The Textual, Social, and Intellectual History of the *Huangdi neijing*
What Kind of History

- What is textual history?
- What is social history?
- What is intellectual history?
The Textual History of the *Huangdi neijing*
When was it Written?

- Earliest mention of a *Huangdi neijing*: the bibliographic section (*yiwenzhi* 藝文誌) of the Book of the Han (*Hanshu* 漢書), a history of the Han dynasty completed around 90 CE.

- Earliest material that looks like an early version of some of the *Neijing*’s material: the medical texts found in the Mawangdui 馬王堆 tomb—which was closed in 168 BCE.

- So in the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) roughly in the 1st century BCE.
Books in the Han Dynasty

- There were two forms of books in the Han dynasty:
  - Bamboo rolls
  - Silk scrolls
Basic Structure of the *Huangdi neijing*

- All of the surviving *Neijing* texts are divided into titled chapters.

- In most of these chapters the material is presented as a dialogue between the Yellow Emperor and an interlocutor.

- Qi Bo 岐伯 is the most common interlocutor, but there are several others as well.
Known *Huangdi neijing* Texts

- *Suwen* (素問, *Questions on the Fundamental*)
- *Lingshu* (靈樞, *Numinous Pivot*)
- *Zhenjing* (針經, *Needle Classic*)
- *Zhenjiu jiayi jing* (針灸甲乙經, *The Systematic Classic of Acumoxa*)
- *Taisu* (太素, *Grand Fundamental*)

These two together are usually called the *Neijing*
The Relationship of These Texts to One Another

- Identical or nearly identical passages found in all of these texts, but in different places and surrounded by different text.

- In other words, while the chapter titles, arrangement, and content differ in all of these texts, there is a great deal of almost identical material that is repeated in them—just in completely different places.
Chapter X: Treatise on Dance Parties

The Yellow Emperor said …

… hey, Macarena! …

… a fierce fire consumes qi …

Chapter Y: On Compliance and Rebellion

Qi Bo said …

… hey, Macarena! …

… therefore the sage …
The Relationship of Texts in the Corpus

David Keegan gives a list of how one chapter of the *Lingshu* is divided up in the *Taisu*:

*Lingshu* 3.10a is *Taisu* 8.1  
*Lingshu* 3.10b is *Taisu* 8.1  
*Lingshu* 3.10c is not in the *Taisu*  
*Lingshu* 3.10d is *Taisu* 9.3  
*Lingshu* 3.10e is *Taisu* 9.4
Will the Real *Huangdi neijing* Step Forward?

- So what did the original Han dynasty *Neijing* look like? Which of the texts we have is closest to it?

- Physicians and scholars have argued over this for at least a thousand years.

- But David Keegan—in his PhD dissertation, “The *Huang-ti nei-ching*: the Structure of the Compilation, the Significance of the Structure”—has provided a convincing answer: *none of them*
Keegan showed that all of the Neijing texts we possess are compilations of short passages that are shared among most or all of the Neijing texts.

He called these short passages “primary texts” and argued that each Neijing text—including the one mentioned in the Hanshu, was a selective organization of these primary texts—a recension—derived from a large corpus of these primary texts that we can call the “Huangdi neijing corpus.”
Will the Real *Huangdi neijing* Step Forward?

- It is this corpus, then, that is the “original” *Huangdi neijing*.

- Interestingly, both within the *Neijing* itself and in texts like the *Shanghan lun* (傷寒論, *Treatise on Cold Damage*), there are references to book titles that are now chapters in the *Neijing* texts.

- This supports the idea that these texts once circulated separately and were later compiled together.
Canonization of the *Huangdi neijing*

- From the Han dynasty up through the Tang dynasty (618-907), the *Huangdi neijing* corpus seems to have been growing and changing—as evidenced by the various recensions of the corpus that survive.

- But in the Song dynasty (960-1279), the imperial government printed standard editions of three of the *Neijing* texts: *Suwen, Lingshu*, and *Zhenjiu jiayijing*. This increased their importance, but also froze them in one form.
While the imperial printing meant there would never be a new recension of the *Neijing*, it also made these texts much more widely available.

