

# *A spiral flowing (huanliu 環流): Thinking with uncertainty*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines a narrative from the Daoist text, *Liezi*, where three doctors offer distinct diagnoses to Jiliang, each symbolizing different perspectives on human life and knowledge. The first doctor's diagnosis is based on observable symptoms and lifestyle, the second considers genetic factors, and the third doctor introduces an abstract "governor" of life, highlighting the role of uncertainty and change. This story embodies the Chinese philosophical concept of *yinyang*, emphasizing life's inherent unpredictability and continuous transformation. The discussion extends to the Daoist principle of *huanliu* (spiral flowing), illustrating life's cyclical and dynamic nature, evident in traditional Chinese medicine and philosophy. The paper suggests that ancient Daoist wisdom, with its acceptance of uncertainty and change, remains relevant and insightful in contemporary contexts.

**KEY-WORDS:** KEY WORDS: Daoist Philosophy; Huanliu; Uncertainty; Traditional Chinese Medicine.

**RESUMO:** Este artigo analisa uma narrativa do texto daoista, *Liezi*, onde três médicos oferecem diagnósticos distintos a Jiliang, cada um simbolizando diferentes perspectivas sobre a vida e o conhecimento humano. O diagnóstico do primeiro médico baseia-se nos sintomas observáveis e no estilo de vida do paciente, o segundo considera fatores genéticos, e o terceiro introduz um "governador" abstrato da vida, destacando o papel da incerteza e da mudança. Essa história incorpora o conceito filosófico chinês de *yinyang*, enfatizando a imprevisibilidade inerente à vida e sua contínua transformação. A discussão se estende ao princípio daoista de *huanliu* (fluir espiral), ilustrando a natureza cíclica e dinâmica da vida, evidente na medicina e filosofia tradicionais chinesas. O artigo sugere que a sabedoria daoista antiga, com sua aceitação da incerteza e da mudança, permanece relevante e perspicaz nos contextos contemporâneos.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Filosofia Daoista; Huanliu; Incerteza; Medicina Tradicional Chinesa.

There is a story from the early Daoist text *Liezi* 列子 (450–375 B.C.E). Jiliang was sick but he refused to undergo any medical treatment, and after seven days his situation became serious. His seven sons stood in a circle and begged him in tears to seek medical attention:

In order to teach his sons a lesson about life, he agreed to call in three doctors, Qiao, Yu, and Lu, to take his pulse and make a diagnosis. Doctor Qiao explained that Jiliang's hot and cold temperatures, the invisible and visible forces in his body, were out of order. According to him the illness was the result of improper diet, sexual indulgence, and lifestyle stressors. However, it could be cured. Jiliang responded, "This is a *zhongyi* 眾醫 (common doctor), get rid of him now."

Next, Doctor Yu offered his diagnosis and interpretation: "The current condition started even in your mother's womb. Your mother suffered a deficiency of embryonic *qi* and an excess of breast milk. This illness was not a matter of one day or one night. It has gradually been developing." Jilang responded, "This is a *liangyi* 良醫 (good doctor), serve him a dinner."

Lastly, Doctor Lu offered his diagnosis: "The illness is not from heaven, not from a human, and not from a ghost. Your life was generated and endowed with a form 稟身授形 (*bing shen shou xing*). However, it also came with a 制者 (*zhizhe*) governor. You should know it. What can all medicine do for you?" Jilang responded: "This is a *shenyi* 神醫 (spiritual doctor), give him a great gift." (*Liezi*, 1979, p. 205).

How can we make a sense of this metaphorical story? The first *zhongyi*'s diagnosis was an accurate description of common human life in which: dietary indiscretion and lifestyle choices produced a set of syndromes. Something we can see and understand. The second *liangyi*'s diagnosis sees the interdependencies in human life, examining human life in a genetic context. In fact, even today, we are told that some distress may be the result of a DNA defect in the human genome. Something can be known to human mind. The distinct from the first two, which operate at the level of knowing the certainty, the *shenyi*'s

diagnosis points to a "governor" of human life, indefinite phenomenon. Lu indicates that this "governor" is ambiguous, unknown and changeable, something is roughly taken as *shen* 神 (spirit, force, power), a ruling and managing potency in one's life. A commentary claims that "the stupid ones will be perplexed when they hear it, but the intelligent ones will be enlightened when they learn it." (*Liezi*, 1979, p. 205).

