

What is Qi?

Spelled 'Qi,' pronounced 'Chi.' How shall we define this term?

From *A Brief History of Qi* by Zhang Yu Hun and Ken Rose (2001, p.2)

三  
三  
气  
氣

*What is this word? What does it really mean?*

*To establish a firm foundation for understanding its many varied meanings and uses, we turn to the Great Dictionary of Chinese Characters (Han Yu Da zi Dian). This eight-volume compendium of Chinese characters is a standard reference for Chinese scholars, comparable in scale and status to the Oxford English Dictionary. In the seemingly endless pages of that book the problem slowly begins to unfold and acquire perspective. On page 2010 in Volume Three, the section devoted to characters composed with the character (pronounced "chee") begins. Here we find ten ancient forms of this character. Under the heading of the word itself, there are twenty-three separate definitions given. These numbers only hint at the vast complexity and depth of its meanings.*

Originally, Qi meant: "the mist which rises and forms the clouds" and was drawn like the first character (above left). It evolved to the second and third character to differentiate it from the character for "Three" and other characters.

Finally, it evolved into the fourth character. You can see that the original "Qi" is above. The character below represents cooking rice. We can interpret this as 'steam cloud that rises from cooking rice'. This is symbolic of a ephemeral substance that nurtures.

Qi is very much a part of present day Chinese culture. Another excerpt from A Brief History of Qi:

Here are some examples of how Qi is used in the modern Chinese language:

- Ào qi: air of arrogance, haughtiness.
- Biē qi: feel suffocated or oppressed; choke with resentment, feel injured and resentful.
- Bù yòng kè qi or bù bì kè qi: you're welcome (literally, "don't use a guest's airs," i.e., "don't be polite," i.e., "don't mention it").
- Chà qi: feel a pain in the chest when breathing.
- Chù qi: give vent to one's anger; vent one's spleen.
- Chù qi kou: gas outlet; air vent.
- Dà qi: the atmosphere.
- Gū qi: strength of character; moral integrity; backbone.
- Fèi qi: waste gas or steam.
- Feng qi: general mood, atmosphere; common.
- Fú qi: happy lot, good fortune.
- Fù qi: do something in a fit of pique.
- Hé qi: to engage in sexual intercourse (literally, "unite the qi").
- Hé qi: gentle, kind, polite, goodnatured.
- Huān qi: get some breathing room, have a respite, take a breather.
- Huì qi: unlucky.
- Huō qi: anger, temper; in Chinese medicine: internal heat.

(Ibid, 164-5)

So, we can use the following definition for Qi: The vital energy that animates us. This includes our breath, our blood, our lymph, and our nerves.

Gong can be interpreted as 'to cultivate' or grow. Taken together, Qigong can mean 'activities that generate/grow our vital energies'.