Introduction to Neijing Classical Acupuncture Part I: History and Basic Principles

Abstract
Classical Chinese medical texts represent the foundation for all traditional Chinese medical theories and practices. Written over two thousand years ago, these documents set forth and define the basic principles of Chinese medicine and the clinical practice of acupuncture. They represent a critical and comprehensive resource for the modern practitioner. Despite their importance, the fundamental principles contained within these texts remain poorly understood and rarely used in modern clinical practice. This two-part series examines the basic principles and theories of classical acupuncture as originally described within the Huangdi Neijing (Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic) Suwen (Plain Questions) and Lingshu (Divine Pivot). Part I reviews the historical background and some basic principles of these texts. Part II presents an introduction to the clinical principles of classical acupuncture. The ideas contained within these texts represent a powerful theoretical and clinical framework that have the potential to reinvigorate the practice of Chinese medicine.

I. Background
For over two thousand years a small yet precious collection of ancient medical texts written during China’s Warring States (475-221BCE) and Han dynasty (206 BCE-220CE) periods have sustained and nourished the practice of Chinese medicine (see Figure 1).

The discipline of Chinese medicine emerged from a time of intense philosophical and scientific ferment corresponding roughly to the Warring States period of the later Zhou Dynasty (475-221BCE). This period of intellectual reform is referred to as the Zhuzi Baijia (Various Teachers, One Hundred Schools), 諸子百家. Writers such as Laozi (老子, 6th century BCE), Kongzi (Confucius, 孔子, 551-479 BCE), Mozi (墨家, 470-391BCE), Zhuangzi (莊子, 4th century BCE), the various authors of the Huainanzi (淮南子, 139BCE), Zou Yan (鮑衍, 305-240BCE) and other Naturalist philosophers of the Jixia Gate Academy in the state of Qi typify this style of intellectual thought. During this period a revolutionary shift occurred with regard to basic concepts of the natural world. Explanations of observable phenomena began to shift away from primarily shamanistic and empirical viewpoints, and a new epistemological framework emerged that allowed for a more comprehensive and innovative interpretation of the natural world than had been previously known.

In the period of relative stability that followed the downfall of the Qin Dynasty in 207BCE, Han Dynasty scholars attempted to collect and organise different writings of the Warring States period into a coherent system of Chinese philosophy. In sinology, this period of syncretic scholarship is referred to as the Han Synthesis (see Figure 2). Through the combined efforts of different scholars, Warring States texts and text fragments were carefully examined and categorised into different philosophical schools. It is likely during this time that classical medical texts such as the Huangdi Neijing (Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic) were originally compiled (see Figure 3).

A common misperception about the Neijing is that...
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It represents a single work of narrative medical literature. Some even believe it was written by the Yellow Emperor himself in the period prior to the Xia Dynasty (2070-1600 BCE). However, sinologists generally agree that the various writings found within the Neijing reflect literary styles of the Warring States and Western Han Dynasty periods. Further, the diverse writing styles contained within these documents affirm the notion that the Neijing does not represent a ‘book’ in any modern sense, but is rather best understood as being a compilation of different texts and text fragments written by a variety of Warring States and Han Dynasty authors. Associating these compiled texts with the name of a famous historical figure (i.e. the Yellow Emperor) then assisted in placing related writings into specific literary and philosophical traditions (see Figure 4).

Although direct evidence is somewhat limited, it is likely that scholars and scribes working within the imperial libraries were the primary architects of the Neijing text. During the Qin Dynasty the majority of written documents were lost. In the aftermath of this literary destruction, intact texts and text fragments would have been rare and it is doubtful that ordinary people would have possessed them to any significant degree. It is therefore unlikely that any one person or group of individuals would have had access to the large number of texts needed to compile a document the size of the Neijing. In contrast, scholars working within the imperial libraries would have had access to the many different Warring States texts and text fragments that survived the Qin Dynasty literary purge. In this regard, it is significant to note that the first recorded mention of the Huangdi Neijing is found in an inventory of the Han Dynasty imperial library commissioned by the emperor Chengdi in 26 BCE.