This story shows a distinctive feature of Chinese thought: thinking with uncertainty, as *Yijing* (*The Book of Changes*), "The unpredictability of yinyang is called *shen* (spirit, force, power)." (陰陽不測之為神). It holds that unpredictability and change are unavoidable, inescapable and manifested in all things and events under heaven. Uncertainty is not a "thing" or "entity" that is created by human failure, rather a continuous activity and potency that is constituted and shaped by change and emerges from change. Human knowledge as a degree of relationships is measured in terms of probability, which in its turn is explained in terms of *yinyang* configurations in the grand scheme of things (Wang, 2012, p. 66). This approach allows for differences, emergences, alternation, variation and transformation. Such *yinyang* relationships is originated in the desire of managing and dealing with uncertainty, which is the one of the primary concerns in ancient China. This multidimensional relationship shows four basic aspects:

- all levels of relationship defined through degrees of integration;
- emergent order as opposed to a predetermined order;
- constant change and transformation;
- future is not fully predictable.

These propositions can be captured in the model of a spiral flowing (*huanliu* 環流) as a metaphor for the processes of generation, integration, and emergence. The *He Guanzi*, 鶡冠子 (*Pheasant Cape Master*), a text most likely from the Warring States Period (475–221 B.C.E.), gives an influential characterization of this movement: "Beautiful and ugly adorn each other: this is called returning to the full cycle. Things develop to their extremes and then reverse. This is called

spiral flowing (*huanliu* 環流).” This expression contains two Chinese characters. The character translated as flowing, *liu* 流, refers most literally to the flowing of water, and the character itself has the image of water on the left. Other character spiral is *huan* 環, which refers to a shape or thing of circular, ring, loop or hoop. As today's Beijing city subway system, it is called either *erhuan* (second rings) or up to *qihuan* (seven rings). We might thus translate the phrase as "spiral flowing" "flowing circulation." The *Huangdi Neijing* makes the same point more explicitly in terms of *yinyang*: “Yin and yang are mutually connected, like a cycle without beginning. Thus, one knows that attack and defense always follow each other. ... *Yinyang* are interlocking like a cycle without limit, *yinyang* follow each other and internal and external interlock each other like a cycle without limit.” (Niu, 1993, p. 54).

This *huanliu* (spiral flowing) has three basic features:

First, *huanliu* revolves around an empty center. the Daoist classical text *Daodejing* explains the images of the hub, the cart, and doors and windows, all of which identify an empty space in its enclosing frame. The thing depends on this empty space for its form and its “usefulness.” This “structural blueprint” hinges on the concept of enclosure, something that surrounds the emptiness. Thus concrete things themselves always exist through an element of emptiness that is *fuyin* 負陰 (embodying *yin*) or seen as subtle, hidden and non-presence. However, this non-presence is embedded not only in presence but also in motion. This leads towards the concept of rotation. The form revolves metaphorically and literally around the empty space that rotates. The wheel spoke rotates around an “empty” hub; the pot spun on a potter’s wheel and the walls of the room “rotate” around the empty space and toward a spiral movement. This movement is also seen in Zhuangzi’s image of the hinge of the way “axis of courses”:

When “this” and “that” – a right and a wrong – are no longer coupled as opposites – that is called the Course as Axis, the axis of all courses.

When this axis finds its place in the center, it responds to all the endless things it confronts, thwarted by none. For it has an endless supply of “right,” and an endless supply of “wrong.” Thus, I say, nothing compares to the Illumination of the Obvious. (Ziporyn, 2009, p. 12).

This ontological “swirling void” has had a strong impact on later Daoist religious practice. There is a porcelain involving emptiness, known as the *qiqi* 琦器, which has been restored in the Forbidden City in Beijing. This container holds a certain amount of water. If it is filled with too much water, it will tip over; if it has too little water, it will also tilt. The perfect condition will contain just the right amount of water and leave certain empty space in the container. This right amount is measured by the amount of empty space.

