WU QI

COMBAT ENERGY

武氣

By Adrian Chan-Wyles Ph.D

The Chinese Concept of Wu

The ideogram that serves as the foundation for the entire genre of Chinese martial arts is deceptively simple. Pronounced *wu* 武 in Mandarin (*mo* in Cantonese), this character is thousands of years old — dating back at least to the Zhou Dynasty (1134 BCE - 256 BCE) and probably in use even during the Shang and Xia dynasties. The character *wu* sums up the cultural approach to conflict that has become associated — over the centuries — with what it means to be Chinese. The concept is as deep as it is wide, and from this simple character both the External and Internal schools have developed or been represented. Though commonly associated with "war," the character *wu* actually embodies the Taoist concept of *yin* and *yang*.

The Western term "martial" stems from the belief that the planet Mars is the planet of war. More specifically, both the Greeks and Romans viewed the Red Planet as a symbolic representation of the God of War, due primarily to its blood-red color. The Chinese term *wu* has no such association. Herein lies the contextual problem of translation, resulting in loss of meaning.

We may say, then, that "martial" is not an adequate translation of *wu*. Other attempts at translation usually arrive at something along the following lines:

Wu means "to stop a spear."

This is, at best, a half-translation. The character *wu* is made up of two distinct characters. One does indeed depict a weapon — but it is not a spear. The weapon is in fact a *ji* 戟, a six foot shaft with an axe-head at a right-angle to a spear-like point. This weapon (sometimes referred to as a halberd in English) was designed for fighting from a chariot platform. The chariots of ancient China had three occupants: the central driver, the archer that stood to the left of the driver, and the *ji*-user who stood to the right. The *ji* was used to cut and stab downwards into attacking infantry, or used to pierce other oncoming enemy chariot personnel. The axe-head also gave the *ji*-user the option of swinging the weapon in wide circles, should there be enough room. Bear in mind that stirrups did not arrive in China until much later, thus negating the use of cavalry as an attack weapon — as a man with a spear or similar weapon charging at full speed on horseback would, without stirrups, be thrown backwards off the horse when making contact with the enemy. Therefore, chariots were instead used in combat. The *ji* was used in chariot-to-chariot or infantry-to-chariot combat.

The Character *Wu* from various period of time.

Evolution of *Ge* to *Ji*

During the Shang Dynasty (1751 BCE - 1134 BCE), people of noble birth were often depicted holding the *ge* 戈 — a short-shafted battle-axe, carried as a symbol of social rank and status. Many of those found in tombs from this time are made of jade and were obviously intended for ceremonial use. Since only people of rank could carry this weapon in Shang society, it was not a common weapon on the battlefield — and certainly not used by the infantry. Noble people of the Shang often rode into battle on chariot platforms pulled by four horses. The short-handled *ge* would have been of little use from a raised platform moving at speed. The user would need to lean over the side of the chariot to reach the enemy, exposing oneself unnecessarily to enemy attack, particularly from archers. Should the chariot stop suddenly, the leaning soldier would be thrown out amidst the enemy, virtually ensuring death. Such a short weapon could not prevent infantry from mounting the chariot, allowing the chariot to be overrun with relative ease. It would also be difficult to engage more than one opponent at any time. The *ge* also has limited maneuverability — essentially parallel or downward swings on a relatively enclosed chariot platform — as movement is hindered by construction that is designed to protect. Such swinging also requires tremendous strength in combat, and should a swing at close-quarters miss, the user is open to direct counterthrusts from bladed weaponry of all types and from all sides. Remember that the short handle of the *ge* allows foot soldiers to get alarmingly close. Likewise, a *ge* cannot effectively reach an enemy chariot — even if two chariots are side by side. And should a noble-person find himself on foot and having to confront a chariot himself, the *ge* would not be able to reach the enemy on their raised platform.

Because of these shortfalls, the *ge* underwent an evolution of its battlefield. The shaft was extended to approximately two meters and a spear point added to the axe-handle. These changes were clearly visible by the Zhou Dynasty (1134 BCE - 256 BCE) when *ji* became commonplace on the battlefield. All the problems associated with the primarily ceremonial *ge* are resolved in the construction of the battlefield-effective *ji*.

The longer shaft allowed for a much greater and enhanced reach from the chariot platform. Also, during the Zhou period, ordinary foot soldiers started using the *ji* on the battlefield.

The social rank and status associated with the Shang *ge* was altogether abandoned during the Zhou as a more pragmatic approach to surviving on the battlefield was embraced, replacing elitism in society. With the addition of a spear-point to the axe-head, forward thrusts as well as cutting swings became available to the soldiers — together with the effective use of the two-meter shaft, which could parry, block and smash the enemy, as circumstance demanded.