Several lines of evidence support the idea that the Neijing was compiled during the Western Han Dynasty (206BCE-9CE). First, medical texts buried at the Mawangdui archeological site in Changsha, China, in 168 BCE make no reference to the Neijing texts (see Figure 5). Further, the definitive historical treatise of the time, the Shi ji (Records of the Historian) by Sima Qian 司馬遷, written between 109 and 91BCE, makes no mention of the Neijing text. These different lines of evidence suggest that the Huangdi Neijing represents a collection of Warring States and Han Dynasty texts and text fragments originally written by various authors and compiled by scholars and librarians of the imperial library during the Western Han Dynasty, sometime between 91-26 BCE.
II. Classical versus modern scientific theory

For any modern reader to become conversant with the Neijing text first requires a basic understanding of some of the fundamental differences between classical and modern scientific theory. The principles and theories set down within the Neijing represent a unique style of scientific thought that contrasts sharply with the basic tenets of modern scientific theory (see Figure 6).21 For the most part, these differences reflect variations of scientific culture and philosophy, and do not in and of themselves represent inherent distinctions of either clinical efficacy or quality of intellectual thought.22 Without an understanding of these differences, classical texts such as the Neijing typically remain out of reach of the modern reader.23 A few of the primary differences that distinguish these two scientific methods include a different relative valuing of past and present information, an emphasis on the study of nature’s patterns versus its parts, different understandings regarding the basic principles of change and transformation, and the use of symbolic versus narrative language structures.

1. Relative importance of the past and the present

太上不知有之其次親而譽之其次畏之其次侮之
‘In greatest antiquity, they did not know they had it,
In the next generation they loved and dearly praised it,
In the next generation they feared it,
In the next generation they insulted it.’
- Dao De Jing Chapter 17

Classical and modern sciences differ greatly with regard to the relative value they place on past and present information. Classical Chinese science regards information coming from the distant past as having a stronger inherent value. This type of knowledge is seen to have a prescient status, derived from the perceived wisdom and experiences of ancient people. As human civilisation moves forward in time, experience and knowledge are seen to move further away from their original source and thus become more dilute and corrupt.24 In contrast, modern science typically regards information coming from the past as being outdated and irrelevant, and highly values information that has either just been discovered or is in the process of being discovered.

2. Study of nature’s patterns versus its parts

內有五藏以應五音五色五時五味五位也外有六府以應六律六律建陰陽諸經而合之十二月十二辰十二節十二經水十二時十二經脈者此五藏六府之所以應天道
‘Man has five zang organs, which harmonise with the five [celestial] notes, the five colours, the five seasonal periods, the five flavours and the five directional positions. In the exterior [of the body] reside the six fu organs, which harmonise with the six [earthly] tones. The six [earthly] tones differentiate the [qualities of] yin and yang within the channels [jing 紐] and correspond with
the twelve [divisions of the constellations], the twelve [solar periods], the twelve [primary rivers of earth] and the twelve hourly periods [of the day]. Through the mai vessels and the five zang and six fu organs [the body] harmonises with the dao of heaven."

- Lingshu Chapter 11

In classical sciences, the world of observable form is believed to result from intangible patterns of space/time rhythm. Because these underlying patterns are seen to anteced and give rise to the world of observable forms, traditional science prioritises the study of these basic rhythms and patterns. From this viewpoint, the inherent scientific value in the manifest phenomena of nature lies in their ability to convey deeper insights into the intangible patterns of space/time motion that precede them. In contrast, modern scientific inquiry approaches the world through detailed investigations into the nature of form and the material sub-structures of forms. Form and its component parts are examined and described with ever increasing levels of detail and differentiation, while the energetic patterns that generate them are mostly unrecognised.

3. Different understandings of change and transformation

"The Yellow Emperor said, “When using acupuncture technique one must obey certain rules. What are these rules and what are their meanings?” Qi Bo replied, “When using acupuncture, one must first ascertain the conditions of heaven, earth and the celestial bodies.” The Yellow Emperor said, “Can you speak more of this?” Qi Bo said, “To treat correctly first understand the condition of the sun, moon, stars, the four seasons and the qi of the eight primary positions. Only when these things are properly understood is it possible to correctly use the acupuncture method.”"

- Neijing Suwen Chapter 26

Classical science views the universe as being a place of constant change and transformation. From this viewpoint, the only true constant in the universe is change itself. For this reason, classical sciences emphasise the study of the principles of change and transformation. The Neijing itself can probably best be understood as being a comprehensive treatise on the universal laws of change and transformation as they relate to the specific field of human health and illness. In contrast, modern scientific research attempts to limit changing factors (including any influences by the observer) that are believed to obscure a clear understanding of reality.

