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Interpretation of *Hengxian*: An explanation from a point of view of intellectual history

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Abstract *Hengxian*, one of the bamboo books of the Chu State during the Warring States Period that is kept in the Shanghai Museum, was collected by the museum in 1994, and is an important piece of literature that discusses cosmic issues prior to *Huainanzi*. Based on Li Ling's work on the text, as well as hermeneutic work by some other scholars, this essay represents another attempt to determine the words and meanings of the *Hengxian*, with a focus on its cosmological commentary.

Keywords *Hengxian*, *Huainanzi*, Li Ling, cosmology

摘要 《恒先》是上海博物馆藏战国楚竹书中的一篇，1994年入藏上海博物馆。该文是《淮南子》之前讨论宇宙问题的重要文献。依据李零整理的本子与其他学者的释读，可以对《恒先》文义重新加以梳理，并从宇宙论的角度进行新的思想阐释。

关键词 恒先，淮南子，李零，宇宙论

1 Introduction

Feng Youlan remarked, "Generally, most philosophers in ancient China paid attention to human affairs, and thus cosmology in Chinese philosophy did not fully develop until the early period of the Han Dynasty" (Feng 1961, p. 478). Now, Mr. Feng's remark is being revised by the growing amount of literature that has been uncovered, such as *Hengxian* 恒先, the *Taiyi Sheng Shui* 太一生水 (*Taiyi Produces Water*) (Jingmenshi 1998), and the *Daoyuan* 道原 (Source of

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version of the text, I will give some notice. After going through the verbal meaning of the text, the author will then make a theoretical explanation from the point of view of cosmology. What has to be made clear is that scholars argue amongst themselves over how to divide the passages. Here, I divide the whole text into 9 passages in light of my own comprehension of the meaning of the text.

2 Passage 1 of *Hengxian*

Hengxian wu you 恒先无有 (*Hengxian* contains no beings), *pu, jing, xu* 朴¹, 静, 虚 (and is thus simple, still and vacant). *Pu, da pu; jing, da jing; xu, da xu* 朴, 大朴; 静, 大静; 虚, 大虚 (And thereby it is ultimately simple, still and vacant). *Zi yan bu zi ren, yu zuo* 自厌不自忍, 或作² (As *hengxian* was self-fulfilled but not self-constrained, there was *yu*). *You yu yan you qi, you qi yan you you, you you yan you shi, you shi yan you wang* 有或焉有气, 有气焉有有, 有有焉有始, 有始焉有往 (With *yu* available, there was some *qi*; with *qi* available, there were beings, with beings available, there came an initiation of evolution, and with the initiation available, then there were possibilities of development).

As a general statement for the whole essay, the first passage puts forward the issue of how all beings evolved from the "*hengxian*" of non-beings, and suggests that the stages of evolution are "there was some *yu*," "there was some *qi*," "there were beings," "there were came an initiation of evolution" and "there were possibilities of development." This is typical cosmic generation theories.

In a discussion about how the universe was generated, there should be a question about how the universe looked like before its genesis. The first line in *Hengxian* is a reply to this question, saying, "*Hengxian* contains no beings, and is thus simple, still and vacant. And thereby it is ultimately simple, still and vacant." In the vision of *Hengxian*, the quality of *Hengxian* as a non-being is that of ultimate simplicity, stillness and vacancy. It is not the non-being relative to a common being, but the absolute one in an original sense. The so-called absoluteness simply means no peers, that is, the non-being aspects of ultimate simplicity, stillness and vacancy is not limited to any relationships of relativity.

¹ Li Ling reads this word as *zhi*, but Liao Mingchun says it is *pu* (Liao 2004). Here, the latter is accepted.

