

Bibliographic History of the *Su wen*

1. SOME SCHOLARLY VIEWS ON THE ORIGIN OF THE *SU WEN*

The *Huang Di nei jing su wen* 黃帝內經素問 and the *Huang Di nei jing ling shu* 黃帝內經靈樞 form a textual corpus generally known as the *Huang Di nei jing*.¹ Popular accounts of the history of Chinese medicine tend to locate the origin of this text in a distant past, several millennia B.C. Voices refuting authorship by the legendary Huang Di in prehistoric times have been heard in China for centuries, and to this day there is a discrepancy between views held by historians of Chinese medicine in and outside China, on the one hand, and by authors writing for the general public, on the other.

Zu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) and Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085), the two eminent philosophers of the Song era, identified the *Su wen* as a product of the Warring States period, the fifth through third centuries B.C.² The latter's contemporary, Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086), author of the important historical work *Zi zhi tong jian* 資治通鑒, stated: "If someone were to say that the *Su wen* were indeed a work written by Huang Di, this, I presume, would be inaccurate. . . . His name was adopted by medical people during the Zhou and Han eras to lend [his] weight [to their field]."³

Lü Fu 呂復, the fourteenth-century Yuan-era literary critic, noted, first, that the *Su wen* was compiled by several authors over a long period, and, second, that its contents were brought together, like those of the *Li ji* 禮記, the "Book of Rites," by Han-era Confucian scholars who then transmitted the text together with the teachings of Confucius.⁴

During the Ming dynasty, the famous literatus Hu Yinglin 胡應麟 (1551–1602) concluded: "The *Su wen* is also called *Nei jing* today. However, the [bibliographic] section in the [history of the] Sui [dynasty] (i.e., 581–618) only mentions a *Su wen*. The fact is, the fifty-five *juan* of Huang Di's *Nei [jing]* and *Wai jing* [recorded in the bibliographic section of the dynastic history of the

Han]⁵ had been lost by the time of the Six Dynasties (i.e., between the third and sixth centuries A.D.). Hence later persons compiled it [anew] and changed its name.”⁶

Cui Da 崔達 voiced a view critical of Huang Di’s authorship during the Qing era: “The *Su wen*, a text transmitted from the past, contains a dialogue between Huang Di and Qi Bo. Some people say that the *Ling shu* and the *Yin fu jing* 陰符經 were written by Huang Di himself. By the time of the Warring States, many philosophers included Huang Di in their writings. For example, the *Zhuang zi* is said to be [the result of] Huang Di’s inquiring from Guang Chengzi about the Way. My opinion is, at the time of Huang Di no historical books existed yet. How could a text have been transmitted to posterity? Also, the sayings [in the *Su wen*, etc.] are fairly recent. Obviously, they were compiled by persons living at some time in the Warring States, the Qin, and the Han eras.”⁷

Beginning with the twentieth century, Chinese scholars have begun to scrutinize the available historical data systematically, their research findings making it increasingly clear that the textual history of the *Huang Di nei jing* began no earlier than the second century B.C. For example, as early as 1950, quoting an article published in 1928 and concluding that the *Su wen* was written during the Qin-Han era, with the dialogue structure superimposed by even later authors, Song Xiangyuan 宋向元 wrote: “From the *Shi ji* 史記, [section] Wu di ben ji 五帝本記, it is obvious that in early times Sima Qian, the author of the *Shi ji*, did not believe that Huang Di was the source of medical and pharmaceutical teachings. And we, people living in the twentieth century, if we were to accept [the saying that] Qi [Bo and] Huang [Di] are the ‘Sages of Medicine,’ would this not be superstitious?”⁸

Zhao Hongjun, repeating arguments voiced by Liu Changlin in 1982,⁹ pointed out in 1985: “The preconditions for the writing of the *Nei jing* were not given before the Western Han (i.e., 206 B.C. to A.D. 9). The major contents of the *Ling shu* and the *Su wen* cannot have formed before the Western Han. Some of its passages may tentatively be identified as compilations of the Eastern Han era” (i.e., A.D. 25–220).¹⁰

In 1987 Yang Yiya 楊醫亞 attributed the compilation of the *Nei jing* to the Han era, although he accepted an earlier origin for most of its contents: “The *Nei jing* was compiled at the earliest during the middle or late period of the Western Han era. The *Nei jing* of that time quoted and summarized ancient medical texts most of which had been written since the late Warring States era. In addition, it added contemporary medical achievements. In the course of its subsequent transmission, later authors supplemented its contents.”¹¹

