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# Qi 氣

## A means for cohering natural knowledge<sup>1</sup>

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*Pneuma*, *ki*, *prana*, air, breath, vital energy, energy, magnetism – these terms and more have variously been employed to translate the term *qi* over the long history of the Western reception of the world.<sup>2</sup> It is so frequently used in English language contexts that it has now even entered some English language dictionaries. Many Anglophone representations of *qi* have, however, portrayed it as a singular, incomprehensible and universal force that borders on the quasi-mystical. This paper points out how such portrayals short-change one of the most fundamental topics in the history of science in China. *Qi* does not simply point towards a mystical unity between the material and unmanifest worlds, but plays a variety of roles in Chinese medical practice, as well as in other pre-modern sciences. Recent anthropological studies argue that *qi* functions as a linguistic code, providing social and intellectual coherence among practitioners of Chinese medicine and drawing together multiple ways of knowing the world.

*Qi*, standardised nowadays as 氣 or 气, and less commonly found as 炁, 曠, 炁, 氣, and 餽, is normally referred to as *the* fundamental universal substance in Chinese cosmology and physiology. It has played a fundamental role in the fields of philosophy, self-cultivation and ritual practice, as well as in the natural sciences such as medicine, alchemy and astronomy. It is related to the breath, to the vitality of the body, to primordial cosmic substance, to food, to the stars and more. Modern dictionaries give up to thirty-five different definitions of the single character alone. The definitions mostly come in compound terms, pointing to different areas of the vast semantic field such as *qixiang* 氣象 (lit. *qi*-image or weather pattern), *qisu* 氣俗 (fashions and customs) or the modern *qigong* 氣功 (physical exercises which manipulate *qi* in the body – see below).<sup>3</sup> Compound forms beginning with the term 氣 number over 230, a figure which does not begin to address the much wider variety of compounds where modifiers prefix the term, such as *shenqi* 蜃氣 (mirage), *yongqi* 勇氣 (heroic *qi*, or courage), *guqi* 穀氣 (grain *qi*, or nourishment from food) or *tianqi* 天氣 (heavenly or natural *qi*) – which in modern Chinese refers to weather – but in middle and classical Chinese can include air, destiny, seasonal patterns or even daily time markers. *Qi* has played an important role in practices as diverse as military strategy, literary writing, calligraphy, painting, music and the art of conversation.

While many of these uses rely on similar conceptions of *qi*, and cluster together related material practices, many others use the term in ways that bear little or no relation to one

another. This is worth bearing in mind when considering how *qi* has functioned in the history of Chinese science. The traditional and secondary literature has emphasised the concept of *qi* as a unitary, singular substrate of the material universe in all its diversity, whereas in practice, it is frequently divided into typologies, and articulates a wide variety of refined observations of material transformation. It is thus worth paying attention not just to ‘what *qi* is’, but also to how the term functions to impute conceptual and material continuity – a coherence which draws different technical disciplines into a common conversation. Readers not interested in early Chinese language may want to skip past the sections on grammar and writing, to the conceptual history which follows.

### The grammar of *qi*

Some language philosophers argue that the grammar of *qi* may point towards fundamental ways of thinking about the world in early China. *Qi* is a ‘mass noun’, that is, a general type of ‘stuff’ that cannot be counted as individual things, such as carrots, but is uncountable like water. Mass nouns cannot be measured on their own as units, but are distinguished by types, or by specific measures: a cup of water, a pot of wine, a basket of food. Early Chinese mass noun phrases, such as ‘three wines’ (*sanjiu* 三酒), refer to three types of wine rather than three units. Thus, ‘six *qi*’ refers to different types of *qi* (Harbsmeier *et al.* 1998: 312–21).<sup>4</sup> *Qi* nevertheless has quantity – physicians diagnose disease in terms of ‘excess’ (*shi* 實) or ‘deficient’ (*xu* 虛) *qi*. Graham (1989, 402) argues that this way of thinking about *qi* points to a fundamental difference between Chinese thought and Western philosophy, because it counts types of *qi* as subsets of a single whole, rather than as discrete particulars which can be added up. While such general claims unavoidably tend towards essentialism, they are nevertheless provocative ideas for thinking about a term which became ‘the backbone of Han cosmology and physical thought’ (Sivin 2000: 123–4). A full grammatical study of *qi* remains to be undertaken, but many agree that it could provide useful insights.

### Imaging and sounding *qi*



Figure 2.1 气  
in *Shuowen jiezi*

The early forms of the character can tell us about the conceptual roots and phonetics behind the term, and demonstrate that *qi* is not a static concept (Figure 2.1).<sup>5</sup> Different meanings have emerged over time, and scholars are not quite agreed on the order in which they emerged. The longstanding traditional argument by Xu Shen 許慎 (30–124 CE) was that the earliest and original meaning of the graph referred to ‘vapours’, that is, clouds, mist and fog, and that from this the meaning later extended to the breath and the stuff of the cosmos.<sup>6</sup> Although this story was developed quite late, in the first century CE, it has been influential ever since. Modern palaeographers note, however, that older forms of this graph dating back to the second millennium BCE (𠄎, 𠄏 and 𠄐) were used to write a quite different word, pronounced ‘xjət 乞’, which meant ‘seek, arrive, to reach.’<sup>7</sup> The graph was only used as a sound-loan (*jiàjiè* 假借) to represent the term for ‘mists and vapours’ (pronounced k<sup>h</sup>jei<sup>c</sup>), starting from around 400 BCE.

This phonetic reconstruction of the pronunciation bears a striking similarity to words which mean ‘anger’, or ‘the forced expulsion of air along with physical effort’ in

other related languages, namely Austroasiatic ( $k^h$ is, kissa,  $k^H$ es) and Sino-Tibetan (kh̥es) (Schuessler 2007: 60, 423). This corresponds to the Chinese use of *qi* as ‘to become angry’, which is still in use today. It is therefore not certain that the earliest root meaning of the word was ‘vapours’, and its early roots may come from more physio-emotional domains (Figure 2.2).<sup>8</sup>

In fact, the earliest extant graph describing *qi* as the movement of breath in the body also uses the fire component. Graph A below, from an early inscription on body cultivation dating to roughly 380 BCE, combines the ‘vapours’ component with the fire component (火 or 𤇀). The following graphs are arranged roughly chronologically, ending in the first century CE.<sup>9</sup> Graphs B and C also represented *qi*, but combine fire with the sound components 既 and 𠄎 ( $kjei^c$ ), and no vapours. The latter form (D) became adopted throughout the imperial period to refer to special forms of embodied *qi* (Stanley-Baker 2019b; Zhu Yueli 1982) (Figure 2.3).

During roughly the same period, we also find *qi* written with the components for grain 米 and food 食(E-G). At this time, the graph 氣 represented a homophone (early Chinese  $xjət$ , modern Chinese  $xì$ ), meaning ‘to provision guests’, ‘grain’ and ‘sacrifice’ (Schuessler 2007: 423). Over time, the graph 氣 became used as a sound-loan for the term *qi*, and these usages reversed (Qiu Xigui 1995: 260), so that by the early Han dynasty, it was fairly established to write *qi* as we find it in the Mawangdui medical manuscripts (Graph H). We can observe the relations between the graphs, as E closely parallels B above, exchanging 米 for 火. E and F use the sound component 既 ( $kjei^c$ ), together with the grain component 米 or food component 食. G replaces the sound component 既 with ‘vapour’ 气, and inserts grain 米.

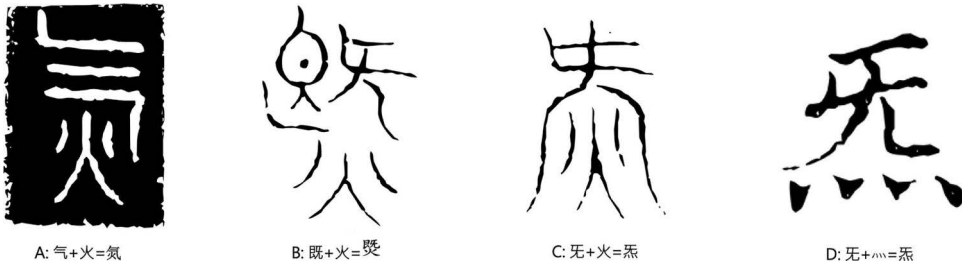


Figure 2.2 Qi graphs with fire component, 380 BCE–100 CE



Figure 2.3 Qi graphs with grain component, Warring States to 168 BCE

By the early Han dynasty, the iconic form in Graph H became the standard way to represent the multi-valent concept *qi*, while 饌 and its variant 粦 began to represent the word ‘provisioning’ or ‘sacrifice’.<sup>10</sup>

The early phonology and palaeography do not support an origin myth of the concept (and graph) of *qi* emerging from a primordiality of mists and fog, and later becoming adapted to mean the breath. We see at least three different primary meaning components in play – mists, fire and grain – being used to represent the spoken word. From this perspective, Xu Shen’s unilinear narrative reads like the Daoist cosmogenesis story retold in a new guise: where the Dao gives birth to the one, which then divides into two, then three, then gives birth to the 10,000 things (*Daode jing* 42; Lau 1963), or the *Zhuangzi*’s notion of primordial chaos (*hundun* 混沌) that is the basis of all things. Spoken and written languages have different and sometimes separate rules and logics, which morph existing forms and sounds to transmit new meanings. Spoken language is, as a rule, prior to the written – and it is evocative to imagine the sounds and sights of heavy breathing after exertion as ‘k<sup>h</sup>-jei<sup>C</sup>’, not unlike that of being in a rage, taking visual form on a cold morning or Tibetan mountainside as misty breath, similar to steam produced by a fire below. But the reality of how the term *qi* was derived lies more in the visual slippage between grain and fire, and the phonetic slippage between kjei<sup>C</sup>, xjət and k<sup>h</sup>jei<sup>C</sup>, and the creative linguistic inventions of people exchanging ideas over time. The question of Xu Shen’s origin story thus deserves to be considered in a new light. While we can cast doubt on his linguistic arguments, the historiographical question should not be whether Xu Shen’s origin story was right or wrong, but what conditions in this period made it intuitive for intellectuals to resort to Daoistic cosmographic arguments when explaining natural phenomena like *qi*. A more thorough examination of this question than space allows for here would surely offer some provocative insights.

