

A Vision of the Origin of Qi Through Wind and Flavours

Abstract

This article begins an investigation into an understanding of qi that is based on its ancient relationship with wind and flavours. Wind was a precursor to the concept of qi. However, in limiting our understanding of wind to the 'spearhead of disease' we lose the richness of meaning and the many facets present in the ancient concept, which were passed on to the notion of qi. Wind was nature's intrinsic ability to move and transform, to bring life. Flavours were also intimately linked with qi as its yin counterpart, while also seen as able to provide transformation and movement. By looking at the classical concepts of wind and flavours, we can enrich our understanding of qi and deepen our awareness of its yin aspect.

Qi as yin yang

The concept of qi (氣) is undoubtedly the most significant in Chinese medicine. Every being, thing or phenomenon that exists in space and time exists as a specific composition of yin yang qi, which establishes its individual nature and destiny. When manifest, qi is always an evolving interaction of yin and yang. This is the reason why the number associated with qi is three, since qi can appear only through the blending, the merging of two (yin and yang), between Heaven and Earth; hence the number three. Nevertheless, qi is often identified with and understood as only its yang aspect, as the 'energy' that gives power to all kinds of activities. This omits half of what qi is: the yin aspect, the essence, the blood, the flavours and the nutrients.

Usually in medicine, qi is seen as the yang side in a pair made with one of the vital substances: essence and qi (or vital qi, jing qi 精氣), blood and qi (xue qi 血氣), or qi and flavours (qi wei 氣味). Within these pairs, qi represents the yang aspect with its key functions of starting and maintaining motion, sustaining rhythms, transforming and warming, to name a few. However, essence, blood and fluids are also what is called qi, as shown in a passage from *Lingshu* (Spiritual Pivot) chapter 30, which is also part of the Daoist canon (daozang 道藏):

I was taught that human beings have essence (jing 精), qi (氣), body fluids (jin 津 and ye 液), blood (xue 血) and vital circulation (mai 脈); but that in fact they are one qi (yi qi 一氣) although they have six different names. But I don't know why it is so.¹

余聞人有精氣津液血脈。余意以為一氣耳。今乃辨為六名。余不知其所以然。

The text gives then a short outline for each of these six qi. Qi itself is presented as one of the six qi:

[Huang Di:] What does one call qi?

Qi Bo: The Upper Heater opens up and spreads the flavours of the five grains. That which pervades the skin like smoke, powerfully fills (chong 充) the body and moistens the body hair, like an irrigation by mist (wu 霧) and dew (lu 露), that is called qi.

何謂氣。

岐伯曰。上焦開發。宣五穀味。熏膚充身澤毛。若霧露之溉。是謂氣。

Even if this description reminds us of what is said of the defence qi (wei qi 衛氣) - with its yang ability to spread through any space, to warm, to powerfully fill the surface - several of the Chinese characters, probably carefully chosen, imply a yin aspect that still exists within the yang. The yang dynamism of qi allows all that nurtures and lubricates to pervade the body from the inside to the surface.

Pure yang qi cannot exist; it is always mixed with some kind of yin counterpart.

Pure yang qi cannot exist; it is always mixed with some kind of yin counterpart. Yang, but also yin, simply cannot exist without the other; it is because they are together, interacting one inside the other, that they are real and able to constitute the form and the functioning of any thing, being or phenomenon. Like Heaven and Earth: without the Earth, Heaven would explode, and without Heaven, Earth would implode; in separation, they would have never even come into existence.

This reminds us that when speaking of qi we have to first consider the context and the level we are addressing. Qi can either be the yang element within

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a pair, as in blood and qi, or can represent the yin side. The defence qi is yang, probably the most yang expression of qi in the body; but its counterpart - the partner without which it cannot exist - is the constructive qi (ying qi 營氣), which obviously pertains to yin, but is still called qi. How can we explain the ying qi if the only idea we have of qi is yang, formless, pure activity or energy? All that is used to construct, build the body is also qi. Essence, blood, fluids are qi. Moreover, when yin and yang merge, the result is a specific qi. Thus any given composition of essence and qi, blood and qi is also a specific qi. We can summarise this by saying: when we have the expression 'xue qi' or 'blood and qi', qi is a qi, blood is a qi, and blood and qi is also a qi.

In this article, the author presents two fundamental forebears of the concept of qi, which developed in the centuries just before the Common Era. They show how the concept of qi is built on what comes from Earth as well as from what comes from Heaven, and can designate a formless agent of life as well as a living substance. These two forebears are 'wind' and the 'flavours'.

