

# From *Qi* to the Ultimate Pursuit — The Similarities and Differences Between *Zhuangzi* and *Mencius*

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## Abstract

In ancient China, *qi* 氣 is an important philosophical proposition. *Zhuangzi* believed that *qi* is a substance that fills the universe and is in constant motion, unbound by any constraints. In contrast, *Mencius* leaned more towards the moral implications of *qi* in his explanations. Both *Zhuangzi* and *Mencius* derived the concept of *xing* 性 in accordance with their respective understanding of *qi*, discussing the ultimate pursuits of life. *Zhuangzi* emphasized the pursuit that is internalized within the heart, advocating that individuals align with nature and seek inner freedom, whereas *Mencius* advocated an externalized approach through benevolence and righteousness, participating in politics to achieve a harmony between the individual and society. These two pursuits reflect their unique understandings of human nature and society, which still hold profound relevance in contemporary times.

**Keywords:** *qi*, *xing*, life pursuit, Chinese political theory

## 1. Introduction

The philosophical traditions of ancient China have undergone significant transformations throughout the centuries, influenced by the dynamic interplay between different schools of thought. Notably, the works of *Zhuangzi*, and *Mencius*, a leading Confucian philosopher, contribute richly to our understanding of concepts such as *qi*, *xing*, and the ultimate pursuit of life. *Qi* is a moving medium that affects people's breath. From the physiological level to the psychological level, the operation of *qi* also affects the person's perception ability, and thus acts on the person's personality. *Zhuangzi* and *Mencius* explained the relationship between *qi* and *xing* from different dimensions, and thus opened a discussion of the intermediate pursuit

of life. This paper intends to explore the nuanced similarities and differences between *Zhuangzi* and *Mencius* as they articulate their visions on *qi* and the ultimate pursuit of the individual.

### 1.1 Problem Statement

Scholars in the past have studied *Zhuangzi* and *Mencius* extensively, but even though they lived in the same era, there has been little research on the connection between *Zhuangzi* and *Mencius*'s thought. More specifically, the following research questions need to be addressed:

- 1) In the context of *Zhuangzi* and *Mencius*, how are *qi* and *xing* connected?
- 2) How did *Qi* lead to the difference between *Zhuangzi* and *Mencius*'s ultimate pursuit of

life?

- 3) What are the differences between *Zhuangzi* and *Mencius* in their thoughts on political participation?
- 4) What can *Zhuangzi* and *Mencius's* theories on *qi* be reflected on and learn from in modern society?

### 1.2 Objectives

The goal of this research is to link *qi* and *xing* with the highest pursuits, to form a complete chain of reactions, and to reflect on and apply this process. Particularly, the study has the following sub-objectives:

- 1) Analyze the concept of *qi* in the writings of both philosophers, examining its implications within their respective frameworks.
- 2) Identify and elucidate the similarities in the ultimate pursuits emphasized in the philosophies of *Zhuangzi* and *Mencius*.
- 3) Highlight the philosophical divergences in their views on the nature of humanity, ethical living, and the role of the individual vis-à-vis societal norms.
- 4) Provide a comprehensive comparative analysis that contributes to the broader field of comparative philosophy and offers insight into the richness of Chinese philosophical thought.

## 2. Preliminary Literature Review

Preliminary literature review indicates that the concept of *qi* in Chinese philosophy has evolved from its physical meaning. At the same time, *qi* can also refer to breath or respiration. In fact, within the philosophical context, *qi* encompasses not only the material aspect but also the metaphysical. *Qi* is in constant motion and constitutes the vital force of life. It generally manifests as *yin* and *yang* or the five elements, which contain internal principles of mutual generation and restriction. The understanding and application of *qi* influence human perception and moral judgment, leading to different ultimate pursuits in life.

