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Article

The Spiritual Features of the Experience of *qi* in Chinese Martial Arts

Veronica Cibotaru

Faculty of Philosophy, Sorbonne University, 75005 Paris, France; cibotaruveronica@gmail.com

Abstract: I argue in this article, grounding on a phenomenological analysis of the experience of *qi* in Chinese martial arts, that the experience of *qi* in this framework can share the features of a secular spiritual experience, in other words of a spiritual experience that is not religious, at least not necessarily. I put in evidence five features that can characterize the experience of *qi* in Chinese martial arts and that arguably pertain to spirituality: (1) the importance of individual experience; (2) self-transcendence and the quest for authenticity; (3) the connection with a transcendent dimension; (4) the importance of corporeity and at the same time the apprehension of a dimension which cannot be reduced to corporeity; (5) the use of imagination in order to grasp a transcendent dimension that presupposes the use of metaphors. Consequently, the experience of *qi* in Chinese martial arts suggests the possibility of a form of spirituality that is not necessarily bound to religion and that at the same time is not a mere rejection of traditional religions. At the same time, I argue that the experience of *qi* in Chinese martial and energetic arts reveals radical possibilities of human experience at the core of which are fundamental transcendental structures of human experience, i.e., the experience of our body and the experience of the world through our body. This suggests the idea that phenomenology has an important potential for the investigation of spirituality and opens towards a research field that can be deeper explored.

Keywords: spirituality; religion; phenomenology of corporeity; phenomenology of martial arts; phenomenology of *qi*

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1. Introduction

The concept of *qi* (simplified Chinese: 气; traditional Chinese: 氣) is a very ancient concept that has its origins in Chinese thought but that is also important for Japanese and Korean thought[1]. It can be translated in English as "vital energy" while its original meaning denoted the vapor of clouds (Wang et al. 2020, p. 177). It is predominant in various Asian currents of thought and religion, such as Taoism or Confucianism (Wang et al. 2020, pp. 177–90) and was already used in the Shang (c. 1600–1046 BC) and Zhou (1046–256 BC) dynasties in order to explain natural phenomena such as earthquakes (Wang et al. 2020, p. 177).

The notion of *qi* has acquired a wide range of different meanings in various philosophical schools. However, it is possible to distinguish two main types of meanings for the notion of *qi*, namely a cosmogonic-ontological meaning and a moral meaning. In its cosmogonic-ontological meaning the concept of *qi* designates the origin of all things but also their material essence, including the essence of human being. As an example, it is possible to grasp this type of meaning in the Taoist classical work *Huainanzi* (2nd c. BC) which says:

> *Dao* originated in the nebulous void, the nebulous void produced space-time. Space-time produced the original *qi*. A boundary [divided] the original *qi*. That which was pure and bright spread out to form heaven; that which was heavy and turbid congealed to form earth. [. . .] The conjoined essences of heaven and earth produced *yin* and *yang*. The suppressive essences of *yin* and *yang* cause

> the four seasons. The scattered essences of the four seasons created the myriad things.
>
> (Wang et al. 2020, p. 179)

As we can see, according to this text *qi* appears at a very early stage of the production of the universe and creates "the myriad things", i.e., all things of the universe. Another interesting idea is that there are various forms of *qi*, which however derive from one original *qi*. The Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi (1130–1200) presents a similar understanding of the concept of *qi*, according to which *qi* is "the material basis that constitutes the myriad things" (Wang et al. 2020, p. 185). This comprehension of the concept of *qi* can also be found in later Chinese philosophy, though in revised form. Thus, interestingly the philosopher Yan Fu (1853–1921) revised the notion of *qi* from the perspective of modern physics, using concepts such as energy, extension, attraction, and repulsion (Wang et al. 2020, p. 189). We can also find an ontological if not cosmogonic meaning of the notion of *qi* in Allen Barry's work *Striking beauty: A Philosophical Look at the Asian Martial Arts* where *qi* is described as follows:

> *Qi* is a word for any gaseous substance-steam, clouds, smoke, the air, or breath. In fact, it is the modern Chinese word for "weather". *Qi* has two basic characteristics. The first is to come in gradations of subtlety, like ice gradually turning into steam. The second is to be dynamic, not static, constantly moving and changing, like water flowing down or steam rising up. *Qi* is material, provided that matter is understood dynamically as interchangeable with energy and never at rest. It has a spatial extension and is in constant transformation independent of awareness. As the original material of all things, it penetrates everywhere and makes all things flow. What we call a "thing" is a more or less momentary stability, nothing substantial or "for itself". *Qi* is energetic, vibratory, and incapable of being still.
>
> (Barry 2015, pp. 28–9)

As it appears from this fragment, Barry uses the modern concept of energy, just as Yan Fu, in order to interpret the concept of *qi*. Interestingly, he insists on the dynamic nature of *qi*, which is precisely implied by the concept of energy.

On the other hand, the notion of *qi* can also have a moral meaning and imply the idea of a moral quality or a moral spirit. One can find this understanding of the notion of *qi* in the philosophy of the Confucian thinker Mencius (372–289 BC) (Wang et al. 2020, p. 178).

The concept of *qi* plays also a crucial role in traditional Chinese medicine. Finally, it is also used in Chinese martial arts, such as Kung Fu or Tai Chi, and in Chinese energetic arts, such as Qigong, which can be practiced for themselves, but are also often incorporated in martial arts. Specifically, the concept of *qi* is often important to the way practitioners experience their martial or energetic practice.

