

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.

By: Edward Neal

Keywords: Acupuncture, Neijing, classical, traditional, Chinese medicine, basic principles

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).¹ Generations of Chinese physician-scholars have meticulously studied and written commentaries on these documents. Until the late 20th century the very concept of Chinese medical scholarship was almost entirely synonymous with the study of these classical texts. Despite their undeniable importance, the extensive body of knowledge contained within these documents is poorly understood and rarely utilised in modern practice.²

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 (鄒衍, 305-240BCE) and other Naturalist philosophers of the Jixia Gate Academy in the state of Qi typify this style of intellectual thought.³ 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).⁴ Through the combined efforts of different scholars, Warring States texts and text fragments were carefully examined and categorised into different philosophical schools.⁵ 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).⁶

A common misperception about the *Neijing* is that



Figure 1: Classical texts

Like the roots of a tree, classical texts such as the *Huangdi Neijing* gather theories and information that have come before them and then act as the foundational support for theoretical and philosophical thinking that comes after them.

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/60/Tree_roots_cross_section.jpg

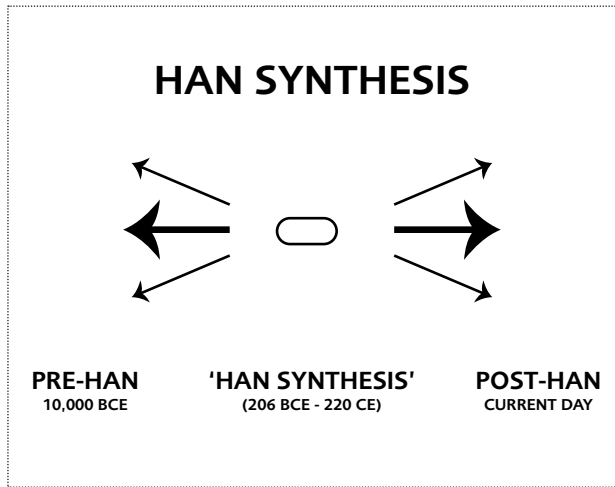


Figure 2: Period of the Han synthesis
 During the Han Dynasty imperial scholars attempted to organise and standardise the writings of the different schools of philosophy that had arisen during the Warring States period (475-221BCE). Conceptually, the period of the Han synthesis can be seen as resembling a double-ended funnel, in which the various theories and ideas of the pre-Warring States and Warring States eras were compiled into a philosophical canon. This in turn served as the intellectual foundation for the different theoretical schools that emerged later in subsequent dynasties.

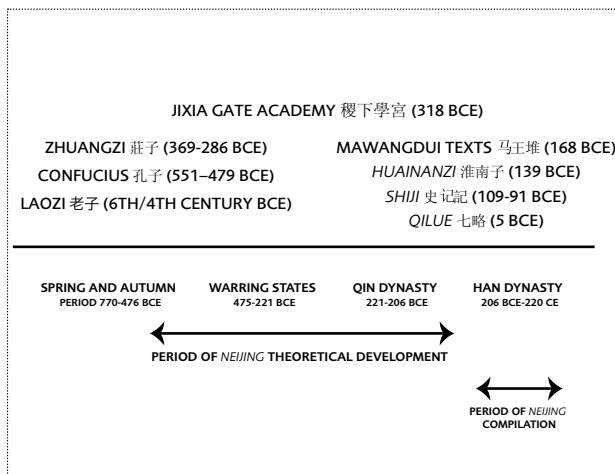


Figure 3: The historical timeline of the *Neijing* compilation
 The *Neijing* text contains theories and ideas from a variety of sources. The text itself was most likely compiled during the first half of the Han Dynasty (206-9BCE).

it represents a single work of narrative medical literature.⁷ Some even believe it was written by the Yellow Emperor himself in the period prior to the Xia Dynasty (2070-1600 BCE).⁸ However, sinologists generally agree that the various writings found within the *Neijing* reflect literary styles of the Warring States and Western Han Dynasty periods.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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).^{11,12,13}