David Keegan, the first Western scholar to write a dissertation on the structure and origin of the *Su wen*, identified a three-step generation of the *Nei jing* text corpus. First, certain ideas were composed. Second, these ideas were

compiled in texts. Third, these texts were compiled in the *Nei jing* corpus. The first step alone involved many authors and took more than six hundred years. As Keegan stated, “The language and ideas in all of the versions of the *Nei jing* were composed between 400 B.C. and A.D. 260. Between the time this language and the ideas it expresses were composed and the time they were set into the compilations extant today they had been shaped and reshaped through a long and active textual tradition. . . . The [extant] versions of the *Nei jing* are not simply compilations but the last in a progressive series of compilations.”¹² Keegan emphasized that none of the *Nei jing* compilations extant today are identical to those texts known under this title in the Han era.¹³

Based on our reading of the text, we largely agree with Keegan, as well as Yang Yiya and other Chinese scholars who hold similar views. In the following, I offer some hitherto unnoticed evidence that supports these views. Presumably, only a small portion of the textus receptus transmits concepts from before the second century B.C.¹⁴

2. REFERENCES TO *HUANG DI NEI JING* AND *SU WEN* IN EARLY BIBLIOGRAPHIC SOURCES

As noted by Liu Changlin, titles such as *Huang Di nei jing* and *Su wen* are conspicuously absent from Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 *Shi ji* 史記 of 90 B.C. Sima Qian’s biography of Chunyu Yi 淳于意, which includes a detailed list of ten medical texts received by Chunyu Yi from his teacher Yang Qing 陽慶, would have provided an opportunity to mention such a fundamental text corpus if it had existed.¹⁵

The earliest known reference to a *Huang Di nei jing* is in a work titled *Qi lüe* 七略. This text was compiled by Liu Xin 劉歆 (d. A.D. 23) in the first century B.C. on the basis of the *Bie lu* 別錄, an earlier bibliography compiled by Liu Xin’s father, Liu Xiang 劉向 (77?–6 B.C.). The *Qi lüe* was a catalog of the holdings of the Han court library at Chang’an after 26 B.C. It was lost in the centuries following the Han dynasty but is quoted explicitly in the *Jia yi jing* 甲乙經 by Huangfu Mi 皇甫謐 (215–282), a text that is still extant.

Huangfu Mi wrote in his preface to the *Jia yi jing*: “The bibliographic section (Yi wen zhi 藝文志) of the *Qi lüe* [lists a] *Huang Di nei jing* in 18 *juan*. Today there exist a *Zhen jing* 針經 in 9 *juan* and a *Suwen* in 9 *juan*. Nine plus 9 adds up to 18. Hence [these two texts] constitute the *Nei jing* [of the *Qi lüe*].”¹⁶

A reference identical to the listing in the *Qi lüe* appears in the “Prescription Techniques” section (*fang ji* 方技) in the bibliography of the dynastic history of the Han, compiled by Ban Gu 班固 (A.D. 32–92), presumably on the basis of the data supplied by the *Qi lüe*. This section lists thirty-six books in four subcategories: *yi jing* 醫經, “medical classics”; *jing*

fang 經方, “classic prescriptions”; *fangzhong* 房中, “inside the chamber [techniques]” (i.e., sexual cultivation); and *shen xian* 神僊, “[techniques of the] immortals.”¹⁷ A *Huang Di nei jing* is listed together with seven other titles as “medical classics”:

Huang Di nei jing 黃帝內經, 18 *juan*

Huang Di wai jing 黃帝外經, 37 *juan*

Bian Que nei jing 扁鵲內經, 9 *juan*

Bian Que wai jing 扁鵲外經, 12 *juan*

Bai shi nei jing 白氏內經, 38 *juan*

Bai shi wai jing 白氏外經, 36 *juan*

Pang pian 旁篇, 25 *juan*

altogether these seven medical classics comprise 216 *juan*¹⁸

Apart from the fact that these seven texts add up to only 175 *juan*, rather than 216, this listing, which does not mention authors, or contents, or times of compilation, raises one central question: is the *Huang Di nei jing* mentioned here identical to or at least related to the *Huang Di nei jing* extant today? While most Chinese historians agree with this equation, others have voiced strong objections.¹⁹

Obviously, by the time of the Jin 晉 dynasty, almost two centuries after Ban Gu had compiled the list quoted above, Huangfu Mi had no text titled *Huang Di nei jing* at hand. Rather, he identified two texts present in his own time, a *Su wen* (Basic Questions) and a *Zhen jing* (Needle Classic), each consisting of nine *juan*, as constituting the *Huang Di nei jing* of the *Qi lue* of the Western Han and hence of the Han dynastic history of the Eastern Han.