One of the consequences of this was that a large number of commentaries and other books about the *Huangdi neijing* began to be written in far greater numbers.
The *Huangdi neijing* after the Song

Some of the more influential commentaries include:

- Ma Shi 馬莳, *Huangdi neijing Lingshu zhuzheng fawei* 黃帝內經靈樞注證發微 (ca. 1566)
- Wu Kun 吳崑, *Neijing Suwen Wu zhu* 內經素問吳注 (1594)
- Zhang Jiebin 張介賓, *Leijing 類經* (1624)
- Zhang Zhicong 張志聰, *Huangdi neijing suwen (lingshu) jizhu* 黃帝內經素問（靈樞）集注 (1670/1672)
- Tamba no Motoyasu 丹波元簡, *Somon shiki* 素問識 (ca. 1808)
Best Editions of the *Huangdi neijing*

- *Suwen*: the 1550 Gu Congde 顧從德 is most reliable, but a partial Jin dynasty (1115-1234) edition also exists.
- *Lingshu*: the 24-fascicle Ming dynasty (1368-1644) *Xinkan Huangdi neijing Lingshu* 新刊黃帝內經靈樞 by an unknown publisher.
- *Zhenjiu jiayi jing*: the Wu Mianxue 吳勉學 edition of 1601.
- *Taisu*: the Kōtei daikei taiso shin shin kōsei 黃帝內經太素新新校正 by the modern Japanese scholar Sago Masami.
For Further Reading in English

- Donald Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Manuscripts*


- Paul Unschuld’s translations of the *Suwen* and *Lingshu* are currently the only translations reliable enough for study but are not without their own problems
The Social History of the 
Huangdi neijing
Who Wrote the Primary Texts of the Neijing Corpus?

- We don’t know a lot
- But we do know a little
- Definitely not the Yellow Emperor!
- And not “shamans”
Who Wrote the Primary Texts of the Neijing Corpus?

- The content of the Neijing includes a lot of terminology related to divination.

- The ideal physician is sometimes referred to as a fangshi 方士, “recipe/formula gentleman.”

- This is a title used by men who taught and practiced a wide variety of techniques that promised divination, longevity, healing, supernatural powers, even immortality.
Who Wrote the Primary Texts of the *Neijing* Corpus?

- This suggests that the authors of the *Neijing* corpus were members—or at least seen as related to—practitioners of these types of practices.

- This fits with our knowledge of the history of this period, in which medicine and physicians were slowly distinguishing themselves from others who taught things like nourishing life, sexual cultivation techniques, divination of many forms, etc.
Who Wrote the Primary Texts of the *Neijing* Corpus?

- We also know that the *Neijing* corpus shows a definite preference for needling with metal needles.

- This suggests they were supporters of this—at the time new—technology and therapeutic method.
Who Wrote the Primary Texts of the *Neijing* Corpus?

Finally, we know that there were other similar groups promoting other traditions of medicine.

- For example, one devoted to Bian Que 扁鹊 and one devoted to Mr. White 白氏.

- We also suspect that there were divisions within the Yellow Emperor tradition.

- These show up in the *Neijing* as differences in the people having a discussion.
Why did they Arrange the Primary Texts in Different Ways?

- This is a question we have a good answer for!
- From the Han to through the Tang, physicians were of relatively low status socially.
- They passed their knowledge and skills on through apprenticeships/discipleships.
- The student would serve the master and study for a long time before being given any texts.
Why did they Arrange the Primary Texts in Different Ways?

- When the master thought the student was ready, he would allow the student to copy some of his medical texts.
- The student copied these texts into a book of his own in the order he received them.
- These were usually either very small texts or small parts of larger texts.
- So doctors books were actually compilations of a lot of possibly heterogeneous material.
How were the Extant Books Produced?

- The people who wrote the books that have survived were not low status doctors.
- They were elite men with an interest in medicine who may (or may not) have practiced on friends, family, and other acquaintances.
- They were used to books that had a fixed order like modern books and assumed that the books they got from doctors were that kind of book.
How were the Extant Books Produced?

- So when they looked at doctors’ texts, they thought there were errors in them—repetitions, things in the wrong place, etc. Which they tried to correct by editing the texts.

- What they included in their recension of the Neijing was based on which doctors’ texts they had access to.

- So every recension is a different ordering of essentially the same materials.
For Further Reading in English

- David Keegan’s dissertation, “The Huang-ti nei-ching: the Structure of the Compilation, the Significance of the Structure”

- Donald Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Texts*

The Intellectual History of the *Huangdi neijing*
What the *Neijing* is Not

- Confucian
- Daoist
The Intellectual Environment of the Han

- United empire in the political world = United universe under one system of cosmology = United world of knowledge in intellectual world

- Records of the Historian (Shiji 史記)

- The Master of Huainan (Huainanzi 淮南子)

- Correlative Cosmology/the Medicine of Systematic Correspondence

- Huang-Lao 黃老 thought
Correlative Cosmology

- Correlative cosmology is a view of the universe in which everything is connected into a seamless whole.

