ABSTRACT

In Chinese Medicine, the silent and constant flow of the energies indicates the health of the body-mind. One of the variants of the energy flow arises from the relationship between the fundamental notion of void (represented by more than one sinogram) and two anatomical spaces mingmen and tanzhong, whose existence is suggested by Zhuang Zi in Qiwulum, the second chapter of his work. The present paper studies the terms of that relationship from the description of the siesta of Nan Guo Zi Qi who moves energies in his harmonious breathing. Since the Chinese admit breath and its dynamisms as a fundamental reality, the void will never lack so harmonically balanced energies that are imperceptible… once again the void.

1- ZHUANG ZI’S QIWULUN

Nan Guo Zi Qi

We know that both in Classical Greek culture and in Ancient China, medicine was a part of philosophy from which the practitioners obtained many of their theoretical foundations. Thus, the wise thinkers when addressing the nature included the study of the human body both in health and disease interweaving the different elements of the universe in their conceptions.

It is common that classical Chinese texts, whether philosophical, literary, historical or technical, approach issues directly linked to the human body and its functions -medicine in any case- or that after being interpreted, notions applicable to medical subjects can be obtained from them.

In order to do so and in this particular case, comes to my assistance Zhuang Zi, whose work reflects the close relationship that thinkers of the time had with the conception of nature and therefore with men. Numerous are the statements, sometimes symbolic some other times metaphorical and also direct ones, result of observations on natural phenomena or geographical details linked to morphophysiological characteristic of men or its emotional-moral modalities, which allow their concepts to be applied to Chinese medicine contents.

From the inner chapters, reputed as authentic, I would like to distinguish here Qiwulum, the second, that allows me to study the concept of void (which was also conceived by Greeks who were, approximately, contemporary of Zhuang Zi) void needed for the energetic dynamisms of the body and, thus, explaining the functionality of the mingmen and tanzhong spaces.

Zhuangzi translations show his sensibility before the subtlety of sense in language and the beauty of this language as well, and on behalf of our logic, surely not like his, his texts cannot be enclosed.
in a fixed frame, therefore translations of the title of this chapter from Zhuang Zi into our language differ according to the translators. Thus, in this redaction we will use different versions as appropriate for the understanding of the text, we find all translations useful since, without ignoring the different senses of Qiwlun, we reflect on which of them, in every given moment, helps us in our work. To the characteristics of the Chinese language the characteristics of the author, philosopher and poet are added.

Qi has the sense of equal, from the same rank, to make equal, to reach an agreement... Wu means object, everything perceived as real. Lun is dissertation, gathering texts to compare them, meditate upon them and develop them. In this way, according to one version the chapter is called “everything returns to the same” due to its proximity to Lao Zi II which affirms that everything goes back to the sameness when it reaches the unity from where everything proceeds.

2. VOID

When describing the nap of his character Nan Guo Zi Qi, Zhuang Zi suggests the existence of mingmen and tanzhong through the Taoist notion that the formless can acquire form through the movements of breaths in those functional areas without organicity which process a high charge of energy.

Nan Guo Zi Qi was napping in an almost ecstatic state; his disciple Yen Cheng Zi Yu, watching the scene, was restless because he did not recognize the one who had been napping the day before, surely it was his Master but not in his habitual state, familiar to Yen. Zi Qi with his back (yang) against a footstool attached to the ground (yin) and his abdomen-chest (yin) receiving light and heat from the sun (yang) breathed placidly, exhaling a mild blow that proved he was alive.

There is a space between these two organic referents (back/chest-abdomen) through which subtle breaths and energies can flow. To exhale a mild breath is expressed by the ideogram xu which, when prived of his right side (kou mouth) is read xu as well but with the meaning of void. This sinogram is one of those ones used in medical texts to express void in the sense of a space of circulation: we can see on the upper side of the character an uncultivated surface, naked, that favours the passage of the wind, the circulation of breaths between heaven and earth; the lower part shows small sprouts coming from the ground surface which are really tiny because the lack of obstacles is important.

