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A Brief History of Qi
Zhang Yu Huan and Ken Rose
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Zhang Yu Huan and Ken Rose
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Acknowledgements

A book about ancient Chinese cultural ideas and artifacts is almost bound to be the result of a collaborative effort. The amount of information that it takes to construct an adequate context for understanding something as fundamental as qi can be overwhelming. And once the material is amassed, there is still the even more daunting challenge of coming to understand it. We have been fortunate to have the help of a large number of people in our efforts to meet this challenge. We could not possibly name them all, but there are some who have been uncommonly generous with their time and attention.

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Martin Inn has been a steadfast guide on the path of personal understanding and cultivation of qi for over thirty years. Students always struggle with the question of how will it ever be possible to repay the gift received from a great teacher. Martin’s comment that this is the book he always wanted to write was therefore especially gratifying. Even today it is possible to recognize some of the most basic ideas and sensibilities that appear in the following pages in Martin’s tài jí class.

Thanks to Tom Kepler for the invitation to visit the Santa Fe Institute and for his thought-provoking discussion that helped us understand ways that the ancient Chinese concept of qi might find its way into the vanguard of modern scientific research.

We want to thank Prof. Jiang Yong Guang and the library of the Chengdu University of Traditional Chinese Medicine for access to their research archives. Likewise we want thank Prof. Zhu Jian Ping and the library of the China Academy of Traditional Chinese Medicine for access to their collections and for his guidance and support.

The names mentioned here are just a handful of the people who have helped and encouraged us over the years that we’ve been working on this book. Despite the help and guidance received, the journey towards understanding qi is necessarily a personal one. In the end the questionable decision to write a book about ideas that are hard to grasp and harder still to express was ours alone, as are the necessary omissions and errors that our work, despite our best efforts, no doubt still contains. One of the reasons we present a book like this is, of course, to pass on the received traditions on the subject of qi. But another one we acknowledge is to invite the scrutiny of readers in the hopes that they can find and point out our errors.

Zhang Yu Huan and Ken Rose
Chengdu and Berkeley
2001
THE QUEST FOR UNDERSTANDING ancient Chinese traditions and mysteries has been a continuous theme among Chinese writers throughout recorded history. Thus there has come down to those of us in the current age a rich legacy of literary records that share this theme and bear witness to this enduring quest. Chief among the topics discussed in such works of literature are questions related to qi. To the Chinese mind in ages past, qi was a kind of substantial force on which everything depends for sustenance and survival; and it was used as a term in a wide range of discussions on subjects from anatomy to astronomy, and of course medicine. There is qi everywhere.

Those familiar with the Chinese literature on the subject will recognize in the current volume, this Brief History of Qi, a work that can find an appropriate place in this long literary tradition. Despite the fact that it appears in English, it reflects a deep understanding of the conventions of the Chinese language and Chinese thought. Its rich dependence on classical texts as sources of illustrative material on the manifold aspects of qi is evidence of the authors’ grasp of the importance of the contextual understanding of this curious Chinese notion, at once simple and complex.

Such a book is frankly rare in the foreign literature on this subject, as non-Chinese scholars and writers have often overlooked the subtleties as well as the grand scheme of traditional Chinese learning. We can see in the pages that follow that the authors have accepted their responsibility for the faithful transmission of Chinese ideas sincerely and have sought to execute it with great devotion. Perhaps it is their personal relationship that lends the authors the immediacy and precision of their insights into how difficult Chinese concepts and words can be rendered into English terms, which appear to this reader to closely convey the sense of the originals. Whatever its origins, we can be grateful for the authors’ penetrating appraisal of the roots and branches of this central theme of Chinese literature and life: qi.

Today we stand on the threshold of a new age of scientific synthesis. The treasures of ancient Chinese thought and culture now find their way into the vocabularies and, more importantly, into the theoretical speculation of researchers in a wide range of fields from economics to cosmology to artificial intelligence and life. A growing science of complexity now begins to weave an interconnecting network of theoretical models that can be used to explore and explain a wide spectrum of natural systems.

Lo and behold, the ancient Chinese possessed their own scheme of systematic complexities and correspondences. And, as the authors have faithfully pointed out in the following pages, it all depends on qi.

Zhu Jian Ping
China Institute for History of Medicine & Medical Literature
China Academy of Traditional Chinese Medicine
Beijing, China
July 5, 2001
FOREWORD

DISCUSSION OF THE SAGES WITH ONE SINGLE QI

According to written records, Chinese civilization has a history of more than five thousand years. In fact, it should be more than eight thousand years according to recent studies by Chinese scholars. Until today, study and research of ancient civilization and philosophy remain in a more or less chaotic state. Modern people who attempt to trace their origins to the ancients often display their ignorance and more resemble than understand barbarians who wore animal skins and drank blood and who danced when the sun rose and sang when the moon appeared. They can differentiate neither gods from ghosts nor truth from illusion. Even the most renowned experts cannot pull themselves out of confusion. Laborious sowing and planting often produces no fruitful harvest.