- Mythic knowledge/empirical observation
- Individual theories
- Synthesis of individual theories within the teachings of various Warring States philosophers
- Compilation of texts and text fragments by Han Dynasty scholars into an organised philosophical canon
- Post-Han editing by scholars of subsequent dynasties
- Consensus editions emerge

Fig.4 Stages in the evolution of a classical text
 Classical texts such as the *Neijing* can be seen to evolve through several distinct phases of development. Typically, these texts began with the myths and observations of ancient people, which over time evolved into individual theories. Warring States philosophers then added to and reframed these theories into philosophical teachings. Later, Han Dynasty scholars (206BCE-220CE) organised Warring States texts into a standard canon of philosophical thought. Han dynasty texts were then edited and rearranged by the scholars of subsequent dynasties. Finally, single consensus versions emerged to become recognised editions of the text. In the case of the *Neijing*, the primary version in use today comes from the Song Dynasty Imperial Editing Office of 1053CE, which was in turn based on an edition by the Daoist scholar Wang Bing in the Tang Dynasty (618-907CE).

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.¹⁴ 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*.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

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).^{17,18} Further, the definitive historical treatise of the time, the *Shiji* 史記 (*Records of the Historian*) by Sima Qian 司馬遷 written between 109 and 91BCE, makes no mention of the *Neijing* text.¹⁹ 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.²⁰

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6d/Mawangdui_LaoTsu_M02.JPG

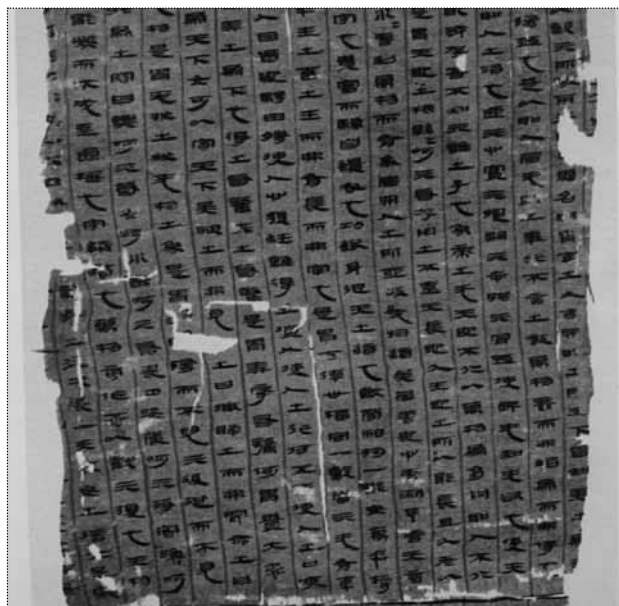


Figure 5: Silk manuscripts from tomb no. 3 at Mawangdui, dating from 168 BCE (Changsha, Hunan)

The Mawangdui archeological site contains three ancient tombs buried during the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 9 CE). Contained within these tombs were the Marquis of Dai, his wife and a male relative. In addition to various articles of daily life, these tombs contain a number of texts related to Daoism, medicine, military strategy, mathematics and other related fields.

Ancient science

- Values knowledge from the past (qian 前)
- Observations are drawn from detailed examination of the natural world
- Views the universe as being a place of constant change and transformation
- Primarily studies the principles of change and transformation
- Reduces complexity to simplicity
- Includes the insights and experiences of the observer as an integral part of the scientific process

Modern science

- Values knowledge from the present and future (hou 後)
- Observations are drawn from detailed examination of the natural world
- Views the universe as a place in which unchanging phenomena can be isolated and identified
- Primarily studies the manifest parts of the world
- Describes the world in increasing complexity and detail
- Attempts to limit the role of the observer and their experiences in the scientific process

Figure 6: Some primary differences between Chinese classical science and modern Western science

Both classical Chinese science and Western science meet the general criteria necessary to be regarded as true sciences. However their fundamental axioms and principles differ significantly. These differences represent distinctions of scientific culture and philosophy and do not represent inherent differences of either efficacy or predictive power.