In this present study it is my aim to offer a phenomenological description of the experience of *qi* as it is lived in the practice of Chinese martial arts in order to show that this experience in the context of martial arts can share spiritual features. In this context I use the concept of experience in its Husserlian sense, more precisely as it appears in the *Fifth Logical Investigation*: here Husserl presents the concept of experience (*Erlebnis*) in its pure phenomenological meaning, i.e., as a complex of psychic acts that is considered in a manner "which cuts out all relation to empirically real existence" (Husserl 1970b, p. 82). Due to this phenomenological understanding of the notion of experience, the legitimacy of this experience is not dependent on its objective reality or validity. In this context, the legitimacy and interest of the experience of *qi* is not dependent upon the objective reality of *qi* or the truth validity of the concept of *qi*. That is also why the lack of accurate philosophical or medical knowledge concerning the concept of *qi* of most practitioners of Chinese martials arts does not put into question the legitimacy of their experience from a phenomenological point of view. Thus, we can see the potential of the phenomenological notion of experience for the research on spirituality since what is central for spirituality is the subjective lived experience and not its objective content which can be problematic

and unproven. At the same time, the phenomenological understanding of the concept of experience does not dismiss the subjective lived experience as a mere subjective and thus problematic experience, since it brackets its objective value and thus does not measure its value with regard to its objective content.

The first part of my analysis is based on the phenomenological research method because its first scope is to describe the subjective lived experience of *qi* in Chinese martial arts while showing at the same time some transcendental, universal features of every human experience that this particular type of experience reveals. The phenomenological research method is most suitable for this research objective. Grounding on this phenomenological description, I argue in the two subsequent parts of my article that the experience of *qi* as it is lived by practitioners of Chinese martial arts is a spiritual experience that at the same time is not religious.

2. A phenomenological Description of the Experience of *qi* in Chinese Martial Arts

2.1. Research Method

As a research method for this part of my study I use the method of integration of qualitative research to phenomenological analysis. Contrary to the quantitative research method, qualitative research is an empirical research method that is focused on non-numerical data such as emotions and subjective representations. Its data are collected through participant observation and interviews. For this reason, this part of my study engages with the subjective way in which practitioners of Chinese martial arts feel the *qi* during their practice.

More precisely, the qualitative research method is used in two ways in this study. First of all, it is based on interviews that I carried with 17 people[2], sometimes with follow-ups. Two of those people are students (one beginner and one advanced) and 13 of those people are Kung Fu, Tai Chi, or Qigong teachers. All interviewees study or teach in Europe (France, Belgium, and Germany). Two of them are of Chinese origin, one of them is of African origin, has studied Kung Fu at the Shaolin Temple in China, a landmark place for the practice of Kung Fu and is currently the cultural ambassador of this temple, and several of other participants studied in China. The others are of European origin. Three of them are former top athletes, since two of them are former Kung Fu world and vice world champions and one of them is a former national Tai Chi champion. This part of my study is based on a second-person perspective. However, I also engage with a first-person perspective, by describing my own perceptions during my own practice of Kung Fu and Tai Chi.

According to the method that I use here the level of qualitative research is distinguished from the level of phenomenological analysis of the qualitative results. I follow here the two tiers research method as it has been described by Simon Høffding and Kristian Martiny (Høffding and Martiny 2016) and more recently by Susanne Ravn (Ravn 2021). This method distinguishes two research levels: first the qualitative research level, and secondly the phenomenological analysis of the results of the first research level. Thus, it does not ground its first research level on phenomenological methods or assumptions. For this reason, the interviews that I led were not directly guided by any phenomenological method or assumption. The second phenomenological research level is used to explore the transcendental phenomenological structures that make possible subjective experiences, in the present study, the experience of *qi* in martial arts. At the same time, the description of these experiences allows to not only to confirm but also enrich the understanding of these structures.

2.2. Qualitative Research Results

2.2.1. Second-Person Perspective

The interview has been carried out by myself with 16 participants in writing form and with one participant by phone. Thus most participants had some time to think about their answers and were not pushed to answer immediately. This reduced the risk of biased

answers. In order to reduce even more this risk the interlocutors were told that they could just answer "No" or "I don't know" when they seemed hesitant to answer. A total of 12 participants were chosen by myself. The only selection criteria was the fact that I knew these people from my own practice of Kung Fu or Tai Chi. Nonetheless, these people do not come from one single place or school, since I practiced Kung Fu and Tai Chi in several countries (Belgium, France, and Germany). Two participants responded to a call for participants which I posted on a Kung Fu forum on the Internet. Three participants were chosen by other participants. Their selection criteria was the fact that they knew these people through their own practice.

The interlocutors were asked to answer these two questions: (1) Do you experience *qi* during your practice of Kung Fu, Tai Chi, or Qigong and if yes through which bodily sensations? (2) Do you experience during your practice a connection between the *qi* of your body and the *qi* of your environment? If yes, how would you describe this experience? I have decided to focus on bodily sensations in order to bring to light the concrete lived dimension of the experience of *qi* during the practice of Chinese martial arts. The answers that I render here are the literal words of the interviewees.

Among all the interviewees three people say that they don't feel at all the *qi* during their practice. One of these people is a beginner student of Tai Chi, but the other two people are teachers of Kung Fu. However, one of them practices a form of Kung Fu mixed with MMA, a form of free fighting that does not originate in a Chinese cultural context. Interestingly, this person considers *qi* as being an esoteric concept. It must be added that two other interviewees show some distance toward the concept of *qi* even if they state that they feel *qi* during their practice. They remark that they don't use often this notion during their teaching because they think that it can be easily misinterpreted. They are both of European origin. One interviewee, which is a Kung Fu student of intermediate level, merely replied that the questions seemed to him difficult.