² According to Li Xueqin, "The word *huo* 或 should read as *yu* 域...which can be interpreted as *jie* 界, having a similar meaning as the word *yu* 宇 (space), therefore, the expressions *yuzhong* 域中 and *yuwai* 域外 just mean *yuzhong* 宇中 (at the center of space) and *yuwai* 宇外 (outside the space). As for Daoist cosmology, it refers to space." It has been commonly accepted that the word *huo* is read as *yu*, here we also interpret this word as a sense of space.

the *Dao*). As these books show, ancient Chinese thinkers had begun to consider cosmic issues much earlier than we had imagined, and the formation of cosmic theories during ancient China occurred over a long process. In her research into *Huainanzi* during recent years, the author has pointed out that the cosmic theories of the Han Dynasties involved two types: one is the theory of cosmic genesis in *Huainanzi*, and the other is that of cosmic structure in *Chunqiu Fanlu* 春秋繁露 (*Resplendent Gems of Spring and Autumn*). As the afore-mentioned literature reveals, *Huainanzi* was not original in terms of its theory about cosmic genesis, for a long theoretical history existed before the occurrence of *Huainanzi*, and all the preceding cosmic theories had possibly served as theoretical examples for the concept of cosmic genesis in *Huainanzi*.

Among all the literature that discussed cosmic issues before *Huainanzi*, no one is more important than *Hengxian*. *Hengxian* is one of the bamboo books of the Chu State during the Warring States Period kept by the Shanghai Museum. It was collected by the museum in 1994, with a photocopy edition and a reordered text by Li Ling formally published in 2003 (Ma 2003, pp. 287–299). According to Li Ling:

This is a complete piece of Daoist work, which is written on 13 bamboo slips and is mostly preserved intact... On the back of the third slip there is an inscription "*Gexian* 互先," which is taken to name the work. "*Hengxian* 恒先" is an alias for the *Dao*... *Hengxian* 恒先 just refers to the *Dao* which originated before the Heaven and the Earth, remains independent and unchangeable, circulates without any slackness, and functions as an eternal creative source.

Scholars still debate over whether *hengxian* can be interpreted as the *Dao* and whether *hengxian* 恒先 is identical to *heng* 恒 in terms of their implications in the essay of *Hengxian*. Because it has just been unscrambled and revealed to the public, it will take time for a consensus to form. *Hengxian* is a newly available piece of material which contains many cosmic ideas, so the author will recite the original passages and then try to locate the meaning of the text in reference to existing academic research. Not a few scholars have tried to make sense of *Hengxian*, and among them the author has come across interpretations by Li Ling, and commentaries by Pang Pu 庞朴, Li Xueqin 李学勤, Liao Mingchun 廖明春, Ding Sixin 丁四新 and Li Rui 李锐. Occasionally, they disagree with each other regarding the order of the words, the sequence of the bamboo slips, and the connection of the meanings between different lines. Here, the text deciphered by Li Ling, that is, the version formally published by Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, is taken as the primary source, with commentaries by other scholars selectively adopted and the opinions of other authors appended. Where I revises Li Ling's

Many scholars consider *Hengxian* as the *Dao* "which originated before the Heaven and the Earth, remains independent and unchangeable, circulates without any slackness, and functions as an eternal creative source" (Li 2004), and their belief can somehow be justified.

In the silk-book *Daoyuan* excavated from *Mawangdui* and the chapter of *Tiandi* 天地 (the sky and the earth) in *Works of Zhuangzi*, one can also find visions that conceive of the beginning of cosmic genesis as some absolute nothingness of ultimate simplicity, stillness and vacancy, and of course, it is also the fundamental idea in the cosmic generation theory in *Huainanzi*. *Daoyuan* begins with the lines, "At the very beginning of *hengwu* 恒无 (eternity and non-being), it was as vacant as it could be. Such vacancy was identical with oneness, and the *heng* stopped at this oneness" (Mawangdui 1974, p. 74). Li Xueqin thinks the expression "at the very beginning of *hengwu*" should be read as "at the very beginning of *hengxian*." With regard to its verbal meaning, it might have been better to read it as "at the very beginning of *hengwu*" (Li 1996, pp. 162–174). Whether it is read as "*hengwu*" or "*hengxian*," the origin of the universe has been defined as "vacancy" and "oneness" in *Daoyuan*. Vacancy is to distinguish itself from the situation where all kinds of beings exist after the genesis of the universe; oneness is to differentiate itself from the state where all varieties of beings are produced and opposed to one another after the universe was created. It emphasizes the totality and unity of the original universe instead of the differences between all the various entities in the existing one. *Tiandi* in *Zhuangzi* has the same vision for the origin of the universe. It says, "It was nothingness at the very beginning, and there were no beings or names. Then, the oneness arose, but the oneness existed alone formlessly" (Guo 1961, p. 424). So, the Chapter of *Tiandi* also envisions the very beginning of the universe as the indiscriminate oneness that contained no beings and was in no forms. Likewise, the chapter of *Tianwen Xun* 天文训 (Chapter of Astronomic Interpretations) in *Huainanzi* says, "Before the sky and the earth were formed, it was vacant and moved quickly; and that is why it is named *taizhao* 太昭 (Great Clearness). The *Dao* started with the vacant..." (Zhang 1997, p. 245). Here the words "before the sky and the earth were formed" suggest the authors of *Huainanzi* must have traced from after the sky and the earth were formed back to the state in which neither the sky nor the earth had been formed. It is by following this train of thought that we find the link to vacancy.