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 經] 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 antecede and give rise to the world of observable forms, traditional science prioritises the study of these basic rhythms and patterns.²⁵ 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.²⁶

3. Different understandings of change and transformation

黃帝問曰用鍼之服必有法則焉今何法何則岐伯對曰法天則地合以天光帝曰願卒聞之岐伯曰凡刺之法必候日月星辰四時八正之氣氣定乃刺之

'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.'"

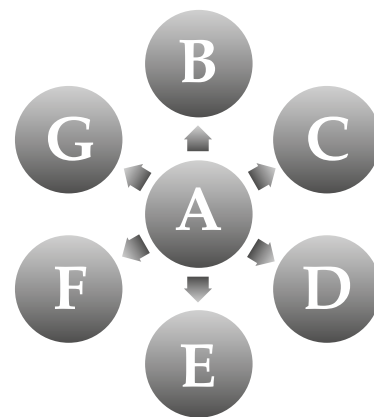
- *Neijing Suwen* Chapter 26

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.²⁷ 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' 文言文) or 'gu han yu' ('ancient Han language' 古漢語). These writings are characterised by sparse language, textual ambiguity, symbolic language constructions, rhythmic meter, multiple character definitions and text-specific meanings.²⁹ 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.³⁰

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.³¹ In this literary style, meaning-dense characters are used to convey large amounts of information in a minimal amount of space (see Figure 7). 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 (see Figure 8). To the untrained eye, symbolic language structures can 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.³²



A. → B. → C. → D. → E. → F. → G.

Figure 7: Symbolic versus linear language structures.

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.