The second characteristic of the *huanliu* is that it has no end and no beginning, continuing on without limit or exhaustion. This quality manifests nicely in the popular *yinyang* symbol. A circular design divided into two interlocking halves with two antithetical dots. This symbol as two teardrop-shaped parts, yin-dark and yang-bright, when they are brought together, they form a circle. Yet the emergent properties of a circle are different from either of these two constituents. If the circle were a hoop, it could rotate or roll and neither of the two parts could do these things. The whole emergent regularity is more than the sum of its parts. These dark and light swirls are not dualistic but as interdependent, reciprocal, and intertwined. Within the strongest moment of *yang*, one finds a small circle of *yin*, and within the strongest moment of *yin*, one finds a small circle of *yang*. Moreover, *yin* is shown as gradually transforming into *yang*, while *yang* is transforming into *yin*. If we imagine that a line drawn from the center of the circle to its periphery represents the configuration of a particular thing, event, or moment in time, then each thing is shown to be constituted by both *yin* and *yang*, dark and light, at any given moment and position. Its two curved, interlocking geometric shapes depict a rotating, self-creating cycle of complementary opposites, of mutually dependent entities whose

beginning are the other's ending. This resembles what is known as the "logarithmic spiral." Nature exhibits this logarithmic spiral from sunflowers, seashells and whirlpools to hurricanes and giant galaxies.

The third aspect of *huanliu* is reversal (*fan* 反), which is a constant theme in the *Daodejing*. Reversal invokes the image of a circle in motion, or, more precisely, a nonlinear and infinite-multi-dimensional spiral movement. The *He Guanzi*, (*Pheasant Cape Master*) calls the case of *wuji zhefa* (物極則反), "a thing will reverse after developing to its extremes," a popular idiom in contemporary China. It is somewhat similar to the term in contemporary Western science called "self-organized criticality," which refers to the tendency of large dissipative systems to drive themselves to a critical state, with a wide range of length and time scales. The idea provides a unifying concept for large-scale behavior in systems with many degrees of freedom. It has been looked for in such diverse areas as earthquake structure, economics, and biological evolution. It is also seen as "regression toward means," or something like more popular and fashionable saying, "what comes up, it must come down."

The *huanliu* moves forward to a critical point of transition and then reverses from it. Things reposition from improbable order to inevitable disorder. Destruction and loss turn out to be the very rhythm by which nature sustains its beauty and regeneration. The ramification of this view discloses a paradoxical nature of reality, and it is worth noting that *fan* 反 not only means reversal but also opposition and going against. This disorder and randomness are far more a part of the natural order of things than is conveyed by the term *he* 和 (harmony). There are different ways to grasp the crux of harmony. Harmony can take the one snapshot of the world but not the whole picture. In life there is harmony and disorder, generation and destruction, life and death... so on. These are conceived through contiguity and distance. Finding harmony depends on combining contrasting elements into relations of contiguity. Such a harmony is formed and cultivated from a multiplicity of ways

rather than by drawing on one exclusive mode. In this sense the harmony is ultimately a matter of integration. This transformative harmony challenges the single-mindedness and assimilative logic of the self-same subject reproducing itself through each encounter.

We see this illustrated in *Zhuangzi*:

What kills all the living does not die. What gives birth to all living is not born. It is something that sends all beings off and welcomes all beings in, destroys all and completes all. Its name is the Tranquility of Turmoil. This Tranquil Turmoil! It is what reaches completion only through its turmoil. (Ziporyn, 2009, p. 44).

This incorporation of conflict and disharmony into the very sustainability of nature. The idea of “balanced” nature has also largely been abandoned in contemporary ecological science. Donald Worster, one of the founders of the field of environmental history, writes,

But now, as we have seen, scientists have abandoned that equilibrium view of nature and invented a new one that looks remarkably like the human sphere in which we live. We can no longer maintain that either nature or society is a stable entity. All history has become a record of disturbance and that disturbance comes from both cultural and natural agents, including droughts, earthquakes, pests, viruses, corporate takeovers, loss of markets, new technologies, increasing crime, new federal laws, and even the invasion of America by French literary theory. (Worster, 1994, p. 424).

