

The nature of qi

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One of the first questions people ask when learning about Chinese medicine is “What is qi?” As acupuncturists, we have a few stock answers for this, most of which have to do with “life energy” and none of which are terribly satisfying. The term “life energy” is, after all, rather vague, completely unscientific and lifted from a paradigm alien to Chinese medicine. If we really want to understand qi, we have to be rigorous about our language, and very clear about the context in which we are speaking. Below, we will attempt to do just this.

The first and most important thing to bear in mind about the concept of qi is that it developed in an empirical, non-Cartesian context. Without going into too much detail, this means that the empirical research classically used to develop the Chinese medical understanding of qi never separated the “mind” from the “world”, as we have done in the West. Rather, the Chinese adopted a tripartite cosmological framework, consisting of the heavens 天, the earth 地 and human relations 人. From this perspective, the heavens are turning with regularity above us, the earth is growing and dying beneath our feet, and we are caught between the two, obliged to mediate between them, but free to do so as we will. Conspicuously absent from this model is the capacity to abstract the “mind” from the system as a whole: there is no God's eye view; there is no scientist's eye view. Rather, the point of human impact is in the middle, and the substance of that impact is defined as qi 氣.

Now, this is not an idle cosmology – at least not for an agrarian society. The turning of the seasons and changes in weather can make or break a farmer, as can the quality of the soil and hardness of the crop. But through systems such as grain speculation,¹ labor organization, canal systems, and so forth, the wild uncertainty of above and below can be gradually buffered until a pleasant, cooperative harmony emerges, an eye in the stormy cycles of the natural world.

Considering the above, then, when we talk about harmonizing qi using acupuncture, what we are talking about has nothing to do with “life energy.” The cosmology behind the word “qi” is not one wherein the human is a battery that needs to be charged up. Rather, it is one in which the human is a pivot or balance point which is sometimes in need adjustment. As such, someone with good qi is not someone who is “fully charged” but rather someone who is stable in the face of stress and capable of handling the vicissitudes of life.

This being the case, we now have the tools to *physiologically* define qi. Rather than seeking a qi molecule or something along those lines, we ought look to physiologic function. Qi, in short, is the capacity to remain in physiologic homeostasis. If an organ exhibits homeostasis, then it has good qi; moreover, because different organs are differently constituted, we should expect the physiologic constituents associated with homeostasis in different organs to be, themselves, different.

This concludes our description of qi in its proper context. In our next article we will discuss how this description sheds light on the question “How does acupuncture work?”

1 Price stabilization.