



Chapter 3

Qì in the Arts

It is this spirit of calm and harmony, this flavor of the mountain air (shan lin ch'i) always a little tinged with the recluse's passion for leisure and solitude, which characterizes all forms of Chinese art. Consequently, its characteristic is not supremacy over nature but harmony with nature.

—Lin Yu Tang, *My Country, My People*

Recent archaeological discoveries have led to a reevaluation of the antiquity of civilization and culture in China. What has long been referred to as over five thousand years of continuous cultural development is now considered as a span of at least ten thousand years. Throughout these hundred centuries, Chinese artists and craftspeople have been making art that embodies and celebrates their ideas and experiences. Ancient artifacts are constantly being unearthed and added to museum collections where they stand in silent yet eloquent testimony to the genius of China's past masters.

People from every part of the world have marveled at the unique styles of artistic expression they behold in Chinese paintings, ceramics, poetry, dance, and music. Yet for many in the West, the complex meanings of such work are hard to decipher. During the course of our research for this book, we followed the common thread that runs through the artwork of virtually every age of China's long past. This thread continues to wend its way into

the fabric of artistic and cultural life in China today. Indeed, many of the artists, art historians, and critics of art with whom we have spoken, and whose work we have seen and read over the past several years, mention this single conceptual thread as the most important element in Chinese art. This thread is *qì*.

SECTION ONE:
THE MOMENTUM OF *Qì*—
Yī Qì Hē Chéng
一氣呵成

Chinese art emphasizes the expression of motion and strength. This vital dynamism has various identifying characteristics that reflect the philosophical constructs mentioned in the preceding chapter. It arises from the ancient dialectical unity: substantial and insubstantial; movement and stillness; firmness and softness; gathering and dispersal. This dialectical construction is easily recognized in terms of Chinese philosophy as *yīn* and *yáng*. In Chinese painting it manifests in wholeness; the entirety of the composition tends “to configure the whole world on one foot of the scroll. It manifests as a momentum containing heaven and earth and the whole universe.”¹

The tension that holds together this wholeness of composition develops from the most fundamental graphic elements: black and white. This blackness and whiteness, substantiality and insubstantiality, become the internal *qì* of intelligence, the germ of style and character. Hence the whiteness and blackness, insubstantiality and substantiality, contain the *dào* of breathing in and out, the *yīn* and *yáng* of the universe, the *qì* of the highest aspiration surrounding every flowing river. The *dào* of *yīn* and *yáng* and the *qì* of high aspiration combine in a visual effect



Qì Calligraphy by
Wang Mu Ji

¹Meng Gu, *Transmission of Spirit and Understanding*, Beijing: International Cultural Publishing Co., 1989, p.76.



Luò Shéng, goddess of the Luo River. Painted by Gu Kai Zhi (c 346 C.E-407 C.E.), a great painter of the Jin Dynasty.

that creates a magical power. Anyone nourished and benefited by such traditions of Chinese culture is guided into an integrated understanding of the universe and life.² The aesthetic engine, this “magical power,” Relies upon *qì* for its fuel and its motive force.

All forms of Chinese art are closely interrelated and integrated by *qì*. The art of calligraphy is driven by “the pulse of *qì*.” In painting this pulse develops into “the charm of *qì*.” Literary expressions divide into two categories. Prose is motivated by “the momentum of *qì*;” poetry is carried by its “romantic charm.” All these factors develop a sense of the beautiful and work on many levels to harmonize the artist, the work of art, and those who behold them together with nature.

Nature in Chinese philosophy is understood to be the constant motion that manifests the changes of life. The root of these changes is *qì*. The concept of *qì* is used to explain the generation, development, and transformation of all matter. It holds the premiere position in traditional Chinese thought. Not only is *qì* the principal source of energy and matter, it also establishes the basis of spirit and the human soul. Importantly, it provides the connective medium through which the ancient philosophers

酒斟時須
滿十分浮

Calligraphy by Su Dong Po, Song Dynasty.

² *Ibid.*

believed human beings could harmonize their growth and development with the forces of nature.

This quest for harmony with nature gained its preeminent expression in the philosophy of the *dào*. Yet all this philosophizing can scarcely compete with the experience of a work of art. After all, the idea that one picture is worth a thousand words is intimately Chinese. Thus, throughout the ages, Chinese artists have sought to manifest the *dào* of nature in their lives and in their work. They applied their intellect to comprehend the changes of the natural world and to transform their perception of the *dào* into the emotional power needed to fuel the expression of their art. This emotional vitality, in fact, is their own, individual *qì*.

They strove to cultivate and refine this *qì* so that their work could be created directly from it. This aesthetic yearning for unity and harmony is expressed in the phrase, *yī qì hē chéng* 一氣呵成 which literally means, “one breath of *qì* and it is done.” It is used of literary compositions to imply a particular fluidity of the movement of ideas from start to finish—the momentum of *qì*. This concept is not limited to a single discipline or mode of expression. It runs throughout all of Chinese art. In fact, this phrase is commonly used to describe the accomplishment of anything done in one fell swoop, without interruption or pause.

