

Qi According to Me

by Darlene Jorgens



Say Qi!

Having lived in the United States my whole life, I did what most Westerners do when I set out to gain an understanding of the word Qi (also known as Ch'i, Chi or Ki.) I looked up the definition. The Oxford Dictionary defines Qi (chi) as the following:

“The circulating life force whose existence and properties are the basis of much Chinese philosophy and medicine.”

Other definitions contained words like “energy,” “vitality,” even “oxygen.” Each of these words seem to merely touch the surface and do no justice to the multifaceted concept the Ancients were hoping to convey. So I persisted in my quest only to find that the modern Chinese and the influential masters of Chinese disciplines who hold to a much more traditional and inherent cultural understanding of Qi, continue to debate the concept amongst themselves. Some argue that definitions, especially one word definitions, like the above are too simplistic. I tend to agree. Others, offer descriptions that seem too ethereal for even a Tai Chi master to wrap their mind around. At the very least are beyond the scope of this writing. Before we try to nail this down, let's expound upon Western and Eastern mindsets to begin to visualize the difference.



Western vs. Eastern

“The consensus today is that we are naturally equipped with two very distinct abilities in terms of how to think about our experience. We can analyze our experience and break it down into ever-smaller parts, or we can join the parts of our experience together into ever-greater wholes. Both modes of thought are within our power and both have a logic, which governs their reasoning.”¹

Basically, as Westerners we are taught to think in terms “ever-smaller parts,” this is also known as reductionist thinking. This type of thought originated in the Greco Roman time period with Greek analytical philosophy. Greek philosophy asserted that the brain was sacred because it is where thought originated.

To make application, consider Ephedra (Ma Huang). The Eastern use of the herb Ephedra is as a remedy for asthma. The actual concentration of ephedrine is less than one percent and it contains other constituents that allow the herb to assimilate into the body’s metabolism gradually and with very few side effects. In this manner, herbs generally strengthen the body and alleviate the cause of the problem, not the symptoms only.



The Western scientific method reduces Ephedra to what it considers to be the herb’s “active component” in this case, ephedrine. Ephedrine is then isolated from the other constituents which makes a very potent substance with all of the herb’s protective substances removed. Its uses include: bronchodilation for breathing problems, a nasal decongestant, raises low blood pressure, as a stimulant in the treatment of myasthenia gravis, narcolepsy, dysmenorrhea, and incontinence/enuresis. Less serious side effects may include: “nervousness, anxiety, dizziness, headache, nausea, loss of appetite or trouble sleeping.” Serious side effects include: “chest pain, unusually fast or irregular heartbeat, vomiting, tremor/shakiness, sweating, severe weight loss, difficult or painful urination, and stomach pain.” Very serious side effects would be: “severe mental/mood changes, fever, trouble breathing, one-sided weakness, confusion, vision problems, slurred speech, etc.”²

The purpose of establishing the differences between the Western and Eastern mindset is to clarify the philosophy and ensuing methodologies. This is an important foundation to understanding the concept of Qi more fully. So with that in mind, let’s move on.

Where'd It Come From?

Briefly, the concept of Qi originates with Taoism. Ancient cultures did not compartmentalize. They did not, as we here in the West are all too familiar with, “separate church and state.” This means that religious beliefs pervade the government, business, medical, community, family, etc. Virtually everything was inter-related and viewed holistically. When a Chinese believer in Taoism practices Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) they incorporate their belief in Qi. In fact, Qi would be considered foundational to TCM.

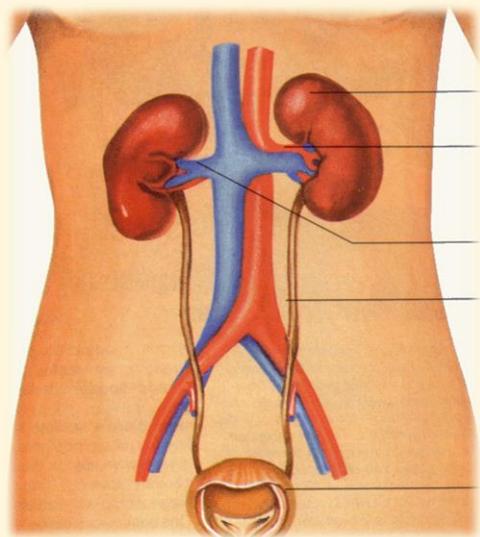
Here is a more complete definition that reflects the Chinese philosophy:

“The primal 'Life Force' that initiated all things and continues to permeate creation is referred to as *ch'i* (pronounced both "chee" and "key"). The pre-creation state is called *Wu Chi*: ultimate nothingness.”³

Where Is It?

