

## • Review

# A review on different English versions of an ancient classic of Chinese medicine: *Huang Di Nei Jing*

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### ABSTRACT

*Huang Di Nei Jing (Nei Jing)*, one of the most important classical texts of traditional Chinese medicine, is the foundation upon which today's Chinese medicine principles are built. This seminal ancient classic has been translated into English many times by different scholars worldwide. The authors have found thirteen English versions, each of which has its own distinctive features. By reviewing different versions and research achievements of the English translation, the authors try to summarize the translation style, purpose, content and other features of each version, and point out each translation's weaknesses, strengths, or significance. The emerging of so many English versions of *Nei Jing*, an ancient and sophisticated text, shows that scholars have disparate understanding of its language and concepts. Additionally, different educational backgrounds, professions and goals of the translators will all contribute to different perspectives and approaches in the translation. It is understandable that so many versions of translation exist for such an ancient and important classic. However, to achieve truly accurate translation of ancient classical texts of Chinese medicine, all translators should abide by certain basic requirements and translation principles.

**Keywords:** medicine, Chinese traditional; *Huang Di Nei Jing*; *Su Wen*; *Ling Shu*; translation; ancient classics

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### 1 Introduction

*Huang Di Nei Jing*, often abbreviated as *Nei Jing*, translates to *Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon*. The *Nei Jing* is the earliest extant Chinese medical text, compiled more than two thousand years ago. It still serves as the text upon which the foundation of Chinese medicine theory is based. Its importance may be compared to that of Plato's *Republic* in Western philosophy and the works of Shakespeare in English literature.<sup>[1]</sup> Scholars widely acknowledge that the *Nei Jing* was compiled from many smaller texts over several centuries. The oldest fragments may date back to the third

century B.C.; early compilations were in circulation by the first century A.D., and significant editing and interpolation of text went on until at least the seventh century A.D.<sup>[2]</sup>

The *Nei Jing* contains two volumes, *Su Wen (Plain Questions)* and *Ling Shu (Spiritual Pivot)*, each with eighty-one chapters. These books introduce basic theories such as yin and yang, the five-phases, and the meridian system, as well as life-related subjects such as ecology, psychology, astronomy, meteorology and phenology that form the basis of traditional Chinese medicine. The *Nei Jing* not only laid the foundation for the development of Chinese medicine, but also influenced the practice of

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medicine in many other countries.<sup>[3,4]</sup>

As contemporary Chinese society embraces all things modern, the *Nei Jing*'s ideas of cosmic balance unfortunately become lost. This study was undertaken to preserve and organize publications of *Nei Jing*.

## 2 Different English versions

Because *Huang Di Nei Jing* is a text of monumental

significance in traditional Chinese medicine and literature, it has been translated into many languages worldwide. A search of the existing literature found that from 1925 to 2015, it has been translated, in part or in its entirety, into thirteen English versions in publication (Table 1), though not all versions may have been included and new versions are still emerging.

**Table 1** List of thirteen English versions of *Nei Jing*

Version mark	Book titles	Translator	Publishing time and forms
A	<i>Sun-wen, the Basis of Chinese Medicine</i>	Percy. M. Dawson	Published as a journal article in <i>Annals of Medical History</i> , 1925. <sup>[5]</sup>
B	<i>The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine</i>	Ilza Veith	First published by Williams & Wikins in 1949 and later republished by University of California Press in 1972. <sup>[6]</sup>
C	<i>Nei Ching, the Chinese Canon of Medicine</i>	Wanrong Man	Published as a journal article in <i>Chinese Medical Journal</i> in 1950. <sup>[7]</sup>
D	<i>A Complete Translation of the Yellow Emperor's Classics of Internal Medicine and the Difficult Classic</i>	Henry C. Lu	First published by Academy of Oriental Heritage in 1978 <sup>[1]</sup> and later republished by International College of Traditional Chinese Medicine of Vancouver in 2004. <sup>[8]</sup>
E	<i>The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine: A New Translation of the Neijing Suwen with Commentary</i>	Maoshing Ni	Published by Shambhala Publications in 1995. <sup>[9]</sup>
F	<i>The Yellow Emperor's Medicine Classic: Treatise on Health and Long Life</i>	Xue-wen Wang, Sui Yun	First published by Dolphin Books in 1996 and the 4th edition (revised) published by Asiapac Books in 2005. <sup>[10]</sup>
G	<i>The Yellow Emperor's Canon Internal Medicine</i>	Lian-sheng Wu, Qi Wu	Published by China Science and Technology Press in 1997. <sup>[11]</sup>
H	<i>The Medical Classic of the Yellow Emperor</i>	Ming Zhu	Published by Foreign Languages Press in 2001. <sup>[12]</sup>
I	<i>Ling Shu or the Spiritual Pivot</i>	Jing-nuan Wu	Published by University of Hawai'i Press in 2002. <sup>[13]</sup>
J	<i>Yellow Emperor's Canon of Medicine—Plain Conversation</i>	Zhao-guo Li	Published by World Book Press in 2004. <sup>[14]</sup>
K	<i>Yellow Emperor's Canon of Medicine—Spiritual Pivot</i>	Zhao-guo Li	Published by World Book Press in 2008. <sup>[15]</sup>
L	<i>Introductory Study of Huang Di Nei Jing</i>	Xiwen Luo	Published by China Press of Traditional Chinese Medicine in 2009. <sup>[16]</sup>
M	<i>Huang Di Nei Jing Su Wen: An Annotated Translation of Huang Di's Inner Classic—Basic Questions</i>	Paul U. Unschuld, Hermann Tessenow	Published by University of California Press in 2011. <sup>[17]</sup>

## 3 General features

These thirteen English versions of *Nei Jing* can be distinguished easily from each other by the volume of

content being translated and in how the translation is applied. Many articles, mainly published in Chinese, have discussed or compared the different English versions of *Nei Jing*. Combining previous research achievements and

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