### Emerging concepts of *qi*

Early sources show a developing understanding of *qi* over time, and indicate that its cosmological dimensions came into play about the year 400 BCE.<sup>11</sup>

Technical literature saw a growing interrelationship between the notion of *qi*, the five agents and *yin-yang*, but these were not present early on. While by the Han dynasty *yin-yang* and the five agents describe phases or states of *qi*, expressed most fully in the medical classics, these relationships were absent in all but very late Warring States literature. Prior to this, *qi* was not considered to be the fundamental unifying ‘stuff’ of the universe. *Yin* and *yang* were regarded as something akin to shadow and light, but did not achieve the status of universal cosmological dualism in the way they did in the Han period. The following passage is attributed to the sixth-century BCE Physician He (醫和), but probably recorded in the fifth- to fourth-century BCE narratives that make up the *Zuozhuan* 左傳:

Heaven has six vapours (*qi* 氣). They descend to generate the five tastes; radiate to make the five colours; are called forth to make the five sounds; and in excess produce the six illnesses. The six vapours are: yin and yang, wind and rain, dark and bright. They divide to make the four seasons; form a sequence to make the five nodes; and make calamity when they exceed.<sup>12</sup>

(*Zuozhuan* 左傳 41)

As Harper argues, we see here *yin* and *yang* not as cosmic poles, but simply as shady or sunny aspects, which generate coolness or heat. The six *qi* form weather and seasonal patterns which affect the body, causing illness when in excess. *Qi* here is causal to the body, but it is not yet that which circulates within the body.

By the fourth century BCE, *qi* took on a cosmological dimension. The passage below, attributed as fourth century BCE, describes the formation of the cosmos from a state of primordial chaos, as one might envision the settling of a bowl of muddy water, the light contents drifting upwards and the heavier settling below:

When *qi*, shapes and matter, were still indistinguishably blended together, that state is called chaos (*hundun* 混沌). All things were mixed in it, and had not yet been separated from one another...The purer and lighter (*qingqing* 清輕) drifted upwards, making the heavens; the grosser and heavier (*zhuozhong* 濁重) settled downwards, forming the earth. The *qi* that rushed together combined to make humans.<sup>13</sup>

(*Chongxu zhide zhen jing*, 1.2a)

Because our access to this text is through a second-century CE or later reconstruction, what we see above may be later ideas that have crept in (Graham 1986; Kohn 2008b). This basic idea was reiterated in the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (139 BCE), and belies a Han dynasty penchant for emphasising the parallel relationship between Heaven and Earth, with humanity in the middle (trans. Major *et al.* 2010: Section 3.1). Nevertheless, the notion of *qi* as an emergent product of the separation of the cosmic primordium is akin to ideas in the *Daode jing* and *Zhuangzi*, and should be understood as emerging during the fourth to third centuries (Graham 1989: 101).

### ***Qi as a medium for self-cultivation***

A number of early texts discuss how to cultivate the body, and one's own self, and demonstrate different relationships with *qi*-practice. The earliest surviving document to describe circulating *qi* in the body is the source of graph A above, a text carved into a twelve-sided ornamental jade block called the *Xingqi ming* 行氣銘 (ca. 380 BCE).<sup>14</sup> It describes a practice where the breath is retained in the lower regions of the body, collects there, rises up and circulates back down again, in this way ensuring life. It is clearly cognate with other self-cultivation literature of the period, a topic that was discussed in multiple contemporary texts, such as the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and *Guanzi* 管子<sup>15</sup>:

To circulate the breath (*xing qi*), breathe deeply so there is great volume. When the volume is great, the breath will expand. When it expands, it will move downwards. When it has reached the lower level, fix it in place. When it is in place, hold it steady. Once it is steady, it will become like a sprouting plant. Once it sprouts, it will grow. As it grows, it will retrace its path. When retracing its path, it will reach the Heaven area. The Heaven impulse forces its way downward. Whoever acts accordingly will live, whoever acts contrariwise will die.<sup>16</sup>

(*Xingqi ming* 行氣銘)

It emerged at a time when the term began to be debated in philosophical texts which have been passed down in the received tradition. These works began to discuss physical exercises and meditative practice in relation to spiritual and cosmological reflection. Some texts exhibit mixed attitudes towards *qi*-practice, distinguishing between its roles in bodily versus

spiritual cultivation. Chapter 15 of the *Zhuangzi* famously criticised ‘huffing and puffing’ exercises that resembled the ‘ambling of bears’ and ‘stretching of birds’. It argued that these attempts to attain longevity were beneath the Daoist sage who accepted the order of things.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the work considers *qi* as playing a fundamental role in life itself, and *qi*-practice an important role in spiritual cultivation:

Man’s life is a coming-together of breath. If it comes together, there is life; if it scatters, there is death...

The True Man breathes with his heels; the mass of men breathe with their throats.<sup>18</sup>  
(*Zhuangzi* 22,6)

The *Zhuangzi*’s practice of the True Man, then, attended to the presence of *qi* throughout the body, but did not seek to manipulate it for longevity.

Other texts from this period did not suggest a conflict between cultivating health and longevity, and spiritual practice. The earliest chapters in the *Guanzi* 管子 are considered to be fourth century BCE but edited by a second-century BCE community. These chapters advocated the alignment of the body, the four limbs, the *qi* and the heart-mind (Roth 1999: 109 ff):

When the four limbs are aligned  
And the blood and vital breath (*qi*) are tranquil;  
Unify your awareness, concentrate your mind,  
Then your eyes and ears will not be overstimulated  
And even the far-off will seem close at hand.<sup>19</sup>

(*Guanzi* 49)

Such alignment bestowed clear health benefits: supple skin, clear and acute sight and hearing, supple muscles and strong bones.<sup>20</sup> Such maintenance also included proper diet: overeating would impair the *qi* and cause the body to deteriorate, eating too little caused the bones to wither and the blood to congeal:

Overfilling yourself with food will impair your vital energy (*qi*),  
And cause your body to deteriorate.  
Over-restricting your consumption causes the bones to wither  
And the blood to congeal.  
The mean between overfilling and over-restricting:  
This is called ‘Harmonious Completion’.  
It is where the vital essence (*jing*) lodges  
And knowledge is generated.<sup>21</sup>

(*Guanzi* 49)

We see in these passages early vestiges of spiritual practice in concert with *yangsheng* 養生 regimes of exercise and diet, and also a more direct expression for the rationale of bodily cultivation as a source of moral bearing.

While Confucius does not mention *qi*, Mengzi 孟子 (Mencius) (372–289 BCE? 385–302/03 BCE?), considered the next great Confucian philosopher after the master himself, advocated the embodied cultivation of ‘vast, flooding *qi*’ (*haoran zhi qi* 浩然之氣), which, when cultivated properly, would ‘fill the space between Heaven and Earth’.<sup>22</sup> For Mencius, his flood-like *qi* was cultivated because he ‘Knows [how to] speak’. It is through ethical thoughts and behaviour that the heart-mind does not disturb the *qi*:

The will commands the *qi*. The *qi* fills the body. The *qi* stops when the will takes over. Therefore, it is said, ‘Take hold of your will and do not disorder your *qi*. ...If [vast, flooding *qi*] is nourished with integrity and is not harmed, it will fill the space between Heaven and Earth. This *qi* unites with Rightness (*yi* 義) and the Dao; without them, the *qi* will starve. This *qi* is born from accumulated Rightness and not an occasional show of Rightness. Action that is below the standard set in one’s heart-mind (*xin* 心) will starve the *qi*. ... The heart-mind must not forget the *qi*, but growth must not be forced.<sup>23</sup>

(*Mengzi* 3)

We see here *qi* taking a central role in self-cultivation. Mencius is at pains to qualify experiences of interiority, distinguishing between thought and the experience of *qi*. There is a phenomenology of *qi* at play here: for Mencius, it is important to define these experiences, qualify their relationships and establish a hierarchy of importance. *Qi* follows the will; thus, it is important to cultivate the mind (the seat of the will), and the *qi* will nourish naturally. It is his rightness of speech that allows him to cultivate vast, flooding *qi*. Notably, like the *Zhuangzi*, he does not advocate ‘forcing’ the growth of *qi*, which he compares to the pulling up of crops in order to help them grow faster, only to result in their dying.

