

## Qi, Chi, Ki part 1

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### Foreword

The word qi has entered Western consciousness because of increased familiarity with traditional Chinese medicine, acupuncture, herbs and qigong. Nearly everybody now knows or has heard of the word qi, but its actual meaning remains a mystery for most Westerners.

Students often ask me this question: “What is qi?” Sometimes my answer is: “qi = x or qi = ?”, because in Chinese qi means ‘invisible’ or ‘the indication of something unknown’. The Chinese distinguish different kinds of qi, each having a different meaning, therefore in books the meaning of qi can vary from page to page or even from line to line.

Today the tendency is for people to contract qi into one concept and thus mix a lot of different ideas, resulting in the loss of accurate meaning.

For those who really wish to study the meaning of qi, I would suggest the research of Chinese books that write about qi. However for most people this is impossible.

To save you time I am offering you this text which contains the most important concepts of qi and an overview of the evolution of Qigong during the last fifteen years.

### 1. The word ‘Qi’

#### Qi, Chi, Ki

The Chinese word is expressed in the West by ‘Qi’, ‘Chi’, or ‘Ki’. The first version is based on the Chinese alphabet, the second is the way it is pronounced in Chinese, and the third is the Japanese pronunciation. We will use ‘qi’. With the increasing popularity in the West of acupuncture, massage, herbal medicine and Taijiquan, the word has come into common use, normally with the sense ‘vital energy’. But in fact ‘qi’ has many meanings in Chinese, because China is a vast country with an immensely long history. As a current Chinese-English dictionary says, ‘the concept of qi can be found in different scientific disciplines such as meteorology, medicine, philosophy and others’. We hope that this text will provide the means to an understanding of the Chinese concept of qi.

#### Qi: the most ancient written evidence

It is possible that some of the texts that refer to qi are more than four thousand years old, but this is difficult to prove and the debate is far from closed. However, there is a general consensus that Guoyu, Zhouyu, a historical work dealing with the Zhou Dynasty, is the most ancient book that refers to qi. It dates from 2,600 years ago. In this book we find the following:

‘During the second year of the reign of King Yie of the Western Zhou dynasty, this region was often stricken by earthquakes. Concerning the earthquakes Yangfu (the uncle of King Yie) said: ‘They are caused by an imbalance of the qi of the cosmos.’ It is interesting that 780 years before Christ the concept of qi was used to explain the mechanism of an earthquake.

Since the concept is so ancient, and because, as we have said, China is so big, with many different regions and cultural influences, the meaning of qi varies from book to book, depending on the period in which each book was written, the region where it comes from, and the scientific discipline from which it originated. Even different chapters in the same book can differ in their concept of qi. Moreover, it is not necessarily correct to attempt to reduce all of these different versions to one system: this would be like taking a number of beautiful pictures and crumpling them up together into a ball. Any deep study of the concept must keep this very much in mind.

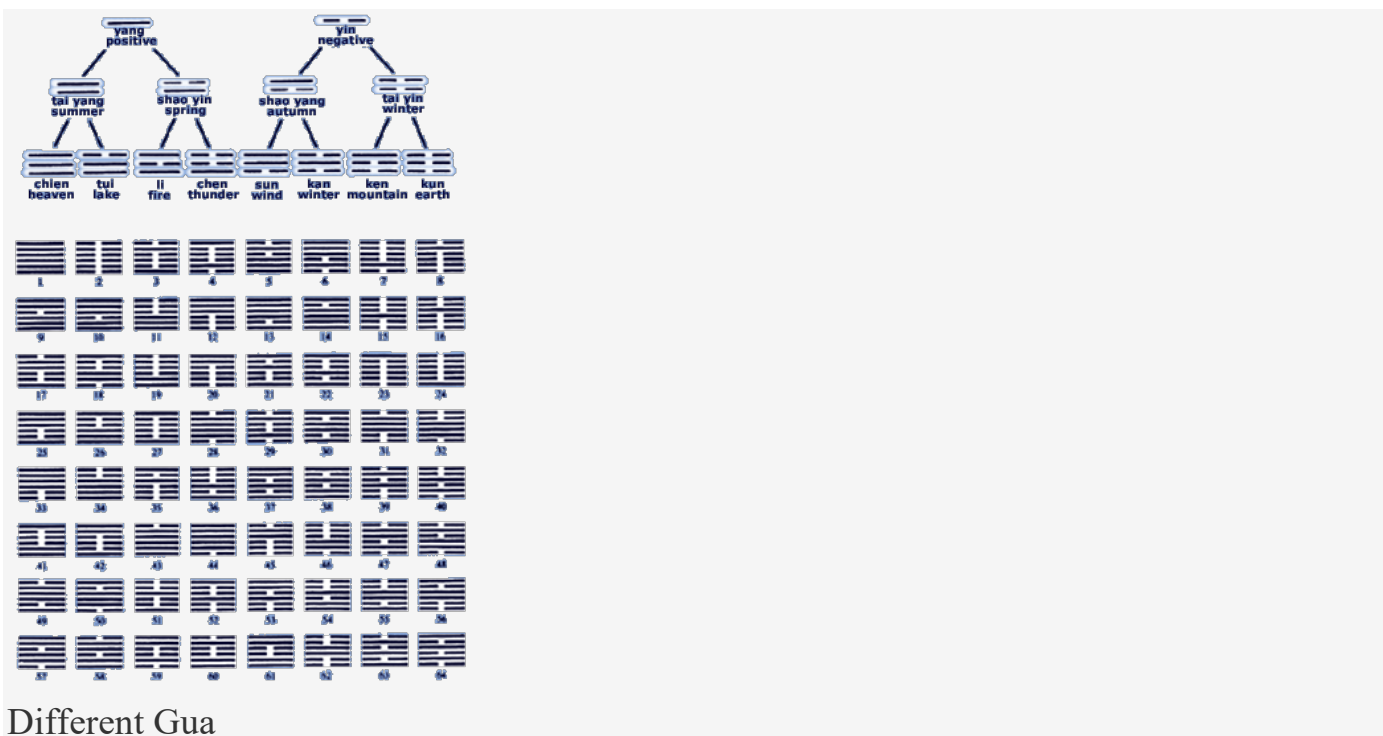
### **Qi in the Chinese written language**

