

‘Origin/Source’: Concepts and Their Uses in the History of Knowledge

Organizers:

Martina Siebert (Max Planck Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte)

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The panel aims at discussing the variety of concepts by means of which in various fields of inquiry (historiography, mathematics, philosophy, alchemy, technology among others), questions of origins or sources were approached in Chinese intellectual history. Moreover, it focuses on the practices shaped to bring origins or sources to light. Lastly, it raises the question of the part such issues played in the various contexts in which they were deemed relevant.

The world with all its constituents was not just there, as such, to start with. In some domains in which Chinese thinkers addressed the issue, it was analyzed as developing step by step, continuously branching out into a myriad of ideas, institutions and things. Concepts were shaped in relation to this idea, pointing out the fact that the constituents had to have a beginning, a start, a source. Moreover, the practices of looking for the “origin” or “source” took shape and were ascribed specific meanings within the various domains of knowledge.

Comment [MS1]: referring back to “the world and its constituents”? Because “process” was not mentioned before?!

Coming from various research fields and having different focus of interest, the contributors to the panel reflect on such concepts as those of ‘origin/source’ 源/源, and related terms, including ‘primordial’ 始, as well as on issues related to them. Andrew Plaks introduces the issue from the perspective of the history of ancient philosophy. Martina Siebert analyzes discussions on origin and invention in technology, the role ascribed to technology in the advancement of Chinese civilization and its relation to the idea of progress. Karine Chemla shows how the concept of ‘origin/source’ 源/源 *yuan* played a specific part for some of those who inquired into mathematics, linking the interest they had in the “source” of mathematical procedures and the importance they attached to the epistemological value of generality. Michael Puett investigates the complexities surrounding notions of *yuan* in early Chinese self-cultivation practice, teasing out the cosmological notions that underlay such practices, and placing these notions within the debates of the time concerning the nature of humanity and the potential for humanity to generate new forms of order.

Comment [MS2]: der Einschub macht den Satz lang und weniger klar?!

On the basis of this first set of case studies, the panel intends to open up a discussion on the concepts of ‘origin’/‘source’ and their various facets.

Finite Beginning and Unbounded Anteriority: Reflections on the Term *yuan* in the Early Chinese Discourse on Origination

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Abstract to follow

The Origin of Things. Making Technology into History

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Chinese scholars since Song times undertook intense investigations into the origin of all the things (and affairs) their civilisation was made of. They assembled their finds in encyclopaedic catalogues specialized in the origin of things (*wuyuan*) from which they fed back into the common knowledge of the elite. From the cooking pot to the imperial bureaucracy, from peonies to corruption everything had to have an origin; everything Chinese civilisation consists of – may it be good or bad, marginal or important – was assigned to a person in time who had made it available by inventing something new, improving something old or introducing something foreign. The paper gives an introduction to the history, content and intention of these catalogues focusing on the parts relating to technology, its artifice and artefacts. Being part of this obsession with and need for origins, what civilizing role was thus assigned to technology? How did the range of “civilising” technologies increase? How and from where did new artefacts arise and how were they incorporated into history? What changes occurred in the approach to and interest in origins as they accumulated in the *wuyuan* catalogues over time? Following these lines of questioning the talk employs the fascination with the origin of things as a tool for probing into the supposed tradition of backwardness of Chinese culture and asks if, on the contrary, it was used as a mode to exemplify and underline the permanence of technological change and progress and for accepting and appreciating the new.

Why the “source” matters. Practices of looking for the “source” in the mathematics of ancient China

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The first extant mathematical texts in Chinese are for their greatest part composed of mathematical problems and procedures. Making no reference to the “source” of mathematical concepts or procedures, they do not provide evidence allowing to discuss the early history of the concept of “source” in mathematics. However, the commentaries on the earliest books that were granted the status of Canons regularly make use of the “source” of procedures for the sake of the exegesis. The talk aims at highlighting the role devoted to the “source” in the mathematical activities to which they bear witness. Moreover, it will describe the practices with which the source is brought to light. In conclusion, we shall wonder which benefits we can derive in our approach to later mathematical sources from elucidating the concepts of “source” or “origin.”

The Problem of Origins: The Concept of *yuan* in Early Chinese Religious Practice

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This paper will analyze the complexities surrounding notions of yuan in early Chinese self-cultivation practice. My goal will be to tease out the cosmological notions that underlay such practices, and to place these cosmological notions within the debates of

the time concerning the nature of humanity and the potential for humanity to generate new forms of order. I will conclude by discussing the ways these debates played out in later medical and religious practices.