

## Philosophical Insights into the 'great' of Great River Culture through Chuang-tzu's 'Autumn Floods'

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### ABSTRAK

The Great River Culture, deeply embedded in the fabric of Chinese history, symbolizes the enduring legacy of the Yellow River and its influence on the cultural and spiritual development of the Chinese nation. Understanding the concept of 'great' within this cultural context is vital for appreciating its profound impact. In Chuang-tzu's 'Autumn Floods,' the exploration of the relative nature of 'small' and 'great' provides an invaluable perspective for this understanding. This paper uses the method of literature analysis to delve into the philosophical content expressed by Chuang-tzu in the seven questions and answers between the Deity of the Yellow River and the Deity of the Northern Sea. Chuang-tzu elucidates that understanding the 'small' is necessary to discuss the great, the distinction between 'small' and 'great' is not constant, and the separation between the Dao and objects, along with the concept of reverting to the true essence. Hence, the 'small' and the 'great' are interdependent, with no fixed division between them. Discussing the 'great' only in the tangible and limited sense of 'seeing things as objects' is far from sufficient. The higher level of the intangible and infinite Dao represents the true essence of the concept of 'great' in river culture.

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## INTRODUCTION

The rise of river civilizations is generally considered the beginning of the world's oldest civilizations. Starting around 5400 BC, river civilizations accounted for about eighty percent of human civilizations worldwide, including the four well-known ancient civilizations, all of which were river cultures. This demonstrates that river cultures had inherent advantages in the conditions necessary for the emergence and development of civilizations. Therefore, in the early stages, river cultures exhibited a high level of development in various fields, including politics, economy, and arts, on a global scale. River cultures were often located in regions with fertile and vast lands, abundant resources, suitable climate, and plentiful water sources. These favorable natural conditions allowed for self-sufficiency in material aspects, unlike maritime cultures which needed to expand and explore externally. The ideological and cultural aspects of river civilizations were developed and continuously evolved based on their own production and living practices, demonstrating a certain degree of independence in their development. The intellectual and cultural contributions of river civilizations can be considered among the earliest and most significant in the history of human thought. The philosophical ideas of each river civilization were unique and brilliantly distinctive in their respective eras. Regarding the river culture of China, it served as a cradle for economic and political development, and also gave birth to a rich cultural heritage. Particularly notable is the philosophical thought that emerged within this river culture. Ancient Chinese literature is replete with discussions on the philosophical ideas inherent in river culture, with Chuang-tzu's work being a classic example. Chuang-tzu's text offers a comprehensive exploration of the philosophical concepts embedded in river culture, with 'Autumn Floods' being a quintessential representation of these ideas. This text encapsulates the profound insights derived from the context of the river culture, reflecting on themes such as the natural world, human existence, and the underlying principles of life and society, all of which were deeply influenced by the unique environmental and cultural aspects of the ancient river civilizations of China.

Chuang-tzu's 'Autumn Floods' presents a metaphorical tale between the Deity of the Yellow River and the Deity of the North Sea, encapsulating Chuang-tzu's philosophical exploration of the concepts of 'small' and 'great.' The narrative begins with a vivid depiction of the rivers swelling during the rainy season, a scene both majestic and beautiful, filling the Deity of the Yellow River with pride. However, his encounter with the vast North Sea leads to a humbling realization of his own insignificance, sparking a series of seven dialogues with the Deity of North Sea. These dialogues serve as a conduit for Chuang-tzu to express his philosophical insights. River culture holds a significant position in Chinese civilization. The 'great' of river culture doesn't just refer to the vastness and majesty of the Yellow River and the Yangtze River, but also encompasses a richer philosophical significance. Understanding the concept of 'great' on a deeper philosophical level is a critical issue. By drawing

on Chuang-tzu's 'Autumn Floods,' we can better interpret the philosophical essence of the 'great' in river culture, fundamentally enriching its cultural depth

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous scholars have delved deeply into Chuang-tzu's 'Autumn Floods,' highlighting its vital role in Taoist thought and its literary merit. These scholarly analyses, examining the text from diverse perspectives, enrich our understanding of Chuang-tzu's philosophy.

Wang Changmin (2016) highlights its incorporation of pivotal Daoist ideas from the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, while Ren Pengfei (2019) contrasts Chuang-tzu's inclusive and detached philosophical stance with Laozi's more austere approach. Wang Weiwei (2020) and Sun Mingjun (2021) further dissect the nuanced interpretations of Daoist concepts within the text, such as 'equalizing things' and the harmony between heaven and man. Zheng Songwen (2022) explores the contemporary relevance of 'objectification,' a term originally coined in Chuang-tzu's works, and Liu Guangtao (2022) emphasizes the profound philosophical and aesthetic depth in 'Autumn Floods,' reflecting Chuang-tzu's intellectual breadth and intricate logic. Sun Mingjun (2023) argues that 'Autumn Floods' reaches a philosophical pinnacle, comparable to 'On the Equality of Things,' in its exploration of Daoist concepts of inaction. At the same time, it presents a critique of Confucian thought.