One Chinese tradition tells us that Chong Ji, who lived during the Huanti period (4700 years ago), composed the Chinese characters which are now known in English as the seal characters. These characters were called zhuan. The Chinese written language evolved for more than 2000 years, and was subject to a number of changes. Various notations arose. King Xuan of the Zhou dynasty and the first Emperor of the Qin dynasty each united the Chinese characters into a coherent system, the first called big zhuan, the second small zhuan. Nowadays when making seals Chinese often use zhuan characters. Therefore the usual translation of zhuan is ‘seal characters’.

### **Knots and gua**

Another -more plausible- theory says that the characters of the Chinese written language underwent many changes during their long history and that almost 7,000 years ago, the Chinese began to use knots in string as a means of recording the weather.

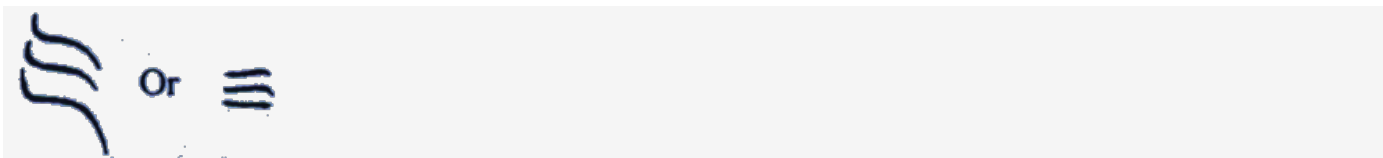
The knots evolved into the gua: full or broken lines (as in the famous hexagrams of the I Ching), which were used not only to describe the weather, but also to express historical, philosophical, or simple scientific ideas. Some gua represent the earliest expression of the qi phenomenon because they deal with qi as we understand it nowadays, but there is no gua that of itself forms a written expression.



Different Gua

After the knot period, Chinese inscriptions were made on bones or tortoise shells, after which engraved copper and inscribed stone, were used for writing.

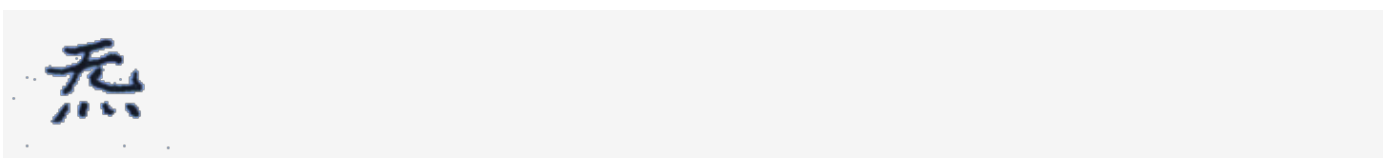
From that time there started to appear the Chinese character that indicates qi. In these periods the basic elements of the qi character varied, but one symbol never changed: the symbol whose trace can be found in every calligraphic expression of the qi concept, namely the symbol for “vapour”.



The character for qi in the shells period

**The shell period**

These inscriptions were like small paintings. The character qi was depicted as shown here on the left. This character was made up of only three lines, and these were in that period the symbol for ‘vapour’. At that time the same three-line symbol not only meant qi but had also other meanings, for instance ‘to beg’, ‘to reach’, and ‘to end’.