Ancient philosophy used humble perspectives to explain phenomena. In time some explanations became clear. Some faded away; some were completely abandoned. The theory of one single qi comes from the Yin and Zhou periods. It was first raised by Yin Yun of the Warring States period. He was first to assert that qi is the basis of material existence. Qi is yuán qi [original qi]. In Lao Zi’s book it is called dào. In Lu’s Spring and Autumn Annals, it is called tài yī [great oneness] or yuán bāo [original bud]. It is called tài jì [ultimate limit] in the Book of Changes. In other words, these terms, tài yī, tài jì, and dào are all synonymous. They refer to the yuán qi before the separation of heaven and earth. This qi is the material that permeates everything. It “covers heaven and carries the earth, extends in all four directions, and gives rise to the eight extremities. It is so high that it cannot be measured. It folds heaven and earth within it and is possessed of no shape.” Qi is also a worldview that asserts the whole world came from nothing to something, from chaos to order. From this perspective the Huai Nan Zi derived the model of existence of the world: “The dào begins with emptiness. Extensive emptiness gives birth to the world. The world gives birth to qi. Qi gives birth to heaven and earth. The endowment of the essence of heaven and earth yields yin and yang. The concentration of this essence becomes the four seasons. The distribution of essence becomes ten thousand things.”

This has become the basic structure of the Chinese worldview for thousands of years. “Heaven and earth mingle their qi. The pairing of things gives birth by itself.” (Wang Chong). This idea of the dào of heaven is the nature of the theory of one single qi. All Chinese philosophers follow it. This idea of qi is so deep and wide; it binds all Chinese philosophy and culture. This idea covers all of heaven and earth, mankind, nature, the four seasons, emptiness and reality, animals, plants, water and fire, spirits and gods. Who knows how many wise sages and gods have whiled away their days in contemplation of this view of the world. Whole schools of thought, the Daoists and Buddhists, have been absorbed by it. No matter god, sage, wise man, or philosopher, they all obey this idea wholeheartedly and give themselves over to seek its dào. From ancient times until today, there is no great opposition to this main theory, even though there has been some variation in the method of practice. Nor does it matter if one is a follower of materialism or idealism. Thus in it we behold the understanding of the divine of the ancient philosophers.
These ancient philosophers believed that the birth, existence, transformation, and disappearance of everything in the world happen under the influence of qi. The birth and death of heaven, earth, wind, clouds, thunder, rain, mountains, water, forests, woods, animals, insects, flowers—all are caused by qi. The birth, aging, sickness and death of human beings, the persistence of time and the whims of fate, the prosperity and misfortunes of the country, disasters and blessings—all cannot be explained without qi. “The birth of ten thousand things all take order from yuán qi.” “When heaven and earth mingle their qi, ten thousand things are born. Heaven covers from above, the earth limits from below; and qi steams up from below; qi falls down from above. Ten thousand things are born in between.” (Wang Chong).

Thus the understanding of the existence of the whole world comes from the transformation of qi. Therefore, the importance and mysteries of qi have been well established. In Wang Fu’s Qian Fu Lun, he says:

“The function of dào and its virtue does not exceed qi. Dào is the root of qi. Qi is the beginning of dào. It must have root; thus qi is born. It must have beginning; thus transformation is accomplished. The dào acts on things by reaching the divine to become marvelous. This is its charge to arrive at strength to become great. Heaven uses its movements; the earth uses its stillness. The sun uses its light; the moon uses its brightness. The four seasons and five phases, spirits, gods, and people, the myriad manifestations, the changes of good fortune and misfortune, which of these does not result from qi? The inexplicable idea of the virtue of dào. still cannot surpass the idea of qi. Nevertheless, dào is the root of qi. Qi is the function of dào.

This relationship between the root and the function of Wang Chong left a dispute as to which comes first for later generations. “The surface of the world has no limit, the end of the world is endless.” The limitless world is the transformation of great qi. There cannot be anything else. It is the same for the creation of heaven. “Yuán qi is bright and great, thus it is called bright heaven. Bright heaven is yuán qi; it manifests brightness. There is nothing else” (Yang Quan: Chan Fu). The qi of yīn and yáng fulfills the great void. There is nothing outside and there is no gap in between. The appearance of heaven and the shape of the earth are all included in this boundary. However, the transformation of the qi of heaven and earth circulates without stopping; it has perpetual life. Thus the life of the ten thousand things is born and grows.

