Objectively beauty is merely the surplus of the illumination of the transformation of *ch'i* (material force). For all the forms of beauty basically result from the gathering of the transformation of *ch'i*. In parallel, truth is limited to the knowledge of phenomena only, while good merely refers to the struggle in existence. To this extent, there is no unification, but rather tension, among beauty, truth, and good.

By contrast, Mou Tsung-san argues, if beauty is primarily understood as "the beauty of Heaven and Earth, the face of the divine" in Chuang Tzu's sense, then real beauty is more than Kantian beauty.⁵¹ At this level, beauty has no longer the form of beauty. In Mou Tsung-an's eyes, this is exactly what Lao Tzu means in saying that "Great music sounds faint."⁵² Ultimately speaking, form characterizes neither truth nor goodness. That is to say, when truth, good, and beauty are unified, they become formless. Their "objects" are no longer in the form of "objects." Instead, they are now things-in-themselves. Therefore, it is only with the non-discriminative unification of beauty, truth and good that noumena can be reached. Though one might not accept the Kantian thesis of beauty as the symbol of morality, one should analogically say that "beauty in the analytical sense" is the symbol of the "formless beauty."

In general, for Mou Tsung-san, the principle of formlessness is the most fundamental idea in aesthetics. That is to say, beauty in the highest sense must transgress the form of beauty. With the stress on such an idea of formlessness, Mou Tsung-san claims that his position is closer to Taoism. In his eyes, even the Hegelian thesis that "art is the form of God" fails to characterize such a state of "beauty without the form of beauty."⁵³ On the other hand, the idea of formlessness should be understood as the most important principle of the Taoist philosophy of art.

VI. In contrast to our phenomenological approach, Tsung Po-hua's association of the Taoist philosophy of art to Romanticism is basically idealistic. In Tsung Po-hua's eyes, the point of

Taoism is to emphasize the active spontaneity of our subjectivity. However, this interpretation does not reflect the Taoist anti-subjectivist approach. It is true that Tsung Po-hua at the end also emphasizes the unity between subject and object. But his speculative approach can hardly leave room for the Taoist thesis of the primacy of self-concealment of the *Tao*. His one-sided stress on the active spontaneity of human subjectivity also overshadows the response-character of the musician and audience. For Taoism, the major role of the musician and audience is rather to echo the call from the *Tao*. In reality, Tsung Po-hua suffers from the lack of the Heideggerian idea of “ontological difference.” As a result, he fails to take care of the “ontological” significance of the art in Taoism.

Likewise, Mou Tsung-san’s interpretation of the Taoist idea of formlessness remains idealistic. In reality, Mou Tsung-san merely conceives of the *Tao* as a subjective stage-horizon. His attribution of beauty to the analytical dimension might intensify the isolation of “the music of Heaven” from the audible music. This might give rise to an unbridgeable tension between great music and the audible music. As a consequence, the sensible dimension of music would be entirely undermined. More importantly, since his explication of the meaning of “formless beauty” is bound to the idea of “fullness,” it can hardly go beyond the “metaphysics of presence” in Derrida’s sense.

By contrast, our phenomenological reading of the Taoist philosophy of art not only avoids Tsung Po-hua’s and Mou Tsung-san’s idealistic misinterpretations, but also clarifies in what sense Taoism downplays the sensible dimension of music. In reality, Lao Tzu’s thesis that “Great music sounds faint” aims rather to lead us back to the ringing stillness which is the authentic origin of all music. Correlatively, in speaking of “the music of Heaven,” Chuang Tzu’s point is simply that music is the house of the *Tao*. For in its very essence, “the music of Heaven” signifies a unity of music with the *Tao*. Accordingly, in order to apprehend the *Tao*, one has to listen to the silent aspect of the music of Heaven. But this does not mean that “the music of Heaven” is entirely soundless. To say that great music sounds faint is to remind us that the *Tao* itself is the ringing stillness. Given the fact that “the music of Heaven” is the proper mode for appropriating the *Tao*, it must exceed the audible dimension, in order to reach the dimension of stillness. To the extent that silence is constitutive of “the music of Heaven,” it is said to be “toneless” music. In the consequence of the fact that the *Tao* is “soundless,” “the music of Heaven” is characterized to be toneless. As Kuo Hsiang declared: “This is soundless music and hence the perfect music.”⁵⁴ It is only in the perfect music that the mysterious nature of the *Tao* is appropriated.

