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Historical and theoretical approaches to comparison in the history of ancient science

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Title: Comparisons in early historiographies of mathematics in ancient China

Abstract: Edouard Biot (1803-1850) was probably the first professional sinologist outside East Asia to devote several articles and memoirs to mathematics and astral sciences in ancient China. He was soon followed by Protestant missionary Alexander Wylie (1815-1887), whose English publications on the topic had a significant impact in Europe. By contrast with the former, who had no opportunity to travel to China, the latter was based in Shanghai and had close contacts with Chinese scholars actively involved in the historical analysis of Chinese mathematical documents from a past that had been recovered only a few decades earlier. A few decades later, Mikami Yoshio (三上 義夫, 1875-1950), who cooperated with David Eugene Smith (1860-1944), and the Jesuit Louis Van Hée (1873-1951) both published extensively on the history of mathematics in ancient China. These various scholars had entirely different backgrounds, and they all played major roles in shaping images of mathematics in ancient China that became widespread in East Asia, Europe and North America. The purpose of this presentation is to show the various ways in which comparison informed their historical writing about mathematics in ancient China. I examine, in particular, how comparison is at play in the topics they emphasize and in their tools of analysis of Chinese sources. I also describe the types of *comparanda* each of them considered, how their writings dealt with these *comparanda*, and how these facets are correlated with the nature of the conclusion they drew.