

SAW Seminar: Mathematical practices in the context of the astral sciences

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Cosmograms, Temporalities, and Computations in premodern Japan

Abstract: Many divination techniques, from the West as well as from the East, use temporal parameters as their ‘primary values’. Such techniques may be referred to as forms of ‘chronomancy’. In the ‘Sinicized world’, we find several of such techniques that, while pertaining to different ‘local’ categories (calendar, *Yijing*, astrology etc.), show signs of structural and procedural likeness. In this paper, I would like to look at three different techniques used in Early Modern Japan (17th-19th century): divination by the eight trigrams (hakke uranai 八卦占い), a kind of horoscopy and “calendar astrology”; “Plum-blossom changes in the mind” (Baika shin’eki, Ch. Meihua xinyi 梅花心易), a form of *Yijing*-based arithmology; and a “fate calculation” technique (*sanmei* or *kanmei*, Ch. *suanming*, *kanming* 算命, 看命) based on twelve “stars.

Although they belong to different categories, they all involve similar algorithms, based on modular arithmetic. What is more, from at least the seventeenth century, these techniques offer similar ways to project tables and circular diagrams onto the practitioner’s left phalanx bones and thus turn the hand into a kind of computing device.

By looking at both the similarities and the differences between these techniques, my goal here is to shed light on the operative processes involved and to try to understand the nature of relations between data, parameters, signs, and results.