

# The Mysteries of the Strange Pulses (Guai Mai)

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The *guai mai* (strange pulses) are also called *yi mai* (weird pulses), the pulses of death, or no life and disharmony. They all represent serious and life threatening conditions wherein the patient is often in emergency care. Yet the advent of modern medical procedures extends life beyond the Han Dynasty prognoses of the Ten Strange Pulses; and when a patient has a terminal disease, the emergence of these pulse conditions suggests an impending health crisis. Under these circumstances, it is critical to understand the cause of the downturn and intervene appropriately. Practitioners who work in hospice and various rehabilitation settings will have many experiences with this pulse group.

The earliest record of the 10 strange pulses take place in the *Nei Jing, Da Qi Lun* Chapter 48.<sup>1</sup> Subsequent discussions are found in the *Mai Jing*<sup>2</sup> and *Zhang Jing Yue's Lei Jing*. Later discussions in a Ming Dynasty book developed the seven strange pulse descriptions that are still in use today. The seven strange pulses will be the subject of the next paper.

## Stomach Qi, Spirit and Root (*Wei, Shen, Gen*)

The ideal pulse has stomach qi (*wei*), spirit (*shen*), and root (*gen*). The stomach qi causes the pulse to be moderate and represents the *gu qi* that comes slowly with harmony. Stomach qi is postnatal qi, it is the source of the postnatal qi and blood, and the transformation of the pulse is full. The spirit of the pulse is the stability of shape volume and temporal factors. Spirit depletion is signified by inconsistent comings and goings. When the pulse begins to flicker, develops arrhythmias and is easily changed in terms of shape and volume, then the spirit of the pulse is absent. There is no spirit if the pulse disappears. The root is representative of the essence; it is the deep area of the organ depth and

it is the proximal positions. The weird pulses all have a distinct absence of one or more of spirit, root or stomach qi.

These pulses show no stomach qi, no organ essence, and they suggest the separation of yin and yang. This usually happens when the internal organs jing qi is exhausted. The real visceral pulses (*zhen zang mai*), appearing with a replete confirmation, signify the 'dying time.' This is why the real visceral pulses are called strange pulses (*guai mai*), death pulses (*si mai*), and terminal pulses (*jue mai*). This pulse happens most frequently when the visceral qi (*Zang Qi*) is exhausted, and it shows the real visceral pulse (almost like a return of yang just before death).

## Weird Pulse Descriptions

*Fu He* (floating-returning) pulses come quickly at the top of the skin where there is a boiling water sensation. It is bigger than the surging pulse but it is irregular, and the back wave pushes the front wave non-stop. In the *Nei Jing*, it says these pulses are like a water wave. This pulse shows a wave on the water, it comes and goes, it doesn't know where it came from or where it is going. Occasionally, it is fast rapid, and at other times, normal. This pulse is different than the heart pulse, which is like a hook. The floating-returning water pulse is superficial lacking both root and spirit. This is the twelve-jing luo and the jing qi are exhausted and the replete evil depletes the righteous. When you discover this kind of pulse, the patient will die within 9-10 days.

*Ru Huo Xin Ren* (like fire burning on wood) pulses can suddenly become very large and then very small. The 'fire burning on wood pulse' is unstable and chaotic and always without root; the changeability is due to a lack of spirit. This pulse often occurs in heart failure.

*Ru San Ye* (like falling leaves) pulses feel like leaves that are falling away from the fingers. The 'falling leave' pulses are

metal pulses in that they are floating without root. They represent a liver depletion because the metal controls the wood. During autumn the wood is weak, so there are liver problems.

*Ru Sheng Ke* (like a visitor) pulses are like a home when quiet; a visitor comes and everyone gets up, but then the visitor leaves. It is like people before they die, they are suddenly alert, and in this case, the yang qi suddenly bounds up. In this instance, the pulse is weak and feeble, then it becomes suddenly strong. It is a form of kidney pulse, it is absent, and then very deep, strong and powerful. The patient dies in the summer because of the repleted fire. The time between summer and fall, there is replete earth which controls the water leading to death because there isn't enough water. The visitor pulse signifies a terminal depletion of kidney qi.