The following passage is from the Confucian classic known as the *Book of Rites* (*Lǐ Jì*) from the Spring and Autumn Period (770 B.C.E.–476 B.C.E). In the volume entitled “Records of Music (*Yuè Jì*),” we read:

Poetry is the expression of the will or aspiration. Song is the recitation of sounds. Dance emotes and mobilizes form. These three originate in the heart, aroused by music. Thus deep feelings enlighten writing. It is the flourishing of qì that thus transforms the spirit. Its accumulation and harmonization in the center will draw out the excellence of the spirit. Thus must music be created without the slightest falsity.

Honesty and righteousness have long been fundamental requirements of Chinese art. They arise from an understanding of the forces involved in the process of artistic creation and reflect the profound roots of morality in Chinese culture. This morality is not based in the Western dichotomy of right versus wrong or good versus evil. It develops from inspection of nature and an understanding of how life should be lived to harmonize human action with the forces of the natural world.

In the Liang period of the Southern Dynasty (502 C.E.–557 C.E.) Zhong Rong expanded upon this ancient theme in a book entitled *Classes of Poetry* (*Shī Pīn Xū*).

Poetry is an act of will. It comes from the heart. A poem embodies words. The feelings arise from the center and give shape and substance to the words. Language is not enough. To rely on language is to sigh and lament. Sighing and lamenting cannot result in reciting and singing. Even to recite and sing is not enough. Thus we must dance it. This is all to say that the creation of art is guided by the spirit.

Zhong Rong's work was one of the earliest bodies of literary criticism in China. It focused on the "Five Character" form of poetry in vogue from the Han Dynasty until Zhong's era. His work had an enormous influence on successive generations of writers and readers in China. Through such influence, the movements of *qì* came to be guided by the spirit, informed by a sense of profound moral obligation to achieve balance and natural harmony. These movements drove traditional art in China steadily forward through the ages. The vast and complex tapestry of the traditional arts in China is indeed woven from this one, single thread. To understand the fundamental principles of the movement of *qì* in Chinese art, we begin with an examination of the ancient art of the dance.

SECTION TWO: THE DANCE OF *Qì*

A comment written in 239 B.C.E. includes a vivid explanation of the origin of the art of dance in ancient China. It is contained in *Lu's Annals of Spring and Autumn* (*Lǚ Shì Chūn Qū*).

In past times at the beginning of the Yin Kang period [during the Xia period, 21st century B.C.E.–16th century B.C.E.], the yīn qì was obstructed and stagnated. The water pathways [of the earth] were congested and did not freely flow. The qì of humankind became sluggish and gloomy. Peoples' sinews and bones curled with cold and could not extend to their fullest. Thus dancing was created to ward off stagnation.

This note echoes centuries later in a version of the same history from the Song writer Luo Mi. In Volume Seven of a book entitled *The Path of History* (*Lù Shǐ*), it reads as follows:

舞

During the period known as Yin Kang, the water pathway was obstructed. Rivers could not flow from their origins. The yīn congealed and the changes of yīn and yáng closed. Thus the people were gloomy and depressed inside. Their skin was obstructed and most people experienced swellings. Those who knew how to mobilize their joints composed the art of dancing wǔ 舞 and taught the people to dance, allowing the obstruction to be removed, to guide and connect the qì. This was called the “Great Dance.”



Seven Plates Dance (rubbing of a Han Dynasty tomb carving.)

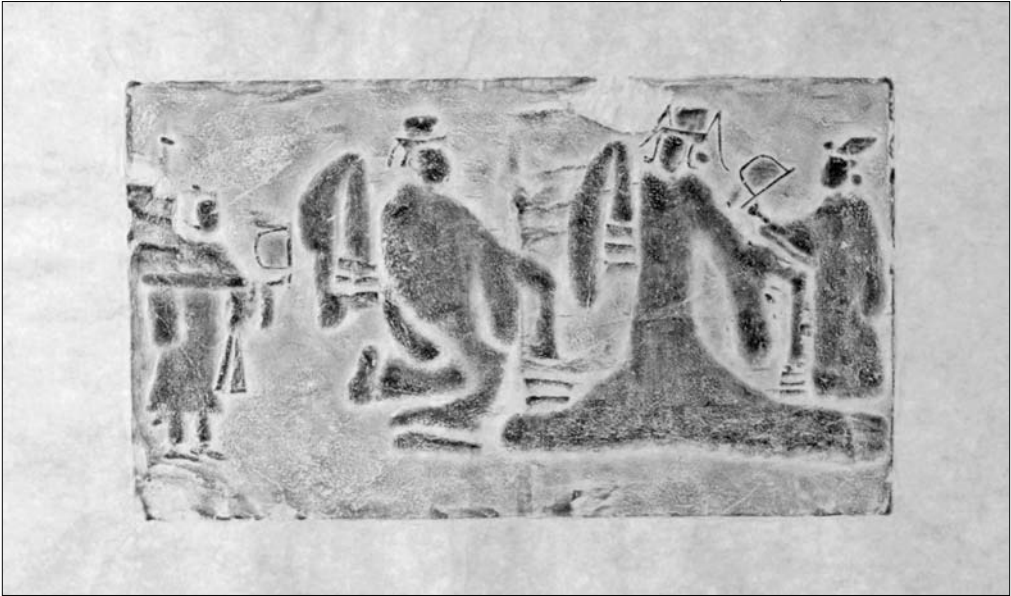
Here we see an intimate relationship between medicine and dance in ancient China. We will return to this relationship at the end of this chapter. For now it is important to note that the proto-healers of prehistoric times, the shaman or wū 巫, incorporated dancing and chanting in their healing rituals. Their dance was their medicine. The origins of the character 巫 reveal the intimacy of this relationship. In the oldest extant dictionary of the Chinese language, the *Discussion of Language and Explanation of Characters* (*Shuō Wén Jiě Zì*), written in the Han Dynasty circa 100 C.E., the roots of the character for dance are described as follows:

*Woman can manifest and mobilize Form and thus beckon God and call down heavenly manifestations through the Dance . . . because they can call upon God by dancing, the character appeared to resemble the “long sleeve dance.”*³

A pictograph of the long sleeves of the dancers' costumes can be seen in the interior portions of the character *gōng* 工. This character means “work.” It is, in its own right, a pictograph of a simple tool used for measuring, an ancient T-square. Importantly it is also the scepter-like instrument often pictured in the hands of the Chinese goddess Nu Wa, one of the highest deities in the Chinese pantheon.



Pictograph of the long sleeves of the dancers' costumes.



Long Sleeve Dance. From a rubbing of a Han Dynasty tomb carving.

The dancing *wū* are associated linguistically with both divinity and the healing arts. Dance is also noted in the book entitled *The History of the Art of Chinese Qì Gōng* (*Zhōng Guó Qì Gōng Shǐ*), as the origin of *dǎo yǐn* 導引, an early antecedent of *qì gōng*. Thus we see that the mobilization of *qì* through dancing is an ancient source of many cultural movements that are still vital activities in China today. (See Chapter 5 for a more complete discussion of *dǎo yǐn* and *qì gōng*.)



Personal stamps from the shamans—relating to the character *gōng*.

³ The “long sleeve dance” is a very ancient and still popular form of dance in China. The costumes include sleeves that are exaggeratedly long, extending as much as a meter beyond the hands.

The relationship between *qi* and dance becomes even clearer when the historical development of the art of dancing is considered. In ancient times dance was known as the art that “mobilized form.” When bodies danced, the changes of *qi* became manifest and visible. Thus the spirit could express itself directly through bodily movement. This spiritual expression was recognized as possessing healing power. It also possessed the “charm of *qi*” and could thus influence not only the human



Nu Wa

spirit but also those unseen spirits believed to play an essential role in causing disease. Thus, as the ancient shamans danced over and around their patients, they became powerful, knowledgeable, the “great ones.”



A shaman (*wū*) prepares an herbal medication for a prince (the soul) to assist his journey.
(Rubbing of a Han Dynasty tomb carving.)

The art of dancing established its place in the foundation of Chinese civilization. As the great Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross, stated succinctly hundreds of years later and half a world away, “Whoso danceth not knoweth not what cometh to pass.”



Entertainment. From a rubbing of a Han Dynasty tomb carving.

An examination of the derivation of the English word “art” reveals yet another close correlation between the ancient Chinese and Greek conceptions of the source of artistic vitality. The English word, “art,” comes directly from Latin “ars.” “Ars,” however, is the romanization of a Greek word, “artos.” This Greek word, far from meaning “art,” means “joint.” It is the root of the word “arthritis,” the “inflammation of the joints.” What at first glance appears to be a huge conceptual gap is quickly closed when it is understood that the Latin “ars” was a shortened borrowing from a Greek phrase, “artos tekne” meaning “the skill of the joints.” The Greek word “tekne” meaning “skill,” is found as the roots of English words such as “technique” and “technology.”

The Greek phrase *artos tekne* is from ancient Greek art. It pertained especially to the skills of the sculptor for whom a primary concern was the faithful reproduction of the human joints. After all, without our joints, we humans would be immobile masses of flesh and bones. For the sculptor, the dancer, indeed for any artist in any form of art that deals with the human form, the function and appearance of the joints is of fundamental importance in expressing the vitality of life and art. Thus the Greek phrase, *artos tekne*, “the skill of the joints,” shortened into Latin as *ars*, and arrived centuries later in English as “art.”

Compare the quotation cited above from Luo Mi of the Song Dynasty, “Those who knew how to mobilize their joints composed the art of dancing and taught the people to dance . . .” Perhaps the ancient world was a smaller and better connected place than anyone has yet found scientific evidence to prove. If such evidence exists, perhaps it is to be found in the dancing traces of the *qì* of ancient artists.

