USES OF THE CATEGORIES OF MODERN AND MODERNITY IN THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE

Organized by :

Center for a History of Philosophy and Science seen from Asia, Africa, etc
(CHPSAA)

Friday
26TH MAY 2023

1.30 pm - 6.00 pm

Room 569 Olympe de Gouges building Univ. Paris-Cité, 8 rue Albert Einstein

SΦHERE
SCIENCES, PHILOSOPHIE, HISTOIRE
UMR 7219

cnrs

UNIVERSITÉ PARIS 1
PANTHÉON SORBONNE

PROGRAMME

Presentation:

Much ink has been spilled on the uses of categories of “modern” and “modernity” in the history of science. This session of our seminar aims to return to these issues to explore the benefits that could be derived from a critical examination of these uses, especially in a context in which historians deal with a global perspective.

1.30 pm-2.45 pm

Karine Chemla (SPHERE, CNRS—Université Paris Cité)

Questioning how The Notion of Modern Science Structures Various Historiographies of science, despite the Differences between them

BREAK

3.00 pm-4.15 pm

Sean Hsiang-lin Lei 雷祥麟 (Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, Taiwan and SPHERE, Université Paris Cité)

Two visions of science-centered modernity in late Qing China
And, Is modernity still a useful concept for the history of science?

BREAK

4.30 pm-6.00 pm

Round Table with the participation of :

- Florence Bretelle-Establet (SPHERE, CNRS—Université Paris Cité)
- Jean-Baptiste Grodwohl (Department of History and Philosophy of Science, SPHERE, CNRS—Université Paris Cité)
- Ken Daimaru (Maître de conférences, CRCAO & UFR LCAO, Université Paris Cité)
- Agathe Keller (SPHERE, CNRS—Université Paris Cité)
- Victor Seow (Harvard University)

ABSTRACT

Karine CHEMLA (SPHERE, CNRS—Université Paris Cité)

Questioning how The Notion of Modern Science Structures Various Historiographies of science, despite the Differences between them

In this talk, I will explore how different historiographies of science give pride of place to a notion of “modern science” in the way in which they define their overall project. I will examine some of the attributes that have been associated with this notion, and some of the problematic consequences of the adoption of this notion for the history of science.

Sean Hsiang-lin Lei 雷祥麟 (Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, Taiwan and SPHERE, Université Paris Cité)

Two visions of science-centered modernity in late Qing China
And, Is modernity still a useful concept for the history of science?

Historians of China generally agree that China’s catastrophic defeat in the First Sino-Japanese war of 1895 marks the starting point of a radical transformation in modern Chinese thought. Oddly, however, science does not seem to have had much of an influence on this transformation during its formative years from 1895 to the early 1910s.

Drawing on my previous work, “The dawn of science as cultural authority in China,” this paper argues that two competing visions of science-centered modernity emerged in China right after this war. They were developed by two towering figures: Zhang Zhidong 張之洞 (1837-1909), the powerful architect of the New Policy Reform (1898-1912), and Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854-1921), the author of *Tianyanlun* 天演論 (*On Heavenly Evolution*), which was published in 1898 as the Chinese translation of Thomas Huxley’s Evolution and Ethics (1893), and is widely celebrated as the most influential book in modern Chinese intellectual history.

ABSTRACT

The context in which they articulated their science-centered conceptions of modernity was the historic debate over the preservation or abandonment of China's quintessential teachings (*jiao* 教). It is well-known that they held polarized positions in this debate over whether or not to abandon the most cherished political institutions and ethical norms of Chinese civilization. It is virtually unknown that they based their positions on two opposing conceptions of Western science/technology: Following the strategy set up by Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) in the 17th century, Yan Fu fashioned "Western science" as Neo-Confucian *gezhi* 格致 (Investigation of Things to Acquire Knowledge) to win cultural authority for it and thereby created an unique local conception of Western science as "Western *gezhi*"
(*xixue gezhi* 西學格致). Vehemently rejecting Yan Fu's conception of "Western *gezhi*" and the related idea of treating Western science as cultural authority, Zhang Zhidong advocated "Western mechanical arts" (*xiyi* 西藝) instead and elevated it into an official category of the Reform.

By making visible their debate over the proper conception of Western science/technology, this article argues that what at the stake in the debate over preserving China's quintennial teaching—from Yan Fu's perspective—was nothing less than the universality of "Western civilization" and therefore a wholesale adoption of it by China—the very first time this radical idea was proposed in modern Chinese history. When On Heavenly Evolution—as a concrete manifestation of Yan's conception of "Western *gezhi*"—rose in importance to become the most influential book of modern Chinese thought, Western science finally succeeded in becoming the trusted foundation not only for the universalism of Western civilization, but also for the Neo-Confucian Way. Even more importantly, at the same time it paved the way for "Mr. Science" to exercise a previously unimaginable influence in twentieth-century China.

In light of this history, we might ask ourselves whether the concept of "modernity" is still useful to historians of science and historians in general? And if the answer is yes, how should we conceptualize it to better capture the historical experiences conventionally associated with "modernity"?