Wind

The Phoenix-winds

Wind, feng 風, is a much older character than qi 氣. What the ancient character represented adds richness to the concept of qi and indeed forms part of it.

In oracular inscriptions (jia gu wen 甲骨文), the character for wind, feng 風, is similar and even assimilated to the one describing the phoenix feng 鳳.² They both had the same pronunciation and represented something analogous.

The character for phoenix 鳳 represents a bird with a long and beautiful tail and a fierce head 鳥, enfolded in what looks like a sail swollen by wind 凡, suggesting a bird flying powerfully and high. The second component, 凡, is also found in the character for wind 風.



Figures: Archaic characters for wind/phoenix

There are four phoenix-winds, four spirits represented as phoenixes (feng 鳳), that send influences on earth as the wind (feng 風) does. They are sent by the High Sovereign in Heaven to the four directions to bring life to each of the four territories forming the Earth. Each phoenix-wind brings influences according to its natural direction.³

Four directions are sufficient to identify four territories, which are representative of any further division in space. They also represent the diversity of life forms on Earth: those in the South, the North, the East and the West. Since the Earth reflects the celestial order, politically those four territories are the four regions populated by all the clans submitted to the authority of the sovereign, who occupies

the central region and sends his influences and orders to the four vassal territories around his central domain.

The apertures

The earth is pierced by countless apertures, the best examples being the caves and caverns that are found in the mountains. At sunset, the phoenixes dwell in such caverns, which are called 'caverns of the phoenixes' (feng xue 鳳穴), or caverns of the wind (feng xue 風穴). Through these cavities, the wind penetrates the Earth to arouse its activity, to excite its fertility.⁴ Reflecting the image of the Earth, the human body is pierced with apertures and orifices through which the natural influences penetrate. Zhuangzi, at the beginning of chapter 2, presents huge trees reacting to the wind, or to the qi of nature, as a model for the behaviour of humans.⁵ He describes the trees with the same expressions that are used for the human body:

In the mountain forests that lash and sway, there are huge trees a hundred spans around with hollows and openings (qiao xue 竅穴) like noses, like mouths, like ears, like jugs, like cups, like mortars, like rifts, like ruts. They roar like waves, whistle like arrows, screech, gasp, cry, wail, moan, and howl, those in the lead calling out yeeee!, those behind calling out yuuu! In a gentle breeze they answer faintly (xiao he 小和), but in a full gale the chorus is gigantic (da he 大和). And when the fierce wind has passed on, then all the hollows are empty again (xu 虛).⁶

大木百圍之竅穴，似鼻，似口，似耳，似逃，似圈，似臼，似洼者，似污者；激者，瀉者，叱者，吸者，叫者，譁者，寔者，咬者，前者唱于而隨者唱喁。冷風則小和，飄風則大和，厲風濟則眾竅為虛。

The expression 'caverns of the wind' will become the caverns or cavities of qi (qi xue 氣穴), the term used in classical medical texts to indicate an acupuncture point. In its presentation of the human body, *Suwen* (Simple Questions), chapter 5, described the acupuncture points on the channels as cavities of qi with a particular location and name:

... assigning to each cavity of qi (qi xue 氣穴) springing from (fa 發) [the channels] a location and a name (chu ming 處名). 氣穴所發。各有處名

Cavities of qi or qi holes is also the title of *Suwen* chapter 58 (qi xue lun 氣穴論, Treatise on Qi Points), where the locations and names of the known points are presented.

The human body and the huge trees described by Zhuangzi are analogous, both receiving heavenly or natural influences from the outside through their many openings and apertures (xue 穴). These heavenly or natural influences penetrating them are called wind when referring to a tree, and become qi in medical texts when speaking of the places receiving the external influences that nourish and transform what is

inside the human body. Needless to say, an acupoint (xue 穴 or qi xue 氣穴) is far more than a mere place to receive qi from the surroundings, since it also deals with the qi coming from inside, and is the place where needles are inserted. This is a good example of 'wind' becoming 'qi' in a name which is central to acupuncture, the so-called 'points' where all qi circulate, and can be accessed and regulated.

The eight winds

Traditionally, all the winds together are called 'the eight winds' (ba feng 八風). This set phrase, in classical times, represented all variations of qi according to the eight compass directions and the eight dates that punctuate the circulation of qi throughout the year (solstices, equinoxes and the start of the each season). They are the totality of the atmospheric and seasonal influences, which naturally vary according to place and time. A spring wind is not the same as an autumn one, and a north wind is not a south wind. A violent wind is a picture of force, a gentle breeze a whisper caressing all life.