4. Symbolic versus narrative language structures

Classical Chinese medical texts were composed in a literary style called 'wen yan wen' ('written spoken language') or 'gu han yu' ('ancient Han language'). These writings are characterised by sparse language, textual ambiguity, symbolic language constructions, rhythmic meter, multiple character definitions and text-specific meanings. Despite this apparent complexity, it should be clearly stated that the principles of classical Chinese are well known and can be learned and understood with training and practice.

In contrast to modern narrative literary structures, where a given passage of text is entirely dependent on the language that precedes it for its meaning and context, symbolic language structures are primarily holographic in nature. In this literary style, meaning-dense characters are used to convey large amounts of information in a minimal amount of space. These characters are then organised into coherent text passages by the use of specific grammatical text markers. A significant portion of the work of classical medicine research involves investigation into the meaning, history and usage of these meaning-dense characters.

To the untrained eye, symbolic language structures appear somewhat archaic and incomprehensible, especially when read in a narrative way. However, classical texts may better be understood as being sophisticated forms of linguistic technology that can convey large amounts of information in a minimal space and with a minimum amount of text degradation and transcription error.

![Figure 7: Symbolic versus linear language structures.](image-url)

A. B. C. D. E. F. G.

The top image represents a schematic representation of a symbolic language structure. In this literary style, single meaning-rich characters simultaneously reference a wide variety of meanings. All of these meanings then tie back to support an underlying holographic meaning. The lower diagram shows the composition of a narrative language structure in which the meaning of any given language text is dependent on the language.
III. Basic principles of Neijing classical acupuncture

The principles of Neijing classical acupuncture are at once more simple and more easily understood than commonly accepted, and at the same time require a higher degree of skill for their clinical execution than is typically believed. With a few notable exceptions, clinical complexity arises from the simultaneous interaction of multiple basic patterns rather than any inherent complexity of theory. Indeed, perhaps the greatest power of classical medicine lies in its ability to reduce the complex medical challenges commonly encountered in real-life clinical situations to relatively simple and straightforward problems with identifiable solutions. The basic theories of classical medicine can be summed up in a few simple principles:

Principle #1: The universe is a phenomenon of breath

天地之間其猶橐籥乎 虚而不屈 动而愈出

‘Is the space between heaven and earth not unlike a bellows? Empty, yet unyielding, it stirs and healing emerges.’

- Dao De Jing, Chapter 5

The primary observation that underlies all traditional Chinese medical theory is that the universe is best understood to be a phenomenon of breath, continuously moving between different phases of birth, growth, maturation and death. The German missionary Ernest Eitel gives a succinct description of this type of thinking when he describes his experiences working in China in the 19th century:

‘Nature, as I have had occasion to remark before, is looked upon by the Chinese observer as a living breathing organism, and we cannot be surprised, therefore, to find the Chinese gravely discussing the inhaling and exhaling breath of nature. In fact, with the distinction of these two breaths, the expanding breath, as they call it, and reverting breath, they explain almost every phenomenon in nature. Between heaven and earth there is nothing so important, so almighty and omnipresent as this breath of nature. It enters into every stem and fibre, and through it heaven and earth and every creature live and move and have their being. Nature’s breath is, in fact, but the spiritual energy of the male and female principles.’

- Feng Shui, or, the Rudiments of Natural Science in China

Ernest J. Eitel [1873]
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Principle #2: The basic qualities of nature’s breath are called yin and yang

The second principle of classical medicine is that the universal breath is composed of two primary forces: expansion and contraction. In classical science, the primary force of expansion is called yang (陽), and the primary force of contraction is called yin (陰). An infinite number of different expressions arise between this basic dichotomy, that are then named according to the phenomena being observed. Some easily recognisable expressions of the universal breath are: the two primary forces: yin and yang, the yielding and the firm. What is hidden and manifest find their positions. Coldness and summer-heat contract and expand. Changing and transforming, all things [follow] this same basic pattern.'

