Review


reviewed by N. Sivin

This volume is a byproduct of the XVIITH International Congress of the History of Science, and an associated workshop at San Diego in 1985. Joseph Chen (Cheng Zhenyi), author of two of the papers, has edited for publication essays by 11 Chinese specialists.

A few papers in this very miscellaneous collection are worthy examples of the best Chinese work. A couple of the essays add little or nothing to what is understood about their topics. Several others are minor but useful supplements to standard accounts. Most are quite unaware of pertinent non-Chinese scholarship, to their detriment. Two of the three that cite recent Occidental work are largely summaries of it.

All of the papers chronicle early Chinese achievements rather than exploring their contexts or probing the causes of change. The only original paper in the book that recognizes worldwide predecessors is Xi Zezong’s on the uses of Chinese historical data in the study of modern astrophysical problems, with especially interesting observations on the gravitational constant. Ke Jun’s survey of ancient metal technology covers ground that Ke often writes about, but the dynamism of his research group makes each publication a progress report, and no research of comparable importance has been done outside China. Three papers, by Joseph Chen, Mei Jingzhao and Zha Youliang, contain interesting observations on Chinese thought about limits. Li Zhaohua describes a little-known paper of ca. 1792 on logistic operations with numbers of different bases.

Odd lapses in historiography or translation weaken the arguments of some papers. Two authors credit the Yellow Lord (Huangdi 黄帝, “2698-2599”) as an inventor. Two generations have passed since Chinese ethnologists demonstrated in *Gu shi bian 古史辨 that, despite their utility as specimens of late Zhou folklore, such stories have no value as history. Recent Neolithic archeology has borne these pioneers out. But (for example) Lu Jingyan, in what could have been a definitive article on lubricants, tells us that the cart was invented in Huangdi’s time, and the water-powered trip hammer ca. 2000 B.C. Lu’s interpretation of a text from the Canon of Songs (Shijing 39), and even of the song’s title, has little in common with the understanding of any expert on that text.

All in all, this book provides in English a representative sample of recent Chinese scholarship, and about as large a proportion of worthwhile papers as one can expect in any conference volume.