

Qi (氣): An Historical Assessment.

By

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Qi, as a distinct concept in ancient Chinese thought, predates such ideals as 'taiji' (太極), bagua (八卦), yinyang (陰陽) and wuxing (五行). Its earliest depictions occur on Shang (1783-1122BC) oracle bones and Zhou (1134-256BC) bronzes, and consist of three lines similar to the ideogram for the number '3' (san) in Chinese mathematics, 三, but with a number of variations;



This may be taken as the oldest, and therefore core element of the developed ideogram for 'qi'. The three horizontal strokes represent three clouds in the sky. From this, is developed the idea of 'air', 'vapour' or 'gas'. But more than this, the implication is clearly one of air and moisture rising together. The mist rises through the evaporation process, into the sky and forms clouds. And indeed, today the simplified Chinese character for 'qi' represents exactly this idea:

气

This character can be read as vapour rising from the ground, and forming three clouds. The traditional character has one more vital ingredient in its construction, namely that of 'rice', or 'grain'. According to the Shuowen, its earliest depiction was that of four grains of millet lying on a threshing area;



Which eventually developed into the character familiar as 'rice' (Pinyin: 'mi') today, depicted as;

米

When the various particles are added together, the traditional character for 'qi' is formed;

氣

The Shuowen defines this concept as 'cloud vapours', and qi here, is presented as 'yunqi' (雲氣). The presence of 'rice', and the addition of 'cloud' to the already existing vapour lines found on the Shang oracle bones, does allow for a variety of interpretations. When the rice grain is missing, and the additional 'cloud' particle is absent, the most obvious meaning is that of water and air, rising from the ground. There is however, another interpretation, namely that of the 'rice' cooking in a cauldron that has a lid on the top. As the hot air and water vapour rises, pressure builds in the cauldron, and the lid is lifted - this reading requires that the three horizontal lines believed to represent 'clouds', have to be re-interpreted to show two horizontal lines of pressured water-vapour, pushing aside the third horizontal line, which is now symbolic of a cauldron lid -气.

Both interpretations are feasible. With the Shuowen definition of 'cloud vapour' (雲氣), it is possible to envisage a scenario of pressured water-vapour rising into the sky, and eventually forming clouds. An extrapolation being that all rising water vapour will make clouds. Whether it is accepted that a cauldron is present or not in the ideogram for 'qi', the presence of the grain of rice definitely suggests a physical link to the ethereal concept of 'water-vapour'. This link is embodied in the process of the breathing mechanism. The breathing mechanism works, because of the build-up and release of 'pressure' in the lung. But we live, because we eat. Rice absorbs the energy from the 'sun' (yang), and is nourished by the rain that falls. The sun light creates the evaporation that leads to the clouds, these clouds then release water to the earth, and the cycle repeats.

Qi is believed to permeate the mind and body, via the breath and the food we eat. An early example of the mention of qi, is in the Confucian Lunyu (Analects);

'16:7. Confucius said: "The gentleman has Three Bewares. When he is young, and his blood (xue) and breath (qi) are not yet fixed, he bewares of lust. When he is mature, and his blood (xue) and breath (qi) are firm, he bewares his temper. When he is old, and his blood and breath are feeble, he bewares acquisitiveness.' (The Original Analects: By EB & AT Brooks – Page 155)

The Zouzhuan, or 'Commentary of Zou), also mentions the idea of 'blood' (xue) and 'breath (qi). This text was begun around 350BC, and is a supplement to the Spring and Autumn Annals of Lu. It maybe considered slightly later than the Lunyu itself, and was developed in Lu around the time that the Daodejing was first composed. And in the Daodejing is found the following expression regarding qi in its relation to 'yin' and 'yang' theory;

'42. Everything carries yin on its shoulders and yang in its arms And blends these vital energies (qi) together to make them harmonious (he).' (Dao De Jing: By RT Ames & DL Hall – Page 143).

Mencius (371-289BC), brings a martial elegance to the qi concept when he says that if one were to confront a 'common fellow', and yet looked within and found that one was in the wrong, one's qi would be so hindered that the fight would definitely be lost.

However, if one's qi was correct, and one was in the right, one would prevail, even against an army of thousands. Here we see the integration of 'qi' (breath), with that of 'moral behaviour' (a combination of 'ren' 'humaneness & 'yi' 'righteousness').

“2A:2. The will is commander over the ch'i while the ch'i is that which fills the body. The ch'i halts where the will arrives. Hence if I said; “Take hold of your will and do not abuse your ch'i”....

May I ask what this flood-like ch'i is?

It is difficult to explain. This is ch'i which is, in the highest degree, vast and unyielding. Nourish it with integrity and place no obstacle in its path and it will fill the space between Heaven and Earth. It is a ch'i which unites rightness with the Way.’ (Mencius: By DC Lau – Page 77).

By the fourth and third centuries BC in ancient China, the idea that there was an underlying and all-pervading psycho-physical essence defined as 'qi', was common place. As ethereal as 'air', and yet as specific as 'moral rectitude' and 'righteous behaviour', it was a concept that also fuelled the body though what is eaten and what is drunk. And it became a cornerstone in ancient Chinese medical thinking, and is manifest as such in the Neijing (internal Classic), attributed to the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi), but believed to have been compiled around 50BC, during the Earlier Han Dyansty. In general and common language practice, 'qi' (and its dialect derivatives) is used to denote the 'air', or 'breath'. And the presence of 'qi' is as common as the presence of 'air'. Confucius himself referred to the blood and air circulation as different entities. Entities that appear to 'integrate' with age and maturity. As an historical coincidence, the ancient Greeks also thought along these lines. And this idea still exists in Chinese medical thinking; there is a distinct blood (xue) flow, and a distinct breath (qi) flow, that overlap and at times integrate in the human body. In martial practice, one's blood and qi are believed to become united in correct placement and precise movement. And this correctness is a focus of the 'will' (yi), which can move the qi around the body, literally by focusing the 'heart/mind'. And Chinese medical thinking has ascribed the direction of qi flow through special channels that are further divided into 'yin' and 'yang'.

The cultivation of 'qi' has been, and remains the prime focus of all Chinese martial systems. Power that is manifest through the bones, or through the musculature and beyond. Taijiquan, 'Grand Ridge-pole Boxing', makes use of the aligned posture, so that the bodyweight can drop into the ground (symbolic of falling rain from condensed clouds), and then makes use of the 'rising' force for the emission of qi. The rising force is akin to the rising of water-vapour, found in the character for 'qi' itself. There are many variants of this model, all valid within their own particular context. But despite whatever the differences in physical explanation for the existence and use of 'qi' in combat, all models are linked by a requirement for heightened awareness. This awareness is the product of a focused mind upon body movement. As the awareness becomes ever more acute, the positioning and placement of the body ever more correct and precise, greater power (qi) is both created and emitted. The body moves around the breath, and through correct alignment, achieves a perfect harmony of 'vital breath' and

psycho-physical matter. To the extent where they merge on the conscious level, and becomes as ethereal as water-vapour itself.