

“Dancing and Drumming” – Feeling the “Rhythm” of *Qigong*, Calligraphy, and *Wu* (Shamanism)

Master Zhongxian Wu

Fig.1 “*Qiyun*” – The rhythm of *Qi*



1. Introduction

Qigong is a traditional method of physical, mental, and spiritual cultivation. Calligraphy is an ancient and elegant art form. *Wu* or Chinese shamanism is the mysterious culture and is commonly considered a religion. Although at first glance these concepts appear unrelated, from a *Qi* perspective they are intimately interconnected.

Qi is usually translated into English as “vital energy”. The existence of the universal *Qi* is like a musical rhythm. Even if we can’t see it, we can feel it in our bodies and in the environment through a deep heart/mind connection. Through the concept of *Qi*, this paper will briefly show how the rhythm of *Qigong*, calligraphy, and *Wu* are interconnected. In Chinese, this rhythm is known as “*Qiyun*” (fig.1) – the rhythm of *Qi*.

2. *Qi* and *Qigong*

While the practices of *Qigong*, calligraphy, and *Wu* may appear different on the surface, at their cores they are identical. All three are used to improve and refine spiritual energy. Furthermore, each of these may be used to harmonize *Qi* or energy, and may also be used as healing arts.

Classical Chinese culture is a *Qi* culture.¹ According to classical Chinese philosophy, *Qi* is the most basic and important material in the universe. *Qi* is the original energy of the universe and follows the laws of the cosmos as it cycles between tangible and intangible forms. Its expression in the sky is found in the stars and their movement. In the earth, *Qi* is found in the mountains, oceans, air, and in all forms of life. For human beings, *Qi* manifests as the physical body and the processes of the mind. This animating energy connects us with the cosmos. The concept of *Qi* pervades all aspects of Chinese culture and life sciences including cosmology, philosophy, medicine, music, calligraphy, painting, martial arts, and *Qigong*.

The ancient Chinese sages or *Wu* created *Qigong* as a life science system to maintain the health of the body, mind, and spirit. It stems from classical Daoist, Confucian, and Moist traditions and is rooted in the principles of Classical Chinese Medicine. In its true form, *Qigong* is a practice for cultivating knowledge and a main method for moving into *Tian Ren He Yi* _____ (the state of oneness of the universe and the human being).

Qigong is translated into English as ‘*Qi* cultivation’ or ‘to work with the *Qi*.’ There are many forms of *Qigong* practice: sitting meditation, movement (including Taijiquan and other internal martial arts), breath work, regulation of mental focus and emotions, visualizations, mudras, and mantras. The proper use of herbal supplements and food choices can be associated with *Qigong*. Cultivation of the classical arts -- such as calligraphy and music -- are considered a form of *Qigong* when conducted in a mindful manner. In any case, all the different forms have the same three keys, or three alignments: regulating the posture, regulating the breath, and regulating the mind. *Qigong* facilitates the development of a deeper relationship with *Qi*. This relationship helps the practitioner understand the laws of the universe and how they influence human life.

3. Calligraphy as a Form of *Qigong*

A skilled calligrapher must adjust his or her posture into an upright stance in order to concentrate, purify the mind, listen to the body, and visualize each character before starting to write. As the calligrapher moves the brush, his or her energy penetrates into or even through the paper. This process is really no different from any other *Qigong* practice.

There is a saying in Chinese calligraphy, “*Yi Zai Bi Xian* _____” meaning “mind before the brush.” In other words, one should purify the mind and refine the *Shen* (spiritual energy) before writing. One of the great emperor calligraphers in the Tang Dynasty – Li Shi Ming – said that the essence of each character originates from the calligrapher’s *Shen* or ‘heart-mind.’ When the calligrapher writes, his or her *Shen* must be harmonized in order to give the character a good presence and shape. The heart is the bone and tendons of the character. If the calligrapher’s heart is not strong, then the character will be weak. Thus, just as in *Qigong*, the heart should combine with the *Qi* and the *Qi* should combine with the heart. *Shen* is the function of the heart, so the heart should be tranquil in order to refine the *Shen*. This is the basis of both practices.

