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An over twenty-year, multi-authored study by Paul Unschuld, Hermann Tessenow, Zheng Jinsheng and others, has come to completion. Its subject, the *Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經 (Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic, hereafter Neijing), is the oldest textual corpora of the Chinese received medical tradition. The result is a magisterial collection: an analytical synopsis, a concordance dictionary, and an annotated translation in two volumes. A major milestone in the early history of Chinese medicine, these collected works provide access to the source text unparalleled in the English language, grounded in extensive and rigorous textual criticism, detailed philology and thoughtful historical anthropology. In honour of the completion of the project, this review considers the contributions of all three publications and the accompanying two CDs.

The *Su wen* 素問 (Basic Questions) is the core focus of the study, being the most authoritative edition of the Neijing. More than a medical authority, the *Su wen* is the most thorough and far-reaching testament of Five Phases (*wuxing* 五行) and *Yinyang* 陰陽 cosmology for its time, and testifies to important new directions in multiple domains of early Chinese science in the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). It demonstrates an admixture of contemporary philosophical, political and cosmological thinking, and stands as an important record of the intellectual and cultural currents emergent in the early formation of the Chinese empire. The *Su wen* is thus of great value to a broad variety of intellectual disciplines in Chinese history, and deserving of the extended attention given it by Unschuld et al.
The *Su wen*, first compiled in 762 by Wang Bing 王冰, is one among three surviving editions of the Han Dynasty *Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經 (Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic). The *Tai su* 太素 (Grand Basis) compiled by Yang Shangshan 楊上善 is the oldest, dating from the seventh century, and the *Ling shu* 端樞 (Numinous Pivot) gets its title in the twelfth, although it is derivative of earlier texts the *Jiu juan* 九眷 (Nine Scrolls) and *Zhen jing* 鍼經 (Needling Classic). Both the *Tai su* and *Ling shu* are comprised from earlier textual corpora assumed to date from the Han. They contain important passages not included in the *Su wen*, and were also commissioned in 1057 for editing by Gao Baoheng 高保衡, Lin Yi 林億 et al. at the Song medical academy. However after ten years, the *Su wen* was the sole edition to be completed. This edition forms the basis of Unschuld et al.’s studies, which perform close comparison with variant passages across all three editions.

The first volume in the series is a detailed analysis of the textual history and contents of the *Su wen*, as well as detailed bibliographic histories of the other two editions. Over sixty pages of the first volume are dedicated to describing the textual transmission and various editions, multiple interpretations of fundamental terms such as inner (*nei* 內), classic (*jing* 經), and basic questions (*Su wen* 素問), and the worldviews and institutional contexts of the editors mentioned above. These pages do more than give philological weight to the study, tracing the genealogical origins of today’s edition through individuals, imperial editorial teams and Japanese collections. This chapter also points out the editorial interests which have shaped the text over time, and nuanced interpretation in different editors’ commentaries. Any lingering suspicions that the *Neijing* was a single authored, unitary text, or that there was ‘an original’ should be laid to rest. Rather, this painstaking tracing of the many hands involved in collecting, compiling, editing and commenting over centuries shows the composite nature of the text, and prepares the reader for the contradictions and inconsistencies that are revealed in later chapters.

The meat of the analysis is chapter five, a 244 pages long, which examines in detail the contents of the *Su wen*. It is divided into twelve sections, each dedicated to different topics: its literary setting; cosmological theory such as *Yinyang* and Five Phases theory; morphological features, such as the body and its organs, blood and *qi* and vessels; nosology such as pathogenic agents and diseases; and clinical practices of examination, invasive therapy, heat therapy and substance [drug] therapy. While this chapter organisation may seem straightforward at first blush, it is the
product of extensive critical thinking and facilitates much easier comparative enquiry from specialists in other medicines. These analytical foci of each section further highlight the heterogeneity and contradiction of different hands in the text, making clear its composite nature, lack of systematicity, and the polyvocality and ambiguity allowed for in early medical authority. The organization is extremely helpful for understanding key ideas of the text, and will serve as an essential reference for years to come.