So, each wind brings life to a place on earth, according to its own specific characteristics, which are determined by its direction of origin. Wind can bring dryness or rain, heat or cold; its effects on the human body can range from pain in the joints to wild behaviour. In English, each wind has its own name, commonly referring to its direction of origin, its nature or its effect, as the Nor'easter or the Nor'wester, the November Witch (a strong autumn wind), or the Diablo (a burning hot wind).

This ties to the archaic concept of wind as a messenger of the supreme power that rules in Heaven.⁷ Wind is the cosmic force that acts between Heaven and Earth. The influences of Heaven that penetrate Earth vary according to place and time. Wind induces the inner and unseen transformations that cause the Earth to bring forth life and living beings, the germination and flowering of spring that precedes maturation and harvest of autumn.

What nowadays appears as a metaphor was then most probably believed to be a reality. When the wind brings the appropriate rain, or warmth, or cold, or dryness at the time when they are due, the harvest is abundant and people have enough to eat: it is life. If the wind brings these influences in excess or insufficiently or at the wrong time, the harvest is meagre and people starve: it is death. Therefore, when each wind comes at the right time and with the right force, life flourishes; when it does not, everything perishes.

Wind brings life from Heaven to Earth; wind brings the renewal of life, opens the apertures, initiates movement, sustains motion and calls the hibernating animals back to light. Blowing in the spring, it triggers the process of transformation that leads to germination, to the growing of the vegetation, and the maturation of grains.

The six qi

Around 400 BCE, a text expressed this ancient and common statement, already calling 'qi' the influences sent by Heaven on Earth to stimulate its fertility. In the *Chunqiu Zhuozhuan* (春秋左傳, *Commentary to the Spring and Autumn Annals by Zuo*) the number of variations of these influences is not eight but six, most probably a number related at that time to heavenly phenomena. Six qi from Heaven enact the earthly production of any form of life through time, including all the variations of the weather and the surrounding atmospheric conditions. These qi from Heaven define the specific features of each being, in terms of their flavour, colour and sound.

These same qi that allow the beginning and development of life through the Earth also penetrate human beings, bringing them fulfilment or disease according to their alignment with the natural (or heavenly) order or lack thereof.

Heaven has the Six Qi (liu qi 六氣)⁸, which descending generate the Five Tastes, issue as the Five Colours, are evidenced by the Five Sounds, and in excess (yin 淫) generate the Six Diseases. The Six Qi are shade and sunshine (= yin and yang⁹), wind and rain,¹⁰ dark and light. They divide to make the Four Seasons, in sequence make the Five Rhythms, and in excess bring about calamity. From shade (= cold) in excess cold diseases, from sunshine (= heat) hot; from wind in excess diseases of the extremities, from rain of the stomach; from dark in excess delusions, from light diseases of the heart. (Chunqiu Zuo zhuan)¹¹

天有六氣，降生五味，發為五色，徵為五聲，淫生六疾，六氣曰陰陽風雨晦明也，分為四時，序為五節，過則為菑，陰淫寒疾，陽淫熱疾，風淫末疾，雨淫腹疾，晦淫惑疾，明淫心疾。

It is easy to see how this model appears in what we know of qi in medicine. A qi which is in excess - or in deficiency - is a pathogenic qi. The six pathogenic qi - which are wind, cold, heat, dampness, dryness and fire - are named 'the six excesses' (liu yin 六淫), using the same character as the one repeated in the text from the *Chunqiu Zuo zhuan* above. Besides when excess or deficient, these qi may also be evil when they do not appear at the right time.

The correct qi (zheng qi 正氣) are the correct winds (zheng feng 正風). They each come from a specific direction (or territory, fang 方). They are neither fullness winds (shi feng 實風), nor depletion winds (xu feng 虛風). The evil qi (xie qi 邪氣) are depletion winds (xu feng 虛風) acting as robbers injuring human beings. (Lingshu ch.75)

正氣者。正風也。從一方來。非實風。又非虛風也。邪氣者。虛風之賊傷人也。

'Depletion winds' (xu feng 虛風) are the winds/qi which appear outside the specific time or season when they are supposed to come (for instance, the northern wind around the winter solstice) and harm human beings.

The actual features of the winds – such as the appropriate time of arrival, and the influence they should bring – were a basis for the development of synchronicity, i.e. the importance of the right time, the opportune moment both in nurturing life and in treatment.