Qi is thought to be all around us, throughout the entire universe. Qi is in the air we breathe, it is in the food we eat and the water we drink, it is in people - called Human Qi (Ren Qi.) Vital Qi (Hou Qi) is used to describe the Qi of a living being.⁴ Qi is an impersonal force to be found in every living and non-living thing. Qi can be either good or bad. References to Qi may be thought of as “vital energy” should one require a simplistic definition.

Now, personal, human Qi is believed to emanate from within the person in the space between the left and right kidneys, called “the gate of life.” This is where the “ancestral” Qi that we would have received from our biological parents, emanates.



Also, it is significant to note that to the Chinese, the Kidneys are the origin of yin and yang in the body. In Western terms, yin/yang would reflect the balance or “homeostasis” in a healthy body. Yin is representative of the constructive, nourishing and fluid aspects of the body while yang symptoms reflect a loss of energy or warmth.

In keeping with simplicity, Qi (vital energy) is said to affect the human body by flowing through the body along meridians (or channels). If the flow of Qi is interrupted, then the body’s “yin” and “yang” become unbalanced and as a result, illness may occur.

Yin & Yang

“In ancient times, physicians ... attempted to balance the Yin and Yang Qi circulating in the body, so there was “no fire” in the internal organs. Each internal organ needs a specific amount of Qi to function properly. If it receives an improper amount, usually too much which makes it too Yang or over-energized, it starts to malfunction, in time causing physical damage.”⁵

Yin and yang reflect the movement of Qi throughout the body. They are relative to each other, not opposites. What is sought is a balance, a harmony with the Dao/Tao or impersonal heaven Qi. Not an absolute because an impersonal heaven or earth Qi can change. The fluidity appears in the yin and yang symbol itself. In the diagram to the right yang is the white symbol that is rising, like fire rises. Yin is the black symbol, like water that rains down. Good or evil moral judgments are not utilized in making yin and yang determinations. Instead it is understood that there is a bit (see the black and white dots in the symbol to the right) of yang in the yin and yin in the yang.

Not everyone knows the correct placement of the yin and yang on the symbol. Often it will be seen depicted backwards and sometimes upside down.

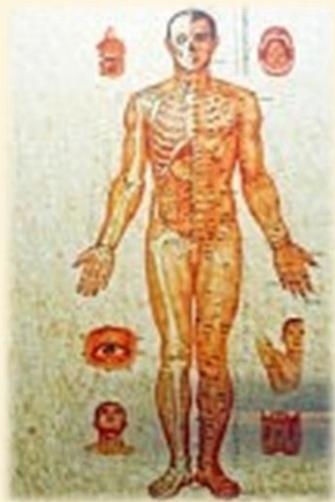
Diagram from:
Traditional Chinese Medicine, Part 1
by Dr. Kai-Yun Cheng⁶



TCM Syndromes & Terminology



The Chinese understanding of the kidneys was that of both the urinary organs as well as the endocrine system. Hence, the term Kidney Qi in TCM has a much broader application than it does in Allopathic medicine where the term Kidney would reference the organ only. When the terminology “Kidney Stagnant Qi” is utilized by a TCM practitioner, they are not saying that something is specifically wrong with the kidney organ itself. What is being communicated is that there is a constriction (lack of free flow of Kidney Qi) along the Kidney organ-meridian.



