



Chinese Concept of “Qi” and Military Wisdom

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Abstrak

Many people know about Sun Tsz’s “Art of War”. Sun Tsz is only one member of the Military School in Ancient Chinese thought. The concept of “Qi” or “Vital energy” or “Life force” is one of the core ideas in works of many members of the Military School throughout Chinese History. In this article, the concept of “Qi” is introduced in the military context, with reference to army governance and military tactics. We should appreciate the relevance of “Qi” in contemporary setting of warfare, security and geopolitics. Ancient wisdom is still valuable beyond the 21st century.

Keywords: Military School of Ancient China; Theory of Qi; Army Governance; Commander Leadership.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of *Qi* has long been a fundamental part of Chinese philosophy and culture. In the context of military strategy, *Qi* does not only refer to an individual's vital energy but also to the dynamics of power within an army and its relationship with the external environment. As stated in various classical texts, including the thoughts of Sun Tzu and Wu Qi, the understanding of *Qi* significantly influences the effectiveness of war strategies and military leadership (Zhao-jun, 2011). The application of *Qi* in Chinese military strategy has evolved throughout different historical periods. Wu Qi, one of the most prominent military thinkers, emphasized that internal harmony within an army is crucial for achieving victory (Fei, 2010). In the later era, Qi Jiguang, a general during the Ming Dynasty, adopted an approach that emphasized the physical and mental training of soldiers to optimize *Qi* in battle (Acevedo & Cheung, 2012).

Moreover, the concept of *Qi* is closely related to the theory of strategic harmony in Chinese military thought. Research suggests that the utilization of *Qi* in war strategy is not limited to physical factors but also encompasses psychological and spiritual aspects that influence the morale and combat readiness of troops (T. Thomas, 2014). The harmony between *Qi* within the army and *Qi* in the external environment can enhance military success, particularly in complex and ever-changing battlefields (Li & Li, 2020).

Other studies also indicate that Chinese military strategy has unique characteristics compared to Western military strategies. While Western strategies tend to focus on kinetic power and technology, Chinese strategies emphasize information manipulation and psychological influence, which are closely linked to the *Qi* theory (Thomas, 2015). In the modern context, understanding *Qi* is relevant not only to physical warfare but also to asymmetric strategies and information warfare (Lim, 2017). Furthermore, the concept of *Qi* is also applied in various aspects of social and economic life in China, including organizational management and strategic decision-making (Cai, 2020). Thus, understanding *Qi* in a military context is not only crucial for comprehending the history of Chinese war strategy but also relevant for contemporary geopolitical analysis (Kan, 2022).

In conclusion, the concept of *Qi* in Chinese military strategy is an approach that integrates physical, mental, and environmental aspects in warfare. The application of this theory in various contexts demonstrates that *Qi* is not merely a philosophical concept but also has practical value that can be utilized in modern warfare strategies and military organization management. Further studies on the application of the *Qi* concept



in the context of geopolitics and military technology will provide deeper insights into the advantages of Chinese military strategy in facing current global challenges.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to explore the application of the concept of *Qi* in Chinese military strategy. The research design integrates several qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of how *Qi* has been applied in military thought.

- a. Narrative Inquiry: This approach involves collecting and analyzing narratives from historical texts and military accounts to understand how the concept of *Qi* has been articulated and utilized in various contexts. By examining these narratives, the study aims to uncover the underlying meanings and implications of *Qi* in military strategy (Riessman, 1993).
- b. Biographical Research: Focusing on the life histories of prominent military figures such as Sun Tzu and Wu Qi, this method reconstructs their experiences and contributions to the development of military strategies involving *Qi*. Analyzing their biographies provides insights into the practical application of *Qi* in historical military contexts (Labov, 1972; Polkinghorne, 1995).
- c. Process Tracing: This method systematically examines causal mechanisms by tracing the processes through which *Qi* influences military outcomes. By analyzing specific historical events and decisions, the study identifies how *Qi* has been operationalized to achieve strategic objectives (Collier, 2011).
- d. Thematic Analysis: This approach involves identifying and analyzing patterns or themes within qualitative data. By coding and categorizing data from historical texts and military records, the study uncovers recurring themes related to the concept of *Qi* and its strategic applications (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).
- e. Autoethnography: This method combines personal experience with cultural analysis. By reflecting on contemporary military practices and drawing parallels with historical applications of *Qi*, the study provides a nuanced understanding of its relevance in modern contexts (Polkinghorne, 1995).

