
**Nakayama Shigeru**

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The book under review here is an almost complete autobiography of a scholar who worked in close collaboration with Joseph Needham for many years.

When historians of science get together for the first time, they start by inquiring of each other ‘what discipline do you come from.’ This is then followed by the question ‘what brought you to the history of science?’ Unlike nowadays, with the professionalization of the history of science being promoted through graduate schools in the history of science, most of them were trained in a scientific discipline. Only later did they become interested in the humanities and turned to the history of science.

The author, Ho Peng Yoke, was first trained in physics and employed in a physics department. At the beginning of his academic career, he also taught history of science within a physics department. However, as he became more and more involved in history, the modern classification of science proved of only limited help in the understanding and explanation of historical phenomena. It was especially his close relationship with Joseph Needham that eventually led him from physics to the history of Chinese science.

Joseph Needham was an intellectual giant and thus well able to initiate and pursue such an extraordinarily grand project as *Science and Civilisation in China* (SCC). According to Ho Peng Yoke (p. 178), one of his collaborators in this great enterprise, it was Needham’s “single-minded” devotion that kept this huge project going. In order to communicate it to the rest of the world, a commonsensical and multi-talented collaborator was essential. As made apparent by the book-cover and front page, on which the portrait of the author is shown, Ho Peng Yoke is always smiling, one might say in order to smoothen the relationship between Needham and the rest of the world.
Such a talent is not only DNA-dependent, but also formed by environment. Born in 1926 as the bright eldest son of an educator of overseas Chinese in colonial Malaysia, he was sent to an English school. During the period of Japanese occupation, he acquired Japanese while working with Japanese civilians. In the post-war period, he received tertiary education at Singapore, and soon Needham agreed to become advisor for his thesis. For teaching assignments, he moved from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur, Brisbane and Hong Kong, while for research he often visited Cambridge in order to work together with Needham as a lifelong collaborator in writing and editing the gunpowder and alchemy sections of the SCC project.

In his later days, when his collaboration with Needham was drawing to a close, Ho developed a particular interest in fate-calculation and divinatory arts (pp. 179-180), subjects which most modern scholars would not touch. My teachers and predecessors in Chinese studies often warned me that one should stay away from research on the “Book of Changes” (Yijing 易經), as this would be futile and lead nowhere. Some people tend to interpret Zhu Xi like an eighteenth-century European scientist, but in reality he was at the same time an extensive supporter of the notion of astrological influence on the earth as well as terrestrial influence on the heavens. This non-Whiggish area, much of which concerns genuine Chinese natural philosophy, creates some embarrassment to those historians of science who dare to step in. When I wrote a book on astrology in Japan, I subtitled it ‘its position in the history of science’, thus referring to my treatment of astrology only in its relation with science and astronomy. Thus, I was not able to generate heartfelt interest in the detailed rules of calculation of pure fate-calculation, such as have been elucidated by the admirable endeavours of Ho Peng Yoke. Whenever I come across interpretations of numerology, he is always an authority for me.

Roving is a keyword of the author’s life, in space and also in language, culture and food. Actually most parts of this book cover the international conferences, meetings, advisory board sessions and dinner parties in which he participated in East and West. Especially in the 1990s, when he replaced Needham as director of the Needham Research Institute, he became a true global traveller, circling the globe twice a year for fundraising and coordinating support groups of the Needham project. Without the cooperation of Ho and his overseas Chinese friends, the Needham project would have never become such a success story.