Concerning the 13 other interviewees, first of all, all of them link the experience of *qi* to bodily sensations, which arise during the practice of Kung Fu, Tai Chi, or Qi Gong. Seven of them localize these sensations in specific places of their body: the hands (the impression that the hands are doubled in volume, tingling sensations, sensation of heat, even during cold weather), the arms (the feeling as if a river or a current flows through the arms, which is correlated for some of the interlocutors with belly breathing), the spine (a sensation of tingling along the spine from down to up), the crown and forehead (a feeling of opening up and relaxing), the sternum and the lower abdomen (tingling sensations), the feet (sensation of heat)[3]. Furthermore, three interlocutors say they feel the *qi* through the meridians (an important concept in Chinese traditional medicine)[4].

Four people do not link the feeling of *qi* to a particular place of their body but link it rather to a holistic experience of their body. One interlocutor merely claims that one can feel very clearly the *qi* running in his body. Another interviewee states clearly that he does not feel *qi* at a particular place of his body but that he feels it everywhere in himself. According to him the experience of *qi* is a synthetic self-perception that involves a set of bodily perceptions (muscular, articular, respiratory among others). Interestingly, this type of synthetic self-perception is shared by another interlocutor who at the same time claims to feel sometimes *qi* in his hands and feet. More precisely he states that one of his principal bodily perception of *qi* involves the feeling of a connection of all the parts of his body that expands and compresses itself according to the direction of the movements. A third interviewee recognizes that he can feel *qi* in diverse parts of his body (tingling, heat, and swelling sensations) but he does not specify which parts. He says that the specific parts depend on the direction of the flow of *qi* energy. A fourth interlocutor claims that he feels *qi* as a kind of vibration associated to heat that runs through his body as well as a small hot mattress around his body.

Finally two interviewees seem not to link the experience of *qi* to their body as such but rather to a connection between their body or themselves and the surrounding world. Thus one of them states that he experiences an opening of his body towards his environment.

The other of them claims that she feels *qi* as an opening and a profound connection with herself and the universe. She also associates this experience with a state of relaxation and inner peace.

Seven interlocutors describe *qi* as energy, as a current or a river that flows through their body. Two of them use comparisons to describe the feeling of this flowing (like a river, like a current). A third person describes *qi* through its similarity with electric power. One interlocutor, although he does not use the notions of energy, current or river, associates *qi* to the experience of free circulation (of blood but also of gravity during static movements). Another interviewee describes *qi* as an inner energy.

Nine interviewees consider explicitly or implicitly that the practice of Kung Fu, Tai Chi, or Qi Gong can lead to an awareness of the *qi* that circulates in our body or to a form of control and enhancement of the *qi* in our body. Indeed, when these interviewees do not state explicitly that their practice allows them to enhance the *qi* in their body, they describe how their practice allows them to obtain bodily sensations that they link to *qi*. One interlocutor considers that the practice of Kung Fu allows him rather to acquire *qi*. Two people also attribute implicitly a form of enhancement of their *qi* to their practice, although they do not link their experience of *qi* to bodily sensations as such.

Qi enhancement or acquisition takes place through various modes: (1) through breathing, relaxation, and other physical exercises (according to six interlocutors); (2) through physical exercises that involve mind control (according to one interlocutor); (3) through the mastery of yin yang and the conjunction of a diversity of necessary elements, such as the intention (according to one interlocutor); this conjunction increases the *qi*; this increase is felt when there is greater self-possession, more harmony and balance; conversely, when there is less *qi*, there is more disharmony and imbalance; (4) through mind control of the *qi* circulation in the body (according to two interviewees); this mind control is conceived by one interviewee as the intention (he uses several times this word) to circulate the *qi* in the meridians (also with the help of concentration on breathing, whose important role is highlighted) and by another interviewee as a form of concentration on one particular place of his body; more precisely, the interviewees fixe their intention or concentration on such or such part of their body by following the principle "where the intention goes, the energy goes" (*yi dao qi dao*); interestingly, this mind control of the *qi* is also conceived by both interviewees as a visualization of *qi*; (5) through meditation (according to one interlocutor); according to him meditation allows for a more spiritual connection to one's *qi*; (6) through specific movements that involve a specific order of the moved parts of the feet (according to one person); (7) through a particular body alignment and contact with the earth (according to one interviewee).

Finally, nine interlocutors link their experience of *qi* to a particular relationship to their environment; thus, one interlocutor says he feels a connection by the wind passing through the fingers (without specifying with what this connection is made) but also a rooting in the ground, as if he were connected to the trees; he describes this wind as both real and imagined; according to him it is through the fluidity of the movement specific to Kung Fu that this connection by the wind takes place; he also describes this connection as the feeling that everything is one and that he is at the center of the things that make a whole; interestingly enough, probably because of the religious background of the practitioner, this feeling is linked to the idea of a unity between the Father and the Son (the two people of the Christian trinity); the practitioner implicitly refers to passages from the Gospel of John such as John 14: 6–7, John 3: 31–2 or John 10: 30. Similarly, two other practitioners describe their experience of the *qi* as a connection with the earth and the impression to become one with the earth, to take root, as if the feet went deep into the earth. Another participant also maintains that the feeling of *qi* allows us to perceive the exterior differently; according to him the feeling of *qi* is a subtle self-perception which leads to a subtle perception of one's environment; the interlocutor insists on the idea that the feeling of *qi* involves a change in perception; he even designates *qi* as the feeling of this change and describes this feeling as the becoming perceptual of a greater power, harmony or interaction between

the plural parts that compose us and the outside world; it is a feeling of renewed and strengthened unity. Another interviewee feels *qi* not only as being in his body but also in his environment; he likes the idea of seeing the *qi* of the earth as an energy that nourishes his body (it is the *yin qi*) and the *qi* of the heaven as a protective energy (it is the *yang qi*); during his practice of Tai Chi or Qi Gong he uses according to his words the yin meridians to capture the energy of the earth like roots of trees (we find here the metaphor of tree roots used by another two interlocutors) and the yang meridians to recover the protective *qi* of the heaven; interestingly, this participant maintains that this practice has developed his senses (olfactory and auditory) but also his capacity to pay attention to his environment (landscapes); the interlocutor maintains that it is a personal feeling, which is based on readings. One participant claims that there is no difference between his *qi* and the *qi* of his neighborhood while another one describes *qi* like a layer of air surrounding his skin, similar to a layer of water on his skin. As we have already seen, one interviewee describes *qi* as an opening and a profound connection with herself and with the universe. Through this connection she feels joy, beauty, and harmony. Finally, one interlocutor states that through his practice his body opens itself to his environment and that it gives him the sensation of being a passage between earth and sky. According to him it is a physical rather than a mental consciousness.

