

## The Inner Classic and the Development of Channel Theory – Part One

by Jason D. Robertson

I was quite happy to read Tony Reid's excellent summary of extant English-language sources for 'channel palpation' in the Spring 2008 issue of the Chinese Medicine Times ([Volume 3 Issue 1](#)). Mr. Reid provided an excellent survey of available information on the subject of points and channels. Since that article was written, Professor Wang Ju-yi and I have completed another text on the subject, Applied Channel Theory in Chinese Medicine, which I sincerely hope a few of you will add to your list of helpful English texts on the subject of 'physiology' in the classical Chinese sense of the word. As Mr. Reid surveyed the 20th century, I hope to paint some broad strokes of the millennia through which the rich tradition of channel theory developed.

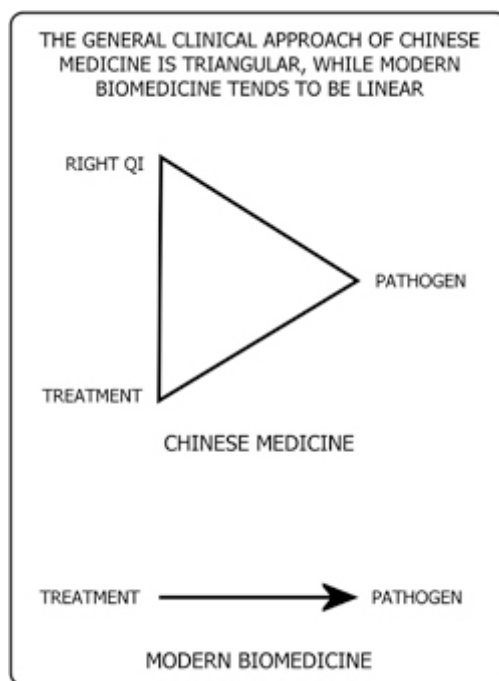
What do the classics have to say about the channels? In particular, what is it about the oft-quoted Inner Classic (Nèi jīng) that sets it apart? In the most basic sense, the Inner Classic is an innovative (even today) description of the complex interrelationship of systems in the body. These systems are woven together and enlivened by channels which utilize the medium of qi. It is because of the unique nature of this system of integration described in the Inner Classic that we frequently encounter the term 'qi transformation' (qi huà) in descriptions of processes that a modern text might call 'physiology.'

To be precise, the Inner Classic describes a system of qi transformation by which the body regulates and maintains the functions of organ systems; communicates with its internal and external environments; responds to environmental changes and responds to disease. The Inner Classic is innovative because of its early recognition that disease involves a process. It seems that earlier conceptions of disease in China proceeded mostly from the perspective of disease as an external invasion of evils which must be removed from the body. While the approach of Chinese medicine did (and still does) consider invasion by external pathogens to be a primary cause of disease, texts such as the Inner Classic began to conceive of the body itself as the environment in which the external pathogen must wreak its havoc. In other words, when attempting to remove the thorn of disease, in order to truly get to the root, one must also take the body, its systems and the interconnections of the channels into account.

It is with this, seemingly simple concept, that Chinese medicine has a great deal to offer modern medicine. When considering the treatment of disease from the perspective of the Inner Classic or other classical texts such as the Classic of Difficulties (Nàn jīng), Discussion of Cold

Damage (Shāng hán lùn) and the Systematic Classic of Acupuncture and Moxibustion (Zhēn jiǔ jiǎ yī jīng), one is not only striving to attack and remove a pathogen. Instead, the goal is often to facilitate the slow evolution of the condition from one of worsening disharmony and discomfort to a return of normal function. Acupuncture and Chinese herbal therapies, when practiced correctly, are used to facilitate a complete removal of the condition by creating an internal environment in which the disease can no longer take root. In the process, one might support the systems of the body (normal/right qi- zhèng qi) or, in more severe conditions, one might at the same time attack the pathogen directly. The operative idea being that one is always considering the normal physiology of the patient themselves as active participants in the process of treatment (as opposed to passive recipients of heroic treatment).

### Chart II.1



One might then ask how this set of theories and clinical approaches came about. What is it about China, especially classical China that fostered the development and preservation of these fascinating medical concepts? The following pages will attempt to explain from an historical and theoretical point of view the evolution of ideas. As many already know, the Inner Classic was not written in one sitting by a single, inspired author (nor was it likely commissioned by a single inspired and benevolent emperor). In fact, the Inner Classic is an amalgamation of ideas which samples from many of the greatest eras of Chinese thought. It is a text that is firmly rooted in pre-history but has also been modified repeatedly throughout its history.