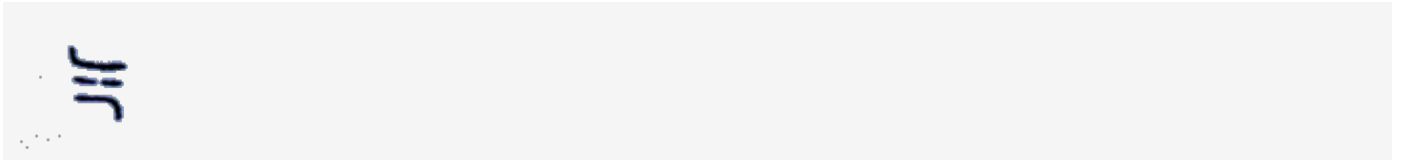


The character for qi in Lishu

**Lishu**

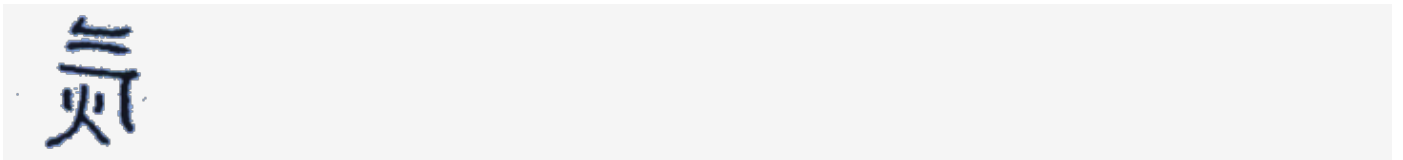
Lishu was an ancient style of calligraphy, the official script used in the Han Dynasty (206 BC- 220 AD). The qi character in Lishu evolved from another character which combined the symbol for vapour and the symbol for fire, as was the case with the qi character on the Xingqi Ming.

Taoist books often use this Chinese character for qi because Taoism began in the Han Dynasty when the Lishu way of writing was used. In Taoism qi refers to ‘the internal energy of the body’. Therefore nowadays people think that this qi character specifically refers to internal energy, but this is not correct as in Lishu script qi does not have this specific meaning.



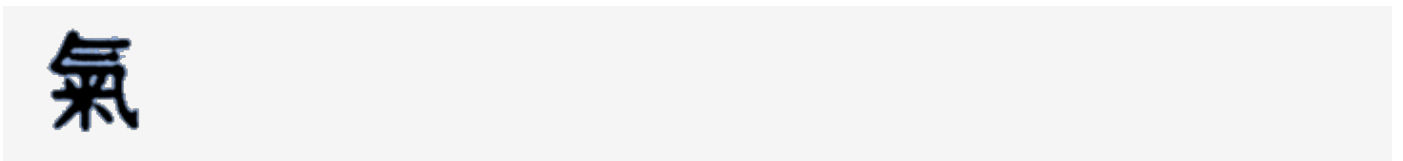
The character qi from Qihe Hu  
**The copper and stone period**

There is an antique copper tea-cup, the Qihe Hu (the tea-cup of the marquis Qi), made in the Spring and Autumn Period of the Zhou Dynasty. This has on it the character that signifies ‘qi’ in this period. This version of the ‘qi’ haracter also uses the symbol for vapour.



The character qi from Xingqi Ming

Another way of writing qi is found on a twelve-sided ornament of stone, which was worn as a pendant at the waist, probably during the Zhou Dynasty, about 2,350 years ago. When this ornament was found in the earth, 70 years ago, it was given the name ‘Xingqi Ming’: ‘Ming’ means ‘text inscribed on a stone’ and ‘Xingqi’ means ‘movement’. It is the first character of the inscription. It was kept in the Museum of Ancient Cultures in Tianjin.



The character for qi in Songti  
**Songti and Zhengkai**

the Song Dynasty (960-1127 AD) the technique of printing with woodblocks was discovered. A new version of the Chinese writing system was designed that was more suited for carving in wood. This was called Songti. By the time of the Song Dynasty, Traditional Chinese Medicine was well-developed, so the importance of food energy for the body was understood. This perhaps accounts for the fact that during the Song Dynasty the way of writing qi changed: the qi character in Songti is composed of the symbol for ‘vapour’ and the symbol for ‘rice’.



The character for qi in Zhengkai

Zhengkai is the hand-written version of Songti, and dates from the Ming Dynasty. Its characters do not differ very much from those of Songti.

Nowadays Zhengkai is used in Taiwan and Hongkong.



The character for qi in simplified characters

**China Today**

The left character is the simplified character for qi that has been in use in the People's Republic of China since 1956.



The character for qi in Japanese

**Japanese script**

The Japanese writing system borrowed a large number of characters from Chinese. One of these is the symbol for qi. The lower part of the character has changed into .>