SECTION THREE: QÌ IN THE EDUCATION AND TRAINING OF ARTISTS: THE BASIS OF AESTHETIC STANDARDS

Bai Ju Yi, one of the greatest literary figures of the Tang Dynasty (618 C.E. –907 C.E.), wrote:

*There is a pure qì of intelligence existing between heaven and earth.
Every form of life receives it, but humans receive the most.*

He explained that it was the role, and indeed the responsibility of writers to refine and congeal this *qì* so that it could be guided by the will, released and disseminated as literature. Thus, throughout Chinese history many of the great artists, writers, and musicians were also practitioners of *qì gōng*, a form of exercise to accumulate, cultivate, and refine the *qì*. [See Chapter 5 for a lengthier discussion of the nature of *qì gōng*.]

The reason is simple. *Qì* has long been understood as the motive force of life itself. Powerful and unseen, it drives all natural phenomena. Traditional arts in China are dominated by themes drawn from the natural environment. Thus artists in China trained themselves not just in techniques that would allow them to replicate the forms and images of the natural world but in methods of acquiring a deep understanding of the essence of such phenomena and of the forces that bring them to life. They practiced to increase their own spirit and personal *qì* and to enable themselves to connect more thoroughly with nature. They thus became conduits of this motive force, so that the lifeblood of their art might become indistinguishable from the vast *qì* of nature. Such cultivation was the bedrock on which the foundations of Chinese art were established.

Liu Xi Zai of the Qing Dynasty (1644 C.E. –1911 C.E.) made this clear. In his book *Conception of Art* (*Yì Gài*), there is a discourse titled “Treatise on the Conception of Calligraphy (*Shū Gài*):”

*The best is to cultivate the shén [spirit].
Next is to cultivate the qì.
Last of all is to cultivate the form.*

Again and again this is made clear by Chinese artists and writers throughout history. Su Che, a scholar of the Song Dynasty, wrote:

Literature is shaped by qì. Yet the ability to write does not derive from slavish devotion. Only by relying on qì can [the writer] achieve perseverance.

He cited two methods of “relying on qì.” One was to follow the advice of Meng Zi and preserve one’s righteous qì—to cultivate an upright spirit. The other was to heed the words of the great historian and author of the *Book of History* (*Shī Jì*), Si Ma Qian:

To become aware of the outer world, to connect with nature, you must travel. See the marvels and natural phenomena. If you can accomplish this, the qì will fill up the center of your being. It will overflow into your face. It will arouse your speech, inspire and manifest in your writing without your even noticing.

The appearance of qì in literary compositions, particularly poetry, was considered of primary importance. The fundamental imagistic character of Chinese poetry developed from this consideration as expressed in the words of Liu Xi Zai:

The spirit of the mountain cannot express itself, thus it emerges through writing the mists and clouds in the twilight. The spirit of the Spring cannot be expressed in words, but it is revealed in grass and trees. Therefore, if the poem contains no appearance of qì [i.e., no image] then the spirit will have no dwelling place.

The appearance of qì is the basis of poetic imagery, but only through the cultivation of qì can these images naturally emerge. The point is driven home by the comments of the Qing Dynasty (1644 C.E.–1911 C.E.) poet, Zheng Zhen.

It is good to read and study many books. But especially precious is the cultivation of the righteous qì. Only when the qì is upright does my self truly exist. Only then can the erudition gained from study attain its full and mutual benefit.⁴

⁴ Quoted from *The Journal of Eastern Qì Gōng*, Vol X, No. X.

The conception of Chinese art is not rooted in reproducing images of the objective world. Rather, Chinese artists sought to cast themselves, their individual understanding of the world, their feelings, and their spirit into their compositions. The training of the artist thus relied first and foremost upon the development of an understanding of *qì* and of techniques for accumulating *qì* so that it could be released and expressed through the work of art. This is not to suggest that the training in specific technical skills was of secondary importance, rather that the acquisition of technical expertise has always been understood to be utterly inseparable from the acquisition of *qì*. This understanding served not only as the basis of artistic discipline and training but of standards of aesthetic judgment.

Xie Zhen of the Ming Dynasty expressed the gist of this aesthetic standard in *A Discussion of the Poetry of the Four Seas* (*Sì Míng Shī Huà*): “If poetry lacks *shén qì*, it is like a drawing of the sun and moon without light.”



Xià Shān Gāo Yīn Tú (Dwelling in the Summer Mountain) by Wang Meng of the Yuan dynasty. In the collection of the Beijing Imperial Palace Museum.

SECTION FOUR: THE CHARM OF QÌ

In one of the oldest extant discussions of painting entitled *Records of the Painting of Yun Tai Mountain* (*Huà Yún Tái Shān Jì*), Gu Kai Zhi, one of the greatest painter of the Jin Dynasty (317 C.E.–420 C.E.), wrote:

When painting the Heavenly Master, you must neglect his figure and concentrate on drawing out the qì of his spirit . . . There runs the stream from bottom up; the perspective of objective things turns everything upside down. Pure qì brings down the mountains! This is the method of painting the mountain.⁵

Qì has always figured prominently in the methodology of Chinese art. The Southern Qi period (479 C.E.–502 C.E.) witnessed the introduction of the Six Methods as the “key to painting.”

⁵From Li Qing, *The Point of View of Man in Chinese Culture*, Xue Lin Publishing House, Shanghai, 1996.