2.2.2. First-Person Perspective

I find in my personal practice several elements evoked in the previous section: the feeling of *qi* like that of a current in my body, in particular in my arms; the feeling that I'm capturing the *qi* of my environment through my fingers; the rooting in the earth which allows me to capture the *qi* of the earth. I also visualize tree roots connected to my feet. I will add a few other elements. These elements that determine my way of feeling *qi* were transmitted to me by my Kung Fu and Tai Chi teachers. With practice I learned to feel them more and more clearly.

Moreover, I have the feeling that the center of my *qi* is under my navel. I feel this place of my body (*dantian*) as the place of origin of my movements during my practice (of Kung Fu and Tai Chi). Before and after the practice of Kung Fu I activate and calm my *qi* center by raising and lowering my hands in front of my navel. During my Tai Chi practice I try to feel that it is not me that moves my hands but that it is *qi* that makes my hands move.

2.2.3. Main Features

1. The feeling of *qi* is related to bodily sensations that, however, vary from person to person. The *qi* is not felt as such but rather serves as an interpretative grid for certain bodily sensations (for example warm hands are interpreted as being the effect of the circulation of *qi*).
2. One can search to control her *qi* but also to liberate it in order to be controlled by it. In that case *qi* does not serve only as an interpretative grid of bodily sensations but can also provoke bodily sensations, such as the feeling that our hands move by themselves.
3. *Qi* is often understood in a metaphorical way as something that flows. Interestingly, one interlocutor compares *qi* to electric power. This shows the metaphorical plasticity of this concept that can be understood by analogy with notions specific to modern science, although it is a very ancient concept of Chinese thought[5].
4. *Qi* is a plastic feeling that can lend itself to interpretations of religious inspiration or specific to other cultural contexts (for example in the case of the perception of the flow of *qi* in the meridians) than those of the practitioner. It is true that the notion of *qi* is closely linked to Chinese medicine, and therefore also to the notion of meridian. However, the interlocutors who shared this feeling do not come from a Chinese cultural context. Hence it is a feeling that is related to a new understanding and perception of one's body related to knowledge of Chinese medicine.

5. The feeling of *qi* is mostly linked to the feeling of a connection with our surrounding world and has thus an underlying cosmological dimension. The feeling of *qi* implies a link between bodily perceptions and a particular perception of one's environment. This feeling can be experienced as the perception of a connection with the environment through the *qi* that is felt as an energy that flows through our body and our environment. This connection can also acquire a deeper cosmological meaning through which the practitioner feels themselves as being at the center of a unity or as a passage between heaven and earth.

To resume, *qi* can be experienced as:

→ a feeling linked to bodily sensations, but which cannot be reduced to these sensations.
→ a hermeneutic and creative feeling at the same time.
→ a metaphorical feeling.
→ a plastic feeling.
→ a bodily-cosmological feeling.

2.3. Phenomenological Interpretation of Qualitative Results

These results feature two characteristic and universal features of human experience:

1. the experience of one's own body
2. the experience of the world through one's own body

1. The experience of one's own body as described through the experience of *qi* reveals both the receptive and active structure of the body that Husserl highlights. The emblematic example of this structure of the body as a living body (which Husserl calls *Leib* as opposed to *Körper* which designates an inanimate body) is the example of one of our hands touching another hand. This example reveals an experiential structure for all living bodiliness, namely the structure of double-sensation (Heinämaa 2021). This double-sensation is both receptive and active, since I touch one of my hands with the other hand, and at the same time I feel the other hand touching my hand[6]. This active dimension is expressed by Husserl as an "I can". Thus, *I can* perceive one hand "by means of" the other (Husserl 1982, p. 97). This double receptive and active dimension of the living body is also expressed in § 62 of *Ideas II*, where Husserl distinguishes two dimensions of the living body, namely the aesthesiological body and the body for the will (Husserl 1989, p. 297). The aesthesiological body is the body that can have sensations, that is "sensing" (Husserl 1989, p. 297). The body for the will is the body that we can move freely, according to our will (Husserl 1989, p. 297).

We find precisely this double receptive and active dimension of the living body in the experience of *qi* specific to the practice of martial arts. Indeed, the people who were interviewed say that they feel *qi* in their body but that at the same time they try to control it and to enhance it.

However, what is particularly interesting in the case of the experience of *qi* is that *qi* is not directly felt as such, but is related to certain bodily sensations for which it serves as an interpretative grid. This is also why *qi* is mostly described metaphorically (as a river, as a current). This indicates that it is not a direct bodily sensation, unlike the sensation of a burnt hand for example. However, these sensations that are related to *qi* are localized in the body, because the interlocutors say that they feel *qi* in their body. It is therefore a genuine bodily sensation, which is hermeneutic and metaphorical.