In conclusion, the phenomenological reading helps us to discover that for the Taoist, apart from the soundless *Tao*, no music would become possible. It is only when one apprehends the *Tao* as the ringing stillness, one is able to listen to “the music of Heaven.” To be sure, such a stage can only be achieved by the sage. As Chuang Tzu said,

“He sees the darkest dark, hears where there is no sound. In the midst of darkness, he alone sees the dawn; in the midst of the soundless, he alone hears harmony. Therefore, in depth piled upon depth

he can discover the thing; in spirituality piled upon spirituality he can discover the essence. So in his dealing with the ten thousand things he supplies all their wants out of total nothingness.”⁵⁵

NOTES

1. Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 128-129; *with modification*. Cf.: Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprach*. (Pfullingen: Neske, 1959), p. 259.
2. Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 160.
3. Martin Heidegger, *Vier Seminare* (Frankfurt/M.: Klostermann, 1977), p. 137.
4. Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, (1968), pp. 157-158.
5. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, p. 180.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Chuang Tzu, *Chuang-tzu* (Taipei : Chung-hua, 1984), ch 1, p. 12a.
8. *Ibid*, ch. 1, p. 16b.
9. Wang Pi, *Wang-pi chih (The Collected Works of Wang Pi)* (Peking: Chung-hua, 1980), p. 113.
10. *Chuang-tzu*, ch. 1, p. 17a.
11. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, p. 185.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, p. 99.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
15. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, p. 145.
16. *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, p. 111.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
21. *Chuang-tzu*, ch. 1, p. 5a.
22. *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, p. 127; I replace “inaction” with “letting-be.”
23. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 140.
25. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, p. 328; I replace “Nature” with “Heaven.”
26. *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, p. 128.
27. *Chuang-tzu*, chapter 5, p. 11a.
28. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, p. 328.
29. Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. and ed. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 30.
30. Martin Heidegger, *Reden und Andere Zeugnisse eines Lebensweges 1910-1976* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2000), p. 554.
31. *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 36.
32. *Ibid*, p.71.
33. *Ibid*, p.16.
34. Martin Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p.71.

35. *On the Way to Language*, p.50.
36. Ibid, p.131.
37. Ibid.
38. Otto Pöggeler, "West-East Dialogues: Heidegger and Lao-tzu." *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, ed. G. Parkes (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), p. 70.
39. *On the Way to Language*, p.131.
40. Ibid, p. 135.
41. Ibid, pp. 121-122.
42. *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 198.
43. Ibid, p.197.
44. Ibid, p.122.
45. For a more philosophical articulation of the Taoist affinity with the Heideggerian phenomenology of the inconspicuous, please see: Wing-cheuk Chan, "Tang Chun-i 'chong-kuo i-shu ching-shen lun' chi shen-hsiang hsueh han-i (The Phenomenological Implications of Tan Chun-i's Theory of the Spirit of Chinese Art)," in *The Phenomenological and Philosophical Research in China*, 6 (2004), pp. 24-39.
46. *Reden und Andere Zeugnisse eines Lebensweges 1910-1976*, p. 554.
47. Tsung Po-hua, *Mei-hsueh shen-pu (Wandering in the Field of Aesthetics)* (Shanghai: Jan-ming Chu-pan she, 1981), p. 172.
48. Ibid, p.173.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
51. *Chuang-tzu*, ch.10, p.14a.
52. Mou Tsung-san, "Shang-che (Discussion)," in Kant, *P'an-tuan-li chih p'i-p'an (Critique of Judgment)*, trans.Mou Tsung-san (Taipei: Hsueh-sheng shu chu, 1992), vol.1, pp.82-91; see also: *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, p. 160.
53. *P'an-tuan-li chih p'i-p'an*, vol.1, p. 86.
54. *Chuang-tzu*, ch. 5, pp. 21b-22a.
55. *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, p.128.