### ***The political cosmos: qi and the five agents***

In the third century BCE, we find that *qi* plays a critical role in conceptualisations of the relationship between the state and the cosmos. It is traditionally said that the major catalyst in the *yin-yang* and five agents theory was the work of technical master Zou Yan 鄒衍 (305 BCE–240 BCE). While this cannot be proved, as all of his works are now lost, the earliest text which articulates the five agents as a cycle of different qualities or kinds of *qi* comes from the same period. It is, however, a political work. The *Annals of Lü BOWEI* (*Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋) is an encyclopaedic work compiled for the benefit of the first emperor of China, purportedly the summation of knowledge of thousands of technical consultants (*fangshi* 方士) hired by the Qin court. In this treatise, produced in order to aid in state management, natural observation becomes so state-oriented that natural forces are construed as the mechanisms behind the state’s success or failure. The following passage describes the five agents in terms of cyclical changes in political rule, as natural as the changing seasons, and reflections of the changing will of Heaven:

Whenever a true king is about to rise, Heaven invariably sends omens to the people below first. In the time of the Yellow Emperor, Heaven first made large earthworms and mole crickets appear. The Yellow Emperor said, ‘The *qi* of earth is getting strong’, and so he took yellow as his colour and earth as pattern for his activities. In the time of Yu, Heaven first made grass and evergreens appear. Yu said, ‘The *qi* of wood is getting strong’, and so he took deep blue-green as his colour and wood as his pattern for his activities.<sup>24</sup>

(*Lüshi chunqiu* 13.2.1)

This formulation was a significant shift in thinking about the right to rule, or Heavenly Mandate (*tianming* 天命), a notion established by the Zhou dynasty. That simpler formulation claimed that Heaven’s assent was granted on the basis of the new monarch’s virtuous conduct, in contrast to the previous ruler’s corruption. The *Zuozhuan* formulation, however, normalises dynastic change as part of the controlling cycle of the five agents.<sup>25</sup> We see the right to rule transitioning from an argument about morality and a personal relationship with Heaven, to one about natural forces, visible by observable cyclical signs, and communicated

through the medium of *qi*. Morality is no longer located within a body that cultivates the accumulation of *qi*, but rather is reflected in the entire universe, the dynamism and change of which is managed through a notion of stable systems of cyclical change.

Through proper observation of these cycles, one can determine the ascending *qi*, and by adhering to that achieve success. This shift also reflects a changing notion of Heaven (*tian* 天), which during the early Zhou dynasty referred to an anthropomorphic deity or pantheon (scholars are divided on this), but in later philosophical and technical works came to refer to ‘Nature’, or the forces of the natural world more generally. This relationship between the state, *qi* and nature formed much of what we might call the ‘political science’ of the time – that is, a science of observations of omens and portents in order to determine the relationships between the state’s actions and the natural world – one which was inclusive of moral and ethical behaviours or, rather, did not differentiate between material and social processes. These are strongly reflected in texts of the early Western Han dynasty, such as the *Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露) and the *Huainanzi*, which assembled technical knowledge and portent divination as part of the necessary toolkits for monarchs to maintain the well-being of the unified empire.

### *Qi in early medical writing*

Excavated texts and figurines from the third and second centuries BCE describe the gradual emergence of *qi*-based medicine, and show the role of physical, bodily sensations in determining the function and nature of *qi* and how to use it. These works include the *Vessel Book* (*Maishu* 脈書) and the *Pulling Book* (*Yinshu* 引書) (Lo trans. 2014) – both discovered in tombs dated 186 BCE in Zhangjiashan in Hubei – as well as others found in Mawangdui in Changsha (168 BCE), in Shuangbaoshan 雙包山 outside Mianyang in South-west China (ca. 118 BCE), and those recently discovered in Laoguanshan, also known as Tianhui in Chengdu (ca. 157–141 BCE). These texts and objects reveal how, prior to the formation of the received medical classics, medical knowledge gradually became more systematic, reaching its full form in the *Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon* (*Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經, ca. first century CE), which defined Chinese medicine for the next 2,000 years (Sivin 1993). While these earlier works contain some correlations between the five agents, vessel locations, acupoints (or ‘cavities’ *xue* 穴), and *yin-yang* theory, they do not reach anything like the theoretical integration of the *Inner Canon*. What we do see is evidence of an increasingly refined language to codify bodily experience.

*Qi* was considered to have different material qualities in different texts. It was depicted with the metaphor of fluid flowing in waterways in the *Inner Canon*, while the contemporary *Toad Canon* (*Hama jing* 蛤蟆經) describes it as an energetic ‘ball’ moving according to the lunar cycle around the body. Lo (2001a) points out that the latter text is the first instance of a ‘circulation’ of *qi*, an imagination grounded in astro-calendrics and mathematical modelling of repeated *qi* movements around the body, whereas the ‘flows’ of *qi* in earlier Han literature and the *Inner Canon* were grounded in the phenomenological experience of self-cultivation practice.

Early figurines engraved with channels of *qi* have been discovered in Mianyang and Tianhui; the latter is punctuated by starry dots corresponding to acupuncture ‘cavities’ (*xue* 穴) described in the later *Inner Canon* (Chengdu Municipal Institute 2015; Zhou Qi *et al.* forthcoming). These indicate the early emergence of theories about the network of channels (*jingluo* 經絡) terms which refer to the warp threads of a loom and a skein of silk. The presence of small models of weaving looms in the Tianhui tomb has encouraged recent scholarship to pay attention to the material origins of this metaphor, which may reflect the influence of textile production on cosmological thought and modes of literary composition



(Zürn 2020). Texts, written on bamboo slips, were literally ‘woven together’ with thread. This metaphor has further implications for rethinking the role of *ji* 機 (mechanism), a term referring both to the mechanism of a crossbow trigger and to the weaving loom (Lo forthcoming). The term plays an important role in early Daoist philosophy as a source of life and dynamism as well as in the use of acupuncture cavities in the *Inner Classic*.

Qi is also described in water-like metaphors of flow and circulation in these early texts, which portray generalised flows of *qi* through the limbs towards particular regions, rather than the anatomically specific channels of imperial medicine. This came to the fore at a time when the central state was concerned with maintaining a fluid infrastructure, internal control and stable borders. The trope of describing *qi* in terms of water draws on an older metaphor that was widespread throughout early texts (Allan 1997), but perhaps most directly encapsulated in the *Dao de jing* 道德經:

The Highest good is like water. Because water excels in benefiting the myriad creatures without contending with them and settles where none would like to be, it comes close to the way.<sup>26</sup>

(*Dao de jing* 8)

But it was not only material metaphors which shaped the way *qi* was conceived. This early literature articulates a diagnostic sensibility that is attuned to internal experiences of the body, which emerged from the body-sensations germane to a *qi*-cultivation practice (Lo 1998, 2001b). These experiences include ‘heat, burning pain, breathing difficulties, gas in the alimentary canal and excessive emotion’ (Lo 1998: 237).

The *Pulling Book* (*Yinshu* 引書) prescribes a variety of stretching exercises, categorised either in terms of the animals they imitate, or in the diseases they are designed to treat, with specific therapeutic ends. They thus appear more aligned with the ‘huffing and puffing’ exercises critiqued in the *Zhuangzi*. The descriptions of *qi* are tactile – where it states that ‘Squeezing the toes benefits the *qi* of the feet’, the suggestion is that *qi* is experienced from warmth, or tensile strength (Ibid.). Numbness is described as a deficiency of *qi*, suggested by the metaphor of ‘rushing water’, perhaps evocative of what we call ‘pins and needles’:

When suffering with there being less *qi* in the two hands, both the arms cannot be raised equally and the tips of the fingers, like rushing water, tend to numbness. Pretend that the two elbows are bound to the sides, and vigorously swing them. In the morning, middle of the day and middle of the night. Do it altogether one thousand times. Stop after ten days.<sup>27</sup>

(*Yinshu* 2)

The dynamic movement of the limbs and their experience of sensation are associated with the presence or absence of *qi*. Thus, we see that *qi* in medical writing is much more than the breath, but comes to stand for a range of qualitatively distinct interior experiences with direct therapeutic implications.

These internal sensations should be read primarily as patient-centred or first-person viewpoints, rather than the detached observation of physicians. They thus constitute a different perspective on embodied *qi* than later channel theory, which required trained knowledge of body topology and palpation performed by someone other than the patient.

Isolated references describe acupuncture, here defined as inserting a needle in order to stimulate the flow of *qi*. *Maishu* 6 contains the earliest description of acupuncture, defined as

using a needle to stimulate *qi* flow. Here, *qi* flows downwards like water and, where it flows upwards, it is seen as pathogenic, a sign of excess, as of a vessel filled up and overflowing. This situation is remedied by cauterisation, but in cases where the *qi* is unstable, needling can be applied:

The channels are valued by the sages. As for *qi* it benefits the lower and harms the upper; follows heat and distances coolness. So, the sages cool the head and warm the feet. Those who treat illness take the surplus and supplement the insufficiency. So if *qi* goes up, not down, then when you see the channel that has over-reached itself, apply one cauterisation where it meets the articulation. When the illness is intense then apply another cauterisation at a place two *cun* above the articulation. When the *qi* rises at one moment and falls in the next pierce it with a stone lancet at the back of the knee and the elbow.<sup>28</sup>

(*Maishu* 6)

This passage does not use named, memorised acupuncture points, but refers simply to the inside of the elbows or knees. Neither does it name any specific channels, or their corresponding inner organs, nor does five agents theory come either into the diagnosis or into the theorisation of the function of the acupuncture point. The needling simply stimulates the generalised flow of *qi*, whether upwards or downwards, which can be sensed in the patient's experience of heat or cold.