2. The experience of *qi* also displays a connection between the experience of the world and the experience of one's body. For this reason we can call the sensation of *qi* a bodily-cosmological feeling. The essential connection between the living body and the world has already been amply described in phenomenology, beginning with Husserl himself. Thus, he characterizes the living body as "organ of all worldly perception" (Hua 4, 247). This connection was also described by Merleau-Ponty who in his manuscript *The Visible and the Invisible* operates an extension of the flesh of the living body to the "flesh of things" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 133) (*chair des choses*) or with other words to

the "universal flesh" (*chair universelle*) of the world (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 137)[7]. This extension allows Merleau-Ponty to conceive how we can perceive outer things in the world through our body: indeed, there is according to him "some relationship by principle, some kinship" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 133) between the perceiving movements of my body and perceived things. This kinship grounds precisely in the flesh that my body and the world both share[8].

However, it is with the contemporary phenomenologist Renaud Barbaras that we find one of the most radical thought of this intimate connection between the living body and the world. By asserting that Merleau-Ponty fails to account for the univocity of the concept of flesh, he argues for a "radical continuity" between my flesh and the flesh of the world (Barbaras 2019, p. 31). He conceives this radical continuity as a relation of belonging. Thus he argues that "to say that I have a body is to say that I belong to the world" (Barbaras 2019, p. 29). To belong to the world implies "to be made of the same ontological texture as itself, to be taken in its thickness" (Barbaras 2019, p. 27). This phenomenological theory describes well the bodily-cosmological feeling specific to the experience of *qi*, which can reveal a connection with our environment particularly through the *qi* that can be felt as an energy that flows through our body and our environment. Thus, *qi* can be felt as what is common to my body and to my environment. In this sense, through the feeling of *qi* my body can be experienced as being of the same ontological texture as my environment. We can thus conclude that the experience of *qi* in Chinese martial and energetic arts is revelatory of radical possibilities of human experience, at the core of which are fundamental transcendental structures of human experience.

3. Is the Experience of *qi* Religious?

The experience of *qi* is not religious because it does not correspond to any of the most prominent conceptions of religion, whether theistic or atheistic, given within the community of religious studies. First of all, the experience of *qi* is not in itself a theistic religious experience since it does not presuppose faith in a god or in a deity. It is true that it can lend itself to theistic religious interpretations as we have seen in the case of an interlocutor, which is why I argue that the feeling of qi is a plastic feeling. Yet, it does not contain any theistic religious element for all the other interlocutors.

There are, however, also conceptions of religion that are not exclusively theistic. From this perspective it might be less obvious that the experience of *qi* in Chinese martial arts is not religious or at least does not contain some religious elements. Thus, John Caputo maintains that there are "slightly atheistic religions" (Caputo 2001, p. 1). Caputo goes even so far as to contend the idea that "religion may be found with or without religion" since "some people can be deeply and abidingly "religious" with or without theology, with or without religions" (Caputo 2001, p. 3). Indeed, what is essential for a religious attitude, be it theistic or atheistic, be it institutionalized or not, is love and passion for something that transcends our narrow self-interests (Caputo 2001, p. 2). However, following from the accounts of the interviewees, the experience of *qi* does not essentially presuppose such a form of love.

The experience of *qi* does not fall either within the framework of other well-known conceptions of religion that are not exclusively theistic. Thus, the experience of *qi* does not necessarily presuppose the experience of the sacred. The sacred[9] as opposed to the profane is however an essential element of the religious experience according to Mircea Eliade (Eliade 1969, p. 25), but also according to Emile Durkheim who defines religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things" (Durkheim 1915, p. 47).

Nor does the experience of *qi* necessarily imply the experience of the divine. However, the experience of the divine is a fundamental element of religion according to William James (James 2002, pp. 29–30), but also according to Paul Tillich who argues that "without a mystical element—namely an experience of the immediate presence of the divine—there is no religion at all" (Tillich 1963, pp. 88–9)[10].

The experience of *qi* does not either correspond to the seven criteria for characterizing religion of Ninian Smart that he calls the seven dimensions of religion (Smart 1998, p. 21). First of all, Ninian Smart considers that we should not define religions too narrowly and should not divide too sharply religions from secular ideologies such as Marxism or nationalism (Smart 1998, p. 10). He also brings to our attention an important fact, namely that this sharp distinction is a modern Western idea and is not present in all cultures (Smart 1998, p. 10)[11].

Secondly, Smart considers that the quest for some essence common to all religions is of no interest since it ends up in vagueness (Smart 1998, p. 12). That is why Smart offers rather a set of features that characterize to a greater or lesser extent a proteiform range of religious movements or manifestations. These features are based rather on what Wittgenstein calls family resemblance in § 67 of his book *Philosophical Investigations*, than on an unchanging essence. That is why, some religious phenomena such as non-institutionalized religious movements like Buddhist modernism that disregard the narrative dimension of Buddhism or nonliterate societies who do not express the doctrinal dimension of their religion can fail to comply, at least fully, with one of these features (Smart 1998, p. 21) since these criteria are rather orientative. However, in the case of the experience of *qi* in Chinese martial arts we can say that it does not comply with any of these criteria. That is why we can conclude that according to these criteria the experience of *qi* is not religious.

Indeed, these are the seven characteristics of religion according to Ninian Smart: (1) the practical and ritual dimension which implies for example regular worship, preaching and prayers; (2) the experiential and emotional dimension that implies emotions like awe or compassion and puts forward conversion experiences of founding religious figures such as Muhammad, Paul, or Buddha; (3) the narrative or mythic dimension following which most religions are based on canonical texts which are considered to be directly or indirectly inspired by God or to be the records of the words of the founder of a religion, such as in the case of Buddhism; (4) doctrinal and philosophical dimension due to which canonical religious texts are not mere myths but are also the underpinning of a specific doctrine; (5) the ethical and legal dimension that entails a range of moral or practical precepts, such as the ten commandments in the Bible but also the numerous precepts sometimes of very practical nature that we can find in the *Talmud*, or such as the five precepts or virtues in Buddhism; (6) the social and institutional dimension due to which every religious movement is embodied in a community that is organized according to a specific structure which sometimes can be hierarchical (for example the Church, the Sangha, or the *umma*); the material dimension due to which a particular religion is incarnated in a material form, such as buildings and works of art, but also through natural features of the world that are considered as being sacred, such as the Mount Sinai (Smart 1998, pp. 13–21).