The silent and undisturbed regular breaths represented by Zi Qi breathing which when circulating make use of the void of the organism so as conceive life, creating it through its movement and keeping it alive as well. Another ideogram to express void is chong that has, on the left hand side, the semantic element of water that talks about the passage of the fluid par excellence, constituent basis of life. And on the right hand side, appears zhong, square target which indicates that the fluid is captured rightly and with strength, an arrow that reaches the target. And lastly the void kong •phonetically very sonorous, as if resounding in an empty hollow, void, the one from the blue vault where the universal breaths move and which Tao Te King equals to a never exhausted bellow.

Nowadays, among us, void is synonym to nearly nothing; very little says the notion of void to a western spirit and when it does, it is in a negative sense.

To the Chinese if something is empty is because what was there before is not there any longer or because the place is filled with something imperceptible, or that being emptied out awaits being treaded or filled up again. Naturally, it is very difficult in our language to find another suggestive term.

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To the Chinese if something is empty is because what was there before is not there any longer or because the place is filled with something imperceptible, or that being emptied out awaits being treaded or filled up again. Naturally, it is very difficult in our language to find another suggestive term capable of substituting the word void, especially when talking about more abstract significances.

The void means inane (empty, unoccupied) as Lucretius named the emptiness “namque est in rebus inane” (“because inside the things exists the void”); “So, there is an impalpable space, imperceptible, unoccupied, not rendered, and virgin. But, in reality, is the container empty? Let us remember that Democritus imagined the void to be that which allows the movement between atoms, and their rest as well.

In order to create a harmonious, balanced current the yinyang breaths should flow without a single squeak in the empty space for that matter determined. This completed flowing is health, that is to say, it is not an absence but a serene, regular trade of energies in the organism. He who is healthy perceives no symptoms, but when disharmony-disease appears, becomes aware of the imbalance. A very simple explanation of the presence and role of the void is given by the flight of a kite which by stopping the wind with its sail creates, on the opposite side, a void that drives the kite upwards.

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China da especial resonancia al vacío generacional, riquísimo suelo para el parentesco abuelo-nieto. El vacío entre el padre e hijo es escaso, especialmente durante la juventud de ambos; ellos son muy cercanos; el vacío existente entre abuelo y nieto es mucho más grande. Lo que se diga entre abuelo y nieto resonará de tal manera, espacio creativo que permitirá la dinámica. Los pensadores griegos participan de esta concepción. Recuerda Heraclito que habló de opuestos que se convierten el uno en el otro debido a su mutua interconvertibilidad: despierto/dormido, por ejemplo, y joven/anciano. 

Lo anterior no parece ser reconvertible aún aunque Heraclito menciona eso porque comparte la idea de que el nieto es la continuidad de la línea familiar y, por lo tanto, el primer nieto fue nombrado después de su abuelo. 

Claramente vemos que el vacío no es en modo alguno ausencia o algo que no existe, aunque a veces no percibimos su contenido. Recuerda, como ejemplo, que la pelota en muy populares juegos no contiene nada, está vacía a pesar de su efectividad: nunca se agota completamente. 

Vamos a ver la fructífera concepción griega sobre la idea de átomos y void que propugnaron teorías bastante avanzadas para la época, aproximadamente al mismo tiempo que las escrituras de Zhuang Zi. El oeste no recibió esas teorías hasta el siglo XV, siglo V a.C. aproximadamente, para aceptar las teorías atómicas de Leucipo y su discípulo Demócrito. 

Demócrito tuvo que llegar a concluir que, convencionalmente decimos “color”, “saboreo”, “claridad” pero realmente, en su tiempo, sólo existen átomos y void. Por Demócrito, el hombre es una microcosmos y ha sido aceptado no en el sentido chino de hombre como el reflejo de su ambiente, sino como un centro de poder de esa cosmovisión y sus variantes (viento, luz, calor, noche, lluvia, estaciones) para explicar sus influencias sobre la salud. 