*Qi* thus formed the medium for expressing and experiencing graded tactile experiences of pleasure, pain and passion. It was associated with burning pain, which travels through the body accompanied by fever. *Qi* rising with heat to the upper body, with an accumulation of uncomfortable feelings, and opposite sensations in the limbs, is almost always pathological. Other signs associated with rising *qi* include breathing difficulties and problems of the alimentary canal – both of which ingest *qi* – such as a hot mouth, split tongue, dry throat, choking on food, pain in the throat, exhaustion and coughing. The presence of excessive *qi* in the alimentary canal was recognised through burping and flatulence, whereas absence of *qi* in the lesser *yin* channel can be indicated by wheezing, dimness of the eyes, a sense of suspension around the heart, sallowness in the complexion, anger, a feeling of alarm and of being trapped, lack of appetite and coughing of blood (*Maishu* 72–3, Lo 1998: 233–5).

*Qi* also extended to the emotions: anger and fear, associated with interoception of the heart and greater chest area. As such, disturbed emotions experienced there ran counter to the therapeutic, calming meditations on the same region we see in the earlier cultivation texts such as the *Guanzi*. Violent anger not released (through battle) will transform into an internal abscess. Excessive and extreme emotions of the nobility – whether anger or joy – lead to bodily harm. *Qi* is also associated with pleasant signs – the arousal of *qi* is a sign of increasing strength and vigour, *qi* welling up in the body signifies sexual excitement and the release of sexual tension is described in these texts with the same language as the illumination of the spirit (*shenming* 神明), a fully embodied, ecstatic state of penetrating insight and clairaudience (*Yinshu* 83, 86; Lo 1998: 236–8).

The *yangsheng* and medical literature of the late Warring States and early Han dynasty thus evinced an increasingly refined sense of internal states of the body. It drew on metaphors and spiritual implications present in the received philosophical and political literature, but focussed much more on direct, self-perceived experience of the body. The adaptation of these internal experiences, derived from exercise and cultivation practices, was a process of gradual medicalisation as these became pathological signs and symptoms, which physicians could draw on during patient interviews to determine the course of a disease.

## Qi in imperial medicine: the Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon

The imperial medical tradition begins with the *Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon*, composed in the first to second century CE, which has been the foundation of Chinese medical theory ever since. In this work, we find a much more thorough conceptualisation of the relationship between *qi*, *yin-yang* and the five agents. With this comes a radically more sophisticated descriptive terminology for *qi*, and a more complex understanding of physiological processes. It was listed first in the catalogue of medical writings in the Han dynasty imperial bibliography, indicating its prominent status, and it has been regarded as the seminal authority on medical theory from then on.

Here, we find the fullest expression of a synthetic theory of *yin-yang* and five agents (Chapter 1 in this volume) in concert with *qi*. These principles are not laid out in a systematic way, but are compiled from many different shorter passages from different earlier sources, many of which have since been excavated (Keegan 1988). Over time, systematic summaries of these theories have been compiled and put together for later generations of students (Chapter 7 in this volume).

The terms for different *qi* from this period take part in a language of orthodoxy and uprightness.<sup>29</sup> **True qi (zhenqi 真氣)** indicates the basic, normal *qi* which flows through the channels, which is formed after a process of digestion, absorption and transformation into the bodily system. This is sometimes interchangeable with **upright or orthodox qi (zhengqi 正氣)**, which refers to normative *qi* of a healthy body, and is distinguished from invading pathogenic, **deviant qi (xieqi 邪氣)**. The latter was identified in classical medicine with meteorological factors, such as wind, damp, dry, cold, heat and summer heat. The term 'deviant' (*xie* 邪) was a touchstone for boundary-marking and debate with other contemporaries, who maintained that illness was the result of ghosts and demons permeating the body with their sepulchral influences – thus entailing ritual instead of medical treatment (Li Jianmin 2009).

**Essential qi (jingqi 精氣)** plays a fundamental role as an elementary and subtle substance. Essence (*jing*) refers to semen when external to the body, but inside the body this subtle fluid is considered to flow throughout the form as the most dynamic and vital of the material substances, second only to *qi*. Essence, *qi* and **spirit (shen 神)** are considered to be on an ascending scale of subtlety and power.

**Original qi (yuanqi 元氣 or primary qi)** is inherited from one's parents, stored in the kidneys and provides the basic motive force of life in the body. It is the primary impetus for growth, as well as the functions of the viscera. In later Daoist works, it comes to refer to **pre-natal (xiantian 先天) qi**, which was variously the allotment from Heaven, and also that inherited from one's parents.

The topology of the imperial landscape, criss-crossed with riverways and trade routes, is thought to have influenced the emerging forms of the **network of channels (jingluo 經絡)**. Interchangeable terms include the **jingmai 經脈** and **mailuo 脈絡**, where *mai* refers to pathways along the body. Although described in earlier texts and figurines, their role in illnesses and therapy only became fully theorised in detail in the *Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon*. The flow of *qi* can be stimulated by acupuncture at specific points along these channels – if it is insufficient or excessive, stagnant or too quick, torpid or clear. These channels contain and communicate *qi* throughout the body, much like the system of rivers and canals which conveyed vital supplies across the Han state.

Military and infrastructure metaphors play a role in the conceptualisation of how the channels transport **'supply qi' (ying qi 營氣, also translated as 'nutritive or camp qi')** and **'defensive qi' (wei qi 衛氣, also guard qi)**. The former brings nourishment to the limbs and

the surface of the body, and the latter protects the exterior of the body from pathogenic invasion. These images reflected the political conditions of the Han state, which was constantly in danger of invasion along its northern borders, and would use warriors in border outposts who radiated outwards from the fort to repel invaders, while supported by a supply chain which brought nourishment and resources to these defenders.

The language of political orthodoxy was also influential. Conditions where the movement of *qi* was not healthy for the body, and ran against the normal directions of flow, were described as **rebellious** (*ni* 逆), **chaotic** (*luan* 亂) and reckless, and in need of regulation and **control** (*zhi* 治), the latter was the classical term for cure, and also for establishing order, often through violent means. The political tenor of these metaphors reflects the historical conditions of the Han state in which these new technological developments emerged, and the close intertwining of its *qi*-based cosmology with the needs of a unified, central state to maintain strict order.

It was not specified whether the channels communicated blood, *qi* or both – as *qi* was considered to flow with, or in, the blood – but the **movement of the channel** or **pulse** (*dongmai* 動脈) was indicative of the state of the internal organs. The channels could be palpated at numerous locations – along the side of the neck, along the radial bone at the wrist at three positions leading up the arm away from the wrist crease, on the dorsal surface of the foot and elsewhere. A fairly sophisticated typology emerged which distinguished qualities of movement – marking speed, rhythm, depth, volume and textures like stringy or greasy or rough. These diagnostics became the direct object of attention in the Eastern Han work, the *Pulse Classic Maijing* 脈經 (trans. Yang 1997), which lays out sensory qualities that have been influential ever since.

Beyond these important types of *qi*, early medical writers organised their observations of natural processes within numerological frameworks to categorise different kinds of *qi* (Chapters 4, 5 and 19 in this volume). Jiang Shan's (2017) doctoral work on the concept of *qi* in the classical corpus identifies a number of typologies of *qi*, and performs a thorough analysis of the different kinds of meanings attributed to the single character *qi*. She also goes on to identify exhaustive lists of typologies of *qi* that are organised by numerologically significant numbers: one, two, four, five, six, nine and twenty-seven. These are both summarised in the Appendix.

These lists show, on the one hand, that *qi* was distinguished on the basis of where it came from, what produced it, where it circulated and what it was associated with – be it blood internal to the body, or natural forces external to the body. On the other hand, they also demonstrate the role of numerology in the organisation and structuring of observational data. The use of numerologically significant numbers to organise and typologise *qi* was not simply born out of a desire to construct a uniform vision of the natural world and the body in it, or to identify a microcosmic reflection of the outer world in the interior of the body. It also acted as a mnemonic, using convenient, memorable numbers around which to structure observations (and sensations) of the material (and inner) world. Some numbers organised multiple clusters of *qi*-types: the five agents, for example, were used to organise different and largely unrelated typologies: calendrical and cosmological progressions, diagnostics of facial complexion, the five external vapours and the *qi* of the five internal organs.

The marrying of these multiple kinds of observation with the same numerology makes a tacit claim that these typologies are related, but without specifying exactly how or why – simply that they are. This is not the same as a claim to causal relation. These organisational typologies allow for the cataloguing and aggregation of observational data, when the mechanisms behind what is observed have not yet been made clear – allowing them to be clarified

later, but also without requiring that they are ever clarified at all. Jiang Shan (Ibid.) argues that ‘the method of numerical logic started to be merged into deductive medical theory’, as medical thinkers began to explore whether these explanatory models were useful descriptions of the world.

