

Seminar SAW

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

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Historiography of comparison and Historiography of circulation, with a particular reference to the ancient mathematical sciences

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19th century uses of comparison in the historiography of mathematics and astral sciences in China

Abstract – At the end of the 18th century and during the 19th century, various milieus in Europe and in China developed an interest in the history of ancient mathematics and astral sciences in ancient China. How was comparison between different bodies of mathematical knowledge, or different mathematical practices, instrumental in the approach to this field of inquiry? This is the main question this talk will address. We will examine in particular how comparison between different areas of the planet in this respect (“horizontal comparison”) affected the aims practitioners of history set for their historical inquiry, and how it affected their methods. We will also be interested in their practice of comparison, and the different meanings they attached to comparisons. Finally, we will also analyze how “vertical comparisons” (comparisons between different moments in the history of China) were carried out, and how horizontal and vertical comparisons interacted with each other, both in the context of mathematical activity at the time, and in the context of historical inquiry.