- Suwen Chapter 66

The second principle of classical medicine is that the universal breath is composed of two primary forces: expansion and contraction. In classical science, the primary force of expansion is called yang (陽), and the primary force of contraction is called yin (陰). An infinite number of different expressions arise between this basic dichotomy, that are then named according to the phenomena being observed. Some easily recognisable expressions of the universal breath include: the changing aspects of the four seasons, the alternating cycles of night and day, the different phases of the waxing and waning moon, the annual rotations of the stellar constellations, the different phases of a human life cycle, physiological respiration, human menstruation and the human heartbeat.37

Principle #3: Directional motion can be identified as moving with or against the universal breath

Once the directional motion of the universal breath has been identified, other circulatory patterns may then be described in relation to the primary motion. In classical science, directional motion that moves consonant with the primary breath is called ‘flow’ (shun 順), whilst directional motion against the primary breath is called ‘counterflow’ (ni 逆). In a similar way, qi that arises from or flows with the primary breath is called ‘correct’ (zheng 正), whereas qi that arises from or flows against the circulation of this primary breath is called ‘pernicious’ (xie 邪).38

Bing qi (病氣) – The qi of illness
Chun qi (春氣) – The qi of Spring
Da qi (大氣) – The breathing qi of the atmosphere
Dan qi (膽氣) – The qi of the Gall Bladder
Di qi (地氣) – The qi that moves through the earth
Dong qi (冬氣) – The qi of Winter
Fei qi (肺氣) – The qi of the Lungs
Feng qi (風氣) – The qi of wind
Gan qi (肝氣) – The qi of the Liver
Han qi (寒氣) – The qi of cold
Huo qi (火氣) – The qi of fire
Jing qi (經氣) – The qi that flows within the jing channels
Liu qi (六氣) – The different climatic qi that circulates through the biosphere
Mai qi (脈氣) – The qi that flows within the mai vessels
Pi qi (皮氣) – The qi of the Spleen
Ping qi (平氣) – A condition of balanced qi
Qing qi (清氣) – Qi derived from food, that is clear, refined and ascends upwards to the Lungs
Qiu qi (秋氣) – The qi of Autumn
Re qi (熱氣) – The qi of heat
Rong qi (榮氣) – Qi derived from food that circulates within the vessel system
Shen qi (腎氣) – The qi of the Kidney
Shi qi (濕氣) – The qi of dampness
Shu qi (署氣) – The qi of summer heat
Tian qi (天氣) – The qi that moves within the heavens
Wei qi (衛氣) – Qi derived from food that has a yang nature and circulates externally to the normal mai vessel circulation
Xia qi (夏氣) – The qi of Summer
Xing (形) – Qi that consolidates into matter - form
Xie qi (邪氣) – Qi that causes or arises from an obstruction of the universal breath
Xin qi (心氣) – The qi of the Heart
Yang qi (陽氣) – Qi that expresses the expanding quality of the universe
Yin qi (陰氣) – Qi that expresses the contracting breath of the universe
Zang qi (藏氣) – The qi of the five zang organs
Zao qi (躁氣) – The qi of dryness
Zheng qi (正氣) – Qi that flows according to the universal breathing pattern
Zhen qi (真氣) – Qi that flows in a correct manner
Zhuo qi (濁氣) – Qi derived from food that is turbid, dense and nutritious
Zhong qi (中氣) – Qi derived from the digestive centre
Zong qi (宗氣) – Qi derived from food that stirs the respiration and the heartbeat

Figure 9: Various manifestations of qi 氣
Some different types of qi 氣 described within the Neijing. All can be understood as being different manifestations of the primary fabric of space/time.
**Principle #4: Qi is the fabric of space/time**

"The dao begins in empty expanse. Empty expanse generates dimension and duration. Dimension and duration generate qi. Qi has a boundary."  
- *Huainanzi* Chapter 3

Throughout history, the concept of qi has had a variety of expressions. However, in classical Chinese science, the concept of qi can best be understood as being the fabric of the space/time continuum. In a manner similar to those given above in the descriptions of yin and yang, different manifestations of qi are then named according to the specific phenomena being observed. For example, when qi consolidates and becomes solid it is called 'form' (xing 形) (see Figure 9).40

**Principle #5: The universal breath moves with number (數) and principle (理)**

道生一、一生二生三生萬物萬物負陰而抱陽沖氣以為和
'The dao generates one, one generates two, two generates three, three generates the ten thousand things. The ten thousand things manifest yin and embrace yang. Qi flows together and harmony arises.'  
- *Dao De Jing* Chapter 42

The universal breath moves with directional predictability.

