

## Seminar SAW

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

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#### Historiography of science, ideologies and identities (culture, civilisation, communities)

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*The Issue of Calendar Era in the Context of the Formation of National Awareness in Modern China*

**Abstract** – In Chinese traditional culture, calendar is the symbol of power. When a former dynasty was replaced by a new one, one of the first acts posed by the new sovereign was to “change the first month of the year (gaizhengshuo , 改正朔).” It suggests that the issue itself should be examined in a social and political larger context.

This paper focuses on the period ranging from the second half of the 19th century to the first half of the 20th century, when dramatic social and cultural changes took place in China. With respect to its international situation, China was in a very difficult position. On the other hand, with the sciences and other cultural artifacts from the West being introduced into China, Chinese intellectuals increasingly became acquainted with Western culture and proposed various political reforms, which aimed both to reform Chinese society and save the nation that was perceived to be in a dangerous position vis-a-vis western civilization. At the time the national awareness in China gradually took shape.

In this context, some new methods of era was proposed and advocated. Before then, Chinese traditional calendar always adopted Emperor Era, these new methods of era not only aimed to replace the Emperor Era, but also contained modern concept of nationhood. Among these new methods of era, the most typical ones including Confucian Era ( 孔子紀年 ), Yellow Emperor Era ( 黃帝紀年 ) and Republican Era ( 中華民國紀年 ) .

The “Confucian Era” was advocated by KANG Youwei, a famous political reformer in the modern history of China. Kang venerated Confucius as a “descendant of divinity” and a “hierarchy of civilization”. The proposition of the “Confucian Era” meant the year when Confucius died as the first year of era. Soon afterward, however, the first year of era was modified to the year when Confucius was born. In any event, the choice of a “Confucian calendar era” was very different from the former era system. Instead of the social order that “dynasty” represented, this era system regarded the entire set of etiquettes that Confucius and Confucianism represented as a marker of cultural identity for the Chinese people.

The “Yellow Emperor Era” was advocated by LIU Shipai. Liu advocated this idea late in the Qing dynasty. Under the pressure of domestic troubles and foreign invasions, nationalism had become widely attractive. To some extent, “Yellow Emperor era” represented an alternative when faced with double pressures mentioned above. When advocating his idea, Liu emphasized the nationalism characteristic of the Yellow Emperor as a national symbol, claiming that “the Yellow Emperor is the Yellow Emperor of the whole Han nationality, so it will carry forward the ethnical feelings of Han nationals if we use the Yellow Emperor as an era symbol.” He thus directly asserted that the meaning of “saving ancestral lineage” should be embodied in the era symbol and that it should be distinguished from the aim of “saving Confucianism as a denomination”, which was the point with the Confucian era. The Chinese Chronicle compiled by Liu accordingly excluded all other nationalities different from the Han nationality. After the Military Uprising at Wuchang in 1911, it was one of the tasks carried out by the revolution, that the revolutionary party immediately got rid of the calendar promulgated by Qing Dynasty, and adopted the “Yellow Emperor Era”, thereby developing the concept of nation embodied in the Yellow Emperor Era.

Both Confucian Era and Yellow Emperor Era reflected the modern concept of nationhood, but there were still some differences between them. As Shen Songqiao has written that the controversy around Yellow Emperor Era and Confucian Era was direct confrontation between two sets of National symbol, namely, cultural nationalism and racial nationalism. (Shen Songqiao, 1997). In fact, this opinion summarized the main difference between these two Eras.

Both Confucian Era and Yellow Emperor Era followed the Chinese traditional calendar. Since 1912 when Republic of China was founded, Gregorian Calendar was adopted as the official calendar, with Republican Era instead of Gregorian Era.

The calendar system consisting of the Republican calendar era and Gregorian calendar constructed the concept of nationhood along these two lines: on one hand, neither a former Emperor era nor the Yellow Emperor Era, which only embodied a certain ethnic group, were adopted; instead, the Republic of China was used as era symbol, emphasizing the national-state as a multinational state and the end of imperialism. On the other hand, replacing Chinese traditional calendar with Gregorian calendar that came from foreign culture, suggested getting rid of the calendar promulgated by former Dynasties. It also expressed a desire to westernize.

However, a calendar being in close related to everyday life and customs, a new calendar could not be fully used shortly after being promoted. Therefore, for a very long time there existed a “dualistic society”, the Gregorian calendar being adopted by officials and the elite whereas the traditional calendar was still used by lower classes (ZUO Yuhe, 2002).

In 1927, the National Government was established in Nanjing; in the following year, the government initiated a movement named “abolishing the traditional calendar and promoting the national calendar,” in which the calendric system consisting of the Republican calendar era and a Gregorian calendar was established as “National Calendar”. In terms of national awareness, this act aimed to impose the National calendar which represented a new unified nation, leading the masses to accept Republic of China. As a foreign culture, Gregorian calendar also took part in this process of constructing national awareness after being transferred as a symbol of national identification.

Three eras mentioned above appeared in the context that the national awareness was forming in modern China. They reflected different cognitions about the other nations and different concept of nationhood, respectively. Although these era symbols largely were circulated as some kind of political opinions, their emergences led to a new concept of time and history.