This essay will first explore how the version of the Inner Classic commonly used today came to be compiled. In the second part of the essay I will then outline some modern English language research that sheds light on what the earliest centuries of acupuncture practice may have been like. The goal is not to provide definitive answers to what might have happened and what people thought during a time period still placed right at the edge of pre-history. Instead, the following pages will attempt to achieve two related goals. The first will be to highlight the simple fact that the Inner Classic is a product not of a single author but instead of a constant process of revision and commentary going back to a period of great intellectual innovation in early China. The second important concept addresses why we are even concerned with a 1500 year old text. Namely, by exploring the history of ideas related to channel theory in the Inner Classic, one can begin to gain a greater understanding of how the earliest practitioners themselves may have understood the therapies we still use today.

#### **Sources of the modern Inner Classic**

The Han dynasty physician Huang-Fu Mi cited the earliest reference to an "Inner Classic" in his introduction to the Systematic Classic of Acupuncture and Moxibustion (260 C.E.). In that text, he describes his earliest source for a text of that name as coming from a bibliographic text from 23 A.D. (titled *qi lüe*). An Inner Classic was also mentioned (but not sourced) by Zhang-Ji in his introduction to the Discussion of Cold Damage (220 C.E.). There is a great deal of discussion about whether all of the text listed in the first century and then cited in the third century is the same Inner Classic that we have at our disposal today. In particular, debate has focused around how the text evolved between the end of the Eastern Han dynasty (220 A.D.) and the compilation by a team of editors associated with the Song dynasty court in 1057 A.D. of the Basic Questions edition most commonly used today.

Following the mention of an Inner Classic in 23 AD, other bibliographies in the Han and Jin dynasties mention the existence of an Inner Classic comprised of various parts. In the Systematic Classic, Huang-Fu Mi describes the Inner Classic as being composed of three parts: the Basic Questions (*Sù wèn*), the Needle Classic (*Zhēn jīng*) and the Essentials on Points and Acu-Moxa Treatment from the Hall of Brilliance (*Míng táng kǒng xué zhēn jǔ zhì yào*). Around the same time, Zhang-Ji describes making use of source materials that include both the Basic Questions and another section of Nine Scrolls (*Jiǔ juàn*). Modern scholars tend to agree that both the terms "Needle Classic" and "Nine Scrolls" are likely roughly analogous to the section of the Inner Classic now called the Divine Pivot (*Líng shū*).

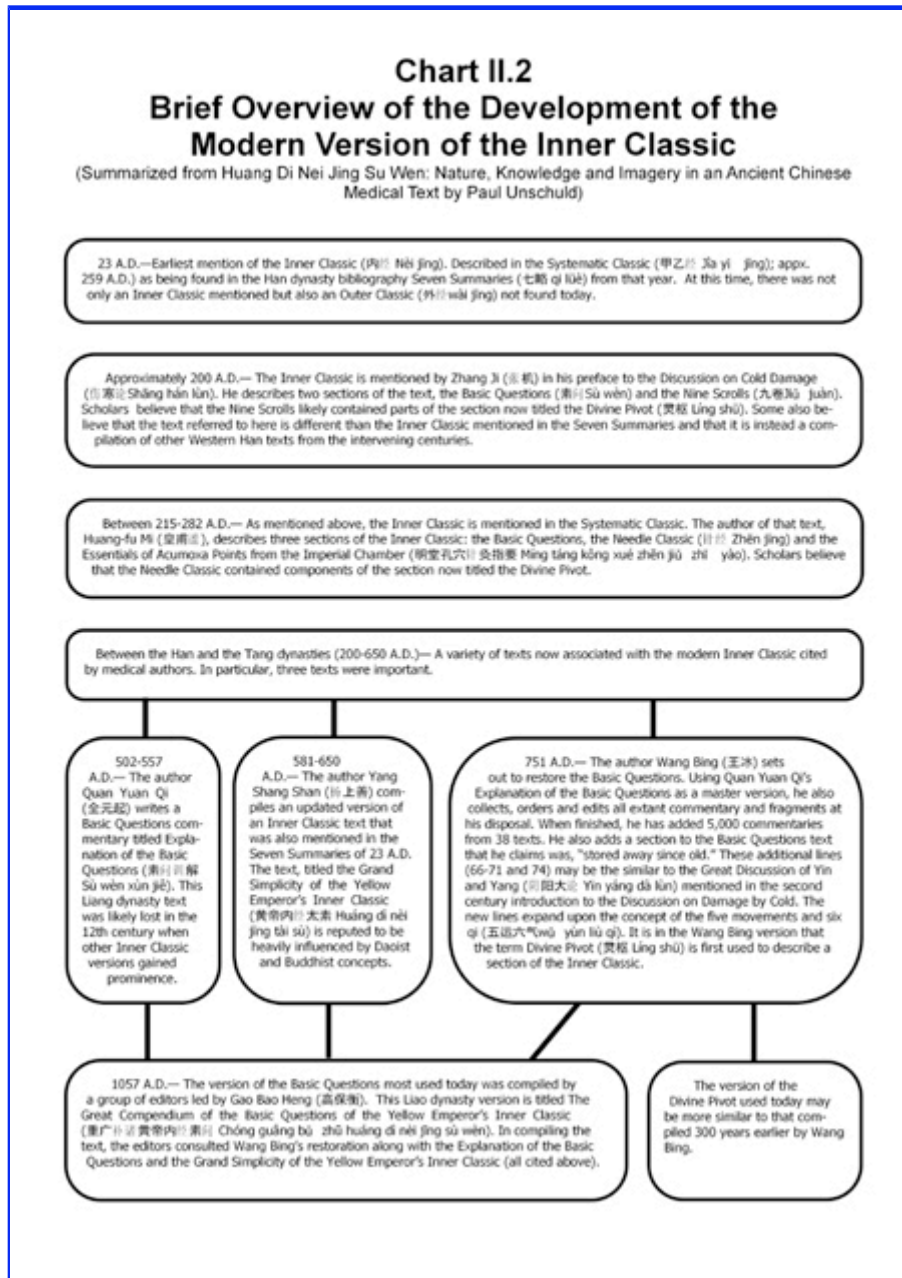
The bibliography of 23 A.D. also mentioned another text that might be associated with the Inner Classic called the Grand Simplicity of the Yellow Emperor's Divine Classic (*Huáng dì nèi jīng tài sù*). A text of this name played an important role in scholarly discussion of the Inner Classic tradition during the time between the end of the Han dynasty and the Song dynasty. While the Grand Simplicity was later lost to Chinese scholars, finds of preserved copies of a text of the same name in Japanese temples during the 1800's provides the modern era with a window into this similar and overlapping text.