A specific qi benefits life:

- when it is in the proper yin yang harmony, for instance when the defence qi conveys sufficient fluids or when fluids are permeated with enough energy to move them;
- when it is in harmony with all others and creates no disorder by being either in excess or deficient;
- when it is in harmony with the appropriate place for its action;
- when it is in harmony with the correct moment in time for its activity.¹²

Almost the same can be said for the wind, as heavenly influence or natural force behind the appearance and growth of life on earth.

Coming back to the six qi described in the *Chunqiu Zuozhuan*, we can say that through the year, in the constant and ever changing alternation of day and night,¹³ through the general warming and cooling of the hot and cold seasons, wind and rain hopefully come in their due time. More than the mere succession of the four seasons, the five rhythms¹⁴ indicate that each moment in time is a specific qi made of a blending of cold or heat, during day or night, with a certain kind of wind and/or rain.

Later, when the theory of yin yang and five elements (or phases, yin yang wu xing 陰陽五行) was developed, the medical approach based on it often referred to the coming together of one or several of the five (evil) qi (wu qi 五氣) or of the six excesses (liu yin 六淫)¹⁵ and considered the place and time of the attack in order to make a complete diagnosis and elaborate the most appropriate treatment strategy.

In ancient times, the wind was seen as the power of Heaven that can start the process of life, set in motion the series of transformation that weave the reality of everything that exists.

Transformation

Another important feature of wind is its transforming power. The classic¹⁶ graphic for wind, feng 風, represents an insect 虫 caught in the midst of a whirlwind. This has been seen by scholars¹⁷ as the wind of spring that sets dormant

vital activity in motion, wakens hibernating animals and leads to the appearance and metamorphosis of insects. It is said that when the wind begins to blow, insects emerge and transform within the space of eight days.¹⁸ In ancient times, the wind was seen as the power of Heaven that can start the process of life, set in motion the series of transformation that weave the reality of everything that exists.

The phrase qi hua 氣化, qi transformation, refers to the continuous transforming action of qi that shapes and animates everything in the cosmos, guides changes and permutations, and organises interactions. Qi hua offers a dynamic vision of a universe in constant transformation. The interplay of yin yang qi gives everything existence, appearance and function. It represents movement and circulation in and between all beings. These are the continual movements that affect forms and appearances, the changing of matter from solid to liquid and from liquid to vapour, as in the transformations of water into ice or clouds. Qi hua causes forms to emerge from what is without form, then return to a formless state. Qi transformation forms the vital processes that make life possible. Life begins, unfolds and reaches its end through qi hua.

Does qi hua mean 'transformations through qi' because these transformations are the work of qi? Or 'transformations in qi' because the transformations affect qi, substances, yin and yang? It all depends on perspective.

In medicine, transformations appear at various levels. They are the bodily interactions of essence and qi mirroring the cosmos. In a person, essence, fluids and all assimilated substances are perpetually transformed by qi to vitalise the physical and mental functioning of our being. One of the principal roles of qi as yang is to interact with substance; as yin, to ensure that transformations take place. It is also thanks to transformations that the five zang, saturated with essence, can produce their qi and maintain their activities at all levels of life.

When we consider the ceaseless play of yin yang, it is qi that can be called everything that exists, both yin and yang. The transformations are therefore those taking place in relation to the six qi mentioned in *Lingshu* chapter 30, which can also be presented in three pairs: essence jing 精 and qi 氣; body fluids jin ye 津液; blood xue 血 and vital circulations mai 脈. Jing transforms into qi, and jin ye into blood, for instance. If qi is understood to be the agent and operator of all transformations, it is the yang that acts upon the yin, upon substances. Qi transmutes them, sets them in motion, makes them circulate and warms them.

All the operations of life – all physical, mental and spiritual activities – are included in the expression qi hua. This includes the functioning of the zang and fu organs, and all the metabolic processes of the body – digestion, assimilation, metabolism, elimination, fluid and nutrient distribution, the maintenance and irrigation of the bones,

joints, flesh, and skin, our responses to external stimuli – as well as the life of the mind and spiritual evolution.

The metabolism of fluids is a good example of the two levels of interpretation of qi hua as 'transformation through qi' and 'transformation in qi':

- Fluids are renewed in the body through digestion, which is qi transformation acting in the Middle Heater.
- Qi acts upon and transforms body fluids to maintain them 'embodied', i.e. in the process of life, and prevents them from becoming harmful.
- Fluid reabsorption in the lower abdomen results from the warming effect of qi transforming liquid in vapours that are released, rise, and are assimilated. This is the qi transformation of the Bladder.
- Water is transformed into qi, as from a liquid state a portion become vapour.
- To make an example, deficiency of qi disrupts the proper transformation of fluids into vapour, causing retention of water, phlegm or dysuria.