As classical medical theories became more widely accepted in the imperial period, Daoist and other communities developed practices coherent with these ideas, but which extended beyond curative treatment. Campany (2002: 18–21) refers to these as being conceived within the ‘pneumatic idiom’.<sup>30</sup> These practice repertoires included the collection, storing and circulating of *qi* in the body with exercises such as ‘guiding and pulling’ (*daoyin* 導引) pathogenic *qi* or illness out of the body, circulating *qi* (*xingqi* 行氣) within the body and sexual cultivation through ‘merging *qi*’ (*heqi* 合氣). The loss of semen in sexual regimes was considered to deplete one’s original *qi*, which is stored in the kidneys, linked to one’s physical inheritance from one’s parents, and one’s store of life in this body. Thus, semen retention was considered an important longevity practice. Dietetic schemas and fasting regimes linked different foods to different levels of moral or intellectual cultivation, asserting that a diet of *qi* made one divine or spirit-like. Meditative practices aspired to ‘foetal breathing’ (*taixi* 胎息) through the abdomen and/or the skin, and medical and cultivation exercises advocated the holding or stopping of breath altogether (*biqi* 閉氣, *buxi* 不息). Such interoceptive practices, which could have visual qualities through synaesthesia, were but a step away from Daoist visualisation of body gods – divinities within the body which kept it functioning like a managed internal bureaucracy, or which communicated with divine powers in the Heavens above (Stanley-Baker 2012, 2019a). The later inner alchemy tradition extrapolated from physical alchemy to internal bodily transformation with a focus on the graded transmutation of bodily essence (*jing* 精) into *qi* into spirit (*shen* 神), which culminated in an immortal (but not fully physical) body of the practitioner (Chapters 29 and 30 in this volume). The mutability of *qi* thus led to a porosity between curing and salvation, between healing, longevity and immortality, and led to many religious sects incorporating medical elements within their repertoires (Chapter 27 in this volume).

*Qi* took on a fundamental role in the neo-Confucian philosophy of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), as the basic material substance of the universe, and counterpart to *li* 理 (principle), the guiding internal order of the material world. Reflections on the interrelationship of *qi* and *li* became a discursive space for considering dynamic change in the natural world and developing the natural sciences generally, for example, in the writings of Song Yingxing 宋應星 (1587–1666?) (Schäfer 2011: 50–89; Cullen 1990). Neo-Confucian thought was very influential on the major medical theorists of the Song, Yuan and Ming dynasties, and played out in their diagnostic theories, notions of circulation and transformation, and the ways they understood pre-natal (that which is innate and inherited) and post-natal *qi* (that derived from the natural world once one is born) (Chapter 9 in this volume; Meng Qingyun 2002).

### **Modern forms**

Over the nearly 200 years since the arrival of Western medicine in China, *qi* has been co-opted into a broad set of conversations about modernity, identity, subjectivity and valid forms of knowledge. With the ever-increasing influence of Western medicine from the nineteenth century onwards, Chinese medicine and its fundamental notions have undergone conceptual transformation, as well as outright rejection. In an attempt to converge Western physics and Chinese science, the medical elect Tang Zonghai 唐宗海 (1851–1908) adapted notions of the then-innovative steam engine to produce the new medical concept of

*qi*-transformation (*qihua* 氣化) (Lei 2012). The logician Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854–1921) argued in 1909 that *qi*, among other traditional concepts like heart-mind (*xin* 心), Heaven (*tian* 天) and Way (*dao* 道), were logically incoherent. Literary authors and scholars such as Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879–1942) and Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) denied the validity of Chinese medicine altogether (Unschuld and Andrews 2018: 99–105). ‘Outdated’ notions like *qi* were criticised by the Chinese medical practitioner Zhu Lian 朱璉 (1909–78), whose textbook *New Acupuncture* (*Xin zhenjiue xue* 新針灸學) argued that *qi* had no basis in reality, and excluded channel theory entirely from its description of over 360 acupuncture points (Taylor 2005: 20–7). Zhu’s rejection of channel theory was not eventually accepted but, since the integration of Chinese medicine with modern healthcare in the 1950s, medical textbooks have largely de-emphasised cosmological speculation about *qi*.

A survey of three popular textbooks in China and the US (Maciocia 1994; Kaptchuk 1983; Chen Xinnong 1987) is instructive. Chen’s widely used *Chinese Acupuncture and Moxibustion*, which is the basis for the US licensure exams, re-defines *qi* in terms of physiological ‘function’, reducing the large universal claims of cosmology to observable processes limited to the body:

Qi is too rarefied to be seen and its existence is manifested in the functions of the *zang-fu* organs. All vital activities of the human body are explained by changes and movement of *qi*.

(Chen Xinnong 1987: 46)

Quantum physics-like terms appear in Ted Kaptchuk’s *Web That Has No Weaver*, a widely celebrated introductory textbook, which describes *qi* as an oscillation between energy and matter (Kaptchuk 1983: 35).

These works reveal roughly the same typologies, which were probably established as part of pedagogical norms after the rationalisation of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) in the 1950s. They divide up their presentation of *qi* into its functions, types and pathologies. Little or no attention is paid to other aspects of *qi* in terms of its historical uses in divination, rationalisation of natural processes, astronomy, expressive arts, nor to means of circulating the *qi* by *qigong* or other internal cultivation. Some translation choices indicate varying relations to traditional thought. The rendering of *zongqi* 宗氣 as ‘pectoral *qi*’ by Chen interprets the term entirely in terms of its function and location, avoiding the Confucian inflections of the renderings by Kaptchuk and Maciocia as ‘ancestral *qi*’. All three texts discuss original *qi* as a substance inherited from the parents during the pre-natal stage, making no allusions to the Daoist notion of the cosmic primordium.

Five agents theory is presented early on in these textbooks as a general theory without reference to the cosmological framing of classical works, and quickly passed over in favour of discussion of the organs (*zangfu* 臟腑). These are treated as material objects and processes, ‘materialist entities within a body-enveloped-by-skin’ (Hsu 2007: 98). Discussion of ‘Organ *qi*’ in Chen is subsumed under the section of general pathologies, and not treated as a distinct category of *qi*, whereas Kaptchuk and Maciocia emphasises *zangfu qi* as spatially local to, and characteristic of, the *zangfu* organs. This may well be due to the fact that it is more intuitive in Chinese than in English to assume that *qi* takes on the qualities of the time and space in which it is located, and the categorical boundaries between some *qi* are porous to the fluidity of *qi* itself.

While reformed Chinese medicine (commonly referred to as TCM) seems to have set aside more traditional cosmological frames of reference, this is not true of all forms of *qi*-practice.

Qi continues to function as a fully operational term in religious and self-cultivation contexts, perhaps most conspicuously in *qigong*, which was the subject of wide popular fascination in the late eighties and early nineties in mainland China when it was known as *qigong re* 氣功熱 (*qigong fever*). Those studying this moment have been at pains to wrestle with how the different kinds of *qigong* they encountered were accommodated or not within broader social, political and epistemological frames of modernity. Scholars like David Palmer (2007) and Nancy Chen (2003) have described how the communities formed through shared bodily practice established alternate political spaces for private and political expressions that may have run counter to norms expected in the socialist state. Elisabeth Hsu (1999) closely reads the traditional literature and contrasts it with one *qigong* healer's teachings and practice, framing these within anthropological studies of ritual healing and ethnomedicine. She argues that *qigong* positions the physical body within a phenomenologically sensible relationship to the outside, palpable world, mediated by the universal continuum of *qi*, constituted as a form of the 'body ecologic'. Thomas Ots (1994) early on took a phenomenological position, focussing on the interoceptive experience of the body as a vehicle for personal self-exploration and means for psychological self-transformation. The interiority of *qigong* is also the core of two studies by the philosopher Yasuo Yuasa (1987, 1993), who argues that the phenomenology of *qi*-practice is the basis of a distinctively East Asian mode of embodiment. This phenomenological approach has been influential on East Asian scholars such as Cai Biming 蔡璧名 (1997; 2011) whose historical studies enquire into the relationship between *qi* and East Asian modes of knowing the world and self.

### ***The epistemological itch: what to do with qi?***

Taken collectively, the above-mentioned studies of *qigong* all touch on a common anxiety or disconcertment. As Verran (2014) argues, disconcertment points to deeper, tacit misalignments between basic ways how people constitute and deal with the world around them. Scratching this epistemological itch, unpacking the reasons for the discomfort, can help reveal the contours of the disagreements, and perhaps allow for their better coordination. These attempts to scratch the epistemological itch presented by *qi*-practice, that is, to explore how people deal with *qi* in a modern world which denies the epistemological grounds of *qi*-practice, proceed through emic explanation (by uncovering the internal rationales and logics of *qi*-practice), etic interpretation (situating those practices within alternative theoretical models) or justification (intellectual and socio-political legitimation of these and subordinate practices as culturally valid). This itch is felt in myriad ways, whether through political crackdowns on *qigong*, intellectual movements to criticise Chinese medicine within China (*piping zhongyi yundong* 批評中醫運動) and outside (quackwatch.org), or through insurers' denial of coverage for *qi*-based practice. More subtle forms of enlightenment parochialism construct *qi*-practice into a Eurocentric genealogy as 'mind-body medicine', beginning with Mesmerian parlour tricks, and addressing *qi* only as a late 1960s newcomer, entirely ignoring its longstanding cultural, intellectual and medical history within China (Harrington 2008). The epistemological itch does not arise from such acts of boundary-marking alone, but rather from the fact that, despite them, intelligent, educated, modern people continue to engage in *qi*-practice. How does a concept similar to the ancient Greek *pneuma* and the early modern 'animal magnetism' abandoned in Western culture continue to hold wide currency in East Asian thought, language and habitual practice, even as these societies have fully adopted a scientific practice and worldview? And why do more Westerners increasingly adopt *qi*-based practices, whether sitting meditation, moving *qigong* or TCM?