Meridians are a three-dimensional network of invisible energy pathways that are connected to every cell, tendon, bone, organ, and even to each other. It is believed that all things conscious and unconscious in the mind, emotions and spirit is interconnected with this meridian network.⁶

As we can see, the Chinese view the body systems more in terms of function instead of form. This is also true of the other eleven TCM organ-meridians: lung, large intestine, stomach, spleen, heart, small intestine, (kidney), bladder, pericardium, sanjiao (triple energizer/burner), gallbladder and liver.⁷

Although Western medicine recognizes only viruses and bacteria as external pathogens, the Chinese observed that the body mirrors certain climactic conditions.” These are called the six pernicious influences; the six pathogenic factors, excesses, or evils. They are wind, cold, heat, dampness, dryness, and summerheat.⁸

Simply, Wind is yang and usually comes with another influence such as Cold and is presented by tics, twitches, fear of drafts, headaches and stuffed up nose. A deep invasion of Wind can cause seizures, ringing in the ears and dizziness. Cold is yin and it chills all or part of the body. Heat causes either overactive yang or insufficient yin and creates redness and warmth. Dampness is yin and reflects the spleen’s inability to transform fluids in the body. It is associated with mucous. Dryness, yang, is often linked to heat because it creates evaporation and dehydration (i.e. asthmatic breathing, dry cough, acute pain, and fever.) Summerheat, another yang factor, feels humid and oppressive like a sudden high fever and the total lethargy that arises with Dampness.⁹

TCM vs. Allopathic Medicine

TCM was not founded upon modern scientific values. Rather, it was formulated during a time when the entire known world held similar holistic logic and reasoning. It is based upon by thousands of years of empirical observation individualized to the person, which, although readily dismissed by modern, “science-based” medicine for the masses, does not make it an invalid discipline.



Practitioners of TCM use a variety of modalities to move Qi within the body thereby clearing areas of obstruction. Some of the more traditional methods are quite well-known such as classic traditional herbal therapy, massage, acupuncture, acupressure, and Shiatsu massage (which is a combination of massage and acupuncture to promote energy flow.) Ayurveda could also be included in the TCM-type modality. Although Ayurveda is an Eastern Indian methodology, the

philosophy behind it utilizes a similar belief system as Qi and its energy movement. Rituals where the spirit world is accessed in order to manipulate the health of an individual through channeling is called Shamanism. These rituals can be utilized alongside the TCM-type healing methods as well as is demonstrated in the popular practices of martial arts (which is much more than learning defensive maneuvers), yoga, Qigong and even New Age (sometimes referred to as Neoshamanism.) There are Native Americans which have taken up New Age or traditional eastern Indian practices. They are similar to that which for the most tribes, has been culturally lost, therefore, Native Americans seem to readily integrate the concept of Qi. Remember that to the ancient mindset, religion and health are vitally connected.

Allopathic medicine has its strong points and the utilization of scientific method and reductionistic thinking is foundational to its strength. Like anything else, however, when followed to its extreme, we can see that it promotes “tunnel vision” as the whole person is very complex and should be considered when assistance is requested.

With a holistic consideration of the individual and whether we choose to adopt a belief in Qi or have only a desire to understand the methodology behind TCM, at some point we might pose this question. Is it possible that we could become mere reductionistic allopathic-type “PEZ”-dispensers of herbs and remedies to treat client symptoms? While some may argue that that is exactly the point (because natural is better than synthetic, etc.) the inverse may be true as well. Those with health issues could come for “natural” help with a very limited understanding of what it entails. It is likely that a majority of clients will come to us steeped in the Western mindset, thinking of alternative remedies just as they do any prescription drug. They will lack the understanding of how their toxic environment, food, water, relationships, emotions, inner thoughts and spirituality are undermining their very body’s ability to thrive. Our challenge? To communicate what they need to know to “go the distance” and regain their health.



It is no small undertaking to educate a culture with a perspective on health that is in many respects foreign. May we be granted wisdom and the ability to convey what is most important to those we are called to serve.



References:

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⁴ <http://ymaa.com/articles/basic-concepts-qi-and-qigong-part2>

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⁶ <http://www.tcmworld.org/what-is-tcm/the-meridian-connection/>

⁷ <http://www.acupuncture.com/education/theory/primarychan.htm>

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