In classical Chinese science this quality is called 'li' (principle 理). Li (理) means that as the universal breath cycles through different states of expansion and contraction, it does so in an organised and foreseeable way.

As the universal breath moves through different levels of expansion and contraction it transits different states of numerical complexity. In classical Chinese science, this property of dimensional shifting is called 'shu' (number 數).41 In the classical renaissance of the Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE), the neo-Confucian scholar Zhuxi (朱熹, 1130 – 1200 CE) summarised both of these ideas by stating that the yin yang breath occurs with both number (shu 數) and principle (li 理).42

**Principle #6: Moving with the universal breath brings health and vitality; moving against it brings disability, illness and death**

聖人無常數，死生之本也；逆之則災害生從之則福善起是謂道者聖人行之者尊之。陰陽則生逆之則死從之則治逆之則亂。

Therefore yin yang and the four seasons are the end and beginnings of the ten thousand things. They are the root of death and life. Moving against them brings disability and calamity. Move with them and serious illness cannot take hold. Acting in this way is called achieving the dao. With regard to the dao: the sage harmonises to its circulations while the ignorant regard it [simply] as an ornament. Moving in accordance with [yin and yang] restores life, moving against them brings death. Follow these things and order is restored. Oppose them and chaos ensues.'  
- *Suwen* Chapter 2

From the perspective of classical Chinese science, human health and longevity depend on the body’s ability to move in harmony with the universal breath. Human beings are not seen as isolated from nature but rather as existing within a complex and ever-changing circulatory field in which they actively participate and coexist. When the universal breath expands, the body fills, the vessel circulation flows to the exterior of the body and yang is activated and nourished. When the universal breath contracts the body disperses stale energy, the vessel circulation moves to the interior of the body and yin is activated and nourished.43 In classical medicine this deceptively simple equation is the primary prerequisite for all health and vitality.

Any condition that impedes the body’s ability to move in harmony with the universal breath is called an ‘illness’ (bing 病). Any intervention that restores the body’s ability to move with the universal breath is called a ‘treatment’ (zhì 治). When the universal breath circulates freely within the individual, it is called the condition of being a ‘balanced person’ (ping ren 平人). Restoring the patient’s body to this optimised state of functioning is the goal of all classical medical treatments.

**Summary**

Written over 2000 years ago, the Chinese medical classics are the philosophical foundation for the practice of Chinese medicine. Almost every traditional method found in Chinese medicine today can be traced back to these basic ideas. These documents contain a comprehensive source of theoretical and clinical information. However the knowledge they contain is poorly understood and rarely used in modern clinical practice. Although these texts often appear difficult to decipher, the principles needed to interpret them are well known and can be learned and understood with study and practice. Part two of this paper will examine the basic principles of the clinical practice of classical acupuncture.

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In Chinese medicine the early medical classics are generally considered to be the Huangdi Neijing (Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic) Sawsen (Plain Questions) and Lingshu (Divine Pivot), the Neijing (Classic of Difficulties), the Shang Han Lun (Treatise on Cold Damage) and the Shennong Bencao Jing (Divine Farmer’s Classic on Herbal Medicinals). Non-medical classics that have had a strong influence on early Chinese medical thought include the Da Qing (Classic on the Way and Virtue), the Yi Jing (Classic of Changes) and the Huainanzi (Masters of Huai). Although modern TCM practice broadly borrows concepts from the medical classics such as yin and yang, qi (氣), heaven, earth and human being (六人), and the six confinements (六合), a classical understanding of these terms is the capacity to put these principles into clinical practice is rare in modern practice.

The Academy of the jia jia Gate was founded in the later part of the 4th century BCE in the city of Linzi in the state of Qi, as part of an ongoing strategy by the rulers of this state to increase their political prestige. The academy was the schools of Naturalist philosophy of whom Zara Yan (顔), 305 - 240 BCE was a principal proponent. These teachings had a particularly strong influence on the theoretical development of the Neijing.

During the Han Synthesis, most schools did not rewrite or significantly alter the original source material. Rather, their aim was to collect these texts and compile them into a more organised system. This reflected a cultural tendency for standardisation that began in the Qin dynasty. Besides philosophy and science, other aspects of culture that were standardised during the reigns of the Qin and the Han include written language, currency, law and weights and measures.

