

## SAW Conference on Writing histories of ancient mathematics – Reflecting on past practices and opening the future, 18th-21st centuries

24-28 Octobre, 2016

organized by Karine Chemla, Agathe Keller, Christine Proust and the SAW group  
Université Paris Diderot, Condorcet Building room 366A Klimt- 9:30 am to 5:30 pm

### Making sense of the diversity of mathematics

Thursday October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2016

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*Shifting to sinological tradition and science: Alexander Wylie's study on the history of astral sciences in China, with a comparison with his historiography of mathematics*

**Abstract** – In 1867, Wylie published an annotated catalogue of Chinese books entitled *Notes on Chinese Literature*. Different from the catalogues of Chinese books compiled by the previous European sinologists on the basis of the collections in the libraries to which they had access, Wylie followed the suggestion by Abel-Rémusat and catalogued Chinese books in terms of the divisions and subdivisions system in the *Siku quanshu zongmu* (Catalogue of the Complete library of the four branches). The subdivision “Astronomy and Mathematics” in the *Notes on Chinese Literature*, which introduces 108 books, is a much more complete catalogue of Chinese books on mathematics and astral sciences in a Western language than anything previously published. On the other hand, Wylie collected over one thousand eclipses records from ancient Chinese books by using the knowledge included in his bibliography. His study on Chinese eclipses records continued and developed the tradition of Chinese astronomical records study established from French sinologists Antoine Gaubil and the Biot father and son, for the purpose of contributing the study of history and of science.

With respect to the sources used, the approach adopted, the features of his

translations and the purpose, Wylie's study of the history of astral sciences in China is conspicuously different from his writing of the history of mathematics in the 1850s. The latter relies on interpretations of ancient mathematical works given by Chinese scholars, and uses the comparative method, through translating Chinese terms into corresponding mathematical English words. Moreover, his historiography of mathematics leads him to the conclusion that the Chinese had the same scientific spirit as the European people did. This conclusion was strongly linked with the Christian idea that "all people are equal in the eyes of the God" and it became the theoretical foundation of the British missionaries' strategy, which was to introduce the advanced sciences from Europe and thereby preach Christianity. By contrast with this comparative and theology-oriented historiography of mathematics to which his early works attest, Wylie's study of the eclipses records—his representative work in the history of astral sciences— shifts to collecting scientific data from ancient Chinese works. It thus presents some continuity with a historiography developed by an earlier European sinological tradition and also a scientific orientation.