As we see, the advantage of these dimensions is that they allow to cover a very large spectrum of religious movements which are not necessarily theistic and sometimes are even categorized as being rather a form of philosophy, such as Buddhism. However, the experience of *qi* in the context of Chinese martial arts does not fall under any of these criteria. (1) Indeed, as we have seen it does not entail any particular ritual but rather physical exercises which aim at some form of efficiency (for example in order to acquire more *qi*-energy). (2) It does presuppose an experiential and emotional dimension since the practitioners relate a rich inner experience of *qi* sometimes mixed with emotions such as peace and harmony, but these experiences are not conversional, and these emotions do not entail any form of awe or compassion as in the case of specific religious experiences and emotions. (3) It is neither based on any canonical texts, although one interviewee admits to being inspired by his readings, but these readings are presented by him as being optional and freely elected and certainly not canonical. (4) Although the experience of *qi* related by the interviewees grounds on a concept that has been widely used in Asian philosophical contexts, the interviewees do not appeal to this philosophical background. (5) There is clearly no ethical or legal dimension involved in the experience of *qi* of the interviewees since they never mention any ethical or social precept. Thus, it can be said

that the experience of *qi* in Chinese martial arts is not normative. For this reason, it cannot be considered to be a religious experience if one maintains, like Kevin Schilbrack, that normativity is an essential element of any religion. Thus, Kevin Schilbrack argues that "religions always teach normative paths" (Schilbrack 2013, p. 312). More precisely, what, according to Schilbrack, makes the specificity of religions is that they teach normative paths by referring to nonempirical realities which are not considered to be dependent on the human being or on other beings of the empirical world (Schilbrack 2013, p. 313). (6) The experience of *qi* does not echo any social or institutional dimension, since the practitioners never appeal to a specific community or organization. It is true that I appeal to my Kung Fu and Tai Chi teachers in my account from a first-person perspective. Generally, the figure of the teacher (*shifu*) is important in the learning context of Chinese martial arts. However, what is at stake here is not so much the idea of a community or of a rigid structure as the idea of the importance of an inheritance. (7) Finally, the experience of *qi* is devoid of any material dimension as it is understood by Ninian Smart since it does not appeal to any buildings, works of art, or natural features which are considered as being sacred. It is true that the Shaolin Monastery, a Chan Buddhist Temple, or the Wudang Mountains, home to a complex of Taoist temples and monasteries, play an important role in the collective imagery of practitioners of Chinese martial arts since they are renowned and almost legendary places for the practice of Kung Fu and respectively of Tai Chi. Moreover, interestingly enough those are also religious places[12]. However, the interviewees never mention them in the description of their experience which shows that they do not consider them as being essential for their experience of *qi*.

4. The Spiritual Features of the Experience of *qi*

I argue that *qi* experience in Chinese martial arts, although not religious, can nonetheless share spiritual features. Indeed, it can feature several traits that are considered to be specific to spirituality according to several contemporary scholars. Thus, Philip Sheldrake maintains that "people on a spiritual quest often reject traditional sources of authority and their association with fixed dogmatic systems in favor of the authority of personal, inner experience" (Sheldrake 2012, p. 17). James Nelson also defends a similar idea, since he argues that "today the term of spirituality is often used to denote *the experiential and personal side of our relationship to the transcendent or sacred*" (Nelson 2009, p. 8).

Now in the experience of *qi* it is interesting to note that although there are several points in common among the interlocutors interviewed, each interlocutor has his own experience, which is an internal experience insofar as it involves subjective bodily lived experiences. Although the interviewees do not strictly speaking reject a form of authority, neither do they appeal to some form of authority (for example to certain canonical texts) in order to build and interpret their experience. Reference to certain texts is possible (as one interviewee said) but it is not compulsory. Ninian Smart also implicitly makes a case for the rejection of a specific authority as characteristic of spirituality. Thus he contends that "there are plenty of people with deep spiritual concerns who do not ally themselves to any formal movement" (Smart 1998, p. 12). Indeed, people who do not ally themselves to any formal religious movement also do not accept at least unconditionally the religious authority of a particular religious movement[13].

Sheldrake gives a second criterion for defining spirituality:

> [All types of spirituality] foster self-transcendence and transformation via a movement away from what they see as "inauthentic" towards the authentic. Broadly speaking, the inauthentic implies some sense of limitation or lack of freedom.
>
> (Sheldrake 2012, p. 37)

From my personal experience, the experience of *qi* allows me to reach a more authentic and natural movement, because it is no longer I who controls the movement, but it is the energy of *qi* that directs the movement. This circulation of *qi* allows more freedom in

movement and it releases more strength. Conversely when I try to control my movement I feel a form of limitation. This feeling of naturalness or authenticity in the movements through *qi* can be linked to the feeling of *qi* circulation that many interviewees put forward. Indeed, when a movement feels natural it feels as if it flows. This type of movement is particularly important in Tai Chi (Gu 2017) but also in Kung Fu, since it is conceived as an ideal movement for the practice of these arts.

The idea of such a natural movement can be conceived through a concept that is important for Taoist thought, namely the concept of *ziran* (自然), that means what is naturally so, without purposive action (*wuwei*, 无为) (Wang et al. 2020, p. 25)[14]. Thus, such a movement is natural because it is not a form of purposive action. That is why, in order to reach this type of movement one must not seek to control my movements. At the same time, these are not arbitrary movements, but they have an inner structure that is precisely led by the circulation of *qi*.