The contexts are many, and so are the different lives of *qi*. In the Sinophone world, the term *qi* is widely distributed across many domains of life simply through language alone. Words containing the character refer to steam, the breath, flavour, atmospheric conditions, weather, the feeling in a room, anger, tone of voice, the weight of calligraphy brushstrokes, the scent of flowers and even scientific terms for oxygen, gas and others. Even as the world of scientific knowledge denies the reality of *qi*, scientific terms written in Chinese depend on the term as a linguistic component of meteorology, gases and electricity. The appearance of the term in so many diverse domains and concepts inherits a tacit, linguistic assent to its universality.

Yan Fu's rejection of *qi* as logically incoherent neglects that the function of *qi* is fundamentally *cohering*: it expresses a world that is coherent, intuitively drawing together many discrete areas and asserting their mutual relevance and the potential for humans to interact with them in comparable ways (Stanley-Baker 2019b). The tangible atmosphere in a concert hall as the last strings go quiet, the texture of a conversation, or the aroma of food, constitutes an external field in which one finds oneself, along with others. At the same time, they are internally sensed experiences that are related to emotions, desire, discomfort, bloatedness, physical pain or the pleasure of relaxation. Whether or not users of these words assent to a materiality of *qi*, it is indelibly present in their lived linguistic worlds, and for that reason will always remain an intuitive concept.

Clearly, for many, *qi* is palpable, convincing and produces results. It is not difficult to experience, and requires no religious belief framework, just the patience and willingness to try simple, physical exercises such as *zhanzhuang* 站桩 (standing like a post and holding the two palms opposite one another). Whether the *qigong* practitioner's sensation of something present between the hands, of body relaxation, of the dull ache of pressure at an acupuncture point or the travelling pain which radiates out in a line during needling, *qi* can be sensed as practitioners describe it.

But it is another thing to assert that these sensations indicate the presence of a common *thing* called *qi* (Farquhar 1994: 34–5). Such claims participate in larger socio-epistemic, or cosmopolitical debates, which resist the notion that one normative form of rationality should hold sway (Stengers 2010; Farquhar 2002). The sometime dramatic successes of *qi*-practice, inexplicable to the language and praxis of science, give them the air of the 'miraculous'. Such performances draw attention to *qigong* as a spectacle, but in the same stroke relegate it as epistemically secondary and subaltern to rational science (Zhan Mei 2009: 91–118). This can be particularly egregious in the case of the grandiose claims of some *qi*-healers and masters, and the mutability of *qi* as a material substance affords no clear boundary-markers between valid medical claims and fantasy (Chapter 49 in this volume).

The search among Europeans and Americans for 'authentic' or 'pure' Eastern tradition, teachers and lifeways through their forms of *qi*-practice is well-documented as part of larger 'romanticist critiques of modernity' (Scheid 2002: 43), new Eastern religiosity (Unschuld 2009: 202–3) or an enlightened form of orientalism (Phan 2017). The distinctively Western psychotherapeutic *imaginaire* of Chinese medicine privileges 'authentic expressions of self' over consideration of the historical, philosophical and technical applications of the term *qi* (Pritzker 2014: 46–9, 122–32). While these frameworks are argued by some to be 'authentic', they have also produced one of the stumbling blocks for better integration of Chinese medicine with modern globalised medicine (Wegmüller 2015). The appeal to a liberationist holism associated with *qi* also ignores the political history both of *qi* and of 'holism' itself. Historically, holism has been a functional term in fascist and Maoist authoritarian regimes (Scheid 2016). The emergence of *qi* itself as fundamental cosmic stuff, intertwined with



*yin-yang* and five agents, was situated within the political cosmology of the Qin and Han states as an assertion of an ‘all-embracing interdependence’ bound up in new forms of sanctioned violence (Lewis 1990: 218; Hsu 1999).

The very slipperiness of *qi* is thus both its undoing and also its power. Its infinite permeability and constant transformation and movement make it impossible to capture in defined, limited and repeatable laboratory experiments that are the stuff of rational science, despite repeated attempts by researchers in the Mainland and on Taiwan. Yet, scholars who have paid attention to ‘*qi*-talk’, that is, practitioner discourse about *qi* and the role it plays in the work they do, also reveal important functions of this discourse. They draw our attention to what the language of *qi* actually does. It is widely acknowledged that to remove *qi* from Chinese medical theory is to reduce it to minor anatomical exercises, related to trigger points, and the practice of ‘dry needling’ or intra-muscular stimulation. Notions of *qi* are fundamental to the epistemology of Chinese medicine, and afford it the conceptual framework to draw together generations of accumulated natural observations – whether or not their causal relations are coherent to modern science. The language of *qi* that connects, for example, migraine headaches with dryness in the liver, leading to its inability to capture liver *qi*, which rises up to the head and causes the headache, facilitates the use of acupuncture on the gallbladder and liver channels on the lower leg and foot which alleviate the headache.

Scheid (2013) points out that *qi* and other Sinophone terms function to create a translanguagual community of practice, as these terms and concepts are shared in common across Chinese, Japanese, Korean, English and other languages – however, they may variously interpret them. Ho (2006; 2015) and Pritzker (2014) describe how *qi*-talk enables a discourse within which bodyworkers can articulate their tactile sensations and assessments of their patients. While this has a social function, designating insiders and outsiders depending on their fluency with *qi* language, it is also a language for various styles of practice, wherein professionals compare their treatment rationales and tactile sensibilities.

This tactile focus accords with Lo’s insight that the early formation of classical medicine arose from the phenomenological experience and observations of pain, pleasure and sensation (Lo 2001b; 1999; 1998). Herein the slipperiness of *qi*-talk is not a generalised vagueness about cosmic unity, but rather a finely tuned discourse, a subtle differentiation of nuanced shifts and changes that can be observed in others or experienced in oneself. Its permeability to the self and the other is resistant to rigid quantification, and can also give expression to the lived bodily subject or *leib* of phenomenologists like Ots (1994) and Yasuo (1987; 1993). The tacit, subjective, masterful sense of touch, to which *qi*-talk gives expression, excludes objective forms of knowing that have historically emerged from a particularly visual mode (Daston and Galison 2010).

Regardless of popular mischaracterisations of *qi* as mysticism, the language of *qi* is a storehouse of long-held cultural memories, which reflects changing values over time. Whether or not objective science argues that *qi*-talk is like that of the blind men who failed to identify the elephant, the kind of skilled knowledge that it takes to stroke the creature’s trunk and identify its textures and moods is articulated in the language of *qi*.

### Appendix: Categories of *qi* in the *Inner Canon*, by Jiang Shan 姜姍

This Appendix is designed to complement Stanley-Baker’s chapter on *qi* as a mass noun. As he points out, mass nouns are distinguished by types, or by specific measures. Below, I set out some of the different types of *qi* that can be found in the *Yellow Emperor’s Inner*

*Canon* (and below translated from Unschuld 2016), focussing on the connotations of the single character *qi*.

### 1. An abbreviation for a variety of different types of *qi*

The fact is: When man exhales once, his vessels move twice, and the passage of his *qi* covers a distance of 3 inches. When he inhales once, his vessels move twice again, and the passage of his *qi* covers a distance of 3 inches.

Lingshu 15 (*Unschuld 2016: 15.239*)

This passage comes from a chapter on the *ying* 營氣 ‘supply *qi*’ and *wei qi* 衛氣 ‘defensive *qi*’. *Qi* here refers to both types depending on the context, and thus functions linguistically as a pronoun.

### 2. Formless elements of the body, as opposed to the physical form

Bo Gao replied: Wind and cold harm the physical appearance. Grief, fear, fury and rage harm the *qi*. When the *qi* harm a long-term depot, they cause a disease in that long-term depot. When cold harms the physical appearance, the physical appearance will show a reaction. When wind harms the sinews and vessels, the sinews and vessels will show a reaction.

Lingshu 6 (*Ibid.: 6.127*)

In this passage, we see the physical form being contrasted with the interior *qi*. Note that the former is visible externally to others, whereas the latter is sensed internally to self.

### 3. The functioning of any body parts

If there are 50 movements without a single intermittence, all the five long-term depots are supplied with *qi*. If within 40 movements there is one intermittence, one long-term depot is without *qi*. If within 30 movements there is one intermittence, two long-term depots are without *qi*. If within 20 movements there is one intermittence, three long-term depots are without *qi*.