This view of nature is remarkably close to the view assumed by *huanliu*. It emphasizes coherence through interaction and the emergence of what is new and unpredictable. It also reveals the continuity between natural events and human life. The *huanliu* demonstrates the ambiguity and complexity in life and nature, nevertheless it attempts to make sense of this complex reality through the generative spiraling movement and passage that come from it.

This *huanliu* thinking model not only allows us to make sense of the world and explain its origin but also provides a guide for how to act within it. All things eternally oscillating between each other, explaining

the enormous diversity of circumstances in life. At any given point, yin-dark or yang-bright is in the process of change. This difference is implicit in any state of being – there are no fixed points or frozen moments. Things exist in phases. Space is conceived as a field, defined by positions and goals. Time is conceived as a string, moved in a circle. Although it is impossible to fully represent change in our thinking, we can also consider the “performance” of every point in one continuous motion. Such *huanliu* thinking demands a careful looking for a consistent pattern. It is like the standing wave that emerges in a moving stream, where the water particles are constantly changing while the pattern persists.

At its core, *huanliu* thinking takes the world as a net shaped by thousands of diverse things and events but linked through consistent patterns, movements, and forces. This allows one to perceive and think about the world in a multi-dimensional space, something seen in what is called “spatial intelligence.”

This *huanliu* thinking seeks out meaning in experience that is not immediate, but begins in the formless and meaningless, as one aspect of the intricate web of life. Practically speaking, this indicates that when one faces a task, one needs to make an intentional shift from the immediate to the wider spectrum, paying attention to the background and implicit patterns. This model epitomizes spontaneous cognition of environmental relations. The cognitive power resides in its capacity to elucidate the relationships in a complex network and environment.

For example, in traditional Chinese medical practice the main diagnostic procedures are about finding the patterns of one's problem, so-called *bagang bianzheng* 八綱辨証 (eight principles for differentiating symptoms) method of diagnosis, focusing on the differentiation of symptom complexes. These principles are based on a few sets of distinctions: *yin* and *yang*, which are the basic categories of diagnosis; heat and cold (*re/han* 熱寒), which determine the nature of the disease; exterior and interior (*biao/li* 表裡), which determine the location of the



disease; deficiency and excess (*xu/shi* 虛實), which provide a quantitative assessment. Although the pathological conditions may differ in thousands of ways, these variations never exceed the bounds of *yin* and *yang*. That is, all can be approached through the pairing of differences. This hub for human understanding of all things comprehends at least three variables:

- 1) The rhythm of *yinyang* (*jiezou* 節奏): either *yang* or *yin* is too fast or too slow;
- 2) The balance of *yinyang* (*pingheng* 平衡): too much or too little *yang* or *yin*;
- 3) The transformation of *yinyang* (*bianhua* 變化): *yang* or *yin* changing too much or too little.

Three most respected legendary heroes through Chinese history also exemplify this pattern-recognition orientation. In The “Zun Deyi” (“Respecting Virtue and Rightness”) text recently excavated at Guodian reveals:

Yu the Great’s moving the waters was by following the *Dao* of water. Zao Fu’s riding horses was by following the *Dao* of horses. Hou Ji’s planting the earth was by following the *Dao* of the earth. There is nothing that does not have its *Dao*, but the *Dao* of human beings is nearest. Thus, gentlemen first select the *Dao* of human beings.

These three popular heroes epitomize advantageous human action, which comes from following along with the *huanliu* thinking, whether of water, horses, farming or human beings. Water is a dominant metaphor relating to terrain. Yu the Great (大禹 Dayu) was the legendary founder of the Xia Dynasty (2070 – 1600 B.C.E.). He mastered flood control techniques to tame rivers and lakes. Originally, Yu’s father Gun (鯀) was assigned by King Yao (堯) to tame the raging flood waters. Over nine years, Gun built strong dikes all over the land in the hope of containing the waters. During a period of heavy flooding, however, all of these dikes collapsed, and the project failed miserably. Gun was executed by King Shun (舜). Yu learned from his father’s

mistakes and took a different approach to manage the water. Instead of using force to combat the floods, such as dikes to stop up the water, he used the way of *shudao* 疏導 (redirecting) and *shunni* 順逆 (following along/going against). He dredged new river channels to direct the flow of the water, going with rather than resisting the tendencies of the water. These channels served both as outlets for the torrential waters and as irrigation conduits to distant farmlands. He, thus, successfully controlled the floods. His method serves as the metaphor of flowing along in attunement with the order of terrain to get things done with excellence, ease, and sustainability.