The birth and death of life happens under the influence of qi; it transforms emptiness. Emptiness transforms into divinity; divinity transforms into qi; qi transforms into blood, blood transforms into shape; shape transforms into infancy; infancy transforms into childhood; childhood transforms into youth; youth transforms into adulthood; adulthood transforms into old age; old age transforms into death; death then turns back to emptiness; emptiness then transforms back to divinity; divinity then transforms back into qi; qi then transforms back into things. These transformations are like the chain of rain. It continues without stop. The livelihood and death of the ten thousand things are not issues of self-desire. Even if the ten thousand things have no desire to be born, they must be born. Even if the ten thousand things have no desire to die, they must die. Thus it can be said that birth does not accord to self-desire; death does not accord to self-expectation. Yan Fu says in his Yuan Qing, “Subjected to the whole of heaven, earth,
humankind, all things, birds and beasts, insects and words, grass and wood, in order to resolve the principle of connection: it all begins with one qi. And it evolves into ten thousand things.”

Evidently nothing is not transformed from qi, and nothing is not born from qi. It is so great that it has no outside, so small that it has no inside, so high that it has no above, so deep that is has no below. It creates heaven and earth and transforms the ten thousand things. It nourishes life. It implements the great dào. It threads together rationale and virtue. It is the root and function that can interconnect human nature.

Qi is the mother of things; the mother of things is the mother that gives birth and nourishment to all things. Qi includes all things; all appearances are included in it. The qi of the country is called “the counting of qi.” If the country is divided and its ruler has passed away, it is said, “the counting of qi has ended.” The qi of the general is called “integrity of qi.” The qi of man is called the “manner of qi” or the “qualities of qi.” The qi of heaven is called the “weather of qi.” The qi of god is called “immortal qi” or “spiritual qi.” The qi of ghosts is called “bewitching qi” or “evil qi.” The marvel of all things is humanity. Humans are born from qi. They receive qi from nature. They protect the true yuán qi. The body adjusts the qi of yìng and wèi. To be born, one must depend on qi. To live, one must depend on qi. To grow strong, one must rely on qi. Sickness decreases qi. Death depletes qi. If one does not drink for days or eat for weeks, still one may not die; but one will surely die from not breathing qi for less than an hour. It is clear how precious qi is.

Zhang Yu Huan and Ken Rose, distinguished scholars of Oriental medicine and philosophy, have worked more than ten years on the subject of qi. They consulted thousands of classics to gather and compile material on qi. Together they made a thorough inquiry of this idea and wrote A Brief History of Qi. This work gives precise explanations of the ontology of qi, the transformations of qi, and the merging and driving force of qi in the fields of ancient Chinese philosophy, literature, art, self-cultivation, medicine, health preservation, and science and technology. It lets Western scholars recognize and understand China. It reveals the apparent chaos and mystery but also the vitality of qi so that people can better recognize the indispensable existence of qi in the universe.

With the publication of A Brief History of Qi, we witness a growing understanding of Oriental culture to which these scholars have made long-lasting contribution to bridge East and West. This achievement should be deeply respected and admired. It conforms to the sentiments of Eastern scholars. I use the tip of my pen to wish that Ken and Yu Huan can harvest more fruit in their research of Eastern culture. When they honored me with a copy of their book, I felt delighted to write this brief foreword.

Professor Chu Cheng Yan
Early Autumn of 2000
At Bu Xi Zhai in Cheng Du
Sichuan, People’s Republic of China
A Brief History of Qi

1. Qi - The Basic Principle

In the history of human civilization, Qi has been a fundamental concept. It is the energy that sustains life. Qi is believed to be the source of all life and is the basis of all phenomena in the universe.

2. The Concept of Qi

Qi is often described as a form of energy that flows through the body. It is said to be present in all living things and is responsible for maintaining health.

3. Qi in Traditional Chinese Medicine

In traditional Chinese medicine, Qi is considered to be crucial for maintaining physical and mental health. It is believed to flow through the body and is responsible for various bodily functions.

4. Qi and the Immortal Philosophy

Qi plays a significant role in the philosophy of immortality. It is believed that the practice of certain techniques can help to balance and enhance Qi, leading to longer life and a healthier body.

5. Qi and the Art of Living

Understanding and maintaining Qi is essential for a healthy lifestyle. It is believed that by practicing certain exercises and habits, one can improve their Qi and live a longer, more fulfilling life.
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