En Fragmento 9, Demócrito establece que “no sabemos nada verdadero, sólo lo que producen los cambios del cuerpo y lo que es introducido en su cuerpo o ofrece resistencia a él”. Idea que compartimos con cualquier equivalente oriental. 

Lo sabemos que el pensamiento chino trabaja sobre complementariedades, así que para hablar de void, su yinyang opuesto plenitud, ha de considerarse. Pares de antónimos no establecen una dualidad excluyente de modo de pensar sino que son ternarios porque el soplo circula juntando los términos. El componente creativo es el tercer miembro. Por eso escribimos yinyang y no yin/yang, la doble línea (occidental) propone una excluyente opuesto. 

Hablando de esto y sin dejar de lado Qiwulun, Yanchen el discípulo pregunta al Maestro que ya está despierto, cómo podría convertir su cuerpo en un tronco seco (yin) y su mente en cenizas muertas (yang) y la respuesta dice que es posible en el perdón de la identidad individual en beneficio de la identidad universal. Ziqi, debido a su euforia, logra penetrar el void que nada más es una metáfora de Dao. 

3. MINGMEN y TANZHONG
Here we talk about two spaces inside the thoracic – abdominal cavity that process breaths: **mingmen** “the gate of life or the gate of fate”, between both kidneys at the second lumbar vertebrae level, residence of the original energy **yuanqi** capable to generate a new being; and **tanzhong** “center of the chest” that takes a position which is equivalent to the former but in the upper part of the esplacnic cavity between the two lungs.

In the constant search of the **yinyang** harmony, needed for function, **mingmen** work (there is no organ) is ascribed only to the right kidney **yang**, hormonal, and not to the left kidney **yin**, urinary. In **mingmen** resides **yuan** the source, the origin of every human being and that is the reason why it is a region where energies, quite mobile, get transformed, evolve: *door of life*, that is to say that life and its activities depend on **mingmen** and on the dynamic of **qi** (energies), both in the kidney area. **Dumai** 4 is the acupuncture point **mingmen**.

**Qu Lifang**’s illustration below, explains the vibratory field between kidneys, where the energetic axe linking **mingmen** with **tanzhong** is clearly shown.

The constant interrelationship between theory and practice is manifested, for instance in the **Tai Ji Quan** positions, in the exercise of holding the ball of energy which covers the area round the navel up to the thorax on the sternum zone.

Access to **tanzhong** “in the middle of chest” is gained through the acupuncture point **renmai** 17, important place of energy interchange and resonance of the heart between 2nd, 3rd and 4th intercostal spaces as well, area covered by three points of acupuncture: **RM 17, 18 and 19** which, from the center of the sternum relate with the major arterial, venous and lymphatic vessels. Through **tanzhong** passes **zongqi**, the ancestral energy that mediates between the genetic lineage we come from and the singular being each one of us is; this energy is also known as thoracic energy because it is stored in the center of the thorax, center that is no other than **tanzhong**. Here we are facing the zones where **yuanqi** and **zongqi** are processed, initial biological energies, fundamental ones.

**Tanzhong** also known as **shanzhong**, center or sea of upper energy, also conveys the meaning of container with fat-**tan** - fat that smells. **Shan** means “ram smell”. Usually, **tan** the fat, whether in cholesterol form or in lymph form, as well as the membranous tissues (peritoneum, aponeurosis, pleurae) tend to have a strong and particular odour. The mediastinum is an important crossroad of organic elements, membranes and lymphatics.

In **Suwen** 8 it is explained that “The liver system is the Office of the General, planning is its product. The gall bladder is the office of the Fair Correctors (judges) who issue decisions. **Shanzhong** is the Minister counselor who rules the office and the transmission of the messages of happiness sent to the monarch”.