- This was accomplished by grouping things into sets of related categories:
  - yin/yang, the five phases, three yin three yang, the eight trigrams, the ten heavenly stems, the twelve earthly branches
Huang-Lao 黃老

- Claimed to take the ideas of the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi 黃帝) and Laozi 老子 as its source
- Was very popular in the early Han dynasty
- Scholars knew little about it until Huang-Lao texts were found in the Mawangdui burial
- These texts have been translated by Robin Yates in *Five Lost Classics*
Huang-Lao thought—like most of the schools of thought from the Warring States period—was mainly focused on how to govern a state.

From the *Daodejíng* it took the idea of the unseen ruler and, especially a commitment to “doing nothing” (*wuwei* 無為).

But what did “doing nothing” mean to Huang-Lao advocates?
Unlike the *Daode jing*, where doing nothing appears to literally mean doing nothing and is an intentional paradox, Huang-Lao gave very specific advice on how to do nothing. This advice centers on three related terms: the Way (*Dao 道*), compliance (*shun 順*), and rebellion (*ni 逆*).
Both compliance (shun 順) and rebellion (ni 逆) are originally words about water.

Compliance was movement along with the flow of water or water moving in the correct direction.

Rebellion was movement against the current or water moving in the wrong direction, i.e., flooding.

Water was a powerful metaphor in Early China, see Sarah Allen’s The Way of Water.
So in Huang-Lao, the Way was the river and the goal was to comply with its flow. Doing so was “doing nothing” because your just doing what’s natural—your floating down the river.

Rebellion was action contrary to the Way, just like trying to move against the current of a river, it is active effort, and just like a flood, it causes damage.
Huang-Lao in the *Neijing*

- This trio of concepts—the Way, compliance, and rebellion—run through all of the *Neijing*.

- This is particularly striking because in general the *Neijing* is a very heterogeneous text.

- (It’s also no accident that the primary figure in the dialogues of the *Neijing* is the Yellow Emperor.)
Huang-Lao in the Neijing

When combined with correlative cosmology, this set of concepts allowed the Neijing’s authors to unify the world in one conceptual system and specify what sort of behavior was natural and positive within that system and describe how to treat deviations from that correct Way (i.e., illness).
“The three months of spring are called sprouting forth; heaven and earth both generate, and the myriad things therefore flourish. Go to sleep after dark and rise early. Stroll to the hall. Wear [your] hair down and relax [your] body in order to make [your] mind come forth. Produce and do not kill. Give and do not take. Reward and do not punish. This [is the behavior] which corresponds to spring qi. It is the Way of nourishing life. If [one] rebels (逆) against this, then the liver will be damaged. In summer there will be an [undesirable] transformation into coldness.”
—Suwen 2

☞ This is “doing nothing” in the Neijing!
Huang-Lao in the *Neijing*

- Huang-Lao’s focus on government might seem strange as inspiration for a text on medicine.
- But in Early China there was a long history of using government and medicine as metaphors of one another.
- Miranda Brown has recently suggested that even the style of reasoning seen in early Chinese medicine is modeled on the reasoning of government officials, see *The Art of Medicine in Early China*. 
Huang-Lao in the Neijing

This metaphor survives to this day in Chinese medical terms:

- **zhi 治** = to govern/to treat
- **zhen 診** = to examine the facts in a legal case/to examine a patient
- **duan 斷** = to issue a judgement/to make a diagnosis
- etc.
For Further Reading in English

- The early chapters of Hinrichs and Barnes, *Chinese Medicine and Healing*
- Sarah Allen, *The Way of Water*
- Miranda Brown, *The Art of Medicine in Early China*
- Donald Harper’s chapter in *The Cambridge History of Early China*
- Elisabeth Hsu, *Pulse Diagnosis in Early Chinese Medicine*
Pulling it all Together
So, we can say that the *Huangdi neijing* is a corpus of small primary texts that have been arranged and edited by different authors into different recensions.

Its authors were members of the emerging group of physicians who distinguished themselves from other healers, diviners, spirit-mediums, etc. but still shared some ideas with them.

They also appear to have been proselytizers for a new medical therapy: the use of metal needles.

This corpus of texts was mostly produced in the 1st century BCE and was influenced by the ideas of correlative cosmology and the teachings of Huang-Lao, both of which were widespread at that time.
The result was a set of heterogeneous texts that share a view of human life, health, illness, and treatment as part of the same system that governed the cosmos, politics, the weather, and literally everything else—and emphasize acupuncture as a treatment method.

At the time it appeared, the *Huangdi neijing* was one of a number of medical texts and traditions, but—for reasons that are not clear—it became dominant and is the only one of those traditions that has survived to modern times.
Thank you for attending!