Pockets within the analysis give pause. At different points Unschuld inserts modernist norms such as ‘scientific facts,’ or constructs the separation of science and religion in ways which uncomfortably parallel the European Enlightenment. Two examples follow.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belching</th>
<th>Coughing</th>
<th>Talkativeness</th>
<th>Swallowing</th>
<th>Yawning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heart</td>
<td>Lungs</td>
<td>Liver</td>
<td>Spleen</td>
<td>Kidneys</td>
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In unpacking the relationship of the Five Phases to bodily functions in *Su wen* 23 (see table above), Unschuld argues that they result from a mixture of “empirically valid observations,” neatly distinguished from “purely theoretical constructs.” Arguing that only some relationships could “hold in the light of modern reasoning” serves to insert biomedical norms and neglects forms of observation common to contemporary *yangsheng* (nourishing life) practice. Proprioceptive attention to the space above the diaphragm (often referenced with the same term, “heart” *xin* 心) during burping or to pulling sensation in the lower back during a large yawn renders intuitive and “empirical” the heart-burping and kidney-relations Unschuld identifies as “theoretical.”

The epilogue is sensitive to extra-medical, political and philosophical forces which shape the ideology in the *Neijing*, but these are uncomfortably construed into an analogy of the European Enlightenment. Philosophical theories are transposed onto Han social movements, polarising “Confucians” and “Huang-Lao” adherents against “Daoists,” and fore-shortening the complexity and ambiguity of these categories in the period. These simplified communities are arranged to play out the struggle of rationality against religion as the constitutive drive which brings the *Neijing* into existence.

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5 Unschuld 2003, 119ff.
6 Unschuld 2003, 319-350.
8 For example, “When [Han doctors] were faced in the second and first centuries B.C. with a choice between continuing … demonological and ancestral explanations, on the one hand, and trusting new explanatory models based on systematic correspondence, on the other, many of them opted for the latter for very much the
This analytic forces strange convergences, for example, onto the label “Daoism,” foregoing the conceptual and philological precision demonstrated elsewhere. Although he acknowledges the need for care when interpreting Han literature in the light of Warring States philosophy, Unschuld then cites the fourth-century BCE text *Daodejing* to explain antagonism by Han “Daoists” to theories of nature that include social order. He sets up ideological oppositions between “religious, Daoism-inspired macrobiotic hygiene and immortality practices” and “a therapeutic context reflecting mainly Confucian and late Zhou, early Han Huang-Lao values,” boundaries which are not clearly substantiated by Han texts. No accounting is given for the complex emergence of “religious” Daoism, or for the critiques of immortality and *yangsheng* macrobiotic culture found in *Laozhuang* philosophy. The construction of an alliance between Huang-Lao and Confucian values against Daoism runs counter to, for example, Sima Qian’s synonymous use of the terms Daoist and Huang-Lao discourses (*Daojia yan* 道家言, *Huang-Lao zhi yan* 黃老之言), and his description of them as subject to critique in second-century BCE by those in favour of Confucian arts (*rushu* 儒術). just around the time the *Neijing* was coming into formation.

This dichotomisation of religion and rationalism leads Unschuld to unpack the term *shangxia tongfa* 上下同法 (the same laws apply above and below) as an exclusively socio-political notion, neglecting the cosmological notion of homology between heaven and man, attested in terms like *tianren xiangying* 天人相應 and *tianren heyi* 天人合一 in Han philosophical texts and the *Su wen* itself. Some re-examination of the primary and secondary sources used in the epilogue would be in order for readers interested in these issues.

These interpretive matters, however, are but blemishes on an otherwise magisterial study. The philological work on the *Neijing*, which forms the foundation of the thematic synopsis in chapter 5, is increasingly deepened in the succeeding publications, the *Dictionary* and the *Annotated Translation*. The first is a dictionary of terms as they are used in the *Su wen*. Contrary to most dictionary formats, this is a “concordance dictionary.”