The first to present a systematic summary of traditional Chinese painting at this time was Xie He in a work entitled *Records of the Character of Ancient Painting* (*Gǔ Pīn Huà Lù*). The foremost of the six methods he recorded was “feeling the charm of qì.” This theory of “the charm of qì” became a cornerstone in the foundations of traditional Chinese painting. Writing in the Tang Dynasty (618 C.E.–907 C.E.) in *Records of Famous Paintings from throughout the Dynasties* (*Lì Dài Míng Huà Jì*), Zhang Yan Yuan noted:

Ancient painting can transform action directly from form yet still uphold the bones of qì.⁶ Seek the painting out of the form. This is difficult to explain to lay people. Contemporary painting, though possessed of form, lacks the charm of qì. Therefore, utilize the charm of qì to accomplish the composition of painting, and the form will be implicit.



Hán Jiāng Dú Diào Tú (Fishing in Solitude on Cold River) by Ma Yuan of the Southern Song Dynasty. In the Collection of the Taipei Imperial Palace Museum.

What is the “charm of qì?” In the Qing Dynasty, Zhang Geng explained it in a book called *A Discussion of Painting from Lu Mountain* (*Lú Shān Huà Lùn*).

There is the charm of qì, transmitted via the ink, some via the brush, some through action without intention. The highest level is that transmitted through actions with no intention. The next is action with intention. The next is that which is transmitted through the brush. The lowest is that sent through the ink.

What does it mean to send it through the ink? It means the painting is accomplished by spreading the ink like a halo around the sketched-out drawing. What is it that is called transmitted via the brush? It means the use of the dry brush to rub out the light ink strokes with thorough strength so that light itself flows out.

⁶The phrase “bones of qì” is a literal translation of the Chinese expression *gǔ qì*. This is an idiomatic, technical term in the nomenclature of traditional Chinese fine arts. It has several meanings that derive from the figurative juxtaposition of these two words. One common meaning of this phrase is “spirit.” In painting, however, it refers to the formal aspect of a composition, i.e., to the spirit that holds a composition together, in place.

What is meant by action with intention? It means the artist can liberate the method of using the brush and the movement of ink so that they correspond to whatever the intention is: sparse or dense; varied amounts; thick or light; dry or moist. All can exist in perfect arrangement.

What is meant by action without intention? It means the artist fixes his attention and concentration, and then the vision flows out through the movements of the wrist. The original intention is one thing, but suddenly it appears completely different! It comes out just like that, sent out with no intention. You can say, "It is enough." But in fact it is not enough. How can you call it enough, when there is no way to add it up? It is originality beyond the feelings of the brush and the weight of the ink. It comes from the thriving pivot of heaven. Yet it can only be sensed by one who is tranquil. Even the slightest delay will confuse the mind, and it disappears in the ink.

It is indeed no easy matter to understand this concept, for first one must grasp the answer to a more basic question: what is *qì*? The heft of this book in your hand is to some extent a measure of the import of the latter question. If *qì* could be understood in a single word or phrase, it would not take such an effort to describe and define it. Of course, to the Chinese, *qì* is *qì*. It needs no further explanation unless one seeks to fathom the depths of its mysteries and, indeed, the charms that have grown around this deceptively simple word. To understand the charm of *qì*, we must look into these depths.

In ancient times, primitive people did not create elaborate explanations for the phenomena of the natural world. The wind blew across the face of the earth. Rain fell. Thunder and lightning came, startling all far and wide. The sun rose and fell, exchanging its place at the zenith with the moon following its own, unique patterns. The explanations that ancient Chinese evolved for such phenomena all partook of the concept of *qì*. In time a group of magicians and shamans, the *wū*, developed. They occupied the position between the forces of the natural world and human beings. These shamans developed the ability to "control and utilize *qì*" through mobilizing and sublimating not only the *qì* of natural phenomena, but also the *qì* of supernatural beings, invisible spirits, and demons.

To exert this control over the *qì* of nature and to intervene between humans and supernatural forces, these shaman used the archetypal tools of magical correspondences: chants and incantations, dancing, and various elaborate rituals, combined with potions concocted from the roots and leaves of plants mixed together with the severed parts of animals. All these

efforts were undertaken to influence, that is, to charm people and to induce their belief in the power of the shaman. The natural result was that people came to have faith in their magical abilities.

As the centuries passed and ancient superstitions began to give way to more articulate, technical explanations of natural phenomena and the forces that afflicted people, the shaman began to disappear. This evolution occurred with and fed back upon the evolution from magical correspondences to the notion of systematic correspondences; and the *wū* thus evolved to become counselors, mathematicians, physicians, alchemists and chemists, astronomers, engineers, and the entire spectrum of intellectuals and artisans. Some *wū* remained and their practices continue until today, although they are submerged in the countryside beneath the mainstream of modern culture. The concept of *qì*, however, endured all these transformations. Some would say that it was *qì* that engendered such growth and development. Thus some of the flavor of the ancient, magic world was retained within the concept of *qì* itself. To this day in China, as elsewhere, there are those who understand *qì* as a supernatural force. As this concept has spread to other cultures, however, it is today heavily overlaid with the belief systems of the recipient culture, whether largely biblical concepts of “spirit” or the popular if ill-defined concept of “energy.”

