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Comments on the papers by Chu Pingyi and Morris Low

Contending histories of science
Workshop "Renegotiating the scope of Chinese Studies"

13-15 March 2000
Santa Barbara

We have just heard two extremely interesting talks, both very helpful for us to analyse what it may mean to use the words "China" or "Chinese" in relation to science, technology or bodies of knowledge. Two talks that gave many insights to think about how history of science, science studies, as a field, may help us understand certain uses that are made of the words "China", "Chinese".

In my comments, I would precisely like to concentrate on the use of some expressions like "Chinese science", "Western science", "Arabic science", or any such expression binding a given body of knowledge to a specific region, to a given community or to a political entity. I do indeed believe that we are faced here with a very general, a very common phenomenon, which goes well beyond the case of China, even though we might here wish to concentrate on this very case. A phenomenon which requires analysis because of all the deviations it may lend itself to.

We could approach this question in two ways. Either "Chinese science", "Western science" and the like are categories used by some of us, historians, and we could question these expressions as relevant categories for understanding the realities we work on. Or else, we could look at these expressions as categories of the actors we observe, and wonder when such categories appear, how they are used and by whom.

I'll do a little bit of both, even if I'll rather concentrate on these expressions as categories of actors.

What I personally found most inspiring in the talks we heard was the fact that both speakers spoke at at least two levels, as Morris Low put it explicitly: professional and personal.

Chu Pingyi spoke as a historian of science in China — his profession —, but also as a historian of science living, working, in Taiwan. And his account bears witness to how a working scientist in Taiwan makes use of the words "China", "Chinese", "Taiwan", "Taiwanese", when describing the evolution of his field in the last decades in Taiwan. This proves to be very interesting for analysing how identities can be defined within, and by, scientific activity, a point on which I would like to elaborate later.

As for Morris Low, when speaking at a professional level, he questioned how Japan, or Korea, were taken — or, rather, not taken — into account in the various histories of science dealing with China, depending on who is speaking, where, and when. He hence also raised the problem of sinocentrism in the writing of history. But, at a personal level, if I understood correctly, he engaged in a reflexion about the diaspora, its contribution to the spread of what he calls "Chinese science", and the use by immigrants of specific bodies of knowledge in constructing a Chineseness. More precisely, he raised the question of how science and technology enter practices, objects, places, which actors may read, where they are, as signs constructing an identity as "Chinese". He hence provides a very interesting and different perspective on how bodies of knowledge may enter the process of constructing something "Chinese". This leads to the challenge of considering "Chinese science", "Chinese technology", as categories of actors, as a world phenomenon today, calling for more research.

In other words, the two contributions we heard, speaking both at two levels, give us the possibility of observing the use of the kind of expressions such as "Chinese science" by two kinds of actors. We may analyse either how working scientists may make use of such categories, or how users of science and technology put what they conceive of as "Chinese bodies of knowledge" into play in activities perceived to define them as "Chinese". These will be the two threads I shall attempt to follow up below, although very sketchily.

Let me first turn to Chu Pingyi's paper. What appears to me to be most relevant for our topic, in the picture Chu Pingyi drew of the evolution of the fields of history and of history of

science, technology and medicine in Taiwan from 1949 on, is that he described a transition: a transition from a stage when Taiwan is constructed by some as Chinese and even as "the genuine China", to a stage when some groups strive to elaborate in which ways Taiwan is Taiwan, as distinct from China. He thus allows us to observe a process of emergence and consolidation of the use of the name of a given geographical entity for coining a type of scholarship produced —Taiwanese scholarship. This goes in parallel with a shift in how some actors conceive of the community they belong to, and displays very clearly the historicity of the use of the word "Chinese" in a given place, by a given group. And Chu Pingyi alludes to how social and human scientists took part to both stages, and how their scientific activities reflected this transition. In order to think about our topic today, it seems to me that we have here an ideal case to deal with.

As regards a construction of Taiwan as China, as "the genuine China", after 1949, Chu Pingyi stresses how sociologists and anthropologists contributed to it, and this, from the very starting points they chose. "Other social scientists", he adds, "engaged in the movement to sinicise social sciences", and here I would find it very interesting if he could describe further with which means and how this sinisation was performed.

As for history of science, in the first stage, national as history was, it concentrated on history of science in China, and, mainly practised by working scientists of the hard sciences, it focused on how ancient China had contributed, by her innovations, to world science. Hence it was a history of the "firsts", as it is sometimes called —a world phenomenon, probably started in the West, and typical of national history of science.