However, these studies are not without flaws. The modern interpretations, while significant, tend to overly rely on contemporary viewpoints and philosophical structures, often overlooking the original context of Chuang-tzu's ideas. Such an approach can distort or oversimplify Chuang-tzu's original thoughts, thereby missing out on a deeper comprehension of the text. Consequently, while these analyses offer invaluable insights into 'Autumn Floods,' they should be balanced with an awareness of modern-centric biases, focusing more on the text's significance within its authentic historical and cultural setting.

## METHODOLOGY

Employing literature analysis, this paper meticulously examines the allegorical story of the Deity of the Yellow River and the Deity of North Sea in 'Autumn Floods,' shedding light on Chuang-tzu's philosophical dialectics concerning the relative nature of 'small' and 'great.'

The approach used in this article is a classic cross-era interpretation. While Chuang-tzu's philosophical interpretation of river culture is based in his own era, this article aims to discuss not just the river culture of Chuang-tzu's time, but the continuous evolution and influence of river culture from its inception to the present day. Specifically, it involves exploring the essence and impact of river culture from a broader historical perspective. This entails examining how the foundational elements and philosophical concepts of river culture, as presented in classical texts like 'Chuang-tzu,' have been adapted, interpreted,

and integrated throughout various periods in history, up to the modern era. By doing so, the article seeks to understand the enduring influence of river culture and its evolving significance across different historical contexts.

## RESEARCH RESULT

The Deity of the Yellow River's initial question reveals his epiphany of personal insignificance amidst the grandeur of nature. His pride, rooted in the forceful convergence of rivers into his domain, is dwarfed by the vastness of the North Sea. The Deity of North Sea's responses highlight the limitations of perspective, drawing parallels to a well-dwelling frog's inability to grasp the expanse of the sea and a summer insect's unawareness of winter's frost. These dialogues emphasize the importance of understanding the smaller realities to comprehend greater truths, transcending fixed notions of scale. Chuang-tzu navigates through this discourse, unveiling a dynamic world where perspectives shift with time and context, where opposites coexist and contribute to a holistic understanding of existence, and where the pursuit of Dao leads to a profound realization of the inherent unity and balance in the natural world.

## DISCUSSION

### *The Structure of 'Autumn Floods'*

The 'Autumn Floods' utilizes perspectives from 'Equalizing Things,' vigorously arguing for the infinite relativity of the size and rightness/wrongness of all things, and the extreme impermanence of human status and honor, with the aim of encouraging people to shed falsehoods, embrace truth, and comply with nature, without harming their innate nature in pursuit of fame and fortune.

The chapter begins with seven exchanges between the deities of the Yellow River and the Northern Sea, spanning nearly two thousand characters. The opening discusses the self-contentment of the deity of Yellow River and his admiration for the vast ocean, humorously deeming himself a joke in the eyes of the truly knowledgeable. It then connects to the topic of the 'distinction between great and small' from 'Free and Easy Wandering,' discussing the principle of the well frog being unable to speak of the sea. It continues by denying the difference in size on a quantitative level, shifting from the 'quantity' to the 'quality' of all things. Finally, it moves from discussing all things to expounding on the Dao of Heaven, which encompasses and transcends all things, as in 'all things are equal, who can say which is short or long,' while the Way is present in all things, as in 'what to do, what not to do, it will naturally transform.' This leads into the theme of 'equalizing things' discussed in the 'Equalizing Things' chapter. The chapter interweaves metaphor and reasoning, poetry and prose, in a captivating manner.

In order, although 'Autumn Floods' is in the middle of the outer chapters, it holds a high status and has been highly praised by scholars and literati throughout the ages. Lin Yunming of the Qing Dynasty said, 'The main idea of this chapter originates from the 'Equalizing Things' of the inner chapters,

breaking and creating anew. Having reached the pinnacle, it uses words and changes as if with a divine axe, a masterpiece through the ages, opening countless methods for future generations.' Mr. Zhu Wenxiong said, 'This chapter on the distinction between big and small seems to come from 'Equalizing Things.' However, when it says 'do not use humanity to destroy heaven,' it shows the greatest of the Way still lies in inaction, which is also the essence of 'The Grand Master.'" He also said, 'This chapter is Chuang-tzu's most satisfactory work.'