We cannot say with certainty how widespread such beliefs are in the contemporary world, although even if the percentage is small, there may still be millions of Chinese who conceive of *qì* as a powerful force capable of producing extraordinary, even miraculous effects. Moreover, for a great majority of the Chinese people, *qì* is a cultural motif that has moved civilization steadily forward on the grandest scale. The flow of *qì* has carved a deep, indelible impression in the Chinese psyche over the millennia. It resonates in every aspect of Chinese life.



Charm from Qing Cheng Mountain.

骨法

The charm of *qì* is a rarefied and cultivated harmonic of this fundamental resonance. Yet it still retains some of the primordial flavor described above. That is to say that in the hands of a master of traditional Chinese painting, a single stroke of the brush, imbued with the charm of *qì*, transports the spirit of those who view its traces. People viewing Chinese paintings created many centuries ago experience this charm of *qì*, whether they are Chinese or strangers in lands far removed from the yellow earth of China. This is a manifestation of the harmony of the internal and external worlds, the world of objects and the world of the spirit. The charm of *qì* is the shuttle that weaves back and forth to bring about this harmony. In the Tang Dynasty, Zhang Yan Yuan stated this clearly: “Seek the painting in the charm of *qì*; then the resemblances of form are woven within.”

The relative importance of *qì* and its charm was explicitly described in the Five Dynasties period (907 C.E.–960 C.E.) by Jing Hao who wrote of the six keys to skill in a work entitled *Records of the Methods of the Brush* (*Bī Fǎ Jì*):

First is Qi.
Second is Charm.
Third is Mind.
Fourth is View.
Fifth is Line.
Sixth is Ink.

Later in the Song Dynasty the great authority of Chinese artistic criticism, Guo Ruo Xu, elaborated on the significance and relative importance of these six keys or methods of traditional painting in his *Records of the Knowledge of Painting* (*Tú Huà Jiàn Wén Jì*):

*The discussion of the six methods of painting will never change for ten thousand years. From the “bone method”⁷ (gǔ fǎ 骨法) of using the brush on down, five of these methods can be learned through study. Only the charm of *qì* comes from innate intelligence. It is the feeling of elegance that endows painting. Since the moral character of a*

⁷The “bone method” (*gǔ fǎ*) is an aspect of how to use the brush to construct the composition of a painting.

painter must be high, the charm of qì must be of a high level. Attaining a high level of the charm of qì, motion emerges [in the painting]. This is the so-called spirit of the spirit that enables [one] to connect with the essence.

In his *Discussion of Famous Paintings from throughout the Dynasties* (*Lì Dài Míng Huà Jì*), Zhang Yan Yuan emphasized this point again and again:

The mind comes before the brush. The mind remains even after the painting is complete. This completeness is the qì of the spirit.

According to contemporary scholar Meng Gu, in his *Transmission of Spirit and Understanding* (*Shén Yǔ Wù Dé Chuán Dòng*), “The profound purpose in Chinese painting is tranquility.”

The highest praise for the poetry of the ancients is “there is a painting in the poem.” The highest praise given to paintings was “there is poetry in the painting.” In spite of the difference in artistic form between poetry and painting, they both seek the same artistic conception: profound quiet; harmony with the orderly changes of nature. Thus the vivid charm of *qì* is the artist’s positive agreement with and embellishment of the tranquility of both society and nature. This social tranquility and society’s praise of the beauty of the tranquil found unity in painting. The living *qì* of the spirit resounds in profoundly quiet painting. This is the basic reason why the charm of *qì* occupies the position of primary importance in the theory of Chinese painting which emphasizes the expression of subjective intentions.



Měi Huā Tú (Plum Blossom) by Hong; early Qing Dynasty. In the collection of the Anhui Provincial Museum.

Not only does the *qì* function to connect the mind and spirit of the artist with the painting, it weaves the painter, the painting, and the viewer into a single unified experience. In fact, it stitches all of Chinese art into an elaborate, ongoing tapestry of continual creation, cultivation, and refinement of aesthetic imagination and imagery.



Yīn Jū Shí Liú Guān (View from Secluded Dwelling), by Chen Hong Shou of the early Ming Dynasty. In the collection of the Taipei Imperial Palace Museum.

SECTION FIVE: UNDERSTANDING Qì: PERCEPTION AND APPRECIATION OF ART

Traditional Chinese arts are so tightly woven together as to be inseparable. Indeed, many of the great poets of ancient China were also painters. Virtually all painters and poets were accomplished calligraphers. In his discussion of the artistic life of his country and his people, Lin Yu Tang explained:

The position of Chinese calligraphy in the history of the world's art is thus truly unique. Owing to the use in writing of the brush, which is more subtle and more responsive than the pen, calligraphy has been elevated to the true level of an art on a par with Chinese painting. The Chinese are fully aware of this when they regard painting and calligraphy as sister arts, shū-huà, "calligraphy and painting," forming almost an individual concept and always being mentioned in the same breath.

