

# **The Qi Concept in Classical Chinese Medicine**

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## **1. Introduction**

The concept of Qi, usually referred to as 'chi', is now more widely known in Western circles, even though its precise meaning might still appear obscure. It is generally described as "life force" or "vital energy", a phrase which is often used in modern writings. Yet this straightforward definition can conceal the true complexity of Qi, since it has physical, mental, social, philosophical, cosmological and spiritual dimensions. Qi can denote either a physical process or a spiritual principle. In order to fully appreciate the richness, variety and significance of Qi, it is necessary to look at its history as presented in the classical medical texts, to examine the main schools and figures that have influenced it, and to take into account the modern theories which underlie current medical practices (Carlos Matos et al., 2015). Since there are differences among the classical sources, it is important to investigate how various texts define and interpret Qi if a more in-depth scholarly understanding is to be achieved and to prevent oversimplification.

The article looks at the idea of Qi within the context of Classical Chinese Medicine (CMed) and aims to deal with a number of key questions: What is Qi? How is it understood in theory, how is it passed on, and what potential does it have in the future? Classical Chinese Medicine is a traditional system of healing which originated in China and whose fundamental principles were laid down in texts written roughly between 206 BCE and 219 CE. While modern medicine does not place as much emphasis on Qi, CMed describes the human body in a manner that is meaningful to its practitioners. If we examine Qi from the point of view of CMed, we will be able to understand its more subtle features and prevent the overly simplified explanations which are so frequently encountered nowadays. The present discussion is concerned with the traditional standpoint and does not cover any of the more recent developments in the field.

## **2. The origin of Qi in Classical Chinese medicine**

Currently, individuals who attempt to translate classical Chinese medicine find it difficult to explain the concept of Qi in a manner that sounds natural and easy to grasp. This difficulty is especially noticeable in the West, since most people there do not have the required cultural background or knowledge of health, of how the body functions, or of the various stages of life beyond what modern medicine offers. Western scholars tend to employ terms such as "vital energy", "life force", or even "function" when referring to this idea. The Chinese character 氣, or Qì in Pinyin, rarely makes clear what it actually signifies. As a result, there is often confusion or misinterpretation, particularly in the more recent interpretations of the

classical texts. Although these modern versions seek to remain faithful to the original meaning, they generally concentrate on the idea of "energy", a concept which is more familiar in today's context. Yet the true meaning of Qi in classical thought is a person's lively sense of well-being. When this is understood, it becomes possible to interpret the ancient texts more accurately and to draw practical lessons for everyday life. For that reason, it is still a significant challenge to comprehend the origin of Qi, its classical explanations, and how it has been translated into other languages and cultures.

The concept of Qi apparently did not arise until rather late in the course of the development of classical Chinese medicine. Historical references show that references to Qi are found much less frequently in medical texts before the end of the Song dynasty, a period which is regarded as lying outside the classical phase of Chinese history. The chapter states that the idea of Qi mostly developed alongside the Zang-Fu theory and the Five Elements model, especially during the early Yuan dynasty; it also places emphasis on Wang Shuhe's commentaries on the *Nèijīng* from the early Ming dynasty. Nevertheless, at that time too the traditional discussions of Qi were still incomplete, since no genuinely definitive or fundamental works on the subject have ever been written in the classical literature or in later writings up to the present day. By tracing the historical development of the concept we can see how the interpretations of Qi have changed and how these changes have influenced current clinical practices and theoretical models.

### **3. The nature of qi and the manner in which we come to know it**

Qi (氣) is one of the basic ideas in Chinese medicine and may be regarded as a vital life force that passes through the body. As it lies at the junction of existence and knowledge, the nature and fundamental characteristics of Qi have been the subject of extensive scholarly investigation. Most of the commentaries focus on its origin and on the way it functions, often overlooking its deeper essence as well as the various definitions assigned to it. Only by examining the true nature of Qi, by looking at its characteristics and by considering how we come to know it can we hope to gain a better understanding of Qi and lay a more secure foundation for future discoveries. Qi can be seen as a physical form of energy which comprises both matter and vitality, always in a state of change but at the same time retaining a sense of completeness. The qualities of our knowledge of Qi—such as brightness, vaporiness and lightness—show its physical, energetic and informational features. It appears in written form, in images and in sounds, and is therefore accessible to all and plays a broader social role. We acquire an understanding of Qi through experience, by reading, through discussion and by visualisation. Nevertheless, a great deal of our knowledge depends on passing it on from one person to another and on remembering it, a process

which rarely has any personal significance. For that reason, it is essential to develop personal experience if we are to genuinely grasp and deepen our understanding of Qi.

In Classical Chinese Medicine, Qi is more than just a concept since it plays an important role in the body's physiological system, the system linking Qi with three classical systems — the channels (meridians), the Zang-Fu organs, and the Five Elements. The summary given here provides the foundation for a more detailed examination of channel theory and highlights its key structural and functional characteristics; the Five Elements framework is presented in order to illustrate how the activities of the Five Organs and the Zang theory provide a means of understanding the various functions of Qi (Ik Zhang, 2020).

