

**OBSERVING MATHEMATICAL PRACTICES AS A KEY
TO MINING OUR SOURCES AND CONDUCTING CONCEPTUAL HISTORY.
DIVISION IN ANCIENT CHINA AS A CASE STUDY**

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How to make sources speak is a question of general interest for historians. This article discusses which benefits history of science, and even conceptual history, can derive from studying clues drawn from our documents. The thesis for which I argue is that restoring mathematical practices in relation to which our sources were produced yields key resources to inquire into facets of conceptual history on which our sources only leave clues. I also claim the description of practices allows us to perceive changes in actors’ knowledge. I unfold the argument in the context of a case study, i.e., the mathematical work done on arithmetical operations, more specifically division, in ancient China. I first outline aspects of a state of knowledge on this topic that can be captured on the basis of a book composed in China in the first century CE and related evidence. There, the argument pieces together evidence on this state of knowledge and information we have acquired on mathematical practices at the time. I then contrast the results obtained with features of the state of knowledge on the same topic to which other writings, produced in the preceding centuries in China, testify. The comparison highlights that the state of knowledge evidenced in the first century must have been the result of a work for which we so far have no other written evidence. The conclusion draws general remarks from this specific case study.

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