Understanding original qi through wind

Nothing is felt when the wind does not blow, but at any moment there is the possibility that the wind may start to blow. When it does, it is not 'the' wind, but a particular wind with its own name, coming from the north or south, from the mountains or the ocean, bringing rain or drought. It turns and changes, and becomes another kind of wind. Wind is therefore an image of the one qi: indefinite, infinite, without form or features and without manifestation, because it manifests itself in all the different and particular forms of qi. Wind is one and multiple, as is the spirit (shen 神) or the qi. One because it comes from one source, such as Heaven, and maintains its relationship to the origin. Multiple because, when expressed on Earth - or in a body -, it is always specific.

Coming back to Zhuangzi chapter 2, the text just before the passage quoted above speaks of what precedes the manifestation of wind, when the wind does not yet blow: 'So long as it doesn't come forth, nothing happens (wu zuo 無作).' This wind - or qi - does not manifest through any activity or specific feature, is without rain or drought, without cold or heat. It is purely infinite potentiality, without any determination of its own. When a qi does exist, it manifests and has specific features, qualities and effects. This can be seen as the relationship between the original qi (yuan qi 元氣) and any qi which manifests in the cosmos or in the body. When a qi manifests itself, it is given a name according to its nature and function: it is the qi that is able to defend, or to construct, or to gather, and so on. When 'qi' alludes to the source of all that exists, it cannot be 'a qi'; it is rather the absolute Emptiness, the Great Void from where everything emerges.

Flavours

The character for qi, in its ancient forms, does not have the meaning of wind or qi as discussed above. One of the most ancient forms of the character qi 氣 is 气; it represents something which rises, shown as 三 三 三 气, an offered prayer, a request made to higher powers. Later, once the concept was fully developed, scholars would see 气 as the water evaporating from land to form clouds. The grain of cereal 米 added to this character, making it qi 氣, reminds us that vitality is nourished by grain, by food, by the qi emanating from jing 精, essences. It is in the context of the offering of grains, or food, that we find the first use of qi 氣 in ancient texts,¹⁹ with a meaning equivalent to another character 飢, also pronounced qi, formed by qi 氣 with the addition of shi 食: food, to eat.

The meaning of the character written as 氣 or 飢 is to present a living animal or uncooked grain to someone to be used as a sacrificial offering; thus, perhaps in relation with the archaic meaning of qi 气, the character in its two forms is also used for the animals or grains given as an offering. From that, the meaning evolved to the food provided to the animals, such as horses, belonging to the travellers being hosted, animal feed, grain ration and most probably any comestible, anything that brings satiety, including to human beings. In fact, the *Shuowen Jiezi* (*Explaining Graphs and Analysing Characters*) explains the character qi 氣 through the character kui 饋,²⁰ meaning 'to present food to someone' or 'to sacrifice, to supply with food, provision, to nurture'.

It is quite obvious that when one eats, one's forces are renewed and the body's substances replenished; when starving, exhaustion - both physical and mental - comes before emaciation. It is therefore evident that food restores both what has a form and what is formless within a human being. Or, as it could be formulated after the yin yang theory and the concept of qi had fully developed, the yin as well as the yang aspect of qi in the body are regenerated through what is eaten. Consequently, in medicine, both the defence qi and the constructive qi are rebuilt with what is digested.

The fact that the very substance of food gives rise to ying qi can be seen as a qi hua: the transformation of vital matter into activity, functioning, or the transformation of essence/flavours into qi. The yin gives rise to the yang, as it is reiterated in the classics; for instance:

Yin is that which treasures the essence (cang jing 藏精) and then there is a vivid surge [of yang]21. Yang is that which defends on the exterior (wei wai 衛外) and then solidity (gu 固) is the result. (Suwen ch.3)

陰者，藏精而起亟也；陽者，衛外而為固也。

In the book previously quoted from around 400 BCE, we find:

Flavours (wei 味) are used to move qi, qi is used to substantiate the inner disposition [of the mind; the intention, will, zhi 志], inner disposition is used to settle the speech, the speech is used to emit orders. (Chunqiu Zuozhuan, Duke Zhao, 9th year)
味以行氣，氣以實志，志以定言，言以出令。

When the flavours are carefully chosen and blended, their composition starts a process where body, qi, mind and spirit benefit one another.

The quality and balance of the flavours determine the regular movement of qi; the regulation of qi leads to a quiet and equanimous mind that is able to form thoughts and express them through language. Consequently, the orders so emitted are those of good government.