## 3. Methodology

This paper will utilize a comparative textual analysis methodology, treating *Zhuangzi* and *Mencius* as primary sources. The research will adopt a hermeneutic approach to understand the intricacies of *qi* and its significance in both texts. Key analytical techniques will include:

- 1) Cross-Philosophical Comparison: Contextualizing the thoughts of *Zhuangzi* and *Mencius* within the broader historical and cultural landscape of ancient China to grasp the influences and implications of their teachings.
- 2) Critical Interpretation: Engaging with secondary literature to challenge and support interpretative claims regarding the similarities and differences identified in their philosophies, thereby enriching the discourse with diverse perspectives.

## 4. Philosophical Connotation of Qi

### 4.1 Definition and Origin of Qi

The concept of *qi* in ancient Chinese philosophy represents a transformation from the physical to the philosophical realm. In the natural world, the basic meaning of *qi* refers to flowing gases, such as smoke, clouds, and mist. Within the context of ancient Chinese philosophy, the significance of *qi* becomes even more diverse and rich. *Qi* does not necessarily possess a tangible entity but is abstracted into a concept. It is described as the form that constitutes the world, with all living beings originating from nature and being influenced by it; thus, *qi* is also the material that forms the human body.

Both *Zhuangzi* and *Mencius* have provided interpretations of *qi*, with *qi* embodying absolute movement. *Zhuangzi* delves deeper into the origins and operational processes of *qi*. In *Zhuangzi's* contemplation, the movement of *qi* arises from the mutual generation and restriction among its various elements, which exist in a parallel state, creating a dynamic interplay that propels the whole forward. *Mencius's* foundational explanation of *qi* largely draws from the discourses of earlier thinkers or contemporaneous schools of thought. *Mencius* introduces the moral aspect of *qi*, responding to the Confucian pursuit of propriety and benevolence. Unlike *Zhuangzi*, *Mencius's* concept of *qi* involves a continuous deepening from the surface to the core, influencing the human heart and establishing moral norms that shape virtuous qualities. The operation of *qi* stems from the ongoing cultivation and deepening of morality, establishing a progressive relationship between *qi* and the heart.

### 4.2 Zhuangzi's Natural Qi

In *Zhuangzi: Inner Chapters, The Human World*, it is mentioned, the spirit is empty and waits for

all things (Watson, 2013, p. 93). How should we understand “empty and awaits things”? In the context of *Zhuangzi*, “empty” is often used to explain a certain concept. For instance, the first line of the *Dao De Jing* states that the *Dao* cannot be named or described. Regarding “empty,” in *Zhuangzi*’s context, *qi* does not have a specific physical form; it is not the tangible vapor, mist, or smoke that people experience in real life. However, “empty” does not imply nihilism; it does not represent emptiness or meaninglessness, but rather signifies a kind of fluidity and vitality. “Awaits things” indicates that while *qi* may seem void, it also means that *qi* is not constrained by subjective or objective factors and can encompass all things in the world, embracing the universe in various ways.

*Qi* is a term rich with vitality. It is believed that the universe began in a state of chaos, where all things were empty. *Qi* constantly moves and circulates, and then the universe transforms the void into the tangible, creating distinctions between the “named” and the “unnamed.” *Qi* is often divided into complementary aspects, the most common being yin and yang and the five elements: metal, wood, water, fire, and earth. In the interactions of things, the concept of eternal cycles is conceptualized, propelling progress and generating seasons and years. In *Zhuangzi: Outer Chapters: Knowledge Wandered North*, it states, You have only to comprehend the one breath that is the world (Watson, 2013, p. 340). *Qi* connects the world; all things in heaven and earth are filled with *qi*. *Qi* has no distinction of size; it permeates every corner of the world and resides in every person’s body, constituting the essence of the universe and humanity. Therefore, for *Zhuangzi*, *qi* is a fundamental and essential entity.

