

Bio

Emily Baum is an associate professor of modern Chinese history at the University of California, Irvine. She is the author of *The Invention of Madness: State, Society, and the Insane in Modern China* (University of Chicago Press, 2018), which was shortlisted for the International Convention of Asia Scholars 2021 Book Prize. She is currently writing a history of acupuncture between China and the United States in the second half of the twentieth century.

Title

How *Qi* Became Energy: Parapsychology and Alternative Medicine in 1970s America

Abstract

Qi has long been a thorny concept, presenting both translational and conceptual difficulties for scholars and physicians working beyond Asia. In English today, *qi* is most often translated as “vital energy,” but this was not always the case. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chinese-English dictionaries offered vastly different translations for *qi*, including breath, air, vapor, ether, and vivifying force. Why, then, did “energy,” a concept most closely related to physics and chemistry, become associated with *qi*?

As this paper will show, the association of *qi* with energy came about because of a complex confluence of events, including the temporary partnership that was forged between the biological sciences, Chinese medicine, and parapsychology in the 1970s. During that decade, physicians at institutions like UCLA and Stanford began to pay closer attention to paranormal phenomena, including the possibility that all humans possessed an “aura” that could be detected through such means as Kirlian photography (a technique developed in the Soviet Union to capture the body’s electric discharges). Their fascination with the paranormal happened to coincide with the introduction of acupuncture to the United States, a practice involving the flow of *qi* through invisible lattice networks called meridians (*jingluo*). Inspired by Chinese medicine, American physicians began to posit that perhaps *qi* was no different than the energy fields that were viewable via Kirlian technologies. This unlikely intersection of phenomena, I argue, eventually caused *qi* to become correlated with “energy,” a definition that is not necessarily intrinsic to the concept of *qi* itself but which it nevertheless retains today.