There is no gap between what can be seen as substance (flavour), as movement (qi) and as mental activity (zhi 志). When the flavours are carefully chosen and blended, their composition starts a process where body, qi, mind and spirit benefit one another. One or two centuries after this text was written, qi would be the name given to what is behind the entire process, that which allows this series of transformations.

Beside the relationship between flavours as yin and qi as yang, it is also possible to take flavours as a yin yang entity. The word 'flavour' then encompasses not only the intrinsic quality of a substance, but also its effect, the action triggered by the flavour within the person. It is the same as with blood; when speaking of blood in a living body, what is implied is a moving and warming blood, the function of blood as a substance that is also qi or is totally permeated with qi.

Let us take some examples from classical and medical texts. First, an early text where the flavours, and the way they are mixed and prepared, impact the working of the mind and the balance of the emotions:

Harmony may be illustrated by soup. You have the water and fire, vinegar, pickle, salt and plums, with which to cook fish. It is made to boil by the firewood, and then the cook mixes the ingredients, harmoniously equalizing whatever is in excess. Then the master eats it, and his mind is made equable (ping qi xin 平其心). (Chunqiu Zuozhuan, Duke Zhao 20th year)²²
和如羹焉。水火醯醢鹽梅。以烹魚肉。燂之以薪。宰夫和之。齊之以味。濟其不及。以洩其過。君子食之。以平其心。

When the text was written, the concept of qi was not yet completely developed. Each flavour is taken as having

a specific action or effect; the blending of flavours also results in a specific action and special effect,²³ which will be later considered as qi.

In medical texts, it is not uncommon to find the same use of flavour to include action and effect. *Suwen* chapter 22 directly links each of the five flavours to its action:

Pungency diffuses; sourness gathers; sweetness loosens; bitterness hardens; saltiness softens.
辛散，酸收，甘緩，苦堅，鹹溼。

It goes without saying that the organisation of the flavours as five, following the model of the five phases (wu xing), implies five ways to act and to trigger a reaction, an effect. Each phase is a qi acting according to its proper nature. Through the correlation with the five phases, each flavour is associated with one of these five qi and, therefore, has an action analogous to it. For instance, sourness is correlated with wood and wood qi enhances spreading and dispersing. However, the sour flavour gathers and that is another effect, different from the one of the wood qi. So the flavour can be considered as representative of the qi of one of the five phases (sourness for the wood qi). At the same time, it has also a specific effect (gathering in the case of sourness), which is different, even as in this case, quite opposite. Nevertheless, this different effect has to be called a qi since it is a stimulus, a transforming activity, a movement, and not a substance. Thus, speaking of 'flavour' implies not only the substance, but the action and effect, the qi inherent to this substance.

Now there is another – and more commonly known – relation between flavours and qi; the one expressed by the four qi (cool, cold, warm and hot) associated with each of the five flavours. This association often refers to the substance of a type of food or ingredient as flavour and the effect induced in terms of cooling or warming. All the possibilities concerning temperature are presented in a pattern of four, in the likeness of the four seasons: to cool, to make really cold, to warm, to make really hot.

We have a yin yang pairing, with the flavours being yin, because of their substantiality, and the qi being yang, because of their formless effect on the form. However, if we take the yin part of this pairing, the flavours, within it we find what can also be called qi. Each flavour induces an effect through its own substantial quality, which is different from the effects the four qi have in terms of temperature.

Lingshu chapter 63 gives a good explanation of how each flavour affects the body. It uses the term 'qi' at several levels. First, it gives the specific location of the activity of each flavour, according to the theory of yin yang and the five phases; these locations are the 'parts' of the body associated with each of the five ways for the qi to move that are, in human beings, the five zang organs. Each flavour, when in excess, induces a particular kind of

pathology, which is explained by its action. We can notice that qi is one of the five parts of the body, related to the Lung and the Upper Heater.

Huang Di asked Shao Yu: The five tastes enter the mouth, each going to its specific place and each leading to its particular disease. Sourness enters [the part of the body that allows] the muscular movements (jin 筋); eating too much [of it] leads to dysuria. Saltiness enters the blood; eating too much [of it] leads to great thirst. Pungency enters the qi; eating too much [of it] leads to cave heart (dong xin 洞心).²⁴ Bitterness enters the bones; eating too much [of it] leads to retching. Sweetness enters the flesh; eating too much [of it] leads to compression on the heart.

I know that it is so, but I don't know how and why. I wish to hear about the reasons.