Two other texts played an important role in preserving the information found in modern copies of the Inner Classic. The first, compiled during the Liang dynasty (502-557 A.D.) by Quan Yuan-Qi is the first acknowledged commentary on a section of the Inner Classic. Titled Commentary on the Basic Questions (*Sù wèn xūn jié*), the text played an important role as a source for the Song dynasty revision used today. The second important text was a thorough re-composition of the Inner Classic undertaken by Wang Bing in 751 A.D. Using the work of Quan Yuan-Qi as a master text and consulting 38 source texts to add 5,000 commentaries from scholars of preceding centuries, this Jin dynasty text is considered pivotal for its preservation of an ancient understanding of the Inner Classic. It is in the work of Wang Bing that the term *Ling*

shū; Divine Pivot, is first applied to a section of the Inner Classic.

Finally, in 1057 A.D., a group of Song dynasty court scholars edited by Gao Bao-Heng produced the edition of the Basic Questions used today. The group was also charged with creating a definitive edition of the Divine Pivot but there is no evidence that that section was collected or revised at the time. Modern versions of the Divine Pivot are likely similar to the one compiled 350 years earlier by Wang Bing. In compiling a definitive version of the Basic Questions, the Gao Bao-Heng team made ample use of the scholarship found in the Commentary on the Basic Questions, the Wang Bing version of the Inner Classic and the earlier Grand Simplicity of the Yellow Emperor's Divine Classic. In fact, it is possibly because of the perceived definitiveness of the Gao Bao-Heng version that the Grand Simplicity in particular became less important in the centuries that followed; eventually disappearing from China altogether.

Thus a general picture is formed of a textual tradition in the Inner Classic that involved the work of scholars for at least 1,000 years before finally creating the text known by that name today. The general overview of that process is summarized in Chart II.2, below.



**Biography**

Jason D. Robertson L.Ac. is a licensed acupuncturist and educator in Seattle, WA. Mr. Robertson has spent 8 years studying Chinese language and medicine in Taiwan and China (B.A. Washington and Lee University, Taiwan National University). Most recently, Mr. Robertson published a translation of his work with Professor Wang Ju-Yi titled Applied Channel Theory in Chinese Medicine (Eastland Press, Seattle 2008). Besides his work as a clinician and author, Mr. Robertson is a member of the core faculty at the Seattle Institute of Oriental

Medicine.

[1] This statement and the information in the previous and following three paragraphs is summarized from: Unschuld, Paul. *Huang Di Nei Jing Su Wen: Nature, Knowledge and Imagery in an Ancient Chinese Medical Text*; University of California Press, Berkeley. 2003.

**Other Consulted Texts**

Bates, Don (ed.). *Knowledge and the Scholarly Medical Traditions*; Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. 1995.

Ping, Chen (ed.). *History and Development of Traditional Chinese Medicine*; Science Press, Beijing. 1999.