This type of movement presupposes a transformation not simply of one's body but of the relationship to one's body, since it presupposes to be able to perceive our body as a place of circulation of *qi*, with other words, to be able to perceive our movements as having an inner structure and spring. Sheldrake uses precisely the notion of transformation in order to understand spirituality, as we can see in the fragment above. This transformation through the experience of *qi* can be understood as a form of self-transcendence that following Sheldrake is a feature of the spiritual view of sport (Sheldrake 2012, p. 41).

Another characteristic trait of spirituality according to Sheldrake is that "whether or not we have explicitly religious beliefs, spirituality speaks of a "greater scheme of things: and enables us to develop a sense of connection to this" (Sheldrake 2012, p. 107). This connection with a transcendent dimension as an important feature of spirituality has also been highlighted by other authors (Zwingmann et al. 2011; McGrath 2006; Schneiders 1998). The experience of *qi* can involve, as we have seen, a bodily-cosmological feeling that is based on the feeling of belonging intimately to the world through the same texture specific to our body and to the world, namely *qi*. In this sense this bodily-cosmological feeling involves the sense of a deep connection with something bigger than us which is at the same time going through us, since *qi* flows through us. For this reason we can say that the experience of qi can involve the feeling of a "greater scheme of things".

We can also make a link between *qi* as it is experienced in martial arts and the notion of spirit that Husserl deploys in particular in the *Vienna Lecture*, that suggests the idea that the experience of *qi* is of spiritual nature. As Neal DeRoo argues, for Husserl "spirit is not merely produced by us, but is also in us, constituting us even as it is constituted by us" (DeRoo 2020a, p. 258). Further DeRoo argues that spirit according to Husserl is "essentially living (. . .) a dynamic force (. . .) is affective, not merely effected" (DeRoo 2020a, p. 259). For this last interpretation, DeRoo draws on Husserl's characterization of spirit as "vital presentiment" in the *Vienna Lecture* (Husserl 1970a, p. 275). Without identifying plainly *qi* as it is experienced in martial arts with spirit in the Husserlian sense of the term, we can however discern some parallelisms concerning some essential features of Husserl's conception of spirit. First of all, *qi* is constituted through our bodily sensations but at the same time it is experienced through the practice of martial arts as being in us, and more radically, as flowing through us. Just as spirit, it is constituting us as it is constituted by us. Secondly, as its English translation already shows, *qi* means vital force. It is experienced in martial arts as a dynamic force guiding our movements and more deeply, as a dynamic force which opens us to the world and brings to our consciousness our radical connection with the world. At the same time this vital force experienced through martial arts is not as we have seen a purely bodily feeling. It is rather a feeling built on bodily sensations but not reducible to them. This non-reducible dimension to the body is characteristic for Husserl's conception of the spirit and the spiritual. This appears clearly from this passage from the *Vienna Lecture*: "let us now turn our attention from the human body to the human spirit (. . .) the word *life* here does not have a physiological sense" (Husserl 1970a, p. 270). We see two elements in this passage: first of all, in order to think about the human spirit,

we have to convert our attention from our body; secondly, the characterization of spirit as life is not to be understood in a physiological sense, i.e., in a sense pertaining to our body in its mere biological and primary sensory dimension. This holds also for the experience of *qi*: the experience of *qi* cannot be reduced to mere bodily sensations; for this reason the experience of *qi* as a vital force is not to be understood in a physiological sense.

At the same time Husserl concedes that "the human spirit (. . .) is grounded on the human *physis*; each individual human psychic life is founded upon corporeity" (Husserl 1970a, p. 271). We find here again a parallelism with the experience of *qi* since it is necessarily grounded on bodily sensations and behaviors. This echoes the idea defended by Neal DeRoo following which spirituality cannot be a super-empirical reality, but is necessarily bound to material conditions (DeRoo 2020b). In that sense, as Bergson argues, what is spiritual is not spiritualistic (Bergson 1946, p. 139).

Eventually Sheldrake considers that "spirituality relates to a process of unlocking the creativity and imagination that enables us to touch the edge of mystery" (Sheldrake 2012, p. 107). Sheldrake's idea concerning this creative and imaginative dimension peculiar to spirituality can be linked to Mark Wynn's view on spirituality according to which an essential feature of spirituality consists in "the capacity of the mind and body to shape the character of the experienced world" (Wynn 2019, p. 19). However, as we have seen, a part of the interlocutors use metaphors to describe the feeling of *qi*: this presupposes a work of the imagination. Without going so far as to assert that it enables us to touch the edge of mystery, the use of metaphors in order to describe this experience indicates the fact that it is a question of grasping a reality that cannot be easily described. However, as Renaud Barbaras argues, if the metaphor "tells us something, it is because it tells us something about *the world*" (Barbaras 1998, p. 267). Thus, the experience of *qi* reveals us something about the world, and more deeply about our relationship to the world.

5. Conclusions

I argue in this article, grounding on a phenomenological analysis of the experience of *qi* in Chinese martial arts, that the experience of *qi* in this framework can share the features of a secular spiritual experience[15], in other words of a spiritual experience that is not religious, at least not necessarily. I put in evidence five features that can characterize the experience of *qi* in Chinese martial arts and that arguably pertain to spirituality: (1) the importance of individual experience; (2) self-transcendence and the quest for authenticity; (3) the connection with a transcendent dimension; (4) the importance of corporeity and at the same time the apprehension of a dimension which cannot be reduced to corporeity; (5) the use of imagination in order to grasp a transcendent dimension that presupposes the use of metaphors. Consequently, the experience of *qi* in Chinese martial arts suggests the possibility of a form of spirituality that is not necessarily bound to religion and that at the same time is not a mere rejection of traditional religions.

