WH QUESTIONS, PREMODERN

This lemma introduces the basic structural characteristics of wh-questions in Late Archaic Chinese (approximately 5th-3rd centuries B.C.E) and the principle changes in Middle Chinese which led to the emergence of modern Chinese wh-questions. The lemma also briefly summarizes the emergence of the most common wh-words in use in modern Mandarin.

1. Late Archaic Chinese

Wáng (1958) divides Late Archaic Chinese wh-words into three classes, depending on the initial consonant in the reconstructed forms.

(1) a. 誰 shéi [*ẓiəi] ‘who’, 孰 shú [*zũwʊk] ‘which’

The [z-] series in (1a) refers mainly to persons, though 孰 shú ‘which’ can also refer to things. The main distinguishing characteristic of 孰 shú ‘which’ is that it presupposes a known set of individuals among whom a choice is requested. 誰 shéi can function as subject, object, or predicate, while 孰 shú typically occurs in subject position.
(2)  a. 誰將當日食？ (Zuòzhuàn, Zhāo Gōng 左傳/昭公 7)

    Shéi jiāng dāng rìshí?

    who will face eclipse

    ‘Who will face the consequences of the eclipse?’

b. 父與夫孰親？ (Zuòzhuàn, Huán Gōng 左傳/桓公 15)

    Fù yǔ fū shú qīn?

    father and husband which dear

    ‘Which is dearer, one’s father or her husband?’

The [ɣ-] series includes 何 hé and 奚 xī, which were generally used as nominal wh-words meaning ‘what’. In matrix questions, wh-expressions were generally required to be in preverbal position. Subject wh-phrases appeared in-situ before the verb, as in (2). Object wh-phrases moved to a position preceding the verb but below the position for the subject, as shown in (3). The positional difference is clear from the relative positions of subject and object wh-words with respect to the modal jiāng ‘will’. Subjects precede the modal, as in (2a), while objects follow it, as can be seen in (3a).
(3)  a. 我將何求？  

Wǒ  jiāng  hé  qiú?

I  will  what  ask for

‘What will I ask for?’

b. 丈人奚憂？

Zhàngrén  xī  yōu?

elder  what  worry about

‘What are you worried about, old man?’

The [ɣ-] series also includes the adverbials 豢 hé ‘when’ (4a), 胡 hú ‘why’ (4b). 何 hé could also be used for ‘why’, as in (4c).

(4)  a. 吾子其曷歸？  

Wú  zǐ  qí  hé  guī?

my  sir  will  when  return

‘When will you return?’

b. 夫子胡不入乎？

Fūzǐ  hú  bù  rù  hū?

master  why  not  enter  EXCL

‘Why don’t you come in, Master?’
何必罪居者？

何 必 罪 居 者 ？
(Guóyǔ, Jìn 國語/晉語 4)

何必罪居者？

何必 罪 居 者 ？

‘Why must (one) blame the residents?’

誰 shéi ‘who’ and 何 hé ‘what’ also functioned as nominal predicates.

(5)  a. 追我者誰也？

追 我 者 誰 也 ？
(Mèngzǐ, Lílóu 2 孟子/離婁下)

追 我 者 誰 也 ？

追 我 者 誰 也 ？

‘Who is the one chasing us?’

b. 君與我此，何也？

君 與 我 此 ， 何 也 ？
(Guóyǔ, Jìn 國語/晉語 1)

君 與 我 此 ， 何 也 ？

君 與 我 此 ， 何 也 ？

‘Why is it that my lord gives me these things?’

Wáng reconstructs the series in (1c) without a consonantal onset. All of the members of this series refer to locations or goals.
(6)  a. 其子焉往？
(Mèngzǐ, Lílóu 1 孟子/離婁上)
Qí  zǐ  yān  wǎng?
3.GEN  son  where  go
‘Where would their sons go?’

b. 將安可得乎？
(Mòzǐ 墨子 32)
Jiāng  ān  kě  dé  hū?
will  where  POT  obtain  EXCL
‘Where could (they) be obtained?’

It is very rare for embedded interrogatives to contain wh-words. This is particularly true of embedded questions containing a wh-word in object grammatical function. This type of wh-question was more generally expressed as a relative clause formed on suǒ. Employment of a relative clause in place of a clausal constituent is probably due to the fact that embedded clauses were typically nominalized in Late Archaic Chinese, as shown in (7b). Genitive case on the embedded subject is evidence of the clausal nominalization.

(7)  a. 有司未知所之。
(Mèngzǐ, Liáng Hui 2 孟子/梁惠王下)
Yōusī  wèi  zhī  suǒ  zhī.
servant  not  know  SUO  go
‘I do not know [where (you) are going].’
2. Middle Chinese Changes

Early in the Hàn period (2nd century BCE-2nd century CE), movement of phrasal wh-constituents was lost, as shown in (8a). In contrast, monosyllabic wh-words continued to undergo fronting, as in (8b). This asymmetry was noticed by Feng (1996), who analyzes both Old and early Middle Chinese wh-movement as prosodic cliticization.

(a) 此固其理也，有何怨乎？(Shiji Liānpō 史記/廉頗藺相如列傳)

Cǐ ɡù qí lǐ yě, [VP yǒu hé yuàn] hū?

‘This is the way things are; what complaint could you have?’

(b) 子將何欲？(Shiji, Cìkè 史記/刺客列傳)

Zǐ jiānɡ hé [VP yù tā]?

‘What will you want?’