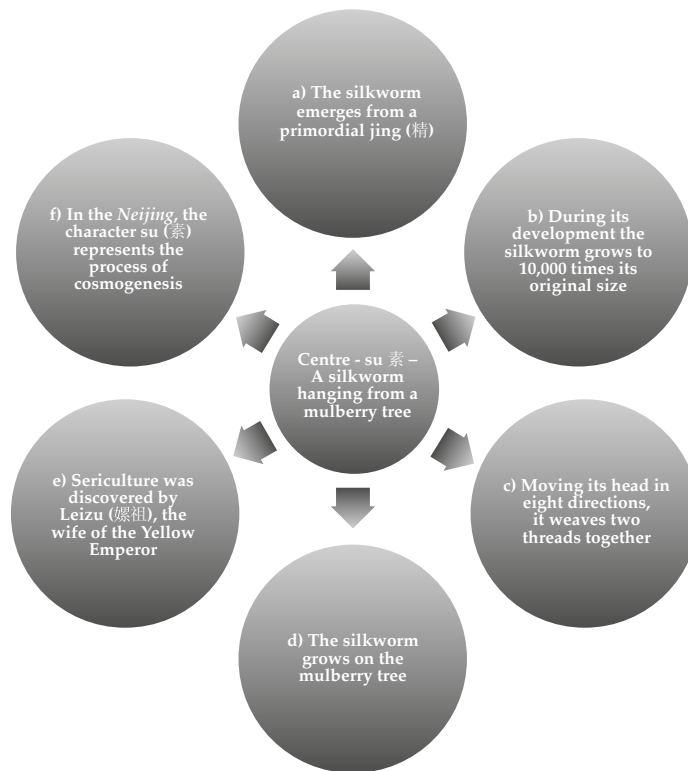


Figure 8: An example of a symbolic language structure - su 素

In this image, the Chinese character *su* 素 is used to illustrate a common meaning-rich character used in the formation of symbolic language structures. *Su* 素 is a component of the title *Huangdi Neijing Suwen* 黄帝内经素问. It is most commonly translated as 'simple' or 'plain' (hence the frequent translation of the *Neijing Suwen*, 'The Yellow Emperor's Internal Classic - Plain Questions'). The character *su* 素 depicts the picture of a silkworm hanging from a mulberry tree. In the *Neijing*, the silk radical is often used to convey the concept of cosmogenesis.⁴⁵ In nature, the silkworm emerges from a cocoon. Moving its head in eight primary directions, it emits two different threads from its mouth that it weaves together (c.f. the two opposing forces of yin and yang). In a specific historical reference to the Yellow Emperor, it was Leizu, the wife of the Yellow Emperor, who is said to have discovered sericulture when a cocoon accidentally fell into her teacup in the time prior to the Xia Dynasty (2070 - 1600 BCE). All these meanings are conveyed simultaneously by the single character *su* 素.⁴⁶

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虛而不屈動而愈出

'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.^{34,35} 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]

Principle #2: The basic qualities of nature's breath are called yin and yang

九星懸朗七曜周旋曰陰曰陽曰柔曰剛幽顯既位寒暑弛張
生生化化品物咸章

'The nine stars hang suspended shining brightly [in the sky]. The seven [planets] turn within the [heavens]. These are called 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

上古之人其知道者法於陰陽和於術數食飲有節起居有常
不妄作勞故能形與神俱而盡終其天年度百歲乃去

'In ancient times, people understood the way of the dao. They harmonised their actions with yin and yang and with the numerical rhythm [of nature]. In their diet they ate and drank with regular consistency. In their lives they followed a regular pattern. Within their labours they were not rash. In this way, they were able to preserve both form and shen [神]. Thus they lived out the full measure of life bestowed upon them by heaven and lived to be one hundred years of age.'

- *Suwen* Chapter 1

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 (脾氣) – 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 (暑氣) – 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 qi (形氣) – 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

道始生虛廓虛廓生宇宙宇宙生氣氣有涯垠

'The dao begins in empty expanse. Empty expanse generates dimension and duration. Dimension and duration generate qi. Qi has a boundary.'³⁹

- *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)

道生一一生二二生三三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

故陰陽四時者萬物之終始也死生之本也逆之則災害生從之則苛疾不起是謂得道道者聖人之愚者佩之從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 disaster 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 accentuated and nourished.⁴³ In classical medicine this deceptively simple equation is the primary prerequisite for all health and vitality.

Any condition that impairs 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' (zhi 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.

Edward Neal, MD LAc. has been involved in the practice and teaching of Chinese medicine for over 20 years. Originally educated as a Western medicine physician, Dr. Neal studied traditional acupuncture with Dr. Anita Cignolini of Milan, Italy. Formerly an Associate Professor in the Department of Classical Chinese Medicine at the National College of Natural Medicine in Portland, Oregon, Dr. Neal is currently the director of the International Society for the Study of Classical Acupuncture (ISSCA), a non-profit organisation dedicated to scholarly research, professional education and community service within the field of the Chinese medical classics and classical acupuncture. The society invites active participation from practitioners and students all over the world who have an interest in studying and promoting the reemergence of classical acupuncture practice. For more information on the society please visit www.isscaonline.org. More information about Dr. Neal and his research work can be found at www.edwardnealmd.com.