Considering its ineffectiveness in combat and the large number of them found in tombs, the Shang *ge* was more or less symbolic and ceremonial in function. For this reason, it is doubtful that the *ge* particle contributed to the formulation of the character *wu*. To deflect a short-handle axe would be a tricky business and a dangerous undertaking. As the person carrying the *ge* would be in a chariot, it is difficult to imagine how one would "close the distance" to deflect the axe. Furthermore, such an action entails an "attack" — in opposition to the ideogram's meaning of defense. Furthermore, ordinary people during the Shang were not allowed to use the *ge*, and yet they fought on the battlefield. It was therefore impossible for them to defend themselves with a *ge*, or indeed against a *ge*. With the advent of the *ji*, however, the ideal of righteous defense — both against a weapon (bare-handedly) or by the use of a weapon, makes perfect sense. This change in weapon evolution occurred during the Zhou Dynasty — the time in which the *wu* character was formulated into its conceptual structure. At this time, ordinary people were allowed to take surnames for the first time in Chinese history. During the Shang, only those of high birth were allowed to have surnames, and they carried the *ge* as a matter of social rank. The Zhou, by

An ancient *Ge* blade.

A modern *Ji* blade.

Characters for *Ji* (left column), characters *Ge* (right column).

contrast, allowed all to take names — and people could use whatever weapon they wished. The Zhou also saw an intellectual out-pouring of philosophy, with the works of Chuang Tzu, Lao Tzu and Confucius (amongst others) coming to prominence. The character *wu* is steeped in the noble aspirations of these philosophies.

The second aspect to the character *wu* denotes a "stamping foot," as in stamping on something to stop it from moving. However, this character does clearly advocate the use of a part of the body as a weapon, and it serves in principle as the basis for all unarmed kung fu styles, just as the *ji* particle serves as the basis for all armed kung fu styles. Here we see the integration of both armed and unarmed combat.

But what is this integrative practice actually showing us? Both the *ji* and the "foot" are defending a chariot from attack. Here we see quite clearly that *wu* does not advocate attack in any sense, but rather conveys the righteousness of the principle of self-defense. This is the essence of Chinese kung fu.

The "external" principle (the use of *ji* and the foot in combat) is plain to see when directly employed to defend a chariot. But what of the "internal" principle? This comes about by placing the particle for a "stamping foot" before the particle for the use of *ji*. This denotes the requirement of a very serious and comprehensive study of the internal aspects of the arts. In mastering this, one becomes so skilled in the reading of events, and so able to place oneself in the right position, that no offensive action can ever be taken against you. It is not a case of simply "stopping a spear" (as it is often stated), but rather preventing a *ji* from being used against you at all times. The *ji* in this instance is symbolic of any offensive action taken against oneself.

Conclusion

The Chinese character *wu* is written with two particles:

1) A stamping foot.

2) The use of a *ji*.

The character advocates the righteousness of self-defense but does not advocate aggressive behaviour. Both the armed and unarmed traditions are represented, as are the Internal and External schools. The character further advises that the practitioner of kung fu train to such a deep level that all conflict is avoided by the use of superior positioning — thus rendering violence unnecessary.

The Concept of *Qi*

The Chinese ideogram for this concept is worthy of much contemplation, as the principles it conveys are deep and difficult to fathom.

The character is written as a metal cauldron (*xing* 鼎) hanging over a fire. The cauldron has a detachable lid. Within the cauldron is a boiling water, and within that, there is rice cooking. Steam from the boiling water builds up within the rounded cauldron and causes pressure; this pressure, in turn, makes the lid lift up and down in a rattling motion.

The Character *Wu* from various period of time.

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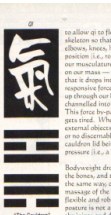
In one modern Chinese dictionary, the character *qi* 氣 has 82 definitions! This is not surprising. *Qi* can mean merely air, or it can refer to the deepest and most profound use of energy. We have the five qualities or elements (*wu zhong liu xing zhi qi* — the five types of *qi* dominating at different times 五種流行氣), wood, water, fire, metal and earth. As the foundation of the physical universe and a doorway to the spiritual essence of the universe, the *Yi Jing* (*Change Classic* 易經) has an entire hexagram dedicated to "The Cauldron" (Number 50). The German translator Richard Wilhelm has this to say about the hexagram:

"All that is visible must grow beyond itself, extend into the realm of the invisible. Thereby it receives true consecration and clarity and takes firm root in the cosmic order." (*R.C Wilhelm The I-Ching Workbook – Hexagram 50*).