*Ru Wan Ni* (like a mud pill) pulses are dry and hard. They feel like atherosclerotic vessels. The stomach qi is absent and the pulse is hard and short. The pulse is not smooth and it feels like a ball of dried mud. This pulse represents a stomach jing depletion.

*Ru Heng Ge* (like a crossing beam) pulses are long and hard, there is no stomach qi inside. The wiry pulse suggests wood and the liver and gallbladder influences, however, it is now overly wiry and has turned hard. This is what is referred to as the true liver and gallbladder pulse.

*Ru Xuan Lu* (like a very thin and fine string), this pulse is thin and fine like a song that is fading away. It is very light but there is a string there. When pressing it, is very hard, thin, fine and rapid; there is a sense of disharmony. This is a true yu and jing qi depletion sign. It is showing the Bao luo (uterine network vessels) jing qi depletion. The kidney channel goes to the root of the tongue; when the yang qi is depleted and the patient can't talk then suddenly gets up

and becomes talkative. If the patient remains quiet, it will be treatable.

*Ru Jiao Qi* (like mixing paint) pulses feel like mixing paint: the vessels mix together, the pulse is felt soft and dispersing in all directions, the waves arise without departure. The original meaning of jiao is crossing, it spreads in the four directions. This indicates that the chong, ren, and zang fue are depleted. It also indicates that the kidney qi is exhausted and the patient may die within 30 days.

*Ru Yong Quan* (like a bubbling spring) pulse arrives and there is no sensation of departure, like a bubbling spring, there

is no root (gen), tai yang UB channel jing qi depleted pulse.

*Ru Tui Tu* (like ruined dirt pile) pulses are soft at first touch and then it is absent. There is no rebound, the pulse comes surging big and forceless, because the muscle jing qi is deficient. If the patient shows this kind of pulse with black spots on the skin it indicates that the earth collapse and water is replete so that the earth dies right away. The timing of death occurs when the ivy blooms in the spring time and the wood controls the earth.

*Ru Xuan Yong* (like a tonsil): this pulse is big on top and gets smaller. It is floating and big, but when you press deeper it gets smaller. This is a distinctly floating pulse and always relates to the lungs. In the winter time the lung qi is already exhausted and stuck, the twelve shu stream points qi is depleted, After the guarding time (in this case, after the lung time) the lung is depleted, i.e., the lung is replete in the autumn, and becomes depleted in the winter.