For example, the Han dynasty historian Sima Tan (165 - 110 BCE) divided the different schools of Chinese philosophy into six primary groups: the Naturalists (yinyang jia 阴阳家), Confucians (rujia jia儒家家), Mohists (Mojia jia墨家), Logicians (Mingjia jia名家), Legalists (fujia jia法家) and Daoists (Daojia jia道家). To this later added were the Agriculturalists (Nongjia jia農家), Diplomats (Zongjia jia縱橫家) and the category of Miscellaneous Schools (Saijia jia雜家). Under the Emperor Wu (who ruled 141 - 87 BCE), the Han state elevated Confucianism to be the official ruling philosophy of state. This situation continued over subsequent dynasties. Of these different schools the Naturalists had the greatest influence on the writing of the Neijing.

The Neijing commonly in use today is composed of two primary sub-texts: the Sawsen (Plain Questions 素問) which primarily deals with issues of general theory and the Lingshu (Divine Pivot 灵樞), which is the first recorded treatise on acupuncture theory and practice. The Lingshu is either similar to or identical with two other classical works entitled the Zhenqing (Needling Classic 素問) and the Jiujuan (Nine Rolls 九卷). For more information on the structure and history of the Neijing see: Keegan, D. (1988). The Huang-Ti Nei Ching: The Structure of the Compilation: the significance of the structure. University Microfilms International, Unschuld, P. (2003). Huang di neijing su wen: nature, knowledge, imagery in an ancient Chinese medical text. University of California Press. Kong and Unschuld, P. (2003). The Huang-Di Neijing: A Studi of the Compilation; the significance of documents written within the ‘Yellow Emperor’ literary tradition. Careful reading of the two texts reveals a number of critical differences in both theory and literary style that suggest that they exist within two separate philosophical and literary traditions.

It is possible that the Neijing has a pre-Qin origin. However, no historical mention of the text is known prior to the Western Han Dynasty completed in 111CE. In 168 BCE, the Han emperor Chengdi commissioned the scholar Liu Xiang (劉向) to compile an inventory of all the holdings of the imperial library. Liu Xiang was assisted by his son Liu Xin (劉歆) who completed the project after the death of his father. Their report was later included in a document named the Qi Lue (Seven Summaries 七略), which was completed in 5 BCE. Although this document has since been lost, its contents were recorded in the Hancha (Book of the Han 漢書), a history of the Han Dynasty completed in 111CE. For further reading see Kong, Y.C. (1910) Huangdi Neijing: A Synopsis with Commentaries. The Chinese University of Hong Kong and Unschuld, P. (2003). Huang di neijing su wen: nature, knowledge, imagery in an ancient Chinese medical text. University of California Press.

18 These documents describe a precursor vessel (mai 脈) system, with some passages that closely parallel text passages found later within the Lingshu. This suggests that during this time the concept of a physiological vessel system was undergoing active evolution and transformation.

19 If the Neijing were to be discussed within the Shiji, it most likely would have been mentioned in the biography of the Han Dynasty physician Chunya Yi (淳于意) -also named Cang Gong (仓公). Chunya Yi was born the city of Linzi in 205 BCE and received training under several well-known physicians of his day. In his biography, Chunya Yi lists various medical texts that he was required to learn as part of his medical apprenticeship. In these descriptions, the Neijing is not mentioned. This does not however definitively prove that the Neijing was not in existence at this time. For example, it is possible that although the Neijing was not part of Chunya Yi’s recognised training, it may have been hidden, had a different name or have been in existence in another region of the country unknown to Chunya Yi’s teachers.

20 Although this is one possible scenario, it is not the only possibility. For example, the Neijing could also have been written prior to Qin Dynasty but remained hidden or undiscovered until the Han Dynasty. Alternatively, it could have become established in another region of the country but remained unknown in the area near Mawangdui. Other possibilities like this exist.

21 Within this paper, the term ‘modern science’ or ‘modern scientific theory’ refers to a standard model of Western scientific research typified by scientific theories that refer to a ‘modern science’ or ‘modern scientific theory’ of natural phenomena. The Neijing defines two primary aspects of change, hua 化 and bian 变. Hua 化 transformation describes the process of change that occurs between the dissolution of a thing and the unseen recycling of its constituent parts back into something new. Bian 变 transformation describes the growing phase that occurs after a thing has been born as an individuated manifestation. Like yin and yang, these two processes occur simultaneously and in an interrelated fashion. For example when a person eats a meal, they digest food (a hua 化 transformation). This then builds body tissue such as muscle (a bian 变 transformation).