Indeed, *qi*, in its basic meaning, is the substance that constitutes the world, the root of existence, or the initial mover of nature. At the same time, *qi* constantly moves, creating the dynamics of the universe and serving as the core of the laws of movement of all things. In the context of human society, *qi* also encompasses human behavior. *Qi* can refer to a person’s temperament, demeanor, or emotions (Goldin, 2017). *Qi* influences the ceaseless vitality of all things, the natural order, the cycle of life and death, as well as joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness.

#### 4.3 Mencius’s Human Nature Qi

In *Mencius*’s discourse, the concept of *qi* is not discussed as frequently as in the *Zhuangzi*. *Mencius* does not provide a detailed explanation of *qi* from various perspectives; rather, he emphasizes it significantly in relation to the concept of “Noble Spirit” (浩然之氣).

‘May I ask what your strong points are?’

‘I have an insight into words. I am good at cultivating my “flood-like *qi*”.’

‘May I ask what this “flood-like *qi*” is?’

‘It is difficult to explain. This is a *qi* which is, in the highest degree, vast and unyielding. Nourish it with integrity and place no obstacle in its path and it will fill the space between Heaven and Earth. It is a *qi* which unites rightness and the Way. Deprive it of these and it will starve. It is born of accumulated rightness and cannot be appropriated by anyone through a sporadic show of rightness. Whenever one acts in a way that falls below the standard set in one’s heart, it will starve.’ (Lau, 2003)

*Mencius* confines the concept of *qi* within the realm of humanity, characterizing it as moral and benevolent. In his fundamental interpretation of *qi*, *Mencius* essentially responds to *Zhuangzi*’s views. *Qi* is similarly ineffable and difficult to articulate; it permeates the universe and connects heaven and earth. However, the description of “supreme greatness and utmost rigidity” is absent in *Zhuangzi*’s discourse. “Great” signifies vastness and boundlessness, while “rigid” implies steadfastness and strength. In fact, this already imbues *qi* with a moral significance, a notion that is further substantiated in the subsequent text. *Mencius* elucidates the basic concept of *qi* in simple terms and then shifts his focus to its moral function. He asserts that *qi* is complementary to the principles of *Dao* and *yi*; without morality, *qi* loses its potency. In the context of *Mencius*, the movement of *qi* arises from the accumulation of moral virtues, which are cultivated from within through the development of inner beauty, rather than being acquired by chance. The noble spirit here is not about cultivating a vital essence, but rather about nurturing the realm of “great courage.” This quality of “great courage” is manifested in the ability to remain undisturbed, maintaining a moral heart, and consistently possessing the steadfast courage that is not swayed by external influences.

#### 5. The Distinction of Xing in the Context of Zhuangzi and Mencius

### 5.1 Basic Meaning of Xing

*Qi* was initially used to explain phenomena in the natural world, and later, the concept of *qi* gradually extended to human society. Nature typically refers to one's inherent qualities, which are considered gifts from heaven, the innate nature bestowed upon humans. Ancient Chinese philosophy engaged in intense discussions regarding the essence of human nature and the dichotomy of good and evil. As a substance that permeates the universe, *qi* has a significant influence on the formation of nature. However, *Zhuangzi* and *Mencius* held differing views when discussing human nature.

### 5.2 Mencius: Benevolence and Aspiration

Confucianism favors morality over the nature bestowed upon us by heaven, as the way of heaven is benevolent. Bodily desires do not solely belong to humans; they are shared with animals, yet this does not encompass the entirety of human nature (Graham, 1990).

*Mencius's* concept of *qi* leans towards moralism, and it also points to the heart, but *Mencius's* notion of *xing* refers to the innate ability to discern right from wrong, which he believes is inherent in all humans. *Mencius* posits that human nature is fundamentally good. Therefore, what he refers to as the cultivation of benevolence and virtue is the growth of internal energy, a spontaneous development, with education serving the purpose of nurturing this growth. The sage, as a moral exemplar, exerts a tremendous radiating influence (Graham, 1990). Thus, what individuals need to do is to continuously engage in the capture of thoughts based on their nature, assessing the relative importance and correctness of desires and impulses, and cultivating a resilient spirit of "hao ran" (a noble and righteous energy), rather than succumbing to or yielding to their original nature.

