

Seminar SAW

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

organized by Karine Chemla, Matthieu Husson, Agathe Keller, Christine Proust and the SAW group

Université Paris Diderot, Condorcet - room 483A - 9:30 am to 5:30 pm

<http://sawerc.hypotheses.org/seminars/internal-seminar-historiography-2015>

Programme - June 17th, 2016

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

Presentation – This day will be devoted to exploring how the history of ancient mathematics and science at large has been written and used in the past and still is written and used today by groups of people to construct and publicize their ideologies or their identities. What implicit image of mathematics/science are put into play in such cases? What kind of histories are written, reclaimed or quoted? How do those promoting and using these histories position themselves in relation to academic histories? Are they reclaimed by specific political parties? What conceptions of culture and civilization do they use?

Agathe Keller, *Vedic Mathematics and its historiography of «hindu» mathematics*

Irfan Habib, *Legitimizing the present through mis-readings of the past: New historiographies of science in South Asia*

LEI Hsiang-lin, *How Did Chinese Medicine Become Chinese? Re-thinking the conception of culture in understanding Chinese medicine*

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

Agathe Keller (ERC Project SAW & SPHERE, CNRS-Université Paris Diderot)
Vedic Mathematics and its historiography of «hindu» mathematics

Abstract – « Vedic Mathematics » can be the name of many things. It is the title of a book published posthumously in 1962 by a religious figure, the Śaṅkarācārya of the Puri Maṭh. Here, we will look at the posterity of the book, its enduring commercial and political success since the 1990's, especially analyzing the different meanings these two words came to mean, and the images of India's mathematical past they carried.

Irfan Habib (University of Delhi, India)
Legitimizing the present through mis-readings of the past: New historiographies of science in South Asia

Abstract – One common factor rampant in South Asia, since the past few decades, is the over dependence of our political elite on the past. It happens in history and culture, most often, surprisingly it is fashionable in the readings of the history of science as well. There are some valid reasons to question orientalist/colonial reconstructions and interpretations, but imagining science and scientific theories which did not exist, stretches this engagement to ridiculous proportions. It had been quite common among some Islamic scholars to perceive something they call "Islamic science", with state support and legitimacy. However, we see a patently revivalist streak being promoted in India, patronised by the state, which emphasizes the need to rewrite history and particularly history of science. It is committed to unravel a new "nationalist" historiography of science which has been ignored by most of the liberal, Marxist and other schools of history writing all these years. I shall attempt to engage with both these trajectories and argue for a non-communitarian historiography of science.

LEI Hsiang-lin (Academia Sinica, Taiwan)
How Did Chinese Medicine Become Chinese? Re-thinking the conception of culture in understanding Chinese medicine

Abstract – This paper begins with a counter-intuitive phenomenon: in 1929, when the practitioners of Chinese medicine started their long-lasting endeavor to create a systematic national entity of Chinese medicine, they at the same time voted to reject calling themselves Chinese medicine (*zhongyi*). This historic decision runs against the conventional wisdom that these advocates adopted the strategy of associating Chinese medicine with "Chinese culture" and conversely got used by the governments as a tool for creating a "Chinese identity." Departing from this historic juncture, this paper is devoted to understanding how they envisioned a new "Chinese medicine" in the

1930s and through which processes, and for what purposes, it was later renamed as Chinese medicine in the Communist period? In addition, this paper draws on and recasts the history narrated in my recent book into a historiographical reflection on why the emergence of a new Chinese medicine that was self-consciously “neither donkey nor horse” (roughly “neither Western nor Chinese” but much more) is so invisible in both the historical and the public understanding of Chinese medicine. For what political functions, moreover, this new medicine has been submerged under the image of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Conversely, once we see it as such, how this new understanding might help us to re-think a series of important questions with which Chinese medicine has been associated since early twentieth century: the notion of China’s modernity, the Chineseness of Chinese medicine, the exclusion of Chinese medicine from the mainstream historiography of modern medicine, and the related recent debate around the question if Tu Youyou’s award of the Nobel Prize counts as a vindication of Chinese medicine.

WU Yan, (Institute for History of Science and Technology, Inner Mongolia Normal University, China)

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 “hierarch 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 Shiwei. 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.