4. *Wu* and its Function

The Chinese character *Wu* is commonly translated as ‘shaman’ – a somewhat incomplete interpretation. The practice of a *Wu* only distantly resembles that of the shamans, who today are mostly located in Siberia and travel in ‘alternative realities’ as part of their religion. Siberian shamans are very aggressive. In trance, but in full possession of their faculties, these shamans may climb the World Tree to reach the Heaven of the Ancestors or descend to an Underworld in search of lost or trapped souls. They undergo difficult and painful initiations, including ritual death and rebirth. In contrast, the *Wu* referred to by the Chinese character is much more a spirit-medium. Through natural ability, training, and ritual preparation, the *Wu* can summon the bright spirits. These spirits inhabit the *Wu*’s body and speak through the *Wu*.²

The ancient *Wu* were different from the modern concept of *Wu*. Today’s *Wu* may channel transmissions from spirit bodies without being able to recall the communication. In ancient China, the *Wu* possessed *Shen Ming* (literally ‘Bright Spirit’): spiritual enlightenment and a deep understanding of the Universal Way. The *Wu* embodied *Tian Ren He Yi*, and through this ritual connection with Heaven, sustained both Yin and Yang – stillness and movement.³

The syllable *Wu*, written and intoned differently, also means dancing. It is no coincidence that

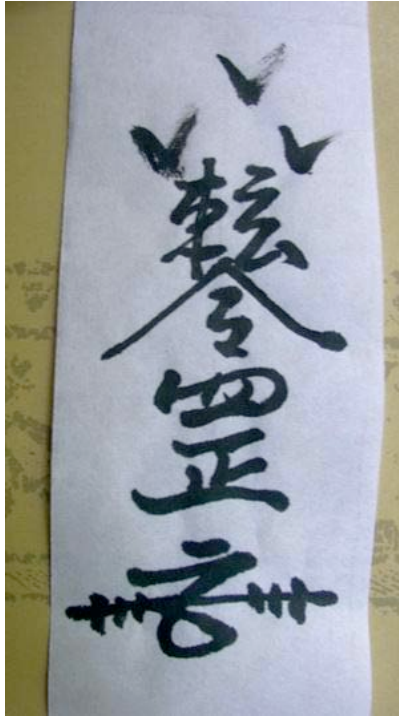
dancing connects the *Wu* to the Universe and helps develop their *Shen Ming*. According to *Xici*, one of the *Ten Wings* of the *Yijing*,⁴ through dancing and drumming one can accomplish a full understanding of one's own *Shen* and can also communicate with high-level beings. (The *Yijing* is also known as the *I Ching* or *Book of Changes*.) Dancing and drumming are methods to understand the *Shen* – this is illustrated on ancient pottery from more than four thousand years ago. Even the shamans of today use the ritual of dancing to facilitate universal connections, such as bringing rain to dry farmland. The ancient *Wu* were able to elevate their spirits to become one with all other spirits.

The *Wu* were omniscient and governed the country in addition to aiding others in transcending the physical plane. They were also able to function as doctors and taught disease prevention. Their keen observation of and close relationship with the universe even enabled them to avert natural disasters.

Chinese culture is based on the *Wu*, which predates both Daoist and Confucian culture. The ancient Chinese emperors were *Wu*, and through the ancient Chinese classics, we can understand the role of the *Wu*. Many classics are, in fact, named after great emperors or sages.

Classical Chinese Medicine (CCM) and Chinese shamanism are also widely considered to originate from the same source (*Wu Yi Tong Yuan* _____). Many ancient Chinese documents verify that doctors were indeed shamans.⁵ CCM, which merged with Daoism and Confucianism, is thoroughly based on *Yijing* science. The Tang Dynasty sage and medical king Sun Simiao stated that 'nobody qualifies to be a master physician without knowledge of the Science of the *Yijing*.'⁶ Therefore, the *Wu* is the source of all classical Chinese traditions.

5. Chinese Characters and *Wu*



The story of the creation of Chinese characters is related to the *Fu* (The Chinese character *Fu* _ means symbol, omen, or in alignment with). It was said that Cangjie formed the Chinese characters after observing patterns of animal track combined with the trigrams. This legend also tells us that it was storming heavily and the spirits were weeping at the moment he created these characters – reminiscent of the *Wu* calling in the rains. In fact, the ancient Chinese characters have the same function as the *Wu*, who used the *Fu* to access the universal *Qi* and circulate various forms of energy.