These two spaces –without organicity but indispensable– are symmetric, **tanzhong** between the two lungs and **mingmen** between both kidneys, only functional, with a large mobile energetic charge, one in the thorax and the other in the abdomen; just like the parallelism between the two places which stand out when contemplating the description of **Zi Qi** nap told by **Zhuang Zi** in his **Qiwulun**, for which “The leveling which makes things equivalent” is at this point of our work, the proper translation. **Mingmen** is the conception of an abstract function ruled by the element fire and without a corresponding organ. It is a “presence” justified by its action, without a precise organicity and without equivalence.
in the anatomical or physiological concepts of Western medicine. Here, in this place resides yuan, principle, source, energetic origin of the human being in the conception from which a new being arises from chaos. Yuan means original, firstly, raw, like a water spring sprouting in the mountains. Ming means order, destiny, and the order that configures the life of man, the one who designs the destiny of each and all energies. Men •u20204 is gate, door. In reality, mingmen is the archaic remembrance of the anterior heaven in the posterior one and this memory is topographically equivalent to the navel that is the place from where the fetus absorbs the breath which nourishes his body.

Chongmai to reach, to attain, crossroad is a meridian born in the small pelvis together with other two meridians dumai and renmai jointly described with an image of vegetal nature: a trunk and three branches which together, administer weiqi, the defensive energy protecting abdomen, thorax, back. Furthermore, chongmai as vertical axis is adjoined to daimai that transversally fastens to it, leaving both attached to the spinal column. Thus we have four extraordinary meridians running through the trunk and the head. Let us remember that this area of the small pelvis which reunites the four extra meridians is the one that is mentioned in the Zhuangzi as a space of free flow of energies represented in the nap of Nan Guo Zi Qi.

Tanzhong, center of the chest (in the center of the chest) is symmetric to mingmen gate of life (in the center of the abdomen). This is clearly related to the Taoist concept of void that is what allows energetic flows and interchanges and so, when heaven and earth transfer their most delicate essences for a new being to arise, there is a new biological reality in the established development. For Embryology – science that provides the scheme for the functioning of life- the conception is the beginning where biologically, the body is accompanied by the simultaneous development of a psychic movement; no Chinese will ever come up with the idea of separating the soul from the body, or the man from the universe or the adult being from his/her intrauterine life. Naturally, without complications, the body is the self, the own self.

Let us remember the description in China of chaos-cosmos through the existence of two heavens which show the models of the universe. Mingmen belongs to the anterior heaven (previous) the one before origin-conception, where statically lie all the cosmic matters or essential innate energies (heaven, earth, water, fire) later used in the conception. Out of this, arises the notion that the relationship between kidney and mingmen is that of water with fire, opposites but complementary elements, mutually needing and interinfluencing each other and are the origin of yinyang (water and fire) Strength and vital capacity depend on the two kidneys, the place where wisdom, willpower and reproductive function seat.

Mingmen is a region, a place between both kidneys where the principle of conservation and preservation of jing vital essence and of qi inborn energy, are found.

The combination of both of them composes a firm embryological organizer where heart (fire) and kidneys (water) constitute an axis around which revolves the genesis of the individual; in this genesis participate mingmen and yuanqi the original subtle energy both mental, due to being linked to heart and hereditary as well through the kidneys. Traditionally, kidneys constitute the meeting point of authentic yin yang, or what is the same of water and fire (archetypical) previous to conception.

Mingmen is not an organ but a field of strength for life, the place where resides the hereditary charge that will ensure the development of the individual from conception to death; it is the seat of the original breaths (yuanqi) where primeval yin yang conjugate and the one that materializes itself for treatment in dumai 4.

From Qiwulun we rescue the description of the universal movement of the energies that explains the dynamisms in the two spaces of the body we are talking about here. Even though is that second chapter in the Zhuang Zi the one which inspires this work, in the third one called Yangshengzhu “Nurturing the Vital Principle”, the notion of void is anatomically mentioned: Ding the cook, slaughters an ox utilizing the interstices (the void) that exist between the components of the animal. If there were not interstice between parts, whichever they may be, there would not be movement.

The world of the Chinese thinking, whether it be technical, literary, philosophical, provides useful concepts to different branches of knowledge, among them Medicine: the process is very fertile because it preserves, nowadays, the possibility of the existence of valid interpretation of ancient texts so as to apply them to modern reflection. This can be helpful in understanding important concepts involved in our work.
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