黃帝問於少俞曰：五味入于口也，各有所走，各有所病，酸走筋，多食之，令人癢；鹹走血，多食之，令人渴；辛走氣，多食之，令人洞心；苦走骨，多食之，令人變嘔；甘走肉，多食之，令人悅心。余知其然也，不知其何由？願聞其故。

The specific effect of the sour taste is explained as follows:

Shao Yu answered: When sourness enters the Stomach, its qi, being rough (= astringent, se 澀), collects (gathers, shou 收); it ascends to the two Heaters (= Upper and Middle Heaters) but is unable either to leave or to enter; because it cannot leave, it remains inside the Stomach. If there is a harmonious and gentle warming inside the Stomach, it (the sour qi) descends and pours into the Bladder; the envelop (= skin) of the Bladder is thin and soft; when it receives the sourness, it contracts and shrinks; the bond blocks the passages, the waterways cease to move; this is the reason why there is dysuria. (Lingshu, ch. 63)
 少俞答曰：酸入于胃，其氣澀以收，上之兩焦，弗能出入也，不出即留於胃中，胃中和溫，則下注膀胱，膀胱之胞薄以懦，得酸則縮縫，約而不通，水道不行，故癢。

The qi is not something different from the flavour; it is the qi of the flavour, the sour qi that we cannot separate from the texture of the substance, as we cannot separate blood and qi when speaking of blood.

Let us now take a look at the pungent flavour entering the qi. Some explanations are given in brackets within the translation:

When pungency enters the Stomach, its qi goes to the Upper Heater. The Upper Heater is the receiver of qi, it manages all the yang. When the qi of ginger and garlic chive (the pungent qi) pervades it (the Upper Heater, recipient of all qi), then the qi of construction and of defence (the qi which by their own nature can construct or defend, ying wei zhi qi 營衛之氣) do not receive them in due time, they persistently remain under the heart (the epigastric area); this is the reason why there is cave Heart (dong xin 洞心). Pungency moves with the qi (here the qi that gather in the Upper Heater and the

Lung, defence and constructive qi, probably first the defence qi); this is the reason why it leaves [the body] with the sweat. (Lingshu, ch. 63)

辛入于胃，其氣走於上焦，上焦者，受氣而營諸陽者也，薑韭之氣熏之，營衛之氣，不時受之，久留心下，故洞心。辛與氣俱行，故辛入而與汗俱出。

No ginger or garlic chives leave the body through the pores with the sweat, but the pungent qi, which has permeated the defence qi, leaves the body with the fluids that move in association with the defence and the yang, i.e. the jin (津) thin fluids. Pungent food is also responsible for the quality of these jin fluids. Here the pungent flavour is also a qi, with its own effects on the qi the body; if it remains under the Heart, it diffuses and disperses the qi, emptying the Heart of yang qi of and creating the Heart condition mentioned in the text. There is also the qi of the body, gathering in the Upper Heater and the Lung, especially the yang qi of the defence, which cannot be dissociated from the fluids. Sweat, induced by the pungent qi in the Lung qi, frees the body of the excess of pungent taste by sending out fluids, which carry the pungent flavour assimilated through digestion and the metabolism of fluids.

We can come back to the lines from *Lingshu* chapter 30 quoted at the beginning, where the qi disseminated from the Upper Heater goes to the surface of the body (skin and body hair, corresponding to the Lung) and is able to moisten, to act like dew and mist, which are full of humidity. Under this light, we can consider the definition of the jin (津) thin fluids in *Lingshu* chapter 36:

As the Triple Heater emits the qi to warm the bulk of the flesh, and powerfully fill (chong 充) the layers of the skin, this is what makes the jin (津).

故三焦出氣。以溫肌肉。充皮膚。為其津。

Conclusions

This article only intends to show how the twofold reality of any manifested qi - which is yin yang - can be traced back to two of the most important roots for the formation of the concept of qi as it developed in China between the fourth and the first century BCE. It does not aim to analyse all the aspects of the concept of qi, nor all the sources that contributed to its making. Its goal is to help us to consider the yin aspect of qi and to understand it more deeply.