Endnotes

- In Chinese medicine the early medical classics are generally considered to be the *Huangdi Neijing* (*Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic*) *Suwen* (*Plain Questions*) and *Lingshu* (*Divine Pivot*), the *Nanjing* (*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 theory include the *Dao Dejing* (*Classic on the Way and Virtue*), the *Yi Jing* (*Classic of Changes*) and the *Huainanzi* (*Masters of Huainan*).
- Although modern TCM practice broadly borrows concepts from the medical classics such as yin and yang (陰陽), qi (氣), heaven, earth and human being (天人地) and the six conformations (六合), a classical understanding of these terms or the capacity to put these principles into clinical practice is rare in modern practice.
- The Academy of the Jixia 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 so-named because of its proximity to one of the city gates bearing its name. Teachers from all over China came to teach at the academy and receive imperial patronage. Particularly prominent within the academy were the schools of Naturalist philosophy of whom Zou Yan (鄒衍, 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 scholars 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 陰陽家), Confucians (Rujia 儒家), Mohists (Moja 墨家), Logicians (Mingjia 名家), Legalists (Fajia 法家) and Daoists (Daojia 道家). To this were later added the Agriculturists (Nongjia 農家), Diplomats (Zonghengjia 縱橫家) and the category of Miscellaneous Schools (Zajia 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 *Suwen* (*Plain Questions* 素問), which primarily deals with issues of general theory and the *Lingshu* (*Divine Pivot* 靈樞), which is the first recorded treatise on acupuncture theory and practice. The *Lingshu* is either similar to or identical with two other known classical texts entitled the *Zhenjing* (*Needling Classic* 針經) 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. and Xiwen, L. (2009). *Introductory Study of Huangdi Neijing*. China Press of Traditional Chinese Medicine.
- Narrative language structures typify most modern writing. In this style, any given text passage is dependent on the language that precedes it for its meaning. For example, if multiple chapters of a novel are removed, the text becomes unreadable. Symbolic language structures on the other hand, such as those found within the *Neijing*, are essentially holographic in nature. Because each text passage refers back to one holographic perspective (here the reality of the universal breath and its relation to human health and illness) component parts can be rearranged and individual sections may be lost without a critical loss to the overall text.
- Read in this way by those who do not understand its overall structure and underlying theoretical basis, the *Neijing* often appears archaic, chaotic and unintelligible.
- For an overview of these ideas, see: Keegan, D. (1988). *The Huang-Ti Nei Ching: The Structure of the Compilation; the significance of the structure*. University Microfilms International and Unschuld, P. (2003). *Huang di neijing su wen: nature, knowledge, imagery in an ancient Chinese medical text*. University of California Press.
- For example, the very first passage of the *Neijing Suwen* Chapter 1 reads:
昔在黃帝生而神靈弱而能言幼而徇齊長而敦敏成而登天
'In ancient times, there lived the Yellow Emperor. At birth, his spirit and divine intelligence were evident. As an infant, he could speak. As a child, he was smart and insightful. As a young man, he was sincere and respectful. When he was fully-grown he ascended to fulfill the mandate of heaven.'
This passage was taken in its entirety from the hagiography of the Yellow Emperor written by Sima Qian in the *Shiji* 史記 between 109 and 91 BCE.
- For example, it is a commonly held belief that the *Nanjing* was written by the semi-mythical physician Bian Que (扁鵲) and that this text represents a direct commentary on the *Neijing*. However, it is perhaps more likely that the *Nanjing* is a collection of writings compiled within the 'Bian Que 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 probable that the *Neijing* represents one such collection of documents written within the 'Yellow Emperor' literary style.
- Much of the thinking on these types of ideas comes from the doctoral work of Donald Keegan, PhD. For more information see Keegan, D. (1988). *The Huang-Ti Nei Ching: The Structure of the Compilation; the significance of the structure*. University Microfilms International.
- After the victory of the Qin Dynasty in 221 BCE, the intellectual diversity that had characterised the Warring States period was violently suppressed in favour of the state-sponsored philosophy of Legalism. The historian Sima Qian describes the situation in a speech given by the Qin Prime Minister Li Si (李斯) to the Qin Emperor:
臣請史官非秦記皆燒之非博士官所職天下敢有藏詩書百家語者悉詣守尉雜燒之有敢偶語詩書者棄市以古非今者族吏見知不舉者與同罪令下三十日不燒黥為城旦所不去者醫藥卜筮種樹之書
[Prime minister Li Si said] 'I, your subject suggest that writings of historians not of the Qin Dynasty be burned except those required by court scholars [to pursue] their duties. Anyone possessing poetry or books from the one hundred schools of philosophy [百家] shall deliver them to a military officer for burning. Anyone who dares to speak of this poetry or books shall be executed. If anyone uses ancient books to [criticise] the current [government] their family shall be killed. Any official who knows of such an act but fails to report it will suffer a similar fate. Thirty days from this decree, anyone who has not [turned in their books] for burning shall be branded a criminal and sent to [work] on the Great Wall. Books exempt from this edict shall include books on medicine, divination, agriculture and forestry.'
- It is also possible that the *Neijing* has a pre-Qin origin. However no historical mention of the text is known prior to the Western Han Dynasty (206-9 BCE).
- In 26 BCE, the Han emperor Chengdi commissioned the scholar Liu Xiang (劉向) to compile an inventory of 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 *Hanshu* (*Book of the Han* 漢書), a history of the Han Dynasty completed in 111 CE. For further reading, see Kong, Y.C. (2010) *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.
- The Mawangdui site contains three separate burial sites. Tomb #3 contained silk manuscripts upon which the medical texts were written. For