The ancient *Wu* (shamans) used the *Fu* to treat those who were ill or to connect with universal energies. Fig.2 is a *Fu* from my *Wu* lineage. I made it to purify energy in my *Qigong* practice. The *Fu* are said to have originated from *Fuxi*, the first legendary emperor in ancient China, when he made the *Bagua* or trigrams. These trigrams are considered the earliest *Fu* of the shamanic school. The *Fu* resemble characters from the ancient oracle bones style or ‘running style’ calligraphy. *Fu*, in fact, may be regarded as a type of *Qigong* – they are one way to

connect with universal energies and open the body in order to collect and transform the *Qi*. They may be used in practice to help others and in the practice of *Fengshui*. In traditional *Qigong* practice, a master uses the *Fu* to transmit the energies of the universe and of the lineage to his or her students.

Fig.2

6. The Rhythm of Calligraphy, *Qigong*, and *Wu*

Qigong, calligraphy and *Wu* have a deep relationship with the *Qi*. By following the processes prescribed by each of these modalities, practitioners can use *Qi* as a medicine to heal or to harmonize *Fengshui* or energy because they are essentially three aspects of the same face. The vivid vibrations of *Qi* form the rhythm of calligraphy, *Qigong*, and *Wu*. Let’s take a look at the Chinese character “*Yao* _” (medicine) as an example to get a feel for this rhythm.



Fig.3 Three different calligraphy styles depict the same character, “Yao”

The character *Yao* (Fig.3) is composed of two parts: a radical, meaning grass or herb, and the character for music. In addition to carrying the meaning of medicine or cure, this character can stand for music itself, happiness, or enjoyment. Ancient sages spoke of music as an analogy for universal energy. Harmony is derived from the resonance of sacred sounds. Harmony is also the connection and response of different entities. The *Yijing* illustrates this idea with the image of a mother bird’s song and the response of her babies. In other words, the energy created by resonating in harmony with the universe is the original medicine.

Dancing and music are forms of vibration, as is shaking. When practicing *Qigong*, we always begin with shaking in order to open the pores, connect with the *Shen* and *Qi* fields, and communicate with the Universe. We also use different sounds or mantras to open the meridians and all the cells of the body to connect with the universal energies and harmonize with the universal *Qi*. This process in *Qigong* is no different from the *Wu* rituals of dancing and drumming – through the vibrations and special frequencies, they connect with the universal *Qi*, their own spirits, and high-level beings.

Calligraphy also may be considered a special form of dancing – dancing with the brush. A skilled calligrapher will change his or her rhythm to penetrate personal energy or *Qi* into the characters. The characters resemble the ‘tracks’ or footprints of dancing. In good calligraphy, we can see a *Qi* rhythm, much like a musical rhythm. It is as if we were looking at the very picture of sound, and when we read the characters, we can feel the energy flowing.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, these three distinct modalities have the same function from a *Qi* perspective. This is reflected by the Chinese idiom *Yi Qu Tong Gong*: “different sounds have the same function or result.” Just as three different pieces of music can instill the same harmonious feeling, these three disciplines can harmonize our energies with those of the universe.

Acknowledgements

Joanne Wu, Deirdre Orceyre, and Pamela Causgrove provided editorial assistance for this article.

¹ See Zhongxian Wu, “Seeking the Roots of classical *Qigong*: Exploring the Original Meaning of the Pure Yang Mudra.” *Empty Vessel*, Winter, 2003.26

² Stephen Karcher, *Ta Chuan*(New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000, p40)

³ Li Zehou, *Jimao Wu Shuo*(Beijing: Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe, 1999, p68)

⁴ There are ten commentaries to the *Yijing*. It is commonly believed that Confucius wrote them to assist modern people in understanding the terse and cryptic language of the original text. Today these are included with the *Yijing* and are referred to as the ‘Ten Wings’ because they assist our minds in understanding deeper meanings and thus help us achieve greater heights.

⁵ Chen Lai, *Gudai Zongjiao yu Lunli—Lujia Shixiang de Geyuan* (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 1996, p35).

⁶ Zhang Jiebing, “*Yi yi yi*”, in *Leijing Fuyi* (Ming Dynasty; reprinted in Xian: Shaanxi Kexue Jishu Chubanshe, 1996, p350)