The meridian system affects the body's structures by directing the flow of Qi and influencing it from the Dantian; each channel has its own pathway and contains points that are linked to the different organ systems. This results in two kinds of Qi and establishes the separate functions of the Qi within the network. The Zang-Fu organs make up the principal basis of Qi since they regulate its movement, its pathways and its transformations, as well as assigning roles that extend beyond the individual organs to cover broader functional systems. The Five Elements theory shows a reciprocal relationship between these organ systems, controlling the manner in which they interact, aiding in the understanding of various systemic processes, and organising the activities of the Zang-Fu in relation to the Qi of the interconnected organs.

## **5. The manner in which qi functions: through generation, transformation, movement, and regulation**

The methods by which Qi is produced, altered, circulated, and regulated within the body are important if we are to attain a better understanding of classical Chinese and East Asian medicine, a system which has always relied on empirical observations of Qi. A framework grounded in this understanding can increase our insight into the way in which Qi interacts with and affects health and disease (Ik Zhang, 2020).

Qi is produced by the transformation of the inherited Yuan Qi and by drawing in postnatal Qi, this postnatal Qi consisting of Ying Qi, Wei Qi, Zong Qi, and Jing; after birth our main supply of Qi comes about as a result of the digestion of food, the Spleen and Stomach being essential in the transport, transformation and conversion of the nutrients into Qi; Yin and Yang are the fundamental forces that ensure that Qi and blood flow smoothly and thus help to maintain the body's general well-being; Qi travels along the meridians and blood vessels, the meridians serving as the principal pathways for this movement; in the instance of meridians associated with the Zang-Fu organs there can be places where Qi becomes stagnant, and the Dantian works in a manner similar to a battery by storing vital energy.

The regulation of Qi consists in keeping in balance the relationship between Yin and Yang, as well as that between the interior and the exterior, cold and heat, deficiency and excess, and between the opening and closing of the meridian collaterals. If these opposing forces are unbalanced, then the flow of Qi may become blocked or irregular. In traditional Eastern medicine, treatment of disease is directed at reestablishing these natural balances.

## **7. The pathways of qi and disease: deficiency, excess, imbalance, and stagnation**

In Classical Chinese Medicine (CCM), Qi is considered to be the vital energy that originates in Heaven or the universe and travels through a series of interconnected channels known as meridians, these channels in turn being linked with the Five Yin Zang organs. Difficulties arise when the flow of Qi becomes weak, excessive, irregular, or stagnant (Cho et al., 2013). A deficiency of Qi in the Spleen and Stomach may result in feelings of tiredness, fatigue, low energy, a sense of cold, and a preference for warm foods. If the Lungs have insufficient Qi, this can lead to a weak voice, rapid breathing, sweating for no apparent reason, and a tendency to catch colds. When the Heart Qi is not sufficient, it may cause palpitations, fear, anxiety, and problems with sleeping; Kidney Qi deficiency might result in frequent urination and impotence; and Liver Qi deficiency can cause irritability, mood swings, and emotional stress. Such deficiencies can interfere with the body's ability to transform and move Jing and Blood, thus affecting nourishment and normal functioning. Conversely, an excess of Qi disrupts the balance, obstructing the flow of Jing and Blood and causing a feeling of fullness or congestion. Excess Qi in the Heart may result in a red face and restlessness; in the Spleen it may cause abdominal fullness and impair digestion; and in the Liver it might lead to conditions such as epididymitis or partial erections after urination. When Qi is out of balance or does not correspond to a person's natural Qi pattern, harmony is lost and various types of Qi become unbalanced or get stuck. Disharmony that involves the Spirit or Jing Qi is generally manifested by a lack of energy, dull perceptions, a tightness in the chest, feelings of sadness, and difficulty in expressing or maintaining one's external appearance. Moreover, when Qi stagnates, it disrupts its smooth flow, resulting in internal tension and blocking the processes of transforming and moving Jing.

## **9. A comparison of qi with the corresponding modern physiological concepts**

In traditional Chinese medicine the idea of "qi" is employed to refer to all the vital energies which give animation to the universe (Tang et al., 2018). It is frequently termed "atmosphere", "breath", "energy", "gas", "motive force", "spirit", "vapour" and "vitality" (Scheid, 2018). The various names illustrate the origin of the word—namely the vapour that rises when rice is being cooked—and show the different meanings it has, meanings which are mostly dependent on the context. Qi functions as a universal principle bringing together all aspects from the cosmic to the physical world. Although it includes ideas of matter and energy as

well as those of meaning, movement, vitality and spirit, it is flexible and is understood in different ways according to the situation. For this reason qi should be regarded not so much as a distinct entity as rather as a sign of the fundamental processes of life. Early doctors believed that qi was the force carrying out the body's basic functions such as metabolism, digestion, breathing, reproduction and movement.