Apparently, *Hengxian*, *Daoyuan*, Chapter of *Tiandi* in *Zhuangzi* and *Huainanzi* are all identical in their visions of the origin of the universe, for they all conceive of the nature of the origin of the universe as vacancy, stillness, simplicity and oneness. Such conceptions both come out of the necessity of theoretical logic and the value of Daoists. With regard to logic, theories about cosmic genesis necessarily embrace the thought that beings come from non-beings, for "being"

is something which implies some qualities, such as confines and rules, even though it refers to nothing concrete such as a specific person or object. Therefore, "being" is defined and limited. As *Quanyan Xun* 詮言訓 (Chapter of Commentary Words Interpretations) in *Huainanzi* says, "What begets things is unseen among things" (Ibid., p. 1469). In other words, what makes things cannot be things. Likewise, what makes beings to be beings cannot be beings, either, and has to be some non-being. So, any reference to the genesis of the universe will lead to the thought that "being comes out of non-being." On the one hand, the concepts of being and non-being in light of such thoughts emphasizes that non-being is prior to and more original than beings, and on the other hand, that non-being cannot be defined, for any non-being that can be defined will become a being and then be excluded from the genesis of beings. Thus, *hengxian*, at its very beginning, can only be conceived of as the absolute nothingness that was absolutely simple, still and vacant, as it is described in *Hengxian*. That is the perspective of theoretical logic in Daoist cosmology, which shows how the Daoists necessarily conceive the beginning of the universe as simplicity, stillness and vacancy.

In regard to their values, Daoists have no choice but to refer to the origin of the universe — simplicity, stillness, vacancy and oneness — in their theory of cosmic genesis. It is because traditional cosmology in ancient China adopts a metaphorical model of humanistic values rather than a cognitive one in the sense of natural sciences. For ancient thinkers in China, cosmology was a matter-of-course theoretical foundation for humanism, a fundamental model to understand society, politics, human life and history. The Daoist position in the genesis theories about human civilization requires matching the simplicity that existed before human civilization with the simplicity, stillness, vacancy and oneness of the universe at its very beginning. Only with such an assumption can "returning to simplicity and truth" find its destination. According to Daoists, the conditions of survival for human beings do not remain the same all the time, but change throughout the course of history, and the essence of such change is that human beings fall from the easy state of no boundaries into the traps of man-made rules. More than once both *Zhuangzi* and *Huainanzi* have talked about such a course. For example, *Huainanzi* says, human beings at their early days "appeared arrogant when they lied and ignorant as they got up, sometimes they thought they were horses and some other time they reckon they were identical with oxen" (Ibid., p. 678). Free and comfortable, they were "ignorant and harmonious with the nature." But by the time of the Yellow Emperor, there were man-made rules to "distinguish man and woman, differentiate male and female, specify superiors and inferiors, and classify the noble and the cheap" (Ibid.). These artificial rules were made to meet real changes and needs; at the same time, the promulgation of these humanistic rules also changed human beings' state of