Now how did the field of history, or rather the field of history of science, technology and medicine, evolve through the transition following the abolition of the martial law in 1987?

Chu Pingyi's analysis is interesting to summarize here. First, the history of Taiwan developed, driven by the expectations of people in Taiwan, and hence by actions taken by publishing houses —two kinds of social forces propelling the emergence and development of the field. To this, funding must be added, funding by central and local governments as well as by private foundations. So much for some of the concrete conditions of its development.

As for the topics, the shift from the history of China to the history of Taiwan went along with a shift in the topics addressed by practitioners in the history of science, technology and medicine. As Chu Pingyi put it, "Applying Western scholarship of science studies at the time to Taiwan", these historians "dealt with subjects related to science policy, Japanese colonial science, popular science, female scientists, reproduction technology and science fiction". We are far from the history of the firsts, and in another social milieu. In these research works, Taiwan is addressed as such, not as China and not as a part of China, which allows to raise new questions: for instance, with the question of the Japanese colonial science, the issues of the scientific influence of Japan and the part it took in the modernisation of Taiwan are addressed —a set of issues which Morris Low deplores are not systematically addressed when writing the history of science, technology and medicine in East Asia, especially when writing in today's China. Awareness grows, through history, of the specificity of the island. Hence, we first see the emergence of the field "history of Taiwan": the island is constructed as a *topic*, by these historical studies which, as Chu Pingyi stressed, developed outside the institutions. But, second, this according to Chu Pingyi's analysis, caused a mutation in how history of China was dealt with in the institutions, which again provides highly interesting material for our topic: Chu Pingyi describes the emergence of a "Taiwanese way" of practising history of science, technology and medicine in China, as opposed to how the topic is dealt with on the continent. After the "construction" of Taiwan as a topic for historical research, we have the construction of an identity —Taiwanese— through construing a specific approach shared by working historians. We are at the core of how identities can be elaborated by, and through, scientific activities.

It is interesting to stress that there is no uniform evolution of a community of historians under social or political pressure. Starting from a situation where China is the main topic of research for historians, there develops, if I understood correctly, two competing ways of practising history in relation to Taiwan: one community focuses on Taiwan, the other community practises history in a Taiwanese way, and these developments occur in two different sets of social groups.

Now, how is this distinction in the way of practising history of China in Taiwan conceived of? The historians of "Chinese" science, technology and medicine in Taiwan, if again I understood correctly what Chu Pingyi meant, each in his or her way, share an awareness that past science developed with categories of thought completely different from ours, within a socio-political context again completely different from ours. Whether they attempt at reconstructing the categories of the historical agents at a given time and place, or the socio-political context within which knowledge was produced or used, depending on the topic on which they focus, they all assume a distance with the historical Chinese agents, a gap between their own cultures of historians in Taiwan and the culture of the Chinese actors observed, which they hence approach as anthropologists.

This shared assumption —namely: that time created a break between our subjects of research, Chinese, and ourselves Taiwanese,—, an assumption of the practising historians within a scholarly activity, opens the possibility that, on the basis of a given past, distinct identities might emerge. Translated in space and society, it lays the foundation for stating, at various levels, the heterogeneity of Chinese studies today, and, "hence", that of China today. Historians of Chinese science in Taiwan, as historians, thus create some of the conceptual tools for the whole group to think of Taiwan in continuity or/and in discontinuity with China.

This raises two sets of questions for Morris Low. He wrote: "If an understanding of the Chinese cultural context is of importance, then it follows that historians and anthropologists of Chinese origin should be encouraged". Which kind of continuity are you, Morris, thinking about when you think of a special contribution of scholars of "Chinese culture" to the study of the past of China?

Second question: how was the continuity, or discontinuity, of Japan or Korea with China elaborated in historiography? Can we find similar shaping of discontinuity?

But this also leads me to ask a question to Chu Pingyi himself: don't you think that such discontinuities, such heterogeneity, should also be considered for the Chinese continent as well, and for what you call "traditional Chinese culture" and which could at least be considered in the plural form?

Anyway, to go back to historical scholarship in Taiwan, one can see the diversity of the contributions of historians to constructing a difference, a break, in the place of, in opposition to, what was previously elaborated as continuity. Elsewhere —second order discontinuity— beyond historical discontinuity, history is shaped as continuous in time and homogeneous in space.

