

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

Actors in early histories of mathematics and astral sciences

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How to talk about Chinese astronomy?

Abstract – At the beginning of the eighteenth century, most members of the European Republic of Letters curious about Chinese astronomy had two kinds of resources at their collective disposal. First-hand experience of contemporary Chinese astronomical practices and concepts could be drawn from Jesuit testimonies principally told to highlight and sustain the recent triumph of missionary-authored texts and tables within the imperial Astronomical Bureau; glimpses of older ideas about the stars could be gleaned from annalistic presentations of China's millenia-long history. In neither case was Chinese astronomy itself the object of inquiry. With the publication of Antoine Gaubil's studies as part of the *Observations mathématiques, astronomiques, géographiques, chronologiques, et physiques, tirées des anciens livres chinois, ou faites nouvellement aux Indes et à la Chine par les pères de la compagnie de Jésus* (1729–1732), however, this was no longer the case. But how did Gaubil write about astronomy as thought and practiced within the historically fluctuating boundaries of 'China'? Were there any precedents for his analysis, and what relevance do his studies have for the contours and emphases of later scholarship? This paper uses Gaubil's *Observations* as a retrospective and prospective lens onto how the discursive formation denominated as Chinese astronomy comes into being.