survival, restricting the life of human beings into a certain mode.³ Therefore, humanistic regulations that have occurred throughout history are restrictive. According to Daoist thought on cosmic genesis, nothing limited can be original beings, so "establishedness" in a humanistic world as a kind of realized possibility of "human persons" is merely a single possibility, and to define human beings with such a single possibility as their whole essence will deny all their other possibilities. Daoists have repeatedly criticized Confucians because the former think the latter have artificially lifted humanistic institutions formed during a certain period of history to a definitive status, and thus denied their historical limitations. According to Daoists, human beings should not be restricted by any "establishedness" in a humanistic world; instead, they should repeatedly "return" to the totality of the "Dao" and the simplicity of "human persons" to the state of infants, and only in this way can they break through the limitation of "humanistic establishedness" and remain open to all possibilities. Thus, in their pursuit of values to "return to the simplicity and truth" and thus to break through "humanistic establishedness," Daoists would certainly describe the origin of the universe in terms of simplicity, stillness, vacancy and oneness when they conceived of their theories of cosmic genesis, so that they could match it with the simplicity that existed before the institution of human humanism. Only with the simple, still, vacant and single origin of the universe can the simplicity before the institution find its cosmological basis, and only with the simplicity before the institution can a "return to the simplicity and truth" become possible. So, whether from the logic in theories or from Daoist values, it is clear that *Hengxian*, a piece of the Daoist works, is predestined to refer to the nature of

³ Such thoughts are commonly seen in Daoist works. For example, Lanming Xun 覽冥訓 (Chapter of Interpretation to the Viewing of Profundity) in *Huainanzi* says, "At times of Fu Xi 伏羲 虞氏... (people) appeared arrogant when they lied and ignorant as they got up, sometimes they thought they were horses and some other times they reckoned they were with the same as oxen. They scampered when they moved and narrowed their eyes when they looked. Although ignorant, they lived in harmony, without knowing where they came from. They lived though leisure without any want, and strolled about without compulsive destinations." Ying Diwang 應帝王 in *Zhuangzi* says, "You Yu Shi 有虞氏 was inferior to Tai Shi 泰氏, however, You Yu Shi was still able to constrain his idea of benevolence to associate with people; ... Tai Shi was at ease when he lay down, and at leisure as he was awake. Sometimes he thought himself a horse, and sometimes an ox." Mori 馬爾 in *Zhuangzi* also says, "At times of highest virtues, human beings lived together birds and animals, looked themselves the same way as myriad things did, however did they discriminate worthy men from those unworthy? Being ignorant, they kept their virtues high; free of desires, it could be thought as simplicity; and with simplicity, they developed their characters. But up to the times of saints, (people) ... practice benevolence... fulfill righteousness... perform music... set up rituals, and the society begins to separate and degrade." A similar idea can also be found in other chapters in *Zhuangzi*, such as *Qule* 缺德, *Pianmu* 駢拇 and *Ziyou* 在宥.

hengxian as simplicity, stillness and vacancy.

However, the question that the Daoist theory of cosmic genesis must solve is how absolute nothingness turns into particular things in relative relationships, and *Hengxian* must first deal with this issue. Perusing the introductory passage of *Hengxian* over 2,000 years later, we can still feel the complexity in *Hengxian* when it tried to deal with this issue. That is, how such vacancy and stillness can become motivated, and turn into beings in a state of movement and thus initiate the beginning of the evolutionary process of the universe? *Hengxian* responds to this theoretical problem with "As *hengxian* was self-fulfilled but not self-constrained, there was *yu*." Here, the word "self" simply means there is no need for any explicit pushes, that is, there is no need for any God to give the first push. Instead, it attributes the initial movement to *hengxian* or the *Dao* itself. A characteristic of traditional Chinese thought is that it tries to explain all things with "self" or "naturalness" as some ultimate causes instead of predetermining an underlying transcendent God; and so to speak, "the law of the *Dao* is its being what it is" in *Laozi* is representative of this aspect. According to Li Xueqin, the character "或" in the expression "或作" should be read as "*yu*," which means "space" (Li 2004, p. 81). Here I agree with Li, but I believe that such a space is not a meta-physical one with physical qualities, but a metaphysical concept of space. Liao Mingchun said, "*yu* is a considerably abstract concept of space," and we agree with that. While Ding Sixin asserted that "*yu* is between *wu you* 无有 (non-being as a kind of being) and *qi you* 气有 (*qi* as a kind of being), a stage where either there was being or not, or either there was *qi* or not" (Ding 2004, p. 101). I am afraid the idea of "*yu*" at an meta-physical level does not conform with the first passage as a general statement in *Hengxian*. In our opinion, the so-called "*yu*" in *Hengxian* is a metaphysical concept of space; in Kant's word, it is an intuitive form of space. The concrete space in experience must merge with beings and/or things; however, the intuitive form of space is a logical condition for the appearance of beings and/or things, but not the contrary. In other words, absolute space logically came first. It is for this reason that *Hengxian* proceeds with the lines: "With *yu* available, there was some *qi*; with *qi* available, there were beings, with beings available, there came an initiation of evolution, and with the initiation available, then there were possibilities of development" only after it establishes the concept of space with "*yu*." Similarly, the chapter on *Tianwen Xun* in *Huainanzi* says, "The vacancy generates space and time, and space and time together produce *qi*" (Zhang 1997, p. 245). So, it can be seen that *Huainanzi* also believes that both space and time give priority to *qi*. The priority here is a priority in terms of logic. And the prudence of the ancient wise men cannot be questioned.

