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# A Paradox of Asia in Multiperspective Critical Consideration

## **Problem and Epistemological Interest**

In the West there are numerous esoteric ideas about 氣 (Kubny, 2002). Also in the martial arts 氣 is dealt with. The philosophers Yamaguchi (1997) and Schmidt (2007), for instance, negotiate each specific—appearance, modes of action and exercise methods of 氣. Their explanations stand in remarkable—partially rather contradictory—relationship to representations of critical researchers. Thinking, experiencing and training the body in the martial art can refer fundamentally to 氣—if one believes in it. But a cleared and profitable attitude towards 氣 can be developed only on the basis of a reflected and critical-scientifically arranged conception of 氣.

## **Objective and Method**

The objective of the study is to critically examine 氣 from the perspectives of various scientific disciplines: philology, philosophy, religious studies, medicine, natural sciences, health and movement sciences with a view to their significance for martial arts. Hermeneutics is chosen as the method. It is based on an extensive literature search.



... as Chinese ideograph consists of steam 气 and rice 米 (Kubny, 2002). The term 氣 "is suitable for a double sense, even antagonism, as it is not rarely to be found in Asian concepts" (Pörtner, 1985, p. 215). This is why there is a tendency to "no longer describe the qi-term, but leave it untranslated in its original form" (Yang, 2011, p. 23).

氣...





In the **martial arts** 氣 on the one hand functions as a catalyst of the perfect movement in the respective requirement context (Kammer, 2007). Since 氣 is often located between "imagination" and "heart/spirit", i.e. action planning, and "body", i.e. visible action (Landmann, 2005), it can be assumed that 氣 is the pre-scientific collective term for efferent and reafferent neuronal impulses (Kuhn, 2017). On the other hand, it functions as attention and perception—possibly also of the intentions of my partner or opponent (Yamaguchi, 1997). Understood in this way, 氣 is also accessible for practice.

In the sense of "Western" systemic health science

氣 is omnipresent **in the everyday language** of China, Japan and Korea (Yang, 2011). Countless composites and idioms with 氣 are used in this language area to express natural, individual and social states, attitudes and relationships (Pörtner, 1985). Man lives "in the cosmic-climatic Ki" (Yamaguchi, 1997, p. 65), which is boundlessly ambiguous. Nevertheless, "a Japanese person without recourse to this word can neither describe his mental state nor a climatic situation" (p. 58). Besides, 氣 is not reasonable. It works, for example, when you reach for a shot glass or a cigarette without wanting to, and it can also drive you into erotic entanglements (Pörtner, 1985).

...could be the key to understanding of 氣. In the Asian cultural area, everything—the human being, the things, the concepts—depends on the context that downright defines action, relationships and mutual understanding.

From the point of view of **cultural philosophy**, 氣 is an ontological basic concept, ubiquitous, the basis of existence of everything and—ultimately everything. But 氣 does not exist, i.e. it is nothing specific (Möller, 2000). In this respect, 氣 is paradoxical. This paradigmatic quality is expressed in the fact that 氣 is neither good nor bad in principle, but can be both at the same time (Kubny, 2002). This becomes understandable e.g. in the horizon of contextuality as a characteristic of Japanese world- and self-understanding. Herein space is given preference over time. Contents are detached from their historical contexts and placed in a quasi timeless juxtaposition. Cultural elements are therefore spatially freely available and can be rearranged again and again (Pörtner, 1999, p. 25).

From the perspective of **religious studies**, 氣

氣 is conceivable as a collective term for physical and psychosocial "resources" (Antonovsky, 1997; Becker, 2006) that can be strengthened through personal initiative and external influence, as well as for risk factors, thus creating an individual and social potential that one can learn to use. 氣 exercise in body and relationship then covers everything that a person can aim at through action. Whether such an exercise must always be explicitly Qìgōng, remains to be seen. Yoga, Kneipp, Pilates, Autogenic Training and presumably even dancing may bring comparable effects.

#### Qìgōng...

..., as a meta-analysis of systematic overview studies shows, can—as concomitant therapy—have a positive moderating effect on numerous (psycho-) medical fields of application (Kuhn, 2017).

By physical or chemical scientific approaches 氣 is not to reach, because those who try do not know, what to search for and what to measure with. Attempts to prove 氣 by the detour of certain phenomena—e.g. warmth, infrared radiation, cell changes, improvement of complaints—fail, because one must always conclude arbitrarily or circularly on 氣 and, in the long run, cannot show that it concerns actually 氣 effects. The same applies to the transmission of 氣—tōate no jutsu, kiai jutsu—, which cannot be replicated under controlled laboratory conditions (Kuhn, 2017). In this respect, 氣 is not some kind of "force" or "energy" and, therefore, neither "life force" nor "vital energy". Such translations "on the one hand remain vague and on the other hand facilitate the danger of forcing Western concepts into a Chinese framework" (Landmann, 2005, p. 86).

—as a "religious primeval word" (Choe, 1995) attains divine status. 氣 is comparable with the Holy Spirit, and also brings salvation (Yang, 2011).
For Yang, God is "the divine Qi that remains in us". Accordingly, faith is the "will function" of 氣 (p. 196). Man can be perceived as "body of 氣" (Yang, 2011, p. 305). Thus, 氣 becomes a question of faith and in this context can only be experienced mystically looking or retrospectively interpreting as long as one would acknowledge things like that. The ambivalence of 氣 is ignored in this perspective.



In Chinese medicine 氣 is first of all everything that moves into the body, within the body and out of the body in the form of gases. Over the centuries, this has led to the development of a confusing, sometimes mysterious variety of 氣, which nevertheless does not cover all illnesses—and therapy of which is often based on shaky feet (Unschuld, 2013). Nowadays, 氣 is a relatively pragmatic term for the neuro-vegetative functional readiness of an organ, which can be influenced by measures such as medication, acupuncture or massage (Greten, 2007). To put it very simply, it is all about multiplying and collecting "good" 氣 and reducing and getting rid of "bad" 氣.

#### Acupuncture...

... shows a mixed picture in metaanalyses. There are no consistent significant differences between acupuncture and comparative therapies. If at all, acupuncture is most likely to be regarded as promising in pain therapy, especially as an accompanying therapy or element of multimodal therapy (Kuhn, 2017).

### **Discussion and Research Perspectives**

氣 is not a phenomenon, but a construct and as such a pre-enlightenment attempt to give a name to the—experienced, perceived, and observed—inexplicable. This happens in everyday-life pragmatic-utilitarian regard, whereby humans can be imagined as "body of 氣" and "body in 氣"—as a matter of course. Terms such as "life force" or "vital energy" are misleading because 氣 is not good per se, but can only be understood as ambivalent and paradoxical. "But why does one do so mysteriously with it", [Sh]Issai Chozan (1659-1741), author of Tengu-geijutsu-ron, the martial art of the mountain goblins, asks (Kammer, 2007, p. 74). "it" refers to the art of sword fighting. And the question aims at connecting mystery to art. The answer given at that time is highly revealing for the context of martial arts today: "If one does mysteriously with it, it happens for the beginner. If one does not do mysteriously with it, then the beginner has no confidence. This is merely a pedagogical trick. Therefore all secrecy is not essential, it is not the core of the matter" (ibid.). Thus, is 氣 in the end nothing more than a marketing instrument? This is where clearing martial arts related research can attach and, e.g., deal with questions of esoterically upgrading course offers by 氣, the reception of course offers dressed up with 氣 by target groups, the biomechanical analysis of so-called 氣 exercises etc.

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Calligraphy "氣": Zhāng Jìdōng, Shěnyáng, 2014