He proceeds with a precise and vivid description of the relationship between these "sister arts" and the fundamental importance of the art of writing in Chinese painting:

It seems to me that calligraphy, as representing the purest principles of rhythm and composition, stands in relation to painting as pure mathematics stands in relation to engineering or astronomy. In appreciating Chinese calligraphy, the meaning is entirely forgotten, and the lines and forms are appreciated in and from themselves. In this cultivation and appreciation of the pure witchery of line and beauty in composition, therefore, the Chinese have an absolute freedom and entire devotion to pure form as such, as apart from content. A painting has to convey an object, but a well-written character conveys only its own beauty of line and structure.



Céng Dié Bīng Xiāo (Layers of Silk Taffeta), by Ma Lin; Southern Song Dynasty. Collection of the Beijing Imperial Palace Museum.

Owing to the inseparability of calligraphy and painting, it is only natural to find an equally intimate relationship between painting and poetry. The art of calligraphy developed naturally from the demands of the Chinese written character, and whereas calligraphy as an artistic form itself is indeed, as Lin Yu Tang observed, “pure form, apart from content,” poetry in China, as in all other languages, has always been the art of enticing the deepest meanings out of words.

These deep meanings have always been inextricably bound with the philosophical ideals of the beauty and harmony of the natural world, that is, with the constant transformations of *qì*. The nature of “the Chinese written character as a medium for poetry” was brilliantly illuminated at the beginning of the 20th century by Ernest Fenollosa in an essay by that name. In it, Fenollosa remarks:

Chinese notation is something much more than arbitrary symbols. It is based upon a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature. ...

These embody true poetry as far as they go. Such actions are seen, but Chinese would be a poor language, and Chinese poetry but a narrow art, could they not go on to represent what is also unseen.

The best poetry deals not only with natural images but with lofty thoughts, spiritual suggestions and obscure relations. The greater part of natural truth is hidden in processes too minute for vision and in harmonies too large, in vibrations, cohesions and in affinities. The Chinese compass these also, and with great power and beauty.

You will ask, how could the Chinese have built up a great intellectual fabric from mere picture writing? To the ordinary Western mind, which believes that thought is concerned with logical categories and which rather condemns the faculty of direct imagination, this feat seems quite impossible. Yet the Chinese language with its peculiar materials has passed over from the seen to the unseen by exactly the same process which all ancient races employed. This process is metaphor, the use of material images to suggest immaterial relations.

In this Chinese shows its advantage. Its etymology is constantly visible. It retains the creative impulse and process, visible and at work. After thousands of years the lines of metaphoric advance are still shown, and in many cases actually retained in the meaning. Thus a word, instead of growing gradually poorer and poorer as with us, becomes richer and still richer from age to age, almost consciously luminous. Its uses in national philosophy and history, in biography and in poetry, throw about it a nimbus of meanings. These center about the graphic symbol.

The memory can hold them and use them. The very soil of Chinese life seems entangled in the roots of its speech. The manifold illustrations which crowd its annals of personal experience, the lines of tendency which converge upon a tragic climax, moral character as the very core of the principle—all these are flashed at once on the mind as reinforcing values with accumulations of meaning which a phonetic language can hardly hope to attain. Their ideographs are like blood-stained battle-flags to an old campaigner.

With us, the poet is the only one for whom the accumulated treasures of the race-words are real and active. Poetic language is always vibrant with fold on fold of overtones and with natural affinities, but in Chinese the visibility of the metaphor tends to raise this quality to its intensest power.

| | Happiness | Myriad | Upright | Eye | to defend | Heaven | Uniform | Corn | to obtain | Tiger | Moon | Sun |
|--|-----------|--------|---------|-----|-----------|--------|---------|------|-----------|-------|------|-----|
| Ancient Images (~2000 B.C.) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Shell-and-Bone Characters (~1900 B.C.) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Da Chun (~1800-4000 B.C.E.) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Xiao Chun (246-207 B.C.E.) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Li Shu (~200 B.C.-588 C.E.) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Changes after Han Dynasty (after 588 C.E.) | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Table of historical changes of Chinese characters. From the book, *Chinese Calligraphy* by Chiang Yee (Harvard University Press, 1973).

What we have seen then is an organic interconnectivity throughout the entire field of view encompassed by all forms of art throughout Chinese history. Clearly and vividly, the concept of *qi* provides the woof and warp that binds this whole field together. What, then, is the position *qi* holds in the

relationship between the artist, the work of art, and those who view, hear, or otherwise receive it? What do we need to know about the role of *qì* in art to correctly perceive, understand, and appreciate what traditional Chinese artists do and make in their art? Indeed, of what importance and benefit is an understanding of *qì* in the appreciation of works of art?

To find answers to such questions we looked into sources that span more than 2000 years of literary and artistic criticism in China. In the Three Kingdoms period (220 C.E.–265 C.E.), Prince Cao Pei of the Kingdom of Wei pointed clearly to the role of *qì* in the literary arts.