- further reading see, Harper, D. (1998). *Early Chinese Medical Literature: The Mawangdui Medical Transcripts*. Kegan Paul International.
- 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 Chunyu Yi (淳于意 - also named Cang Gong 倉公). Chunyu Yi was born the city of Linzi in 205 BCE and received training under several well-known physicians of his day. In his biography, Chunyu 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 Chunyu 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 Chunyu 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 the randomised controlled double-blinded study. However, in actual practice Western science is much more nuanced and varied than these simple stereotypes might suggest. There are areas where Western science and philosophy come surprisingly close to the perspectives of ancient China.
- 22 Three primary qualities are needed to validate any intellectual inquiry as being an authentic science. First, a scientific conclusion must be based on, or be consistent with, demonstrable observations of the natural world. Second, observations must be understood within the context of a larger theoretical framework. Third, scientific theories must possess a consistent predictive power. In these respects, both classical Chinese sciences and modern Western sciences fulfill basic requirements to be considered a science, although the perspectives and theoretical axioms that support them are different.
- 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.
- 25 Traditionally, scholars who understood the primary breathing patterns of the natural world were called fangshi (directional scholars 方士). 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.
- 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 變. 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 變 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 變 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 translator of the *Dao Dejing*, for example, but be unfamiliar with the style of language within the *Neijing*.
- 30 For example see Pulleyblank, E. (1996). *Outline of Classical Chinese Grammar*. University of Washington Press; Barnes, A. (2009). *Du's Handbook of Classical Chinese Grammar*. Writers Printshop; or Rouzer, P. (2007). *A New Practical Primer of Literary Chinese*. Harvard University Asia Center.
- 31 In physics, a hologram describes a three-dimensional image pattern that it 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.
- 38 Most TCM practitioners are familiar with the term zheng qi (正氣) 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 精 (jing) 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 (氣) is best understood to be 'the fabric of space/time.' From this arise a variety of secondary meanings dependent on the phenomena that is being examined. To practise Chinese classical medicine clinically, it is important that the physician has a working understanding of the the primary definitions of these terms.
- 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 (宇) and duration (宙). The term yuzhou (宇宙) means 'universe' or 'cosmos'. It is a classical equivalent to the modern conception of space/time. Space/time generates qi and qi possesses the quality of yain (涯垠) or physical materiality. Qi therefore represents the 'stuff' of space/time.
- 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 (wanwu 萬物). 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 (數) 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 (li 理) with an increasing degree of numerical complexity (shu 數).
- 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'.
- 46 For more information see; Kuhn, D (1984). "Tracing a Chinese Legend: In Search of the Identity of the First Serculturalist." *T'oung Pao*. Second Series, Vol. 70, Livr. 4; or Barber, EJW (1991). *Prehistoric textiles: the development of cloth in the Neolithic and Bronze Ages with special reference to the Aegean*. Princeton University Press.