Seminar SAW - Exploring 19th and 20th centuries historiographies of mathematics in the ancient world, 2015-2016

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Historiography of ancient mathematics and astral sciences, with a focus of China, and the Indian subcontinent: The beginnings of professionalization

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Between Evidential Scholarship and New Humanism: Li Yan and Qian Baocong as Historians of Chinese Mathematics

Abstract - Chinese mathematics became an object of scholarly study in China between 1915 and 1920. The establishment of history of mathematics as a professional academic discipline in USA, Europe and Japan played a crucial role in the acceptance of history of mathematics as a “scientific” pursuit; but there was also a contingent factor of the simultaneous emergence of two strongly determined figures, Li Yan (1892-1963) and Qian Baocong (1892-1974), who took it as their lifetime duty to investigate Chinese mathematical tradition and write its reliable history from a Chinese perspective. This talk will introduce the main intellectual traditions motivating their historiographic writing, including traditional evidential scholarship (kaozheng), essentialist visions of national culture from Japan, comparative histories of world mathematics from USA, the May Fourth “doubting of antiquity” (yi gu) and George Sarton’s take on the “New Humanism”. I will show the reflection of these ideas in the choice of topics and actual style of writing produced by these two major historians.