Reading classical Chinese is somewhat akin to the idle pleasure of watching water babble in a stony brook. The seamless fluidity of transitions between broad differences in nuance can be hypnotic. It is not uncommon for students to confess they’ve lost themselves in the library for a few hours, only to find that the shops have shut and the sun has set when they come up for air. This happy absorption has been brought into the digital age with Hermann Tessenow and Paul U. Unschuld’s Dictionary of the Huang Di Nei Jing Su Wen which includes a digitized, searchable concordance on CD.

The roots of Chinese medicine lie in the rich textual tradition that began with the Inner Classic of the Yellow Emperor, or Huang Di Nei Jing, compiled over 2,000 years ago. The first organized canon of medical theory, the Inner Classic describes a range of ideas about the structure and patterns of the universe and the human body, from five-phases correlating cosmology, to yin and yang, qi and blood, acupuncture meridians and the relationship between the inner organs. The locus classicus for all Chinese medical texts, it is so central that scholars debate today if Chinese medicine has ever moved beyond its ideas. Yet Chinese medical texts have been largely closed to Western students and researchers because of the difficulties of accurately translating these concepts from classical Chinese. Even scholars of pre-modern China approach the specialized terminology of the Inner Classic with caution.

By choosing this text, Unschuld and Tessenow tackle terms that have a pervasive impact throughout the history of Chinese medicine. Every character of the Inner Classic is included, in order of Pinyin pronunciation, and indexed by stroke-count in an appendix. Each entry lists a translation of all the interpretations isolated by the authors, indicating the number of times that meaning occurs in the text. “Water”, for example, has separate entries as a humour and as a pathogenic state of disease, among others. Each of their own translations is accompanied by a passage from the original Chinese.

The fluidity of meaning a word can take is most obvious when studying compounds, which can take on entirely different, even contradictory meanings to the individual characters that make them up. “Heaven” and “breath”, for example, form the term “weather”. Thus “breath” not only animates the human body, but also storms, rainbows and hazy summer days. Small wonder then that Chinese doctors use terms for weather patterns when diagnosing the human body as well. Each entry indicates the compounds where the character appears, showing how it changes meaning in each context, and providing a sample passage from the text. In addition, the authors provide calculations of how many times a given phrase occurs in the text, giving readers an idea of its relative importance.

Readers should be aware, however, that one cannot look up a technical term and gain any theoretical insight other than its direct rendering into English. Opaque terms like “Four counterflows” and “major Yin” are not explained, the assumption being that the reader will look into the Inner Classic itself. This makes the dictionary accessible only to those versed in Chinese medical theory or classical Chinese.

The citations in each entry refer to chapter, page and line number in an annotated Beijing edition of the Inner Classic. This source text is conveniently reproduced in the appendices, enabling translators to cite a known, reliable print edition, without actually being in possession of it. Commentaries such as this one are invaluable for unpacking difficult passages. However, it cannot be bought in Great Britain and only one library (Leeds University) holds the same reprint. In theory, at least, the system has great potential.

Another appendix lists all characters in the book according to how frequently they occur; useful if one wants to find out a term’s importance. However, there is no way to search this list without turning on the computer and browsing the accompanying CD. The digital concordance has interesting innovations: one click on an index of all characters in the Inner Classic takes one to a complete list of citations containing that word. This enables one to swiftly compare different usages of the word and track changes in meaning. If, however, one needs more context than the citations provide, one is forced to turn back to the print copy in the appendices. Providing a digital copy of the source text would have enabled one to do this more swiftly, and quite possibly obviated the need for a concordance at all.

As Sinology becomes increasingly digital, with massive corporuses of e-texts and electronic dictionaries filling the internet, the problem has become one of fluidity: internet texts are changeable; their authorship, and hence their authority, is difficult to trace. Tessenow and Unschuld, with their fingers on this pulse, have provided a digital tool that combines the power of electronic research with the stability of print media. By indexing every single interpretation to specific lines in the Inner Classic, they have provided a powerful tool for verifying and deepening our understanding of the text, and developed a format for future publications that will have a lasting impact.