By employing these qualitative research methods, the study aims to bridge the gap between ancient military wisdom and modern strategic practices, demonstrating the enduring significance of *Qi* in military studies.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Qi: a mysterious concept

When talking about “Qi” or “life force” or “vital energy”, people easily relate it to “Qi Gong” or “Tai Chi”, something linked to Chinese style breathing exercise or martial arts. Others may think about Traditional Chinese Medicine like acupuncture while religious people associate it with Chinese alchemy or meditation. Indeed, the concept of “Qi” is rarely discussed in human affairs. There is a school of thought in ancient China known as Military School of which Sun Tsz was the most famous member. Contrary to common knowledge, the theory of “Qi” is discussed in many works of the Military School including Sun Tsz’s Art of War. In this article, I will introduce to readers the concept of “Qi” as analysed in the ideas of ancient Military School of China and how this is relevant to present day army affairs. In the Chinese cosmology, the universe is built up and circulated by “Qi”, the “vital energy” or “life force”. The army, that is made by people”, is also maintained by “Qi”.

When the Qi in the army is full and strong. It will defeat the enemy. Strong Qi will make the soldiers brave and motivate them to fight. If the Qi is low, soldiers will give up and run away. Secondly, Qi circulates like that in a human body. If circulation is good, the army will be strong and responsive. If there are gaps and obstacles inside the army, it will suffer from sickness and chaos. Further, the Qi in the army should be in harmony with Qi outside the army, that is the Qi in the environment and even the whole universe. The army is not a closed system, its exchange and linkage with Qi of the universe will help to defeat the enemy. Simply speaking, how to manage the “Qi” of the army is crucial in winning the war. Most experts in Sun Tsz easily

neglect this issue. If you can grasp this mysterious concept of “Qi”, you can read between the lines on many texts of the ancient Military School of Ancient China, applying their wisdom in a more creative way.

“Qi” in Army

“Qi” can dissipate and weaken the army. Hence, how to nurture and maintain the Qi is essential. Firstly, we need to “conserve” Qi. Physical supply and logistics should be sufficient. When soldiers move from field to field too much, they become exhausted, leading to decrease in Qi. At this moment, we should “sharpen” Qi by encourage their spirit, make them concentrate and prepare a sharp mind. When combat is close, soldiers should be motivated to have an overriding posture and dare to fight. We should “encourage” Qi. After the soldiers are ready to combat but the battle still has not started yet, they will feel frustrated with morale decline. It is then necessary to “break” Qi, meaning to destroy soldiers confused and depressed minds, leading them back to concentration and readiness for fight without reservation. When the battle starts soon, leaders should “prolong” Qi, thus, to avoid dissipation of Qi during military operations. Strategically, a commander should not only concern about Qi of his own soldiers but detect the critical moments of Qi of enemy troops, that is to avoid when they have strong Qi and attack during weak Qi.

Another aspect of Army Qi is harmony with Qi of universe. There are several applications. First, the climate still matters for military operations. Even though the modern army is equipped with advanced technology, tough weather still affects performance on battlefields. On the other hand, harsh climate may give advantages for retreat and sudden raids. In Chinese tradition, climate is related to “sky” while geography comes from “earth”. Like weather, landscape and topography can be hurdles or advantages. It all depends on circumstances. These two factors not only affect action but influence the rest of soldiers, deployment, setting up bases, surveillance, and even war economy. Apart from this physical and scientific side, we should also consider the metaphysics of Qi of universe. Qi embraces cosmology and morality. There is a Chinese saying known as “the Qi of righteousness exists in the universe”. If the conduct of the army does not correspond with cosmological values, its action will not be approved and fails as a result. Finally, there is a hidden connection between “Qi” of the universe and the army. One may consider this some kind of divination or esoteric practice. In my view, this is indeed related to intuitive thinking and creative observation associated with Jungian psychology and metaphysical philosophy. Examples are Yin-Yang theory, Five-elements theory, astrology reading, Qi observation, etc. If the army can apply such knowledge in studying nature and the universe, a more informed decision can be made to achieve harmony and success in the battle fields.

“Qi” for Commanders

The previous part deals with the Qi army as a whole and common soldiers while this section focuses on generals, commanders and leadership. A general or commander is the centre of the army in action. His own “Qi” relates to the Qi of the whole group. Apart from devising great tactics, a commander should learn two arts: (1) to diffuse his Qi externally throughout the army, and (2) to maintain and consolidate his own Qi internally. The first art is to make the troops under a unified command, causing the Qi to flow smoothly throughout the army. All the troops fight in a homogenous manner without gaps and hurdles in orders, directions and communication. The wisdom is to make the army become “Oneness”, a path to reach the ultimate principle of Tao. When Tao is attained, the circulation of Qi inside the army becomes perfect. Oneness can make the army easier to take strategic opportunities and attain higher morale and be more harmonious with Qi of the universe.

The second art is related to “inwardness” of the commander. A military leader must keep the Qi in mind and “heart” unified and concentrated. If his Qi is in chaos, he will lose emotional control, be easily confused and misjudge the strategic situation. Since his Qi is connected to Qi of the whole army, serious consequences will follow. Mencius proposed the idea of “nurturing Qi” and suggested to practice harmony of Qi for attaining “Still Heart” so that the spirit will become concentrated without confusion. Xu Wei, a painter and military strategist of Ming Dynasty, taught that one must make the “Qi” slowly move with fine adjustment to attain “oneness” with the army and universe. The Tao can thus be reached.