*Qi* also carries the meaning of breath, which easily leads us to another concept: sheng (life). Sheng signifies life, in contrast to death, particularly referring to health and longevity, while also denoting prosperity and wealth. Sheng is the language of anyone concerned about their health and wishing to live to their natural lifespan. Subsequently, with concepts like yang sheng (nurturing life) entering philosophy, there is an emphasis on maintaining a healthy body and ensuring the integrity of life, without sacrificing health for the sake of power,

material wealth, or other pursuits, as exemplified by figures like Yang Zhu. *Mencius* vehemently criticizes such behavior, as it places personal gain above morality, representing a manifestation of egoism (Graham, 1990).

### 5.3 Zhuangzi: Spontaneity and Purity

In the context of *Zhuangzi*, there exists a logical chain of "Dao - Virtue - Life - Nature".

The Way is virtue's idol. Life is virtue's light. The inborn nature is the substance of life. The inborn nature in motion is called action. Action that has become artificial is called loss. (Watson, 2013, p. 370)

The *Dao* represents the highest philosophical concept in *Zhuangzi's* thought. In *Zhuangzi*, it is believed that the *Dao* constitutes the initial state and continuous driving force of the universe, as well as the natural laws governing both the cosmos and human society. *Zhuangzi* emphasizes that each thing possesses its unique characteristics, and each has its own *Dao*. The transformation of the *Dao* generates *qi*, the origin of One is like the origin of *qi*. The gathering of *qi* leads to the gathering of forms, while the dispersal of *qi* results in the dissolution of forms. The existence of *qi* grants life to all things.

In the Great Beginning, there was nonbeing; there was no being, no name. Out of it arose One; there was One, but it had no form. Things got hold of it and it came to life, and it was called Virtue. Before things had forms, they had their allotments; these were of many kinds but not cut off from one another, and they were called fates. Out of the flow and flux, things were born, and as they grew, they developed distinctive shapes; these were called forms. The forms and bodies held within them spirits, each with its own characteristics and limitations, and this was called the inborn nature. If the nature is trained, you may return to Virtue, and Virtue at its highest peak is identical with the Beginning. (Watson, 2013, p. 198)

Positive aspects in *xing* are seen as virtue. It can be seen that virtue is a higher standard based on existence; not every living being possesses virtue. Virtue serves as the most direct criterion for differentiating all things. *Qi* remains actively in motion throughout the entire process. With differing *Dao*, differing virtues, and differing natures, all things manifest their uniqueness. Nature is the essence of life, and *Zhuangzi* believes that only the nature that upholds virtue can be regarded as the essence of life. The



“human nature” that arises from upholding virtue is the essence of humanity.

The people have their constant inborn nature. To weave for their clothing, to till for their food—this is the Virtue they share. They are one in it and not partisan, and it is called the Emancipation of Heaven. (Watson, 2013, p. 159)

Human beings possess a “constant nature,” understanding that the ability to eat and dress is a characteristic inherent to all. What kind of human nature is esteemed by *Zhuangzi*? The following text provides an answer.

Therefore, in a time of Perfect Virtue, the gait of men is slow and ambling; their gaze is steady and mild. In such an age, mountains have no paths or trails, lakes no boats or bridges. The ten thousand things live species by species, one group settled close to another. Birds and beasts form their flocks and herds; grass and trees grow to fullest height. So it happens that you can tie a cord to the birds and beasts and lead them about or bend down the limb and peer into the nest of the crow and the magpie. (Watson, 2013, p. 159)

This passage describes *Zhuangzi*’s ideal world, where all things coexist harmoniously and the people live in stability and peace. *Zhuangzi* believes that there are two ways to attain understanding and seek inner peace: “heart fasting” and “sitting and forgetting.” In the chapter “The World of Man,” *Zhuangzi* explains heart fasting and concludes with the concept of “three listens”.