Lingshu 5 (*Ibid.: 5.116*)

In this passage which discusses the movement of supply *qi* throughout the body, *qi* refers to the function of the internal viscera. In other contexts, it can refer to the function of other organs, or the limbs.

### 4. *Qi* in the channels

Qi Bo replied: It is simply impossible that there is a place not passed through by the *qi*. This is like the flow of water, like the movement of sun and moon – they will never stop.

Lingshu 18 (*Ibid.: 18.248*)

This might be the most common type of *qi* in the *Inner Canon*. Here, the author borrows the water metaphor to indicate that its flow is unending. Note also that elsewhere in the *Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon*, the description of *qi* moving like the sun and moon provides us with the earliest extant reference to regular cycles and the concept of *qi* circulating around the body.

### 5. Characteristic or tendency

Huang Di asked Qi Bo: Now, the *qi* of the four seasons, they all differ in their physical appearance. The emergence of each disease is linked to a certain location where it develops. As for the way of cauterisation and piercing, what specifications exist?

Lingshu 19 (*Ibid.*: 19.259)

*Qi* here refers to a tendency, feature or aspect of, in this case, the four seasons. This kind of use was common in ancient texts. It refers to a summation of the total characteristics of a specific type of thing.

### 6. A counterpart of blood

Whether the long-term depots are firm or brittle, and whether the short-term repositories are large or small, how much grain [they have received], and of what length the vessels are, whether the blood is clear or turbid, and whether the *qi* are many or few, whether the twelve conduits transmit much blood and little *qi*, or little blood and much *qi*, and whether overall they contain much blood and much *qi* or little blood and little *qi*, all this can be quantified.

Lingshu 12 (*Ibid.*: 12.212)

Blood (*xue* 血) was considered the *yin* portion of a larger, generalised *qi*, against which a narrower concept of *qi* was considered the *yang* component (Sivin 1987: 51–2). The pairing of blood and *qi* dates back at least to the works attributed to Confucius in the early fifth century BCE, for whom *xieqi* 邪氣 was a compound referring to an individual's vitality in general (*Ibid.*: 46). This pairing became more formally theorised in the *Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon*, as we see here. Blood was considered substantial and steady, against *qi* which was dynamic and clear. Where blood housed and formed the root of the *qi* that was the force that moved blood along through the vessels, as well as keeping it contained within the vessels.

### 7. An overall term for the various *qi* that flowed through the body

Qi Bo: The major differentiation of the *qi* [is as follows]: The clear [*qi*] ascend and flow into the lung. The turbid ones descend and move into the stomach.

Lingshu 40 (*Ibid.*: 40.388)

The image here pictures a variety of *qi* flowing throughout the body, in dynamic relation to one another. Yet, the first use of the term above generally refers to all of the *qi* and it is therefore a mass noun in the sense used by Stanley-Baker at the beginning of this chapter.

### 8. Internal sensations in the body

In the case of a sudden loss of voice, with the *qi* [breathing section] hardened, [for therapy] one chooses the *fu tu* [opening] and removes blood from the basis of the tongue.

Lingshu 21 (*Ibid.*: 21.270)

*Qi* could refer to interoception of illness sensations in the body as here, where hardness of the *qi* refers to a substantial sense of something plugged or blocked in the throat. Other similar descriptions might indicate feelings of blockage, knots or accumulation in other regions of the body.

## 9. Response to needling

It happens that [a patient's] spirit is excited, and the *qi* moves even before a needle has been applied. It happens that the *qi* and the needles confront each other. It happens that the needle was withdrawn, but the *qi* flow by themselves. It happens that the effect is noticeable only after several piercings. It happens that the deployment of the needle causes the *qi* to move contrary to the norms. It happens that despite repeated piercing the disease increases in its severity.

Lingshu 67 (*Ibid.*: 67.581)

This passage is a typical description of bodily responses to piercing, and furthermore shows the close relationship between *qi* and acupunctuotherapy. It is worth pointing out that these reactions are not necessarily local to the site of piercing, but might be observable throughout the rest of the body. It relates directly to needling and is mostly noticed by the therapist; thus, it is differentiated from 4 or 8.

## 10. Pathogenesis and pathomechanism

When there are evil [qi] in the lung and the heart, the qi remain in the two elbows.

When there are evil [qi] in the liver, the qi flow into the two armpits.

When there are evil [qi] in the spleen, the qi remain in the two thighs.

When there are evil [qi] in the kidneys, the qi remain in the hollows of the two knees.

Lingshu 71 (*Ibid.*:71.645–46)

While *qi* refers to subtle materials in the natural world, when these invade the body to cause disease, the term *qi* refers to the means by which pathogenic influences spread throughout the body.

## 11. Substances in nature

The upright 'proper *qi*' (*zhengqi* 正氣) are proper wind coming out of a certain cardinal direction. They are not [the so-called] 'depletion wind'.

Lingshu 75 (*Ibid.*: 75.655)

When *qi* in the natural world, such as wind, heat, and dryness, remain outside the body, they are not pathogenic, and thus ordered and 'proper'.<sup>31</sup>

## 12. Intestinal gas

Food ingested will be thrown up again. The stomach duct aches. The abdomen is swollen. [Patients] tend to moan. After defecation and [when intestinal] *qi* [have passed], a joyous feeling sets in, as if something had been shed. The body and all its limbs feel heavy.

Lingshu 10 (*Ibid.*: 10.179)

*Qi* here literally refers to gas in the intestines. This may be the most material of *qi* in the *Inner Classic*.

Although these forms of *qi* are closely related to one another, they can be distinguished by the fact that nine out of these twelve forms are 'ideological', that is, grounded in a conceptual

theory about the makeup of the body or the natural order. Only three, described in 8, 9 and 12 above, I maintain, are direct, phenomenological observations of own's body or the body of others (patients in particular) (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1 Qi typologies organised by number

Number of qi	Treatise	Connotation
1	I have been informed that every person has essence, <i>qi</i> , <i>jin</i> liquids, <i>ye</i> liquids, blood and vessels. I was of the opinion that all of them constitute one identical <i>qi</i> . Now they are distinguished by six names. I have no idea why this is so. <i>Lingshu</i> 30 (Ibid.: 30.351)	Singular overarching category of bodily materials.
2	However, when the <i>qi</i> recede in the lower regions, while the camp and guard [ <i>qi</i> ] remain where they are, when cold <i>qi</i> mount upwards, and the true and evil [ <i>qi</i> ] attack each other, that is, when two types of <i>qi</i> strike at each other, then such a union ends in a swelling. <i>Lingshu</i> 35 (Ibid.: 35.379) When [the patient] sweats profusely and is soggy, this is so because he has met with very [much] dampness. The yang <i>qi</i> is diminished, while the yin <i>qi</i> abounds. The two <i>qi</i> affect each other. Hence, sweat leaves [the body] and [the patient is] soggy. <i>Suwen</i> 43 (Unschuld and Tessenow 2011: 43.651)	True <i>qi</i> internal to the body, versus <i>qi</i> invading the body from outside. The former is good, the latter is pathogenic or deviant. <i>Qi</i> distinguished by yin and yang.
3	[Triple Burner]( <i>san-jiao</i> 三焦), as the bypass of [original] <i> yuan qi</i> , guards the passing of three <i>qi</i> throughout the five <i>zang</i> and six <i>fu</i> . <i>Nanjing</i> 66 (Unschuld 1986: 66.561)	<i>Qi</i> which flows through, and is processed by, the upper, medium and lower parts of the body.
4	Comprehensive Discourse on Regulating the Spirit [in Accordance with] the <i>Qi</i> of the Four [Seasons]. <i>Suwen</i> 2 (Unschuld and Tessenow 2011: 2.45)	The <i>qi</i> of the four seasons.
5	The five <i>qi</i> take their positions one after another; each of them has [a <i>qi</i> ] that it dominates. The changes between [periods of] abundance and depletion, this is their regularity. <i>Suwen</i> 9 (Ibid.: 9.170) Hence, when the five <i>qi</i> enter the nose, they are stored by [heart and] lung. When [heart and] lung have a disease, the nose is not free as a result. <i>Suwen</i> 11 (Ibid.: 11.208) I have been informed: in piercing there are five administrative organs serving as five observation points to inspect the five <i>qi</i> . The five <i>qi</i> , in turn, are the emissaries of the five long-term depots; they are assistants associated with the five seasons. <i>Lingshu</i> 37 (Unschuld 2016: 37.387) In case [the patient] was formerly wealthy and later became poor, this is called lost essence. The five <i>qi</i> stay for long; one suffers from something having merged. <i>Suwen</i> 77 (Unschuld and Tessenow 2011: 77.667)	Five <i>yun</i> 運 or cosmic progressions, i.e. five seasons. External influences of nature which enter the body and accumulate there. The five colours as seen in the facial complexion which are used for diagnosing the state of the corresponding internal organs The essential <i>qi</i> of the five <i>zang</i> organs.

