

Seminar SAW : History and philosophy of Mathematics

Abstract :

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Weighing, Counting, and Calculating Coins in Ancient China.

In China much as in most other parts of the world, coins have been the most-used means of monetary transaction over the last two millennia. What makes the Chinese case unique is that generally speaking only coins made of copper in varying alloys with inferior metals were in use. While larger and smaller issues did exist, the majority of coins were of one size, stringing them together in bundles rather than changing their denominations was the common praxis to carry out larger transactions. Under these circumstances the coin as an object itself represented the standard of value par excellence. This status was also reflected in its contours with the circular rim outside standing for heaven and the quadrangular hole inside for the earth.

Thus my talk will focus on coins in the context of their relations with weights and measures as a part of China's monetary policy, their daily use for transactions and calculations, as well as their cultural connotations and meanings. Besides, it will also be observed that coins were used as a means to retrieve ancient weighing units and their values. In the end, a comparison between the "countable" coins and "weighable" silver ingots, which were another important currency, will be presented.