

Does Chi Exist?

By Master Michael Inoshita

Any discussion of Chi or vital energy is often limited by the question of whether it exists at all.

To ask the whether Chi exists to many Chinese seems silly. The entire traditional understanding of life in China is based on a conceptual framework of Chi Paradigm.

The Chi paradigm is a method of thinking about the world in terms of Chi or vital energy. It is based on the philosophy of Yin and Yang and The Five Elements. The Chi paradigm has been used to explain such varied topics as the medicinal uses of herbs, acupuncture, massage, chi kung, martial arts, and even geography (fung shui).

In modern China these traditional understandings Chi functioning often exist side by side with equivalent Western mechanisms.

The co-existence of Chi theory and western science is important. The Chinese and other cultures which use the Chi paradigm have it so interwoven in to the fabric of their understanding of how the world works that chi theory is not replaced by western concepts but rather cohabitates the consciousness of those cultures. It is imperative that while attempting to understand Chi from a western paradigm that we do not dismiss the Chinese conceptual framework.

We in the west simply have no means to easily adopt this paradigm. Our method of understanding the world is not fundamentally based on Chi. To simply state that we as westerners must just accept it would be short sighted and drastically oversimplify the problem of a westerner utilizing this paradigm.

Cognitive science has identified that eastern and western cultures often approach understanding the world differently. Western philosophy is characterized by analytic thought which involves examining an object independent from its context, and using logic and rules to understand the world. In contrast Eastern Philosophy is thought to be more holistic which examines the

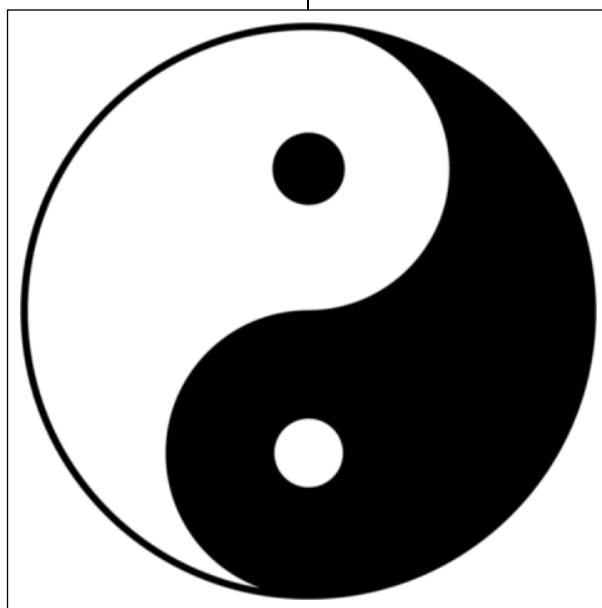
relationship between the object to the field, and prefers to explain or predict events on the basis of those relationships.

Research has also demonstrated that individuals from eastern cultures tend to perceive a greater number of relationships between events. It is important to note that these individuals see a greater number of relationships even when none exists. As a result of their model of perception, individuals from eastern culture view the world as more complex, and tend to expect and accept contradictions among the relationships they perceive. In contrast individuals from western cultures expect consistency, because they believe the world can be understood and explained using logical rules.

The differences in these two methods are important in that they define barriers westerners have to understanding the Chi paradigm. A western mind seeks to remove the object from the context in order to examine it. This tendency makes it difficult to understand the many relationships which exist in the Chi paradigm. For example many things in the Chi paradigm are defined by their Chi and Yin or Yang nature. From the object in question its Yin or Yang nature, Chi, and other attributes can not be determined independently.

It is only by comparing it to other objects that its nature can be determined. As an example the ginseng root is commonly thought of as yang. We know that its character is yang because it, resembles male genitalia (Yang) and is used to treat Yin conditions which are defined as having low energy.

Thus the ginseng root is considered to have a Yang nature. Like wise the amount of ki in ginseng can not be measured independently. Its strength is determined by how effective it is in counteracting Yin conditions. We can see therefore that defining and measuring objects are done in a relational manner, which makes comprehending the fundamental concepts of the



ki paradigm difficult from a western perspective.

