

# **THE PSYCHE IN CHINESE MEDICINE**

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We must be careful not to interpret the Chinese concepts of “mind” and “spirit” in terms of Western (and often Christian) concepts of “mind” and “spirit”.

However, in order to grasp the differences between Western and Chinese views of the psyche, soul and spirit, I will first investigate the Western concepts.

The discussion of spirit and soul will be done according to the following topics:

1. The spirit and soul in Western philosophy
  - a) The spirit
  - b) The soul
  
2. The spirit, soul and Mind in Chinese medicine
  - a) Terminology
  - b) The Spirit (*Shen*) in Chinese medicine
  - c) The concept of “body” in China
  - d) The Soul in Chinese medicine
  - e) The Mind (*Shen*) in Chinese medicine

f) Meaning of the word “*shen*” in Chinese medicine

- i. Unfathomable natural phenomena
- ii. The physiological activities
- iii. A condition of lustre in diagnosis
- iv. Needling sensation
- v. The doctor’s skill
- vi. A term for various vital substances
- vii. The spirit of a dead person

g) Mental illness in ancient Chinese medicine

- i. Liliun Syndrome (*Bai He Bing*)
- ii. Depression (*Yu Zheng*)
- iii. Plum-Stone Syndrome (*Mei He Qi*)
- iv. Agitation (*Zang Zao*)
- v. Palpitations and Anxiety (*Xin Ji Zheng Chong*)
- vi. Manic-depression (*Dian Kuang*)
- vii. Epilepsy (*Dian Xian*)

# 1. THE SPIRIT AND SOUL IN WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

## a) THE SPIRIT

The Oxford English Dictionary definition of “spirit” highlights an important feature of this concept in Western philosophy and illustrates its difference from Chinese philosophy. The dictionary’s opening definition of “spirit” is:

*“The animating or vital principle in man (and animals); that which gives life to the physical organism, in contrast to its purely material elements; the breath of life.”*

The definition of “spirit” as:

*“that which gives life to the physical organism, in contrast to its purely material elements”* illustrates the duality between body and spirit that has been typical of most of Western philosophy, a duality that is absent from Chinese medicine.

However, as we shall see, the difference between Western and Chinese philosophy is not that simple, for some Western philosophers also conceived the “spirit” as a refined form of matter (as the Chinese do). And vice versa, some Chinese philosophers (notably some Neo-Confucian philosophers) conceived of a metaphysical reality distinct from the physical one.

The word “spirit” means “breath” and comes from “*spiritus*”, the Latin rendering of the Greek “*pneuma*” (πνευμα) which also means “breath” or “air”.

“Spirit” has the same meaning as the Latin word “anima” (later used by Jung in a different sense) which derives from the Greek *anemos* (ανεμος) meaning “breath” or “wind”; this is related to the Sanskrit “*atman*” which also means “breath”. Therefore, it is clear from its etymology that “spirit” is something subtle, ethereal in nature, like air.

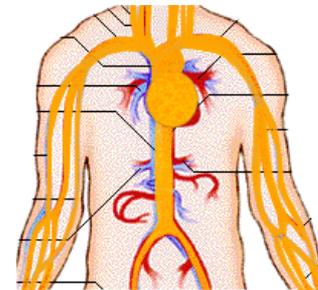
Interestingly, the Greek Stoics conceived “spirit” as a refined form of matter, in the form of a subtle fire, of which the individual souls (or spirits) were particles.



The concept of “vital spirit” animating the body was elaborated by ancient Greek doctors such as Erasistratus who distinguished between:



a psychic spirit (*pneuma zotikon* πνευμα ζωτικον) residing in the heart and flowing in the blood vessels



and a physical spirit (*pneuma physicon* πνευμα ψυχικον) residing in the brain and flowing in the nerves.



The placing of the psychic spirit in the heart is interesting as it coincides with the Chinese view.



Erasistratus's view that there are two spirits, one psychic and one physical, is also interesting as he was a practitioner of what we might today call psychosomatic medicine.

Furthermore, Erasistratus's view of two spirits, one psychic and one physical, resembles the Chinese view of the Shen and Po.



With the Christian religion, the duality between a subtle, non-material “spirit” and a material body became firmly established.



In the Christian religion, the “spirit” is the soul of a human being and is contrasted with the body; at death, the soul survives the body. From the advent of Christianity, the spirit is counterposed to the body.



Interestingly, St Paul thought that the “body” should not be seen as the material body but as the “carnal spirit” (πνευμα σαρκικον). This resonates with the concept of a “corporeal soul” (*Po*).

The opposition and separation between spirit and body are reaffirmed in the philosophy of Descartes (1596-1650) and his rationalism. Descartes also mentions “animal spirits” as St Paul did. In the “Passions of the Soul”, Descartes defines these emotions as follows:

*“Perceptions or sensations or excitations of the soul which are referred to it in particular and which are caused, maintained, and strengthened by some movement of the spirits.”*



The “spirits” mentioned here are the “animal spirits” central to Descartes’s account of physiology. Descartes explains that the animal spirits are produced by the blood and are responsible for stimulating the body’s movement. By affecting the muscles, for example, the animal spirits:

*“move the body in all the different ways in which it can be moved.”*

This description sounds very similar to that of the Po.