Here, the really difficult point lies in the combination of "*yu*" 或 and "*zuo*" 作, that is, "*yu zuo*." The word *zuo* is easy to explain alone as "action," but when it is put together with "*yu*," that is, when the concept of "space" is linked with

movement, it leads to some difficulty in comprehension. We can say that in the conception of *Hengxian*, there was both "*yu*" (space) and "*zuo*" (actions), which were conditions that enabled the universe to begin its course of genesis.

As for the first passage of *Hengxian*, some other ambiguous words include "*wang*" 往 (to go). Li Xueqin explained the word as "*gu*" 归 (to return), which implies a termination, and he thought "*shi* 始 (beginning) is an initiation, and *wang* means a termination" (Li 2004, p. 81). But in my opinion, the word "*wang*" does not imply the action "to return," but refers to the action of going, and is the tendency of time after the universe began its course of genesis. That is, the universe has extended itself towards the procreation of all beings.

3 Passage 2 of Hengxian

(*Wang*) *zhe wei* 1st *you tian di* (往者未有天地) (in the past when there was no sky and earth), *wei you zuo xing* 未有作行 (there was no actions or movement), *Chu sheng xu jing*, *wei yi ruo ji*, *meng meng jing tong* 出生虚静, 为一若寂, 梦梦静同 (There was only vacant space which is intact and still, obscure without any differentiation), *Er wei you ming*, *wei you zisheng* 而未育明, 未有滋生 (At that time, there had been no light yet, and there was no life procreated).⁴ (Note: the serial number in this passage indicates the serial number of a bamboo slip for the words before it; and similarly hereinafter.)

In the second passage, *Hengxian* begins to deal with the concrete evolution of the universe, diminishing by one level in terms of thought. At this level, *Hengxian* once again assumes the state of the universe at its beginning. Here, I use the word "state" to stress that the conception in *Hengxian* about the beginning of the universe involved the physical initiation of the cosmic generation. Li Xueqin adds a repeated word, which constitutes a time adverb expression "*wangzhe* 往者 (in the past)," further highlighting the comparison between the beginning of cosmic genesis and its establishedness.

Because it conceives of the beginning of the universe at a physical level when there was no sky and earth, *Hengxian* thinks of the universe at that time as

⁴ According to Li Xueqin, "The original text on the slips are '*you shi yan you wang zhe wei you tian di* 有始焉有往者未有天地', here a word '*wang*' was missing. We punctuate this line at the end of the expression '*you shi yan you wang*,' and begin another passage with the expression '*(wang) zhe wei you tian di*'" (Li 2004, p. 81). Here, we follow Li Xueqin's form of punctuation and comprehension.

⁵ Li Ling reads the line "*Er wei you ming*, *wei you zisheng*" as "*Er wei you ming*, *wei you zisheng*而未育明, 未成滋生" (Ma 2003, p. 289), and here the text is revised according to Liao Mingchun.