Don’t listen with your ears, listen with your mind. No, don’t listen with your mind, but listen with your spirit. Listening stops with the ears, the mind stops with recognition. (Watson, 2013, p. 93)

How can we perceive nature and coexist with it? *Zhuangzi* believes that the highest realm is to listen with the *qi*, which represents a form of intuitive understanding. Thus, the experiences derived from sensory and rational understanding are not entirely complete and exhibit differences. Intuition, on the other hand, is a mode of thinking that can eliminate the distinctions between subject and object, and between self and other, thereby resolving the numerous barriers to understanding and perceiving things. It directly prevents the ego from obstructing the recognition of things, allowing for deep communication and dialogue. Therefore, in the context of *Zhuangzi*, the *qi*

points to the heart, but this heart, or nature, is comfortable in its detachment from external objects and is pure. Consequently, it is possible to interact with the *qi* of heaven and earth using this “clear” heart, enabling the subject’s personality to reach a deeper level of existential experience.

## 6. The Ultimate Pursuit

### 6.1 *The Pursuit of Life Internalized: The Benevolent and the Supreme Individual*

The concept of *qi* may seem like a basic idea in *Zhuangzi*’s discourse, but it actually contains profound truths and even hints at *Zhuangzi*’s ultimate pursuit in life. *Qi* permeates the space between heaven and earth, and different movements give rise to different entities, resulting in the myriad of things being distinct and each possessing its own uniqueness.

There is nothing in the world bigger than the tip of an autumn hair, and Mount Tai is little. No one has lived longer than a dead child, and Pengzu died young. Heaven and earth were born at the same time I was, and the ten thousand things are one with me. (Watson, 2013, pp. 70-71)

This statement not only describes the myriad characteristics, forms, and laws of all things but also reveals the reasons behind these differences and variations. This means that due to differences in people’s “observation point” and values, individuals observe and perceive things in different ways, resulting in their observations being distinct, relative, and non-singular. *Zhuangzi*’s proposal of such a pluralistic concept reflects the social reality of the Hundred Schools of Thought during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods in which he lived.

The world is in great disorder, the worthies and sages lack clarity of vision, and the Way and its Virtue are no longer One. So, the world too often seizes on one of its aspects, examines it, and pronounces it good... The men of the world all follow their own desires and make these their “doctrine” ... and “the art of the Way” in time comes to be rent and torn apart by the world. (Watson, 2013, pp. 458-459)

The sentence embodies the conflicts and deceptions among different schools of thought in the real world, particularly between Confucianism and Mohism, have not only led to chaos in the realm of right and wrong but have also fragmented and obscured the true *Dao*.

*Mencius* similarly acknowledged the turmoil of society during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, where people were caught in a state of ritual collapse, lack of distinction between right and wrong, and erratic emotions. *Mencius* believed that the way to live in chaotic times is to continually receive education, to learn constantly, and to discern what is acceptable and what is not, encapsulated in the principle of “do not impose on others what you do not desire for yourself.” The perfection of human nature and moral skills can only be achieved through continuous discipline and self-realization. Therefore, *Mencius* divides self-cultivation into three stages: cognitive understanding, ritual establishment, and musical completion (Cook, 1997, pp. 521-522). This leads to the acceptance of the correct moral goals in life, fostering a strong inner resolve, and striving to realize it throughout one’s life. *Mencius*’s cultivation of the mind is a process involving the accumulation of correct actions, ultimately nurturing a noble spirit and becoming a resonant gentleman.

