

COMMITTEE VI

Eastern Approaches to the
Unity of Spirit and Matter:
Qi and Science

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COMMENT ON KIM: QI AND GEOMANCY IN KOREAN THOUGHT

by

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DISCUSSION PAPER

on

Yong-Woon Kim's

QI AND GEOMANCY IN KOREAN THOUGHT

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Comments on committee six, ICUS XVI, Eastern Approaches to the Unity of Spirit and Matter: Qi and Science and on Professor Yong-Woon Kim's paper "Qi and geomancy in Korean thought".

Professor Se Won Yoon states in his paper "Qi and physics", in his Conclusion:

"Qi is an entity consciously prevalent in both the tangible and intangible world, not a mere concept or idea. The fact that we cannot comprehend its action and operation is because we are yet unable to quantify the Qi or unable to formulate a concrete equation for the action of Qi."

Ravi Ravindra and Priscilla Murray say in "The Indian view of nature", p. 26:

"The key lies in the understanding that there is One Energy (Prajña, Qi) which underlies, manifests in and delights in all creation."

Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh writes in "Buddhist views of nature and qi", p. 9:

"In Theravada Buddhism, the term Qi is not known, instead prajña is used. Therefore prajña will be used throughout this paper."

Professor Yong-Tae Choi writes in "The meridian and qi", p. 6:

"Qi is a strongly active and fine substance of movement in body without a moment of halt. Qi constantly develops, moves and changes by means of of inter-antagonism, inter-dependence, reciprocal acceleration and restriction."

and on p. 32:

"From the Oriental Medical point of view, term "Qi" is with

material concept and functional concept."

Riitsu Nishio writes in "The interaction of spirit and matter and the qi function", p. 2:

"Thus, this paper is an attempt to establish a hypothesis about the relationship between spirit and matter, or that between the individual and the whole, which is different from traditional theories. By introducing the concept of Qi, it seeks to systematize material, life, spiritual and other paranormal phenomena in an integrative manner."

For professor Yong-Woon Kim, in "Qi and geomancy in Korean thought" qi is for obvious reasons a crucial concept. He says on p. 9:

"No other nation in the oriental cultural zone to which Korea belongs has ever succeeded in harmonizing itself with nature or the Qi to the extent of Korea."

and on p. 10:

"In nature there is the Qi in heaven and on earth; only when man is in harmony with the Qi should there be a cosmos in order."

and on p. 11:

"The Koreans hold an ideal to conform to the Qi of heaven and earth."

I find it curious that none of the paper-writers I have quoted makes a serious attempt to define "qi". Professor Takeuchi does display an impressive knowledge of Chinese philosophy and his analysis of the Li-Qi theory in Qi thought is very interesting, but he stops at giving some examples of how qi has been used in the history of Chinese philosophy.

Lu Gwei-Djen and Joseph Needham write in their book Celestial Lancets. A History and Rationale of Acupuncture and Moxa, (Cambridge 1980), p. 16, n. a:

"From these hesitating equivalents it can be seen that we do not yet know how best to translate chhi, which is why (ever since SCC, Vol.2, pp. 22-3, 41, 76, 369, 472) we have constantly left it untranslated. We even doubt whether there could be a justified one-word European translation. In Vol.2 we said that chhi was something like pneuma, i.e. subtle spirits, tenous

matter, something resembling air, or a gas or a vapour, but also something which could have the character of radiant energy like radioactive emanation, or X-rays, or very highly penetrating particles. In later Chinese (Neo-Confucian) philosophy, 'matter-energy' may do well enough, but for these earlier periods we should not like to particularise too finely."

No one of the paper-writers in this session has found it fit to use any of Joseph Needham's many books or papers where he discusses qi and other fundamental principles in Chinese science and philosophy, which is rather astonishing. (I should add that when writing this I have not received the papers of Ji and Charon). Another Western historian of science that also could have been used in this context is Nathan Sivin. In his paper "Chinese Alchemy and the Manipulation of Time" (Isis, Dec. 1976, repr. in Science & Technology in East Asia, ed. N. Sivin, New York 1977, p. 112, n. 6) Sivin writes:

"Ch'i refers to the active energy (in the colloquial, purely qualitative sense of the word) that organizes matter into configurations and thus resists change. The word is also applied to configurations of matter so organized. Such configurations are generally defined by their functions rather than by their constituents."

I could go on at length quoting from authorities like A.C. Graham, Benjamin I Schwartz, Feng Yu-lan, Marcel Granet, Shigeru Nakayama, Manfred Porkert, and so on, but I will stop here. My main point is that I think that the discussions, and the papers, would have been more valuable if at least someone had tried to look at qi from the point of view of the Western scientific tradition. Amittedly professor Nishio takes Western science as a starting point, but that is of little interest as he states (abstract, p. 1):

"This paper takes a position against reductionism and materialistic monism, in favor of the Eastern way of thinking."

I do not for a moment doubt the sincerety and sound scholarship of the paper-writers, but I do believe that a critical voice should have been included.

As I have indicated with my introductory quotations from some of the papers of this session, it is obvious that the writers firmly believe that qi is something more than a mere concept. In a traditional western scientific sense qi does not exist as long as it has not been observed or defined with methods accepted by the scientific community.

A vast majority of Western scientists and physicians would make the obvious comparison between the ancient Greek concept pneuma that played an important part in ancient, medieval and

early modern medicine. The theory of pneuma helped answer a lot of difficult questions on how the human body worked, but as medical research progressed this theory could eventually be discarded and is now considered a part of the history of medicine.

Another comparison could be the theory of phlogiston which, during most of the 18th century helped chemists to explain combustion. Everything that could burn had some phlogiston in it, but when oxygen was discovered, the true nature of that process could be explained.

I suggest that qi has played the same role in the Chinese history of science, although it has occupied a more prominent and important place, mainly because of its use as explanation of a very wide variety of phenomena. Those who regard qi as something more than a metaphysical principle must in one way or another prove that qi does exist as an energy, active element, a substance or something else.

What I have said here does imply that I have some doubt about the scientific background of geomancy as described by professor Kim . Apart from that major issue, I liked the paper and I look forward to discuss some details during the session, but I think that professor Kim might have stressed the Chinese ancestry of geomancy a little bit more. I think that professor Kim is quite right when he points out that geomancy "reflects a shared view of the traditional Korean people to keep themselves in harmony with nature". I am convinced that this is true, whether qi has a factual existence or not, and consequently if geomancy is a superstition or not. People tend to behave in a rational way, even if they, for some reason or other, explain their behaviour in an irrational way.