But let me come back again to this shaping of an identity attached to a given geographical entity —"Taiwanese" in our case— through scientific activity. Chu Pingyi helped us analyse how actors —practising scientists— may be led to define bodies of knowledge as attached to a place. Now, are we, as historians, to adopt such categories as relevant descriptive categories? To highlight one of the conditions for this transformation of the history of science, technology and medicine in Taiwan, may help us suggest an answer, at the same time as it may cast light on the phenomenon of shaping identities.

As Chu Pingyi regularly stressed it, and I recalled it above, the emergence of new ways of practising history of science at various places in the "West", the emergence of new questions in the history of science, technology and medicine, exerted a key influence for the evolution of the field in Taiwan, and this for the two communities of historians described. This influence was, for one part, mediated by the students who wrote their Ph. D. abroad.

Opposing the historians of science who were mainly scientists of the hard sciences and who conceived of history of science as the chronicle of a cumulative progress, some Western historians agreed in emphasizing that one should account for practices of knowledge by putting them back into their context in all possible meanings of the term. Again, in opposition to those who mainly focused on the research front of scientific activity, came those who wished to call attention to all the other aspects of the life of the sciences, from popular science to how science took part into imperial projects and so on —remember the list given by Chu Pingyi.

The reason why I recall this context is to stress the fact that history of science is practised worldwide by different communities, most often in the same place, communities that ask different questions and value different approaches. Hence what Chu Pingyi described of the opposition between distinct groups of historians in Taiwan reminded me of what I know of the situation

elsewhere: there are different groups producing discourses on the sciences and their past: scientists of the hard sciences, historians of STM working on ancient times, historians focusing on new areas, etc. These various groups sometimes downplay each other, sometimes collaborate with each other. Hence my questions if, as a historian, I wonder whether I should make use of such categories and speak of a Taiwanese scholarship for instance: how far can one of these groups in Taiwan be thought of as being specific to Taiwan, "Taiwanese" in its way of working, with respect to the closest colleagues practising the same approach to STM elsewhere in the world? how far could any one of these groups represent a "Taiwanese" approach, knowing that in Taiwan there are other groups producing history of science in other ways?

In this very case, it seems to me that the situation could be described in terms of transnational communities of work practising history of STM: they develop either the same competitions with each other, when working in the same place, or international collaborations between each other from place to place. Hence I would suggest that socio-professional communities would be more relevant categories than local identities. If such is the case, this in return casts light on some operations that may be involved in the making of a scientific tradition which could be attached to the name of a region of the world: it often requires, I would argue, some forgetting of the actual diversity and statements of specificity.

So much for how the practice of scholarship can contribute to shaping "regional identities". Let me now turn, briefly I'm afraid, to another kind of actors —the users of bodies of knowledge— and to another modality of making use of knowledge as "Chinese" in the construction, for a group, of identifiers of Chineseness. This seems to me to be a specific contribution to our theme of the case of the diaspora, as witnessed by Morris Low in his paper.

Here we are dealing with a multitude of groups, with fuzzy limits, scattered around the planet, groups that are by definition in contact with non-Chinese others, in societies in which markers of Chineseness are continuously worked out. The previous generations, coming from China, brought with them bodies of knowledge, which were to be adapted to local conditions, which were transmitted through the family. The questions raised are: how do these bodies of knowledge enter in the signs marking their Chineseness? How are they used to display continuity with the place of origin in time and space? How, hence, are these bodies of knowledge constructed as "Chinese"? The list of items explored by Morris Low is extremely suggestive: food, remedies —both at the two levels of the techniques and the modes of consumption—, market gardens, management of space and architecture, bodily practices, material culture, for instance textiles. Most of these items again drew the attention of historians of science only recently. And hence, again, it is thanks to this increase in the range of interests that one can observe in a finer way both the transfer of knowledge and practices that occurred with the diaspora and how these —we go back to our topic now— could enter in the shaping of an identity for a community.

Now my question is here: are we talking of a unique phenomenon, everywhere the same: an extension of China? Or are these constructions everywhere different? Isn't Chineseness defined in all kinds of different ways in different places? The research program which seems to me to be worth pursuing here would be to observe these constructions of a "Chinese" identity in their diversity, both within a given community and in different communities, and to describe the contribution of the diaspora to the determinations of Chineseness. This might provide in yet another way interesting insights as regards the variety of ways in which the meaning of the word "Chinese" can be constructed.

Construction by the working scholar of something Chinese, or not Chinese, construction with bodies of scientific and technical knowledge of identities as "Chinese", these seem to me to be the two main modalities illustrated by these papers to give a meaning to the word "China" with, and through, science and technology as they developed in China. Two modalities which seem to me to be general and not specific either to China or Taiwan. A point which I now leave for discussion.