This narrative shows that through the embodiment of *huanliu* thinking one can grasp the pattern of thing and gain a natural power from heaven and earth, be granted the ability to manage one's internal and external world, and finally, even attain a kind of magical charisma. Human understanding is a matter of integrating conditions that confronts us into our broader network of life. More importantly, all knowing is situated within knowing how.

As the *Huainanzi* says “Looking at the root and knowing the branches, observing the finger, and seeing the return [path], holding to the One and responding to the many, grasping the essentials and ordering the details. These are called “techniques.”

This model is luminated in a horse riding or charioteering in the *Huainanzi*:

Therefore, the Great Man calmly has no worries and placidly has no anxieties. He takes Heaven as his canopy; Earth as his carriage; the four seasons as his steeds, and yin and yang as his charioteers. He rides the clouds and soars through the sky to become a companion of the power that fashions and transforms us. Letting his imagination soar and relaxing his grip, he gallops through the vast vault [of heavens] ... Thus, with Heaven as your canopy, nothing will be uncovered; With Earth as your carriage, nothing will be unsupported; With the four seasons as your steeds, nothing will be unemployed. With yin and yang as your charioteers, nothing will be incomplete. (Roth, 2010, p. 52).

The Great Man as a good horse rider must be able to peacefully work with a controlled flow that responds to unrestrained forces and variations. The horse was a very significant image in many early Chinese texts. Charioteering is not a case of courage (*yong* 勇), but rather a demonstration of a kind of intelligence (*zhi* 智), a strategy for becoming an embodied navigator. He will go with transformation and change, doing as he pleases and unfolding with rhythm. He gallops an infinitely vast land. The horse riding, effective interaction occurs through movement. The immediate interfaces of navigating a horse-drawn carriage include the horses and their power, the terrain, the weather, and one's purpose. The horse rider is linked to the many external factors that may disturb his or her inner state and draw out different kinds of responses. It is a kind of open system that deals with environmental disturbances and processes within it. The *Huainanzi* depicts that you feel with your hand, however, you respond through your heart/mind. This is a common saying: *dexin yingshou* 得心應手, "getting it through your heart/mind and responding with your hands."

Horse riding also requires human adaptation, affecting the reorganization of inherited behavior patterns to fit the existing environmental situations. Managing horses effectively was a necessary condition for success, and horse-driven chariots were crucial for early military battles. Of course, this can be extended to navigating any path, from one's personal life to political organizations. It is about training someone to become a superb horse rider by cultivating a *huanliu* thinking by which one can easily and artfully locate oneself in relation to one's *milieu*.

The *huanliu* thinking provoke us to appreciate world in a different light and lifts our vision to a broader horizon, which implies a paradigm for discerning about change and effective action. The ultimate aspiration is to search for order, pattern and harmony through uncertainty, ambiguity and chaos. Nevertheless, human beings have a need to develop the capacity for successful prediction to avoid danger.

Such predictions are never certain and must go beyond abstract calculations. The *huanliu* thinking shows that the uncertainty involved in human ability to predict regularities. Facing an unpredictable world, one might lose confidence and feel as if there is no stability at all. *Huanliu* thinking emerges as a conceptual apparatus to ease the anxiety of lost control by creating ways of dealing and accepting the inevitability of change and transformation.

Uncertainty is not a problem that needs to be corrected but rather a condition to be prepared for and accepted. One can bear or react to uncertainty passively or embrace it and deal with it in an active and spontaneous way. Real strength entails flexibility; real wisdom entails uncertainty; real endurance entails resilience; real power entails humility.

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