In the absence of any other data, the only clues we have to understand this equation are the identical number of *juan* and the appearance of Huang Di in the title of the *Huang Di nei jing* as well as in the textus receptus of the *Su wen* and of the *Ling shu* as a dialogue partner of various informants.

If the titles of the three *nei jing/wai jing* listings in the bibliographic section of the Han dynastic history suggest a certain parallel in the structures of these books, why and in what way were the *Bian Que nei jing/wai jing* and the *Bai shi nei jing/wai jing* associated with Bian Que and a Bai shi, that is, “Mr. Bai,” respectively? Were these texts structured as dialogues too, with Bian Que and Mr. Bai superimposed on preexisting texts as central figures of a question-and-answer exchange, as is Huang Di in the textus receptus of the *Huang Di nei jing*? This is difficult to imagine, given the nature of the dialogues of the text available today. These usually introduce a Huang Di who—except for his discussions with Lei Gong—is not the ultimate source of wisdom but begs to be taught by his obviously more knowledgeable dialogue partners.

If it is hard to imagine how the dialogue structure of the textus receptus of the *Huang Di nei jing* could be paralleled by similar structures centered

on Bian Que and Mr. Bai rather than on Huang Di, the parallels in the structuring of the three *nei jing/wai jing* pairings listed in the bibliographic section of the Han dynastic history may suggest a different parallel in the significance of the three names Huang Di, Bian Que, and “Mr. Bai,” perhaps as presumed authors, a condition that is not met by the *Huang Di nei jing* text available today.

Also, Huangfu Mi’s equation relies on an identical number of *juan* in the listing of the *Huang Di nei jing* and the *Su wen* plus the *Zhen jing*. However, as Liao Yuqun as well as Yu Zihan et al. have pointed out, the terms *juan* (volume) and *pian* (treatise, chapter) were used interchangeably during the Han dynasty, and there is some evidence that the eighteen *juan* of the *Huang Di nei jing* listed in the Han bibliography referred, in today’s terms, to eighteen *pian*, while the reference to eighteen *juan* of the combined *Su wen* and *Zhen jing* referred to what would be considered eighteen *juan* today.²⁰

The *Zhen jing* mentioned by Huangfu Mi is generally equated with the *Ling shu* available today. If one accepts this equation, even more questions arise regarding the identity of the *Huang Di nei jing* and of the *Su wen*–*Zhen jing*. I return to this issue after discussing the *Zhen jing*–*Ling shu* equation. At this point, though, the historical data already suggest a conclusion.

There is little reason to assume that of the seven texts mentioned in the bibliographic section *fang ji lue* of the Han dynastic history, only the *Huang Di nei jing* survived the turmoil after the end of the Western Han. Rather, it appears that all these texts were lost and that the *Su wen* and the *Zhen jing* equated by Huangfu Mi with this ancient *Huang Di nei jing* were texts compiled during the Eastern Han, most likely integrating and elaborating on bits and pieces transmitted since the final period of the Western Han era. It may well be that some textual fragments of the *textus receptus* of the *Su wen* were also part of the *Huang Di nei jing* or one of the other texts mentioned in the Han dynastic history.

In the preface to his *Shanghan lun* 傷寒論, the Eastern Han author Zhang Ji 張機 (ca. A.D. 200) stated: “In compiling [the *Shanghan lun*], I have made use of the *Su wen* (Basic Questions), the *Jiu juan* 九卷 ([Text in] 9 *juan*), the *Ba shi yi nan* 八十一難 (81 Difficult Issues, i.e., today’s *Nan jing* 難經), and the *Yin yang da lun* 陰陽大論 (Comprehensive Discourse on Yin and Yang). . . . In antiquity there existed Shennong 神農, Huang Di 黃帝, Qi Bo 岐伯, Lei Gong 雷公, Shao Yu (or: Shu) 少俞, Shao Shi 少師, and Zhong Wen 仲文.”²¹ This is the earliest listing of a text titled *Su wen*. This text, traceable to the second century A.D., was subsequently amended significantly, most of all by Wang Bing of the eighth century, who added one-third of the text available today in a final editing by Gao Baoheng 高保衡 et al. in the eleventh century.