*Zhuangzi* believed that *Mencius*’s clear distinctions between right and wrong, good and evil, life and death, led to an extreme of conflict arising from differences. *Zhuangzi* sought to provide a solution to unify the debates on “right and wrong” (YAO, 2023). *Qi* is the substance that constitutes the world, and fundamentally, all things can transform and unite into one. The Way is without beginning or end, but things have their life and death. (Watson, 2013, p. 269) *Zhuangzi* believed that, at its core, the world is a unified whole. The relationship between humans and objects, as well as life and death, is merely a manifestation of *qi*. Guo Xiang commented: “Life and death are but endless transformations, a cycle of beginnings and endings.” In turbulent times, “The morning mushroom knows nothing of twilight and dawn; the summer cicada knows nothing of spring and autumn,” (Watson, 2013, p. 54) so what can be said of humans? The issue of life and death became prominent during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, drawing *Zhuangzi*’s attention amidst many differing concerns. Even when his wife passed away, *Zhuangzi* felt no sorrow; instead, he played the drum and sang. “A sage forgets his feelings; the lowest beings aren’t even capable of having feelings. But the place where feelings are most concentrated is precisely among people

like ourselves.” (Liu & Mather, 2003, p. 347) This reflects the constraints of being human; however, “If you are content with the time and willing to follow along, then grief and joy have no way to enter,” (Watson, 2013, p. 85) embodies human freedom, *Zhuangzi* believed.

*Zhuangzi* said, “You’re wrong. When she first died, do you think I didn’t grieve like anyone else? But I looked back to her beginning and the time before she was born. Not only the time before she was born, but the time before she had a body. Not only the time before she had a body, but the time before she had a spirit. In the midst of the jumble of wonder and mystery, a change took place and she had a spirit. Another change and she had a body. Another change and she was born. Now there’s been another change and she’s dead. It’s just like the progression of the four seasons: spring, summer, fall, winter.

“Now she’s going to lie down peacefully in a vast room. If I were to follow after her bawling and sobbing, it would show that I don’t understand anything about fate. So, I stopped.” (Watson, 2013, pp. 282-283)

Human beings, like all things, originate from the *Dao*, move with the flow of *qi*, and return to the *Dao* through death. In fact, death is a result of the intense movement of *qi*, bringing one closer to moral outcomes, so there is no need for sorrow. *Zhuangzi* believes that an ideal life involves rejecting ambiguous distinctions and accepting all things while maintaining tranquility in the face of death. This perspective on life and death is not nihilistic; rather, *Zhuangzi* does not deny the process of life but emphasizes the experience of living.

*Zhuangzi* develops a depiction of the ideal personality and the highest realm of life. The greatest achievement of *Zhuangzi*’s thought presented to future generations is the spiritual realm of “freedom,” which can also be understood as the pursuit of liberty. *Zhuangzi* refers to this as “freedom in the realm of non-action” and “freedom between heaven and earth.” This concept of “freedom” is illustrated in *Zhuangzi* through descriptions of his ideal personalities: the “Ultimate Person,” the “True Person,” the “Divine Person,” and the “Sage.” It embodies three fundamental spiritual connotations: first, life and death do not change oneself; second, to wander beyond the dust and grime; and third, to keep joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness from entering one’s heart. *Zhuangzi*’s

freedom is the liberation from the constraints of life and death, the conventions of the secular world, and the burdens of emotional turmoil. It is a state of peace and tranquility free from any spiritual burdens, representing a transcendent spiritual realm.

All things arise from the *Dao*, each attaining its virtue, and every entity possesses its inherent nature. If one aligns with this natural disposition, then happiness in the present moment is assured, requiring no external pursuit. (Feng, 2014) What does absolute leisure look like? *Zhuangzi* mentioned, if he had only mounted on the truth of Heaven and Earth, ridden the changes of the six breaths, and thus wandered through the boundless, then what would he have had to depend on? (Watson, 2013, p. 55) *Zhuangzi* also provided a more detailed explanation.