The manner in which a living organism experiences and is influenced by its Qi is complex and develops at a number of different levels—these include the cosmic, the earthly, the seasonal, the weather-related, the daily, and the personal, as well as other aspects in accordance with Chinese cosmology. There is a specific organ associated with each of these levels of Qi, for instance the lungs, the spleen, the liver, the kidneys, and the heart, along with the corresponding physical and emotional functions such as breathing, digestion, emotions, reproduction, and understanding. Since Qi is found at many levels and its various forms may have overlapping meanings and effects, it is often difficult to simply identify Qi with the idea of energy, even though there are no mentions of energy.

#### **10. The points to consider from a methodological point of view when studying Qi: evidence, translation, and sticking to the concept**

The various ideas regarding qi arise from different traditions and this illustrates the complex and multifaceted character of qi (Tang et al., 2018). In general, these ideas must be considered in light of the wider scientific methods and basic models which guide research, medicine, and cross-cultural understanding. The method employed to collect evidence influences the way in which we understand and define qi. As modern ideas of qi frequently involve concepts that lie outside the traditional frameworks, there are additional difficulties for those outside the original cultural context in translating qi into today's language (Yang et al., 2013). When dealing with qi, one must be very careful in order to remain faithful to the standpoint of Chinese Medicine.

#### **11. What this means for clinical practice and for its widespread dissemination**

The way in which Qi is discussed has significant consequences both for practitioners of Traditional Chinese Medicine and their patients, as well as for the presentation of Chinese medical concepts to the rest of the world. In Chinese Medicine, diagnosis and treatment are directly based on the concept of Qi. In order to draw up a treatment plan tailored to the individual patient, practitioners must understand the patient's particular state of Qi. The idea of Qi has an impact on many aspects of the diagnostic process, such as the way in which the meridians are organised, the distribution and function of the Zang and Fu organs, the activities of the Three Burners, and the external factors that are used in treatment. Chinese Medicine recognises a number of common patterns of Qi deficiency, excess,

imbalance and stagnation, each with definite locations and clinical symptoms. Detailed and clear information regarding these patterns is available, which enables the theory of Qi to be applied directly in guiding treatment.

Outside China, the concept of Qi is well known in areas such as Kung Fu and Tai Chi, even if its relationship with Chinese Medicine is frequently confusing. In recent years, a number of people have attempted to separate Qi from Traditional Chinese Medicine by advancing new opinions in the hope of improving cross-cultural understanding. However, although these new views are valuable, they frequently ignore the important historical and philosophical elements. In order to avoid misunderstandings and to enable effective communication with both patients and colleagues, the theory of Traditional Chinese Medicine must be translated accurately and thoroughly. It is important to include various perspectives and to take the time to study and record the way in which these principles are expressed in different local contexts if the discussion on Qi is to progress. Such efforts are very important for promoting Chinese Medicine and for fostering genuine cross-cultural exchange.

## **12. Conclusion**

By looking at the history of a concept we can find out where various ideas come from, for example the idea of Qi in Classical Chinese Medicine. Since the early pre-Buddhist texts Qi has been part of Chinese healing practices and remains one of the basic elements of these traditions (Tang et al., 2018). Initially it was linked with vapor, breath, energy and air and was used to represent both the whole universe and the human body. Around 100 CE, as shown in Wang Chong's Lunheng Poetry, the term Qi started to denote the vital energy associated with matter and movement. The earliest Chinese dictionary, Xu Shen's Shuowen Jiezi (121–120 BCE), provides three definitions of Qi: vapor, breath, and trumpet (the sound resonance of the character). As time progressed, Qi became a central principle and was necessary for understanding physiological, medical, and cosmic processes. The first important use of Qi took place at the same time as the development of the correspondence paradigm, which emphasized interconnectedness.

Qi is also present in works relating to cosmology and medicine; when a theory developed which connected Yin and Yang, the Five Phases, and Qi—especially primordial Qi—the importance of Qi in the Nèi Jīng also increased. The earliest known version, the shorter and highly corrupted Nèi Jīng, remains the fundamental philosophical text on the relationship between Qi and its correspondences. Just as happens in the major works of early Neoconfucianism, for example in Zhu Xi's Five Canons and in Zhang Zai's Xiaojing, a contribution is made to Qi-based cosmology.

The writings of Zhuangzi together with those of the Wang Dong school deal with the subject of Qi, and in contrast to the earlier views which had focused primarily on humans, there is now a greater emphasis on ideas concerning nature; Guo Xiang's commentaries on Zhuangzi help in promoting these ideas. From the fourth century onwards, the earliest Chinese images—those which go beyond their simple utilitarian function—appear in the public sphere through Qi compositions, within a Confucian framework and as part of a system which developed in order to integrate the various traditions.

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