The principle of literature is qì. . . . It lays emphasis on the influence of the character of the writer's self in determining the style of the literary work. It reveals itself in the level of the writer's grasp of nature. It is the basic instinct of life itself.

That *qì* serves as the motive force of painting is illustrated in the following story about the legendary “Saint of Painting,” Wu Dao Zi, in the *Records of Famous Painting From Tang Dynasty* (*Táng Dài Míng Huà Jì*):

Wielding the paintbrush, he has the momentum of a whirlwind. Once General Pei Min gave gold and silk to Wu Dao Zi and asked him to paint a picture for him. He did not accept the general's gift. But he asked Pei Min to perform his sword form for him, so he might observe the qì of the general's strength to help him wield his paintbrush. After the performance of the sword, Wu Dao Zi took up the brush with force and vitality and completed the requested painting in a flash, as if an unseen spirit helped him from within.

The General's riches could not commission a painting, but his *qì* literally impelled it through his sword, into the artist's mind, and out of the artist's brush. It is hard to conceive of a more intimate relationship between artist and audience. Thus we see that as in philosophy and medicine, *qì* is everywhere in Chinese art. In the Liang period of the Southern Dynasty (502 C.E.–557 C.E.), Zhong Rong wrote in his Preface to *Classes of Poetry* (*Shī Pīn Xù*):

Qì changes nature. The changes of nature touch people. Thus qì arouses feelings and emotions. It manifests in dancing and recitation [of songs and poems].

As long ago as the Spring and Autumn period (770 B.C.E.–476 B.C.E.), the importance of *qì* in the arts was recognized and memorialized. In the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chūn Qiū*) it is recorded, “The will is fulfilled by *qì*. The choice of words is decided by the will.”

Two thousand years later, Dong Fang Su, a writer in the Qing Dynasty (1644 C.E.–1911 C.E.), testified to the continuing survival of *qì* as the basis of artistic judgments:

In observing humans as well as all forms of animal and plant life, it can be seen that these all exist because of the arousal of qì. Once the qì is gone, only the unbearable stench of rotteness remains. One cannot tolerate being close to it. It is the same with poetry and literature.

Another Qing writer, Shen Zhong Qian, made the point even more directly:

All things are created through the receipt of the qì of heaven and earth. Thus each has its own spirit. Any attempt to draw a thing with brush and ink ought not only follow its shape but its spirit.

The implications now seem obvious. To perceive, understand, and appreciate Chinese art, we must comprehend the idea as well as the movement of *qì*. Just as artists rely on *qì* to power and guide their aesthetic principles and expressions, so must we be guided by *qì* to receive that which has been bestowed in such works of art. Only then can we fully connect with the spirit of the original. Only then can the vitality of the work enliven us.

In experiencing works of traditional Chinese art, we can not overlook the comprehensive importance of *qì*. Not only does the presence of *qì* in the artwork itself allow the viewer or reader to connect intimately with it, it can serve a curative function as well. This point is illustrated in a story from the Warring States period (475 B.C.E.–221 B.C.E.), told by Mei Cheng of the Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–25 C.E.) in a work entitled *The Seven Issues* (*Qī Fā*). The story goes:

There was a young man, Prince Chu. He had been sick for a long time. His health was exhausted, for he had to remain in bed constantly. The illness had invaded so deeply that even herbal medicine and acupuncture could not help. One night however, Prince Chu received a guest from the state of Wu who told him stories of nature. He recounted these stories vividly, especially the ones about the hunt and about watching the waves at the oceanside. Suddenly, listening to his guest, Prince Chu felt the yáng qì become aroused. First it manifested between his eyebrows. At last it found its way continuously upward and outward until it filled up the entire house! As the night wore on, the guest from Wu continued his wonderful descriptions of the world in words, the mysteries and marvels, until his listener sat up in his bed. Without Prince Chu noticing it, his illness had disappeared.

Today the practice of healing arts is growing in popularity. By “healing arts” here we do not mean only the art of medicine. There is a growing movement in the mutual world of art and *qì gōng* that utilizes the presence of *qì* in all manner of artistic expression to heal patients suffering from a wide variety of diseases. Thus there are artist-healers who express their healing *qì* through their songs; others endow their paintings with their healing *qì* and hang them on the walls of their “patients’” rooms. There is growing recognition in the medical community that a patient’s capacity to express his or her internal or mental imagery can exert a strong influence in that individual’s healing process. To those steeped in the traditions of *qì* and the traditional arts of China, such phenomena are easily understood as manifestations of the mysterious and wonderful power of *qì*.

In the *Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Internal Medicine*, the Emperor’s physician, Qi Bo, points out that the shaman or *wū* treat their patients through “mobilizing the *jīng* (essence) and transforming it into *qì*.” In such curious manifestations and phenomena the embrasive characteristic of *qì* expresses itself unmistakably as the great connective force of nature, the force that unifies all humankind, all the arts, all of creation. It was just this powerful connective force that found its most detailed expression in traditional Chinese medicine, which is where our journey through the history of *qì* next leads us.



Qì character. Calligraphy by Wang Mu Ji.