22 Traditionally, scholars who understood the primary breathing patterns of the natural world were called fangshi (方向士). In classical Chinese science, the universal breath is typically notated by the markers of directional space. For example, south represents the terminal expansion of the breath, west represents contraction, north represents terminal contraction, east represents expansion and the centre represents the directional quality that communicates with all of the four primary directions. The fangshi also practised as the alchemists of their day with varying degrees of skill and reputation. In modern Chinese, to write a Chinese herbal prescription is still called kai yaofang (開藥方), literally ‘use a medicinal decoction to open a direction’. In contemporary practice, the connection of this phrase to its ancient source has largely been forgotten.

23 Predictably, Western scientific research tends to approach Chinese medicine through its own theoretical constructions and perspectives. Therefore, a herbal formula may be investigated to find the one bioactive component that conveys therapeutic efficacy. Likewise, an acupuncture protocol may be examined to find the one acupuncture point or fixed-point protocol that generates a specific biochemical effect, and so forth. While this type of research can yield interesting findings, until basic philosophical and conceptual differences that separate these two systems are resolved, this type of research is likely to remain limited in its conclusions and predictive power.

24 In classical Chinese language the primary orientation to the past is reflected by the characters qian 前 and hou 後. Qian 前 simultaneously means ‘to be in front of’ and ‘to be in the temporal past.’ Similarly, the character hou 後 means ‘to be behind’ and also ‘to be in the future.’ Thus, in classical sciences, the proper orientation of the human being in regard to knowledge is to ‘face forward towards the past.’ In contrast, the future is that which resides ‘behind’ one in what is to come.

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26 Again this is true for the standard model of Western medical research, but is not true for other fields of Western science such as theoretical physics, where an attempt is being made to consolidate different theoretical observations into a unified theory of natural phenomena.

27 The Neijing defines two primary aspects of change, hua 化 and bian 变. Hua 化 transformation describes the process of change that occurs between the dissolution of a thing and the unseen recycling of its constituent parts back into something new. Bian 变 transformation describes the growing phase that occurs after a thing has been born as an individuated manifestation. Like yin and yang, these two processes occur simultaneously and in an interrelated fashion. For example when a person eats a meal, they digest food (a hua 化 transformation). This then builds body tissue such as muscle (a bian 变 transformation).

28 Behind the practice of modern medical research lies a belief that there exists in the world a class of discernable and unchanging phenomena upon which a theoretical foundation can be built that conveys predictive certainty. In contrast, classical Chinese scientific theory states that all things in the universe are constantly in flux. From this perspective, any place within the body that does not constantly shift and change is called an ‘illness’.

29 Textual ambiguity and variable character definitions means that any given passage or character may be interpreted from a variety of perspectives. For example, a character may have several different meanings. Characters also typically lack grammatical number and tense. Rhythmic meter was used to facilitate aural learning and memorisation. Text-specific definition means that any given character may have different meanings dependent on the text in which it is found. For this reason, one may be a competent


31 In physics, a hologram describes a three-dimensional image pattern that is projected from a singular inscription on a two-dimensional plane. Within the Neijing this term means that no matter what topic is being discussed (i.e. the projected image), all text passages refer back to the singular subject, or inscription pattern, of the universal breath and its relation to human health and illness.

32 One important aspect of symbolic language structures is their ability to convey information at the level of inquiry that a given reader brings to the text. Thus, to a beginning student symbolic texts speak in one way and to an advanced reader they will reveal more and different levels of information. This is not true (for example) of a text on advanced particle physics, which contains almost no information available to the untrained eye.

33 One of the fundamental skills of the ancient physician was the ability to interpret multiple levels of phenomena and envisage the resulting interacting complex reality formed by the composite parts. In most cases, the theoretical basis of any one of these observations is not overly complicated to understand. However, the ability to understand multiple levels of phenomena, understand how this was constantly shifting over time and apply this to the field of clinical medicine was a complex skill.

34 The distinction as to whether the breath is a manifestation of the universe, or the universe is a manifestation of breath, was not made in Chinese philosophy. It is simply stated de facto as an observation.