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*same reasons* that, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, European naturalists and physicians turned their backs on what was henceforth considered speculation and began to favour scientific inquiry.” Unschuld 2003, 324, italics added.

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9 Unschuld 2003, 338ff.
10 Unschuld 2003, 329.
11 E.g., *Zhuangzi* 莊子 15.
12 *Shiji* 史記 107.2843.
14 *Su wen* 56, Unschuld 2003, 342f.
The slippery semantics of Classical Chinese are tied down much more firmly through study of the word’s appearance in sentences, phrases or binomes. The concordance form of this dictionary equips users with powerful tools to narrow down specific meanings according to context. Each entry for a character lists its multiple meanings in English, along with sample passages (as many as ten or more) which reflect that meaning. Citation numbers indicate the page number where passages appear in the Renmin weisheng 1983 printing of the Su wen. The text of this is reproduced in Index I, complete with pagination and line numbers, allowing easy location of the relevant passages. Compound terms in which the character appears are also given, including translations and cited passages. The passages in each entry serve as arguments, if you will, for Unschuld and Tessenow’s choice of English rendering. Readers will not get any deeper unpacking of the term than the single English translation. Readers wanting explanation of terms like “Four counterflows” and “major Yin” should turn to section five of Nature, Knowledge and Imagery, or the translation volumes. The primary audience for the dictionary will thus be those who are familiar with Classical Chinese, and able to navigate the varying nuances of the original.

Characters appear in order of their pinyin spelling, and a second index in the back lists the characters by the number of strokes. The third index is most interesting, listing the frequency of appearance of all terms in the work, giving a very clear, empirical idea of a term’s relative importance in the whole work. The dictionary also includes a digital concordance on CD. Clicking on a word takes links to an exhaustive list of all uses of the term throughout the text, enabling one to quickly scan different uses of the word to track changes in meaning. The multiple tools encased within the covers of this dictionary thus mark an unparalleled access to the contents of the Neijing, enabling fine-grained analysis and translation.

The final, most recent part of the series is a complete, annotated translation in two volumes. This translation marks a fundamental leap in access to the Su wen tradition, as it includes not only the Su wen main text, but commentaries from important editors across the centuries. References directly cited in the translation are provided at the back of each volume, but a further list of the over 2,800 sources consulted during the study is provided in an additional CD.

The approach and methods of the translation deserve specific mention. Unschuld, Tessenow and Zheng mark theirs as the first English translation to foreground the heterogeneity of the text, drawing attention to competing thought and disconnected passages in their presentation. Rather than translating with an eye to its modern clinical applications, Unschuld et al. have attempted as true as possible a rendering of the “original contents and
structure of the text.” Terms are translated as closely as possible, to their morphological equivalents, such as pi 脾—spleen, gan 肝—liver, despite broad variance in their conceptual understanding. Some specific terms where one to one equivalences are impossible, such as jing 經, qi 氣, or bing 病, are discussed in the introduction, through which Unschuld et al. outline their strategies of choice. Many of these terms or constructions were opaque even to medieval readers, and have generated a copious commentarial tradition. Unschuld et al. allow for ranges of interpretation by including numerous comments, even those which contradict their own opinion.

A most welcome feature of their translation is their departure from the arrangement of the Su wen as reproduced in the 1983 Renmin weisheng edition, and in Index I of the Dictionary. Where they understand the text to contain commentary that has been blended in by habit over time or copy error, or where they see two different hands at work in passages presented as unified wholes, they have introduced punctuation and paragraph breaks in the translation. Thus readers who compare both versions can clearly see the different layers of text that have been identified by Unschuld and Tessenow. Their seasoned familiarity with the text from decades of study, and the rich battery of critical tools supplied in these three publications mark a profound turning point. They open future generations to a richly expanded world of Neijing studies, in which this set will remain an indispensable classic for years to come.

Other References


15 Unschuld et al. 2011, 13.