The Perfect Man is godlike. Though the great swamps blaze, they cannot burn him; though the great rivers freeze, they cannot chill him; though swift lightning splits the hills and howling gales shake the sea, they cannot frighten him. A man like this rides the clouds and mist, straddles the sun and moon, and wanders beyond the four seas. Even life and death have no effect on him, much less the rules of profit and loss! (Watson, 2013, p. 74)

The “Perfect man” represents the ultimate state of freedom. *Zhuangzi*’s definition of an ideal character encompasses nearly all the concepts we have mentioned, including the theory of the equality of things, views on life and death, and perspectives on freedom. Throughout this discourse, the concept of *qi* is a constant thread; it is both the origin and the process, as well as the outcome.

## 6.2 Political Participation Manifested in Action: Entering the World and Retreating from Society

For the thinkers of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, responding to political demands was inevitable. In terms of government involvement, *Mencius* and *Zhuangzi* presented distinctly different viewpoints.

*Mencius*’s concept of *qi* represents a moral internal circulation that deepens progressively. Therefore, *Mencius* believed one should be proactive, continuously strive for knowledge, and enter the officialdom through the imperial examination, offering advice and strategies for the nation. In this way, one could enter the “whirlpool center” of national politics and

contribute one’s strength. To gain the favor of the rulers, *Mencius* proposed the concept of the divine right of kings.

Wan Chang said, ‘Is it true that Yao gave the Empire to Shun?’

‘No,’ said *Mencius*. ‘The Emperor cannot give the Empire to another.’

‘In that case who gave the Empire to Shun?’

‘Heaven gave it him.’ (Lau, 2003)

Here, the authority of Shun is illustrated as a heavenly gift to explain the concept of the divine right of kings. What *Mencius* refers to is that the exercise of political power lies with the King, yet the value of politics is centered on the common people, which is precisely the essence of *Mencius*’s people-oriented philosophy. *Mencius* places humanity at the center of all natural things, which is the best embodiment of the concept of *qi*. *Mencius* believed that *qi* of humanity is like the splendor of heaven, it is the movement of *qi*.

When we shift our perspective to *Daoism*, a starkly different scenario emerges. *Zhuangzi*’s concept of *qi* represents a mode of movement that continuously extends outward; rather than seeking inward and adding to one’s troubles, it is better to explore outward and seek a vast state of mind. *Zhuangzi* distances himself from politics, believing that the “benevolence and righteousness” advocated by *Mencius* would undermine human nature, leading to hypocrisy and alienation. He aims to dissolve predetermined boundaries, reflecting on things with the power of his own life, thus freely wandering between the banks of existence.

## 7. Conclusion

Both *Zhuangzi* and *Mencius*, from the perspective of *qi*, explain human character and qualities, applying them to the highest pursuits of life while responding to societal needs. This indeed forms a coherent theoretical system. Although *Zhuangzi* and *Mencius* differ fundamentally in their positions, they also share some common ideas. For instance, in addition to the concept of “Noble Spirit”, *Mencius* also mentions “night *qi*” as a supplementary notion, making his discourse appear less radical, which in fact also reflects an influence from *Zhuangzi*’s thought. As for *Zhuangzi*, he recognizes that individuals cannot exist in isolation within society; they are inevitably bound by the social relationships of ancient Chinese rural society, which are tied by

blood. Truly reclusive individuals living deep in the mountains are few and far between, and such conditions are rare, thus the freedom of the heart becomes the true key.

The theory of *qi* itself lacks scientific validation and leans towards a form of simplistic materialism. However, throughout the long development of Chinese culture, philosophers and even traditional Chinese medicine practitioners have refined this theory, discarding its dross while preserving its essence, allowing it to be passed down and validated through practice. “*Qigong*” is a healing method that has survived to this day; it involves a series of movements that engage various joints of the body to adjust breath and exercise the body.

In contemporary society, *qi* similarly permeates the space between heaven and earth, as well as all things. In the context of today’s multicultural backdrop, we should also seek our own *qi* and find a suitable way of life. The image of the individual often becomes a calling card for a group or a nation. The existence of *qi* serves as a thread that connects the cultural narratives of the past and present, as well as the social reflections of different eras.

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