

## 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

### The historiographic effects of categorizing knowledge

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*Shu shu* 數術 : *When an actor's category became an observer's category, why, and what we can do about it*

**Abstract** – *Shu shu* (lit. ‘numbers & procedures’), as it appears in Asian- and Western-language sinology alike, is a modern academic field that has arisen since 1993 around excavated divinatory and magico-religious manuscripts, primarily clustered in the fourth to second century bce. The term itself originates from early bibliographic classification, circa 26 bce – 92 ce, which placed the astral and mathematical sciences (*tianwen* 天文 ‘heaven’s form’ omenology, *li* 曆 mathematical astronomy, and *suan* 算 mathematics) alongside a variety of divinatory arts (e.g. hemerology, pyromancy, and phrenology). Arguing that *shu shu* constitutes a singular and uniquely Chinese intellectual whole within which ‘science’ and ‘superstition’ were as yet undifferentiated, scholars have promoted the use of this actor’s category to justify the publication and study of manuscript sources once suppressed and derided as ‘superstitious’. As much as these sources do obviously merit study, it is important to reflect critically on their modern justificatory apparatus and its implications. The problem, in brief, is that *shu shu*, in its post-1993 instantiation, excludes the very ‘scientific’ sources upon which it relies for its justification, presenting an alternative history of science from which contemporaneous astronomy, mathematics, cosmology, and optics have either been either excised or recast in a mystical light. The theoretical framework behind this purportedly progressive move, ironically, goes back to the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century anthropology of the ‘primitive’, which, among other things, denies non-Western man a quantitative relationship with numbers. In this paper I will deconstruct the modern category of *shu shu* as it has thus far been applied and suggest why and how we might begin actually moving forward with the interdisciplinary study of divination and the astral and mathematical sciences in pre-modern China.