The chapter views the world from the height of the Dao, recognizing that objects are constantly changing and, due to the limitations of subjective and objective conditions, these changing objects are beyond the exhaustive understanding of humans, thus leading to the relativity of human value judgments. Chuang-tzu's macroscopic perspective of 'demonstrating through the Dao' frees cognition from being confined to narrow knowledge and leads human understanding towards the vast realm of infinite relativity.

'Autumn Floods' is composed of two major parts: The first part describes the conversation between the Northern Sea god and the Yellow River god. A question and answer format completes the main body of this section. This long dialogue can be further divided into seven fragments. The first fragment, up to 'Aren't you doing the same by making yourself greater than the water,' discusses the deity of river's 'small' yet self-perception of 'great,' in contrast to the deity of sea's 'great' yet self-perception of 'small,' illustrating the relative nature of understanding things. The second fragment, up to 'How then can we know that the heavens and the earth are sufficient to exhaust the realm of the utmostly great,' points out the difficulty in truly knowing things and determining their size, showing that cognition is often affected by the uncertainty of things themselves and the infinity of all things. The third fragment, up to 'This is the extreme division,' follows the previous dialogue, further explaining the difficulty in understanding things, often being 'indescribable in words' and 'ungraspable in thought.' The fourth fragment, up to 'the house of small and big,' starts from the relativity of things, going deeper to point out that neither size nor status is absolute, and thus ultimately should not be discerned. The fifth fragment, up to 'It will naturally transform,' based on the view of 'all things being equal' and 'the Way having no beginning or end,' states that human cognition of external things must be inactive, only waiting for their 'natural transformation.' The sixth fragment, up to 'Speaking from the extreme to get to the essence,' discusses why it's important to value the Dao, indicating that understanding the Dao leads to comprehending the principles of things and recognizing the laws of change in things. The seventh fragment, up to 'This is called returning to the true,' is the final part of the conversation between the deity of river and the deity of sea, proposing the idea of returning to the true nature, that is, not using humanity to destroy the natural, pushing the concept of 'natural transformation' a step further.

The second part consists of six independent fables, each standing on its own without connection to each other or to the first part's dialogue between the

deity of sea and the deity of river, and does not contribute much to the overall theme, giving a sense of disconnection.

### *Philosophical discourse on the concept of 'small' and 'great' in the Autumn Flood*

#### *1. Understanding the 'Small' to Discuss the 'Great'*

In Chuang-tzu's tale, the Deity of the Yellow River's initial question to the Deity of North Sea is actually an admission of his own smallness. The Deity of the Yellow River once reveled in the grandeur of his domain, swollen with torrents during the rainy season, feeling invincible and immensely proud. This pride is abruptly humbled by the vastness of the North Sea, which reveals to him his own narrowness. The Deity of North Sea's response employs familiar analogies – a frog in a well and a summer insect, unaware of winter's cold, to depict the limitations of a narrow viewpoint. The Deity of North Sea then presents the fundamental premise for discussing 'great:' the necessity to first understand the 'small.' Unlike the Deity of the Yellow River, whose pride stemmed from the seasonal abundance of the rivers, the Deity of North Sea exhibits a humble spirit, recognizing the dynamic relationship of sizes and roles among the rivers, sea, and the cosmos.

#### *2. The Fluidity of the 'Small' and 'Great' Divide*

The Deity of North Sea's explanation of 'understanding the 'small' to discuss the 'great' inherently suggests that the division between small and great is not fixed but relative. The Deity of the Yellow River's further inquiries, though seeking to understand this concept, remain confined to a more concrete level. His questioning only leads to the Deity of North Sea's more direct responses, denying any fixed standard in categorizing the 'small' and 'great.' These responses involve concepts like the boundlessness of quantity and the endless passage of time, which render the endeavor of capturing the true scale of things elusive and futile. The Deity of North Sea emphasizes that all attempts to understand the physical dimensions and the beginnings and ends of things within these infinite parameters are inherently bound to be confounded.

#### *3. The Nature of 'Small' and 'Great' within Limitations of Human Understanding*

In reflection, humans, limited by their short lifespan and constrained wisdom, often grapple with the vast unknown. As Chuang-tzu puts it, our finite knowledge pursues the infinite, leading to inevitable exhaustion and perplexity. Trying to comprehend the true nature of the vast and minuscule in the constantly changing world often leads to confusion. The Deity of the Yellow River's and humanity's attempts to understand the magnitude and triviality of things are challenged by the dynamic and ever-evolving nature of the universe. This understanding suggests that the perceived 'great' of river culture is not a constant but changes with time, perception, and context, much like the relative sizes of rivers and seas against the earth and cosmos.