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Table One

Pulse Arrival	Pulse Shape	Pathophysiology	Prognosis
Fu He (floating-returning)	Fast arrival, the shape is like the coming and going of the water, it comes and goes without root and is difficult to identify, if more than ten times	12 jing luo jing qi are depleted	patient will die within 9 days
Ru Huo Xin Ren (like fire burning on wood)	Shaped like fire burning, can suddenly become very big, then very small	heart viscera jing qi withdrawal	end of the fall and beginning of winter when the grass dies, the patient will die
Ru San Ye (like falling leaves)	Like the wind blowing the falling leaves	liver viscera jing qi exhausted	In the autumn when the leaves begin to fall, the patient will die
Ru Sheng Ke (like a visitor)	Like a visitor it is absent, then becomes suddenly strong	kidney jing qi depleted	they will die in late summer when the blooming of the dates fall away
Ru Wan Ni (like a mud pill)	The pulse comes like a small, hard mud pill the pulses are hard and dry	Stomach jing depletion	They will die in the end of spring and the beginning of summer, when the elm tree drops its seeds
Ru Heng Ge (like a crossing beam)	The pulse comes long solid and hard like an object crossing under the finger	Gallbladder qi deleted	They will die in late autumn when the rice grain is harvested
Ru Xuan Lu (like very fine string)	The pulse arrives wiry like string but thin like silk, it is solid, urgent and disharmonious	This is pericardium depletion	If the patient is talkative, the patient will die after the September frost, if it is combined with retreated and noncommunicative timbre, the patient will live
Ru Jiao Qi (like mixing paint)	This pulse comes and spreads in every direction like mixing paint through a filter	Chong and ren depletion, viscera on bowels depleted, and spirit qi is exhausted and fatigued	After 30 days the patient dies
Ru Yong Quan (like a bubbling spring)	The pulse comes like a bubbling spring, only ascending, no descending, flowing and forceful moving between the muscle, rooted	Urinary bladder channel depletion	They will die in the spring when the chive flower blooms
Ru Tui Tu (like a ruined dirt pile)	This pulse comes huge big and forceless, it disappears with pressure	Muscle jing qi depletion	If the skin is dark and black, earth dissolves and water floods, in the late spring time when mold appears on the leaves, the patient dies
Ru Xuan Yong (like a tonsil)	The pulse arrives large at the crest and small at the base, the pulse feels broad in the superficial region and narrow at the root	The twelve shu points are jing depleted	They will die in the winter when the water is frozen on the surface
Ru Yan Dao (like a knife)	The pulse feels very sharp like a knife with solid sides, the floating top is urgent	Five organ are toast, and the cold and heat accumulate in the kidneys	The person cannot sit and will die after the spring equinox
Ru Wan Hua (like a bullet)	Pulse comes like a bullet, slippery and small with no root	Large intestine jing qi depletion	The person dies in the beginning of summer when date tree leaves grow.
Ru Hua (like a flower)	Pulse comes light, floating light, weak and delicate like a flower	The patient startles easily, is restless sitting and sleeping, hallucinates when standing, this is small intestine jing qi depletion	They will die in the middle of autumn, around September

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*Ru Yan Dao* (like a knife) pulses are opposite of *Ru Xuan Yong*. It is like a knife and gets wider when pressing; the blade is sharp and fast. But while pressing gradually, it becomes surging. This signifies replete kidney heat and they tend to die in the spring time.

*Ru Wan Hua* (like a bullet) pulses are very slippery and they cannot be controlled. With pressure, it slides around. In the original book, one cannot touch the balls because it will slip around. It is rootless and floating and is correlated with the lung and large intestine.

The bullet is chosen since is actually made from metal. Since the large intestine is metal the person dies in the early summer which is correlated with replete wood.

*Ru Hua* (like a flower) pulses are so delicate, they cannot be touched. It is as if the petals fall off. Upon palpation, the pulse is very light and weak; this person

has a heart qi xu with small intestine involvement and fire. It occurs in late autumn when the water qi is beginning to emerge. Because it is late autumn, the earth will be late and there is a qi xu.

In the original discussion, the pulses must have stomach qi, spirit, and root (wei, shen, and gen) qualities, this indicates that the viscera essence qi (*zang jing qi*) is not completely depleted and the patient may recover more quickly. However, these discussions are about the weird, death or exhausted pulses that are sometimes described as the ‘true visceral’ pulses that no longer have stomach, spirit or root (wei, shen, and gen).

Table one provides a comparison that includes the description of the name and nature of the arrival, the shape of the pulse, the pathophysiological considerations and the prognosis. In terms of the latter, it is important to note that these prognostic considerations are circa 100 Common Era. Times have

changed and the progress of technologically and chemically based medical interventions has changed the survival landscape for patients with such serious pulse confirmations. Even so, the serious nature of these pulses suggests a high risk scenario.

1. Wu NL WAT. *Yellow Emperor's Canon of Internal Medicine*: China Science and Technology Press; 1996.
2. Wang S. *The pulse classic = [Mai jing]: a translation of the Mai jing*. 1st ed. Boulder, CO: Blue Poppy Press; 1997.