Contemporary Relevance

The first insight from military theory of “Qi” is that we should see the connection between the commander, the army and the universe. They are not separate compartments working like a machine in the Western sense. A holistic and organic approach to strategy and tactics on battlefield should be considered. Secondly, we should think beyond the physical environment outside the army in military operation. The Qi in the universe is more than the topography, climate and even ecology. Cosmology and metaphysics also play important roles in success of the offense and defense. More creative and intuitive observation and thinking are strategic tools for planning, intelligence, tactics, etc. If we are too addicted to reliance on machines and technology, our intuition and creativity will be curtailed.

I think most military academies including West Point and Saint-Cyr will not teach students the use of inwardness on military leadership. However, as you can see above, “nurturing Qi” is essential for military leadership and strategic formulation. Indeed, in Chinese history, some brilliant military commanders are Confucian scholars who practice inwardness exercise to make their minds peaceful and harmonious. This idea did not exist in modern military doctrines at all.

Asymmetrical warfare has become popular. Non-state actors, rebels, armed groups, militants, and even terrorists have become more popular in geopolitics. If you study the “Qi” theory seriously, it seems that the success of such group practice more on Qi than national armies. Less technology and bureaucracy make “Qi” more necessary for efficient operations. Both sides of the conflict should learn more from Qi.

If Qi circulates in the universe, it also circulates in the State. We can extend our theory to how the “Qi” of state can contribute to the “Qi” of the army as well. Qi is a vital force or energy. What is the vital force of energy of a State or nation? The state is a complex unit, so it is not easy to know what the Qi of the state is. However, I want to point out that personal “Qi” of the national leader may be relevant. According to traditional Chinese wisdom, a state leader needs to conserve his “heart” and “Qi”. To conserve means to minimize his desires so that his mind and heart become focused without chaos and confusion. Then the leader’s Qi can relate to the commander, leading to oneness without gaps. Nevertheless, this is a great challenge for most national leaders. As Clausewitz said, war is the continuation of politics. Statesmen are politicians. To conserve “Qi” in the struggle among diverse political interests, whether personal or national, requires prudence and skills.

Apart from the supreme leader, common people (i.e. civil society) are also related to army and military operations. The Military School of Ancient China, as shaped by Confucianism, treats the importance of people during war. The army should not only be concerned about winning the war, but also the lives and well-being of people. That is why the Military School thinkers, including Sun Tsu, advocated winning without war and preferring quick battles, thus causing least suffering of the people. If we extend this principle, one can learn that the army will gain full support from its own civilians if the troops show sympathy for them. Through this mindset with appropriate action, the “Qi” of the army will become harmonious with “Qi” of civilians. In the contemporary context, civil society is more complex. There are so many sectors with diverse interests. It can be argued that for short term and small military operations, the task is manageable. For large scale and long-term conflicts, interests collide so that a balance needs to be sought for harmonization.

Holistic Thinking

The concept of “Qi” is of long history in China but its application in military art is rarely studied. This short article tries to introduce readers how to think of military strategy and army governance in a holistic way. The commander, troops, environment, common people and the whole universe are linked together for winning a battle. Further, we not only need to analyse the physical and external side of warfare but should consider and practise the inwardness of stakeholders as well.

CONCLUSION

The study of *Qi* in Chinese military strategy highlights its significance in shaping leadership, morale, and combat effectiveness. The findings reveal that *Qi* functions not only as a metaphysical concept but also as a practical strategic tool that has guided Chinese military thought for centuries. Historical analysis indicates that military leaders like Wu Qi and Qi Jiguang integrated *Qi* into training and battlefield tactics to maximize efficiency and resilience among soldiers. The qualitative research methodology applied in this study confirms that narrative inquiry, biographical research, and thematic analysis provide a structured means to examine the historical relevance of *Qi*. Process tracing further elucidates its impact on decision-making processes in military campaigns. Through these methods, the study demonstrates that *Qi* is not merely an ancient philosophical idea but remains relevant in contemporary warfare and strategic planning.

Furthermore, the comparative analysis of *Qi* within Chinese and Western military traditions highlights the distinctiveness of Chinese strategic thought. While Western military doctrines focus heavily on technological advancements and kinetic warfare, the Chinese perspective integrates psychological, environmental, and moral dimensions, all of which align with the philosophy of *Qi*. As modern warfare continues to evolve, the understanding of *Qi* offers valuable insights into unconventional strategies such as asymmetric warfare, cyber warfare, and strategic deception. Future research could further explore the applications of *Qi* in contemporary military training and international defense policies. By recognizing the enduring influence of *Qi*, military scholars and strategists can develop more holistic and adaptable military doctrines.

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