In summary, Chuang-tzu's narrative transcends the physicality of size, advocating a philosophical understanding that challenges and redefines conventional perceptions of the 'small' and 'great.' It invites a deeper

appreciation for the dynamic and relative nature of existence and underlines the significance of embracing change and perspective as integral to wisdom.

#### **4. *The Distinction Between Dao and Objects***

In Chuang-tzu's 'Autumn Floods,' the Deity of North Sea's explanation to the Deity of the Yellow River doesn't focus on strictly defining the small and the great. Instead, it emphasizes the variability of time, all things, and human perspectives, a concept the Deity of the Yellow River struggles to grasp. The Deity of the Yellow River's subsequent questions, more in line with a layman's perspective, shift from tangible to intangible aspects. Chuang-tzu articulates that while the minutest can be termed as 'fine' and the largest as 'vast,' both terms apply to physical entities. However, the immeasurable, formless aspects of existence, which cannot be quantified, lie beyond this tangible scope. This leads to the conclusion that while spoken language can describe the superficial aspects of things, it fails to capture their deeper, intrinsic essence.

Despite the Deity of the Yellow River's confusion about distinguishing between the 'small' and 'great,' the Deity of North Sea elaborates on the difference from the perspective of Dao and objects. In the physical realm, distinctions of size exist due to the diverse and uneven nature of all things, enabling one to draw conclusions of 'great' or 'small' based on perspective. However, in the realm of Dao, there is no distinction of size. The Dao exists beyond the physical, and neither the minutest nor the vastest entities can connect with it. Chuang-tzu emphasizes that the realm of Dao belongs to the indescribable and ungraspable aspects of existence.

This distinction is further explored through the story of Duke Huan of Qi and Lun Bian in Chuang-tzu's 'Heavenly Dao.' Duke Huan, engrossed in reading, is criticized by Wheelwright Bian for focusing on the chaff of ancient texts. Bian uses his experience in wheel-making to convey his understanding of Dao, explaining that the perfect pace in crafting a wheel cannot be captured in words, nor can it be taught or learned. He implies that the essence of Dao, encapsulated in his craft, is lost when the ancient masters pass away, leaving only superficial remnants in texts. Chuang-tzu thus suggests that the pursuit of Dao cannot be fulfilled through books or speech alone, as they are confined to the physical realm.

Consequently, discussing the 'great' of Great River Culture merely in terms of physical attributes fails to touch upon its deeper essence. To truly understand its 'great,' one must perceive it through the lens of Dao, where there is no distinction between the 'small' and 'great.' The Great River Culture, in its essence, is a manifestation of Dao - fluid, encompassing, and beyond physical constraints.

#### **5. *Reflecting Their True Nature***

As the discussion in Chuang-tzu's 'Autumn Floods' ascends to the broader scope of Dao, fixed notions of small and great dissolve, influenced by the variance of time and circumstances. Historical examples, such as the different outcomes of rulers who either abdicated or fought for power, illustrate this point. Chuang-tzu advocates grasping the duality present in everything,

recognizing that the nature of things is in constant flux and dependent on context.

In conclusion, the dialogue between the Deity of the Yellow River and the Deity of North Sea in Chuang-tzu's 'Autumn Floods' delves deep into Chuang-tzu's philosophical ponderings on the 'small' and 'great.' The key is understanding the 'small' to truly discuss the 'great,' acknowledging the fluidity and relativity of these concepts, and recognizing the differences in perceiving them through the physical world versus the Dao. The essence of the Great River Culture, therefore, lies not just in its physical manifestations but in its embodiment of Dao, transcending physical constraints and embracing a more profound, spiritual core.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The story of the Deity of the Yellow River and the Deity of North Sea in Chuang-tzu's 'Autumn Floods' encapsulates Chuang-tzu's philosophical musings on the 'small' and 'great.' Firstly, acknowledging one's 'small' is vital to discussing 'great.' This understanding fosters a spirit of humility and inclusion within the Great River Culture. Secondly, the distinction between small and great is not static but ever-changing, influenced by numerous factors. Therefore, the 'great' of the Great River Culture encompasses a spirit of constant evolution and transformation. Thirdly, the real essence of the Great River Culture, its true 'great', lies not in the physical realm but in the realm of Dao, transcending physical distinctions. Finally, understanding and embracing Dao brings a recognition that the apparent divisions of 'small' and 'great' are influenced by various factors, and their true nature is found in their fluidity and interconnectedness.

## **ADVANCED RESEARCH**

In writing this article the researcher realizes that there are still many shortcomings in terms of language, writing, and form of presentation considering the limited knowledge and abilities of the researchers themselves. Therefore, for the perfection of the article, the researcher expects constructive criticism and suggestions from various parties.

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