"The Cauldron" (Number 50)

The *qi* ideogram has a peculiar two-way symbolism. Namely, it represents both the macro universe and the micro universe that is our individual bodies and minds. By doing so, it clearly shows that one reflects the other. *Qi* permeates all equally. This universal energy flows from above to what is below, and from what is below to what is above — so that a cycle is created. This flow may be smooth and clear, or hindered and blocked. *Qi* flows through the body down channels called *jing* 經, or meridians in the West. These channels can be opened through manipulation from the outside, or by placing needles in certain spots.

However, one must always keep in mind that *qi* is both a universal all-embracing concept and a functionally-specific concept. *Qi* changes to suit any and all circumstances. With this in mind, medical *qi* is not the same as combat *qi*, though the two do overlap.

From a combat perspective, we need to unblock our physical and mental tensions to allow *qi* to flow freely. We need to align our skeleton so that the shoulders, hips, ankles, elbows, knees, hands and feet are in correct position (i.e., rounded like the cauldron) so that our musculature can relax and gravity can work on our mass — fully asserting our bodyweight so that it drops into the floor. This creates a natural responsive force (i.e. combat *qi*) which flows back up through our bodies and which may be used or channelled into the various postures of kung fu. This force by-passes our muscular force and never gets tired. When it is channelled to a fine point, external objects are moved with little apparent or no discernable effort. This is reflective of the cauldron lid being pushed up and down by the pressure (i.e., a hidden force) in the cauldron.

Bodyweight drops down through the center of the bones, and the resultant force travels back up the same way, creating a gentle but invigorating massage of the bone marrow, creating both flexible and robust bone structures. When a posture is not aligned, *qi* becomes blocked around the joints and does not drop into the floor. The blocked areas can become damaged over time.

Conclusion

Combat energy, by definition, must be distinct from our essential *qi* — given to us by our parents at birth. This *qi* is stored in the area between the kidneys, as in the Taoist system of thought. We form as a baby around the *Zhen Zhi* (Heaven's Center 丹田) outward — an area approximately 3 inches below the belly button. If we use up our essential *qi* through poor diet, bad posture, poor liquid intake and poor exercise, we can become very ill and possibly shorten our lives. This why our essential *qi* must stay healthy. The Yellow Emperor's book the *Nei Jing* (*Internal Classic* 內經) advocates "deep breathing," good diet and regular exercise, to keep the essential *qi* strong. This *qi* cannot be used in combat, as such usage would diminish our essential *qi*. This is why *Wu Qi*, or Combat Energy, must be generated in a different way that does not involve essential *qi*. The use of aligned bone structures, and never gets tired. When it is channelled to a fine point, external objects are moved with little apparent or no discernable effort. This is reflective of the cauldron lid being pushed up and down by the pressure (i.e., a hidden force) in the cauldron.

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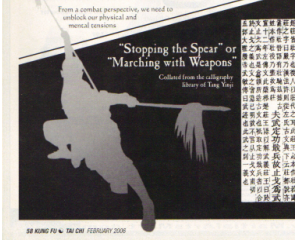

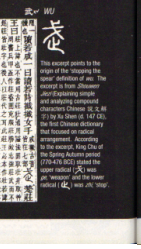

This excerpt points to the origin of the "stopping the spear" definition of *wu*. The excerpt is from *Shuowen Jiezi* (Explaining simple and analyzing compound characters Chinese 說文解字) by Xu Shen (A.147 DC), the first Chinese dictionary that focused on radical arrangement. According to the excerpt, King Cho of the Spring Autumn period (770-476 BCE) stated the upper radical (戈) was *ge*, "weapon" and the lower radical (止) was *zhi*, "stop".

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Recent research based on archeological discoveries of animal bones and tortoise shells have revealed the roots of the earliest forms of Chinese writing. The *Jia Gu Wen* (Jiaguwen/Tortoise Shell character dictionary 甲骨文字典) by Xu Zhengsu (徐中舒), Sichuan Chi Sho Publishing, Co. 1990) (四川辭書出版社), cites King Cho's assertion, and then goes on to state that it is incorrect. The character *zhi* (止) descends from foot, implying marching.

文字源流淺說 編例

In the *Wenzi Yuanliu Qianshuo* (Light discussion on the origin of characters 文字源流淺說) by Liao Yin (廖蔭), Beijing Sin Hua Book Co. 1979, the radicals are shown in their most primitive forms. The oldest oracle bone script of *wu* appears to be comprised of three elements: crossroads, weapon, and foot. Elsewhere, compelling evidence is presented on how a hieroglyph of foot evolved to the radical *zhi*, where the assets of the radical have descended from toes. The author strongly asserts that by the late Zhou (11th century-771 BCE) most people did not understand the origin of Chinese characters and that the meaning of the word might have been changed for reasons of political propaganda.