Aldridge (2010, to appear), however, points out that there are a number of asymmetries between Late Archaic and early Middle Chinese. Principle among these was that Late
Archaic Chinese permitted *wh*-fronting across a nonfinite clause boundary, as in (9a). Long distance fronting was lost in the Hán period. What is observed instead is movement within the embedded clause, as in (9b). Again, this change is accounted for by positing reanalysis of syntactic movement as cliticization. In (9b), the *wh*-word cliticizes to the nearest potential host, i.e. the embedded verb.

(9)  

a. 公誰欲與？  

(Gōng  shéi  yù  [yǔ _]?  

‘Who do you want to give (it) to?’

b. 諸君欲誰立？  

(Zhūjūn  yù  [shéi  lì _]?  

‘Gentlemen, who do you want to place (on the throne)?’

Cliticization of monosyllabic *wh*-words was probably lost soon after the Hán period, resulting in full *wh*-in-situ, which is the norm in modern Chinese varieties. Wèi (2004) provides a few early in-situ examples, as in the 3rd century C.E. text below.
(10) 時以語誰？ (Sānguózhì, Wèi, Máo Jiè 三國志/魏書十二/毛玠)

ńska yù shéi?
then tell who

‘At that time, who did (you) tell?’

In Middle Chinese, there was also an increase in embedded *wh*-questions, especially with *wh*-words as objects. The following is an example from a 6th century text. This is unsurprising, given that embedded clauses were no longer nominalized in Middle Chinese.

(11) 忽而不見，不知何去。 (Fō běnxìng jījīng 佛本行集經 35)

Hū ér bù jiàn, bù zhī hé qù.
suddenly not see not know where go

‘(He) suddenly disappeared, and (I) do not know where (he) went.’

Changes in the inventory of *wh*-words are in evidence from the Hán period. 誰 *shéi* continued to be used for ‘who’ and 何 *hé* for ‘what’. But these increasingly occurred in disyllabic compounds, as in (8a) above. 安 ān ‘where’ was also used in the compound 安所 ānsuǒ ‘where’ until approximately the 4th century, when it was replaced by 那 nà ‘where’ (Wèi 2004).

The modern Mandarin 哪里 nǎlǐ ‘where’ traces its origin to 那 nà, which appeared sporadically in Late Archaic Chinese in the sense of ‘how, why’.
棄甲則那？ 

(12) (Zuòzhúàn, Xuān Gōng 左傳/宣公 2)

Qi jià zé nǎ?

discard armor then how

‘(We) lost our armor; what of it?’

那 nǎ is generally believed to be a contraction of 奈何 nàihé ‘how’ in which the onset comes from the onset of the first syllable and the rhyme from the rhyme of the second syllable (Wáng 1990, Yú and Ueda 1999, Jiǎng and Cáo 2005). The phonological plausibility of this claim is suggested by the fact that 那 nǎ shares its onset with 奈 nài and its rhyme with 何 hé. Baxter (1992) reconstructs 那 nǎ as *nɑj and 何 hé as *gɑj. Guō (1986) lists 那 nǎ and 奈 nài as sharing an initial consonant with 泥 ní, which both Guō (1986) and Baxter (1992) reconstruct as *n-. 那 nǎ acquired the modern sense of ‘where’ in post-Hàn Middle Chinese (Wáng 1958, Ohta 1958).

The modern 什麼, 甚麼 shénme ‘what’ emerged in the Tang period (Wáng 1958, Ohta 1958). The following dialog shows examples of both 什麼 shénme ‘what’ and 那裏 nǎlǐ ‘where’ in a 10th century text.

(13) a. 雪峰問少師："什摩處歸？"對曰："江西。"

Xuě Fēng wèn shào shī: "Shénme chù guī?"

Xuě Fēng ask young master what place return
Dui yuē: “Jiāngxī.”

answer say Jiāngxī

‘Xuě Fēng asked the young master, “To what place do I return?” [The young master] answerer, “Jiāngxī”. ’

b. "峰曰："江西那裏?"對曰："石霜。" (Zǔtángjí 祖堂集 6)

Fēng yuē: “Jiāngxī nǎlǐ?”

Fēng say Jiāngxī where

Dui yuē: “Shíshuāng.”

answer say Shíshuāng


Various proposals have been put forth regarding the origin of 什麼, 甚麼 shénme ‘what’. There is as yet no consensus on the etymology of the first member of the compound. But it is fairly clear that the second member is originally wù 物 ‘thing’ (Shimura 1984, Lǚ 1985, Wú 1996, Fēng 2000, Jiāng 2005). The reanalysis to a wh-word was facilitated by its use in a compound with Late Archaic Chinese hé 何 ‘what’, which itself was still used as a wh-word meaning ‘what’ in Middle Chinese. The following example dates from no later than the 4th century.
(14) 爾作何物也？ (Sōushēnji 搜神記 19)

Ér zuò héwù yě.

you do what ASP

‘What have you done?’

The reanalysis of, wù 物 ‘thing’ as a wh-word is confirmed by the fact that it was sometimes used in isolation to mean ‘what’. 物 wù also combined with the verb 作 zuò, resulting eventually in the modern form 怎麼 zěnme ‘how’ (Lǚ 1985, Zhāng 2003, Jiǎng 2005).

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**Teaser:** This lemma introduces the basic structural characteristics of *wh*-questions in Old Chinese and the principle changes in Middle Chinese which led to the emergence of modern Chinese *wh*-questions. The lemma also briefly summarizes the emergence of the most common *wh*-words in use in modern Mandarin.