A few appearances of the title *Su wen* in the dynastic histories hint at the continuous presence of the text, or at least one or more traditions of it,

throughout the centuries. Thus the dynastic history of the Wei 魏書 (386–550) in *juan* 91, compiled between 551 and 554, characterized a man named Cui Yü 崔彧, who died young but had been an excellent physician, as “having been taught the *Su wen*, the *Jiu juan*, and the *Jia yi [jing]*.”²²

The dynastic history of the Northern Qi (550–577), the *Bei Qi shu* 北齊書, completed in 636, includes in *juan* 49 a biography of Ma Siming 馬嗣明, who is characterized as “a man from Henei.” “In his youth he had acquired an understanding of medicine and he established a comprehensive collection of classical prescriptions. Of the *Jia yi jing*, the *Su wen*, the *Ming tang*, and the *Ben cao*, there was no text he had not recited. When he examined a person, he would know survival or death one year in advance.”²³

The first dynastic history to record the *Su wen* in its bibliography was the *Sui shu* 隋書, compiled during the Tang dynasty in the first half of the seventh century.

While no author ever doubted that the *Su wen* mentioned by Zhang Ji and in later sources listed above is the nucleus of the text with the same title available today, the subsequent reference to a *Jiu juan* (lit., “9 *juan*”) has been more enigmatic. One might be tempted to read the characters 素問九卷 as “*Su wen* in 9 *juan*.” However, Yu Zihan et al. cite three arguments supporting a separate reading as *Su wen* and *Jiu juan*.

First, some of the ancient medical heroes who are mentioned by Zhang Ji, including Shao Shi and Shao Yu, do not appear in the *Su wen*. They are named as dialogue partners of Huang Di only in the *Ling shu*, suggesting that *Su wen* and *Jiu juan* refer to two different texts and that the *Jiu juan* is a predecessor of or identical to the *Ling shu* of today.

Second, Wang Shuhe 王叔和, author of the *Mai jing* (Vessel Classic), who lived during the Western Jin dynasty (third century A.D.) and was a contemporary of Huangfu Mi, ended a quote from an earlier text—found in today’s *Ling shu*—with the three characters 出九卷, “from the *Jiu juan*.”

Third, Huangfu Mi, in the preface to his *Jia yi jing*, explicitly identified the *Su wen* and the *Jiu juan* as two different texts: “The *Su wen* offers the essential and the subtle in a discourse on diseases; the *Jiu juan* is based on the conduit vessels.” In today’s *Ling shu*, sixty of the eighty-one chapters discuss “the conduit vessels”; one chapter bears the title Jing mai 經脈, “The Conduit Vessels.” Finally, all passages quoted by Huangfu Mi as originating from the *Jiu juan* appear in today’s *Ling shu*. While Huangfu Mi quoted from the *Jiu juan*, in his preface he spoke of a *Zhen jing* 針經 (Needle Classic) in addition to the *Su wen*. Presumably, *Zhen jing* and *Jiu juan* are two references to an identical text. By the time of Huangfu Mi, it may have become increasingly inadequate to refer to a text simply by the number of its volumes.

All of this, then, lends strong support, first, to a separate reading of *Su wen* and *Jiu juan* in the preface to the *Shang han lun* and, second, to an equation of the *Jiu juan* with the *Zhen jing* and the *Ling shu*.

The first author to speak of a *Ling shu* was Wang Bing 王冰 of the eighth century. Similar to Huangfu Mi's identification of the Western Han *Huang Di nei jing* as the combined *Su wen* and *Zhen jing*, Wang Bing wrote: "Ban Gu mentioned in the *Han shu*, *Yi wen zhi*, a *Huang Di nei jing*, 18 *juan*. The *Su wen* constitutes 9 *juan* of that classic, together with the *Ling shu* in 9 *juan*. This is how this number [of 18 *juan*] came about."²⁴

The bibliographic sections of the Tang histories do not mention a *Ling shu*, however. The old dynastic history of the Tang lists a "*Huang Di jiu ling jing* 黃帝九靈經, 12 *juan*, Lingbao commentary 靈寶注." *Ling bao* (magic treasure) is a Daoist concept. The new dynastic history of the Tang has a similar entry: "*Ling bao* commentated *Huang Di jiu ling jing* 黃帝九靈經, 12 *juan*." Gao Baoheng et al., who in the eleventh century prepared the version of the *Su wen* available as the standard text today, wrote, "We made use of the *Su wen*, the *Jiu xu ling shu* 九墟靈樞, and the *Tai su jing*." Yu Zihan et al. proposed reading *Jiu ling* and *Jiu xu* as titles signifying intermediary stages in the development from the title *Jiu juan* to the title *Ling shu*.²⁵