Suwen chapter 3 presents yin yang as the basis of life, which together enable the harmonised qi to ensure the vital relationship with Heaven, Nature or the natural order:

From the most ancient time, to commune with Heaven is the root (ben 本) of life (sheng 生) and the root consists in yin yang. 夫自古通天者，生之本，本於陰陽。

The chapter then extensively presents the yang qi and all that can disturb it, to conclude with a shorter survey of the

five flavours. We can venture to say that chapter 3, three being the symbolic number for the qi, has to expound what is crucial to understand what qi is. Here we have yin and yang presented as different but also as indivisible, blending in harmony to keep life in the right movement, the natural order. This is beautifully expressed in chapter 42 of the *Daodejing* (*The Book of the Way and of the Potency*) here quoted from the *Huainanzi*:

[Dao gives rise to one,]²⁵ one gives rise to two, two gives rise to three, three gives rise to the ten thousand beings. The ten thousand beings lean on the yin and embrace the yang and the powerful blending of qi makes harmony.²⁶
(道生一，一一生二，二生三，三生萬物。萬物負陰而抱陽，沖氣以為和。

Let us finish with a quote from a text written around one millennium later by Zhang Zai (1020-1077):

The qi, if we consider its origin (root, ben 本) in the [Great] Void (xu 虛) is pure, one and formless; when stimulated (gan 感), [it, the qi] generates (or: gives life to, sheng 生) [yin and yang] and consequently congregates bringing about all figures and phenomena (xiang 象).²⁷
氣本之虛，則湛一無形。感而生，則聚而有象。

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Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise stated, translations are by the author.
- 2 In classical times, the phoenix was regarded as a good omen; its presence indicated the coming of a virtuous king and of prosperity. Here we speak of the archaic myth of the phoenix, around one thousand years before the classical time.
- 3 These beliefs are found in the oracular inscriptions, i.e. inscriptions on tortoise shell and shoulder blade of oxen, from around 1300-1200 BCE.
- 4 Kuriyama, S. (1994). *The Imagination of Winds and the Development of the Chinese Conception of the Body*, in *Body, Subject & Power in China*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago, p.37
- 5 The trees are a model because they do not deviate from their true nature and react with measure and accuracy. That is not always the case with humans.
- 6 Watson, B. (1968), *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, Columbia University Press: New York, p.36. Available at <https://terebess.hu/english/chuangtzu.html>
- 7 The character *tian* 天 can be translated either as Heaven or as Nature. It denotes all that happens according to the natural order of life, and the source from where everything comes.
- 8 The text in parenthesis was added as clarification by the author of this article.
- 9 Here with the meaning of the cold felt in the shadow and the heat felt in the sunshine.
- 10 It is interesting to notice that rain is one of the six qi, as is the wind.
- 11 In Graham, A. C. (1986). *Yin-Yang and the Nature of Correlative Thinking*. The Institute of East Asian Philosophies: Singapore, p.71
- 12 To illustrate the last two points: the wei (defense) qi should be in the exterior during the day and in the interior during the night. These are the appropriate places and correct times for its activity. If place and time are different, this qi becomes pathological.
- 13 Constant because the succession of day and night never fail; ever changing because the duration of day-time and night-time varies each day.
- 14 The four seasons represent only the well-ordered successions / alternations in time. The five rhythms suggest the interaction of acting forces or potencies along the course of time, as we find in the historical succession of the dynasties explained according to the control (*ke* 剋) cycle of the five phases.
- 15 The five qi are wind, cold, heat, dampness and dryness. Fire was added to form the six excesses.
- 16 As opposed to the archaic form.
- 17 See, for example, *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字 (*Explaining Graphs and Analysing Characters*) compiled around 121 CE by Xu Shen 許慎.
- 18 Jing zhe 驚蟄 Awakening of insects is the name of one of the 24 solar terms (jie qi 節氣), starting around March 5.
- 19 As for instance, in *Chunqiu Zuozhuan*, Duke Huan, 10th year.
- 20 The character kui 饋 is formed by the characters shi 食 as radical - meaning food - and gui 貴 - meaning what is of great value, precious - as phonetic.
- 21 起亟 is here read as qi ji, meaning beginning activity with quickness.
- 22 In Fung Yulan (1983). *A History of Chinese Philosophy*. Vol.1. Translated by Bodde, D. Princeton University Press: Princeton, p.36. Text in parenthesis by the author of this article.
- 23 Action refers to the stimulus that is given; effect to the result. For example bitter acts by hardening; its effect is that something becomes harder.
- 24 The term designates a heart condition due to deficiency of yang.
- 25 'Dao gives rise to the one': 道生一, these three characters appear in *Daodejing* ch.42 but not in *Huainanzi* ch.7.
- 26 Larre, C., Rochat de la Vallée, E. & al. (transl.) (2010). *Jing Shen. A Translation from the Chinese Huainanzi Chapter 7*, Monkey Press, p.7
- 27 Zhang Zai, *Zhengmeng* (*Correcting Ignorance*), chapter 1.