Table 2.1 (Continued)

Number of qi	Treatise	Connotation
6	[A duration of] five days is named <i>hou</i> ; [a duration of] three <i>hou</i> [terms] is named <i>qi</i> ; [a duration of] six <i>qi</i> [terms] is named a season; [a duration of] four seasons is named year. <i>Suwen</i> 9 (Ibid.: 9.169) I have been informed that every person has essence, <i>qi</i> , <i>jin</i> liquids, <i>ye</i> liquids, blood and vessels. I was of the opinion that all of them constitute one identical <i>qi</i> . Now they are distinguished by six names. I have no idea why this is so. <i>Lingshu</i> 30 (Unschuld 2016: 30.351)	A definite temporal marker, a period of fifteen days, which, when added together six times make 90 days, or a quarter of a year. The sum of six different bodily substances in which construct the body.
9	I know that the hundred diseases are generated by the <i>qi</i> . When one is angry, then the <i>qi</i> rises. When one is joyous, then the <i>qi</i> relaxes. When one is sad, then the <i>qi</i> dissipates. When one is afraid, then the <i>qi</i> moves down. In case of cold the <i>qi</i> collects; in case of heat, the <i>qi</i> flows out. When one is frightened, then the <i>qi</i> is in disorder. When one is exhausted, then the <i>qi</i> is wasted. When one is pensive, then the <i>qi</i> lumps together. These nine <i>qi</i> are not identical. Which diseases generate [these states]? <i>Suwen</i> 43 (Unschuld and Tessenow 2011: 43.651)	Nine different pathogenic states or movements of <i>qi</i> , which become so due to emotions or external influences.
27	Of conduit vessels there are twelve. Of network vessels there are fifteen. Altogether there are 27 <i>qi</i> , including above and below. Where they exit, these are the wells. Where they move in swift currents, these are the creeks. Where they flow, these are the transport [openings]. Where they permit passage, these are the streams. Where they enter, these are the confluences. The passage of all 27 <i>qi</i> touches the transport [openings] of the five [long-term depots]. The joints where [structures] intersect, they constitute 365 meeting points. <i>Lingshu</i> 35 and 12 (Unschuld 2016: 35.379)	<i>Qi</i> in the twelve main channels and fifteen collaterals.

## Notes

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- 2 A number of scholarly, book-length works on *qi* make for important references in the historiography of *qi* scholarship. Kuroda Genji’s (1977) *Ki no kenkyū* posthumously publishes a collection of his papers. Onozawa *et al.*’s (1978) *Ki no shisō* 気思想 collects chapters on topics across the imperial period, ranging from early paleography through early imperial medicine and other technical arts, medieval Daoist and Buddhist cultivation, and spending the lion’s share of ink on Neo-Confucian thought. The general arc of this narrative can also be seen in Kubny’s (2002) German language dissertation and monograph. A conference volume on *qi* from the Institute of Ethnology

(Minzu xueyuan 2000), Academia Sinica, Taipei collects cultural studies ranging from paleography, analysis of early excavated literature to modern lab studies, as well as numerous descriptions of contemporary *qi* experiences and cultivation practice. Sakade Yoshinobu's (2007) collection of papers on early medieval medicine and Daoist cultivation practices presents *qi* in the title, tacitly asserting *qi* as a focal medium, but does not articulate a consistent case through the work. In general, Sakade's work over his career has dealt with *qi*-practice. The phenomenologist Yasuo Yuasa (1993, and see below), grounded in Western phenomenology and Kyoto school philosophy, also asserted *qi* as a phenomenological medium through which the East Asian body is constituted. Cai Biming 蔡璧名 (1997) uses close philological reading of early and pre-imperial medical and cultivation works to unpack a similar reading of Chinese embodiment, an approach she later (2011) explicitly argues for as a phenomenology.

3 See Hanyu da cidian chubanshe (2007).

4 Harbsmeier *et al.* (1998) and Graham (1989: 402) disagree over whether *qi* should be considered a mass noun, which is enumerated by container terms such as 'cup of water', or whether it is a generic noun referring to a generalised category of thing, divisible into different types, as in 'the six domestic animals'. Nevertheless, both agree that six *qi* refer to types, not units, of *qi*.

Both writers critique with an even bolder hypothesis put forward by Chad Hansen (1983 [2020]); (1992), who argues that all Chinese nouns are mass nouns. While this hypothesis has since been discredited, nevertheless it has inspired the above reflection about the role of mass nouns in Chinese thought.

5 I would particularly like to thank Ash Henson for going multiple rounds on this with me. Any mistakes and errors remain my own.

6 *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, 2.221 on 氣; see Figure 2.1.

7 Yu Xingwu 于省吾 and Yao Xiaosui 姚孝遂 (1996: 3371–9); Ji Xusheng 季旭昇 (2014: 58). Huang Dekuan 黃德寬 (2007: 3218) argues that this form was used to refer to various time markers and stages of completion (until 迄, already/thus 既, completely 訖). Ji Xusheng 季旭昇 (2014: 58) finds Xu Shen's tale unlikely but, unable to provide a better alternative, agrees that his narrative will have to suffice for the present. Graphs from He Linyi 何琳儀 (1998: 1199). Old Chinese (OC) pronunciation, spoken between 1250 BCE and the Han dynasty (202 BCE), from Schuessler (2007: 423).

8 Thanks to Donald Harper for a lengthy conversation on this point and about dating concepts such as 'stuff in nature' and 'breath'. Notably by the time of the later Warring States and Han, the meanings of 'cosmic stuff' and 'vapors' were well-established. See Harper (1999) for in-depth discussion of sources.

9 Graphs in Figures 2.2 and 2.3 are from Xiaoxue Tang. In graph A, also see Li Ling 李零 (2006: 270); He Linyi 何琳儀 (1998: 1200). In graph H (from the Mawangdui bamboo slips), see also Chen Jian'gong 陳建貢 and Xu Min 徐敏 (1991: 475).

10 Li Xueqin 李学勤 and Zhao Ping'an 赵平安 (2013: 648); see entry by Zhang Yujin 張玉金.

11 These 'received' sources coming to us through the written tradition have been passed on till today through being copied and recopied over time, but may therefore introduce copyist and editorial changes that may subtly shift interpretation and nuance to suit their later eras. Scholars thus differentiate them from 'excavated' sources found in tombs and caves – such editions were produced much closer to the time of original composition, and therefore contain fewer changes.

12 *Zuozhuan* 左傳, 41 (Zhao 1) 708b–9a; Harper 1999: 862.

13 *Chongxu zhide zhenjing* 冲虚至德真經 1.2a, translation informed by Needham and Wang (1956).

14 Once possessed by the collector Li Mugong 李木公 from Hefei, the jade knob is currently housed in the Tianjin Museum. Needham and Wang (1956: 143) date the piece to the mid-sixth century, following Wilhelm (1948). Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1972) puts it at 380 BCE, while Chen Banghuai 陳邦懷 (1982: 344, n. 3) argues for a late Warring States dating.

15 The *Zhuangzi* is a multi-authored work thought to contain chapters by the fifth- to fourth-century sage Zhuang Zhou 莊周, his students and later editors. The *Guanzi* is traditionally attributed to Guanzhong 管仲 (eighth to seventh century BCE), but is mostly considered to have been composed in the fourth century BCE.

On the context of these texts in the Warring States discourses on health and spiritual cultivation, see Stanley-Baker (2019a: 11–12); Rickett (1998: 19); Harper (1998: 125–26; Roth (1999: 161–3) and Kohn (2008a: 14–15). For an overview of these arguments, see Yang (2018: 118–22).

16 Rickett (1998: 19) with minor modifications.

- 17 *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋, 15.535–7. For a translation, see Watson (2013: 15.119).
- 18 *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋, 22.6; Watson (2013: 43.177).
- 19 *Guanzi Jin zhu jin yi* 管子今註今譯, 49.778–9; Roth (1999: 82, 90); Rickett (1998: 51, 53).
- 20 *Guanzi Jin zhu jin yi* 管子今註今譯, 49.778; Roth (Ibid.: 76); Rickett (Ibid.: 48–9).
- 21 *Guanzi Jin zhu jin yi* 管子今註今譯, 49.779; Roth (Ibid.: 90); Rickett (Ibid.: 53).
- 22 *Mengzi*, 3.54b–55a; Rainey (1998: 91).
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 *Lüshi chunqiu jiao shi* 呂氏春秋校釋 13/2.1; translation from Nylan (2010: 399–400). See also Knoblock and Riegel (2000: 13.2.282–3).
- 25 Five-agent theory incorporates two cycles of interaction. In the generating (*sheng* 生) cycle, each agent generates another in a cycle of mutual support. In the controlling or conquering (*ke* 克), different phases mutually suppress, control or conquer one another. This pattern of stimulus and control produces an overall stability and constancy.
- 26 *Dao de jing* 道德經 8; Lau (1963: 12).
- 27 *Yinshu* 引書 2; Lo (1888: 348)
- 28 *Maishu* 脈書 6; Lo (1998: 340)
- 29 The following section draws from an unpublished synopsis of Jiang Shan 姜珊 (2017), provided by the author. Details of her findings are summarised in the Appendix: Categories of *qi* in the Inner Canon.
- 30 This phrase translates the term *qi* with the Greek *pneuma*, a common rendering among some Sinologists. While it is widely adopted among scholars of religion, others (Libbrecht 1990) have argued for the cultural differences between *qi* and *pneuma*.
- 31 Editor's note: On the development of the concept of pathogenic *qi* from the earlier notions of directional winds, see Kuriyama and Barlow (1994).

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