At the same time I argue that the experience of *qi* in Chinese martial and energetic arts reveals radical possibilities of human experience at core of which are fundamental transcendental structures of human experience, i.e., the experience of our body and the experience of the world through our body. This suggests the idea that phenomenology has an important potential for the investigation of spirituality and opens towards a research field that can be deeper explored.

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Notes

1 In Japanese *qi* is pronounced as *ki* and in Korean it is pronounced as *gi*. For an example of the importance of this concept for Japanese thought see for instance the work of the Japanese Neo-Confucian scholar Kaibara Ekken (1630–1714) *The Philosophy of Qi: The Record of Great Doubts* (Kaibara 2007). Concerning the importance of this concept for Korean thought see (Choi and Kim 2018).

2 I warmly thank Alexandre Donnars, Alexandre Thorlet, Alex Van de Meulebroecke, Anna Stoimenova, Dennis Woo, Dominique Saatenang, Erik Ceunen, Kai Han Lo, Olivier, Philippe Alberty, Sebastian Baron, Stavros, Stephan Englebert, Thierry, Wim, Xavier and Yussef for having participated in this interview.

3 It is true that most of these sensations correspond to the parts of the body which are mostly used in martial arts (the hands, the arms, the lower abdomen, the spine, the feet).

4 In traditional Chinese medicine meridians designate paths trough which *qi* circulates in human body. Each path is associated to a specific *qi* energy: *yin* and *yang*. Moreover each path is associated to a human body organ. Although there is no scientific evidence for the existence of these paths from the perspective of Western medicine, each of these paths has a specific localization in human body according to Chinese medicine, which traditional Chinese physicians, such as acupuncturists, can immediately pinpoint. Thus, in the framework of Chinese medicine meridians have a concrete existence.

5 The possibility of reinterpreting *qi* from a modern perspective is showed in (Wang et al. 2020, p. 189). However, according to the authors, this is not a mere possibility, but a necessity, since "the introduction of modern scientific discourse enriched the traditional discourse but also signaled the end of the traditional discourse on *qi*."

6 Neither Husserl himself nor Sara Heinämaa use the notions of "receptive" and "active" in this context. These notions are part of my interpretation of this experiential structure. Sara Heinämaa interprets this double-sensation structure as a sensing-sensed duality, a "dynamic intertwinment of sensings and sensed qualities, internality and externality, subjectivity and objectivity" (Heinämaa 2021). In other words, she interprets this structure as the capacity of the living body to be both subject and object of sensations. This is certainly correct, but I would like to stress another aspect of this structure, namely its receptive and active dimension. In his unfinished manuscript *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty takes up Husserl's analysis of the two touching hands. However he brings to it a nuance: "My left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things, but I never reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization, and one of two things always occurs; either my right hand really passes over to the rank of touched, but then its hold on the world is interrupted; or it retains its hold on the world, but then I do not really touch *it*-my right hand touching, I palpate with my left hand only the outer covering" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, pp. 147–8). Thus, according to Merleau-Ponty there is never a coincidence but only an asymptotic trend towards the simultaneity of the two touching hands.

7 Merleau-Ponty defines flesh in this way: "The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term "element", in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a *general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 139).

8 Interestingly, this idea of this kinship between my flesh and the flesh of things allows Merleau-Ponty to conceive the possibility of the two touching hands: I can touch with one of my hands my other hand because precisely my hands are not only sentient organs but also tangible things, just as other things of the world (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 133).

9 The notion of sacred is synonymous or at least intimately bound with the notion of holy. The latter is used for example in order to translate Rudolf Otto's work *The Idea of the* Holy (1917). Otto uses in German the notion of "*heilig*". German language does not have two distinct words corresponding to the English words "sacred" and "holy". We can find this distinction also in French: "sacré' and "saint".

10 For more recent studies on mystical experience and the debate if this kind of experience is dependent in its particularities on a specific sociocultural, historical and religious context (this position is called a contextualist interpretation of mysticism) or not (this position is called an essentialist interpretation of mysticism) see for example (Katz 2000).

11 The theologian and historian Jean-François Colosimo goes even further by stating that the concept of religion as it is used in its modern sense, i.e., first of all in the sense of a system of belief and not in its original latin sense (*religio*) which means the practice of divine rites, is a Western invention (Colosimo 2018).

12 Moreover, the Wudang Mountains are not only home to Taoist religious buildings but have in themselves a religious, sacred meaning since they are considered as one of the four sacred mountains of Taoism. That is why they are a destination for Taoist pilgrimages.

13 Nonetheless, Smart does not seem to draw a strict conceptual distinction between a religious and a spiritual attitude since he puts the following question a few lines before mentioning "people with deep spiritual concerns who do not ally themselves to any formal religious movement": "cannot a person be religious without belonging to any of the religions?" (Smart 1998, p. 12).

14 The concept of *ziran* is for instance present in the grounding work of Taoism *Dao De Jing* (also referred as *Lao Zi*), for example in chapter 25: "Man takes earth as his model; Earth takes heaven as its model; Heaven takes the Tao as its model; The Tao takes what is natural (*ziran*) as its model" (Lao Zi 1995, p. 133). It is also present in another classical work of Taoism, namely the *Zhuangzi*, for instance in this passage: "This was what is called the state of Perfect Unity. At this time, there was no action on the

part of anyone, but a constant manifestation of spontaneity (*ziran*)" (Zhuangzi). As we see the translator translates the concept of *ziran* as "spontaneity".

[15] I take up Philip Sheldrake's notion of secular spirituality (Sheldrake 2012, p. 17).

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