35 In identifying the essential nature of the universe as being a shifting, multidimensional pattern of expansion and contraction, classical Chinese philosophers achieved what
modern physicists have yet been unable to do - describe a unified theory of natural phenomena. Beginning with Einstein's discovery of general relativity in 1916, scientists have attempted to reconcile disparate phenomena such as the forces of gravity, electromagnetism and the strong and weak atomic forces, as well as the randomness of nature envisioned by quantum mechanics with the orderly predictability of the macro universe. So far they have been unable to do so.

36. Eitel, E. J. (1878). *Feng Shui, or, the Rudiments of Natural Science in China*. Lane, Crawford & Co.

37. From the perspective of classical Chinese science, all physiological processes within the human body represent manifestations of the primary universal breath. The primary trunk divides into several branches. These divide into a great number of terminal branches, which in turn, terminate in a multitude of leaves. In this way, a tree grows in a predictable direction from the ground upwards (理) with an increasing degree of numerical complexity (数).

38. Most TCM practitioners are familiar with the term zheng qi (正气) as meaning the ‘sum-total of qi available to fight an illness’. Elemental Chinese medical terms typically have both a ‘primary definition’ and a number of secondary definitions. For example, the primary definition of the character jing (精) can be understood as being the ‘act or capacity of differentiation’. Secondary meanings of this term include ‘sperm’, ‘ovum’ or ‘essence.’ It is only because these secondary phenomena contain the ‘capacity for differentiation’ that they are then considered to be ‘jing (精).’ Likewise the primary definition of the character qi (气) is best understood to be the fabric of space/time.

39. In classical Chinese scientific philosophy there was a debate as to whether qi was present prior to the formation of space/time. However, after the universal breath begins to cycle through its different numerical dimension, it is generally agreed that qi is present. In the quote cited here from the Huainanzi, the space/time breath originates in a dimension that is devoid of physical materiality. As the breath moves it generates dimension (理) and duration (数). The term

40. The concept that qi represents the fabric of space/time has its roots in early Chinese philosophical writings. It is later stated more clearly in the writings of the Neo-Confucian scholar Zhang Zai (張載) (1020–1077CE).

41. The term dimensional shifting is a term that I have specifically coined for use in this paper. Dimensional shifting is one of the most important and poorly understood theories in Chinese medicine. Briefly stated, dimensional shifting means that as the universal breath passes through its various stages of contraction and expansion, it passes through different quantum states of dimensional reality that are characterised by different orders of numerical complexity. As an example, classical theory predicts that at the beginning of the movement of the universal breath space/time exists in a disordered and highly chaotic state that lacks any definite numerical order. The universal breath then passes through different dimensional states of reality defined by unary, binary, tertiary, quaternary, quinary, senary, septenary, octary and nonary orders of numerical complexity, until it reaches terminal differentiation in the world of the ten-thousand things (万物). In the theory of dimensional shifting, each discrete quantum dimension of space/time operates under a unique set of laws and principles and represents a different aspect of the natural world and the human body.

42. To give a basic example of number (数) and principle (理) we can imagine the basic growth of a tree. A tree emerges from the ground as a solitary vertical shoot. This shoot then grows to become a primary trunk. The primary trunk divides into several branches. These divide into a great number of terminal branches, which in turn, terminate in a multitude of leaves. In this way, a tree grows in a predictable direction from the ground upwards (理) with an increasing degree of numerical complexity (数).

43. As the universal breath circulates, it both nourishes the body and expels stale energy and illness. These changes are analogous to the circulations of a tide pool. When water flows into the pool it brings nourishment and animates life. When it flows outward it disperses waste and the pool returns to a state of rest.

44. The term ping ren (balanced person 平人) does not imply that such an individual exists in a state of static equilibrium. Rather, it means that the circulation of this individual is able to shift freely within the varying states of the energetic milieu of nature, while maintaining a constant connection to the physiologic centre of the individual (for a more detailed description of this phenomena see Master, M. (2012). “The Concept of the Ping Ren”. *International Society for the Study of Classical Acupuncture, 3rd Annual Scholar’s Retreat.* See <http://isscaonline.org/retreat/videos/mitesh-master-ping-ren>.

45. Seen from this perspective, perhaps a better translation of the title of the Huangdi Neijing Suwen would be ‘The Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic: Questions on the Cosmogony of the Universe’.