The amount of relational definitions used in the Chi paradigm generate contradictions, which is a secondary barrier to understanding the Chi barrier from a western perspective. As an example, there are instances in which the traditional medical theories based on meridians cannot explain a given medical problem. The effectiveness of surgery has no known explanation in the Chi paradigm.

In other cases, acupuncture techniques are shown to be able to treat the problem, but the points used do not fall on traditional meridians or follow the prescribed sequence of treatment.

In these cases the traditional acupuncture meridians are modified with new branches and when that is not sufficient to answer the problem new acupuncture meridians are made.

At times the new meridians or branches formed contradict the other theories about how Chi functions in that meridian. This does not pose a problem in the Chinese methods of thinking because a new relationship has been noted.

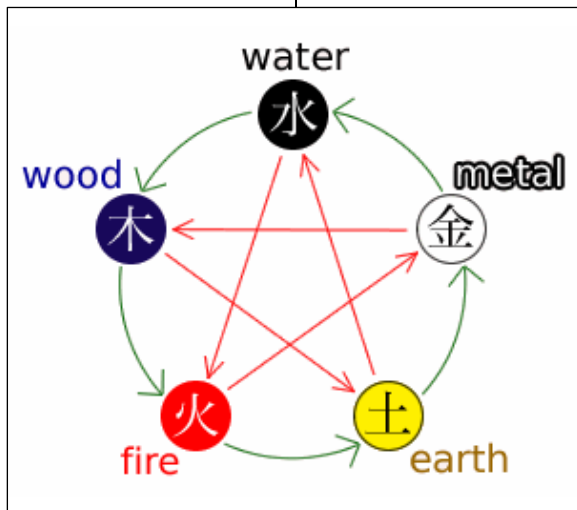
The presence of contradictions with in the paradigm and the inability to measure or define many of the fundamental concepts of the paradigm often makes the westerners dismiss the ki paradigm as superstition or elevate the Chi paradigm as a mystical energy philosophy which can not be understood. I would caution that neither approach is correct. The Chi paradigm does have some fundamental precepts which can be easily understood and applied in a western sense.

The Chi paradigm is often described as a web. In a web those strand which are most often used become thicker and more substantial, and those not used eventually disappear due to lack of use.

The theories of the Chi paradigm imply numerous potential relationships. The Chinese explore and test these relationships with real world problems. Occasionally relationships which are not implied by the theory are discovered to be useful, and likewise occasionally relationships implied by the theory

are found not to be useful. The ones which work are built up and used. The ones which don't are simply discarded.

As martial artists we are often quite comfortable talking about Chi and energy within the context of our martial training. However we may not be as comfortable using these concepts in other areas of our life. An example of the differences in perspective between eastern and western perceptions can be seen by looking at traditional Chinese medicine versus western medicine. The difference between eastern and western thought is aptly described by Dr. Ted Kapchuck in his book the 'Web That Has No Weaver'.



Understanding the pervasive-ness of the Chi paradigm does not fundamentally alter our first impression that whether Chi exists is the fundamental to the study of Chi, when in fact it is not. "Neither the classical nor modern Chinese texts speculate on the nature of Chi, nor do they attempt to conceptualize it. Rather, Chi is perceived functionally by what it does (Kaptchuk)." If we can put aside our desire to define and measure a concept, we can study the Chi paradigm and examine it for concepts or trends which would be useful in the study of Martial Arts.

Our question then becomes not if Chi exists, but rather; how do the Chinese and other traditional cultures perceive the various phenomena known as Chi and how have they used this perception to achieve results in real world situations.

If we view the Chi paradigm as a theory to explain events that occur in real life rather than a mystical force which exists then several interesting possibilities are generated. We can then examine how the Chi paradigm and its associated phenomena relate to us in western life, and how should we incorporate it into our Martial Arts training.

The Chi paradigm has a variety of facets, which have a variety of applications in medical and martial arts settings. Each of these facets has correlates in western science or perception. While it is important that we discuss each of these areas, the vast majority of my discussion will be devoted to the understanding of Chi in traditional martial arts.