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Rethinking 'style' for historians and philosophers of science: converging lessons from sexuality, translation, and East Asian studies

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ABSTRACT

Historians and philosophers of science have furnished a wide array of theoretical-historiographical terms to emphasize the discontinuities among different systems of knowledge. Some of the most famous include Thomas Kuhn's "paradigm", Michel Foucault's "episteme", and the notion of "styles of reasoning" more recently developed by Ian Hacking and Arnold Davidson. This paper takes up this theoretical-historiographical thread by assessing the values and limitations of the notion of "style" for the historical and philosophical study of science. Specifically, reflecting on various methodological and theoretical concerns prompted by sexuality, translation, and East Asian studies, this paper argues that the heretofore ways in which historians and philosophers of science have used the notion of "style" are severely restricted in terms of its mere applicability to the intellectual history of Western science. The particular example of the translation of "homosexuality" into Chinese during the May Fourth era reveals that the notion of "style" has the potential of carrying a much more dynamic conceptual weight, as when used in "styles of argumentation". The paper also engages briefly with the historiography of scientific "national styles" and ends with some concluding remarks on the limitations of "social histories from below" and the under appreciated importance of "epistemological histories of possibilities".

1. Introduction

In this paper, my main objective is to offer some explicit methodological and theoretical reflections on the potential ways in which the field of the history and philosophy of science can benefit from sexuality, translation, and East Asian studies. To accomplish this, I will focus on specific historiographic "points of convergence" that bring the four disciplines together to bear on one another. I see this as a fruitful endeavour especially at the present juncture in time, when the field of the history and philosophy of science is increasingly moving away from treating an all encompassing Western derived definition of "science" as its major frame of reference.[1] However, before delving into the history and philosophy of science immediately, it might help to begin by paying some attention to a larger turning point in the history of the modern historical profession: what scholars have loosely identified as the "cultural turn" of the 1970s.

It is perhaps a well established consensus that, following the broader turn to culture (also known as the "postmodern turn" or the "linguistic turn") in general historiography, historians have become much more attuned to the heuristic value of the politics of naming and, by extension, of defining.[2] Whether it exists on the substantive level of primary sources or on the analytical level of historians' own scholarship, this kind of cultural politics had not always seemed particularly interesting to a substantial part of the historical profession until the heightened awareness to the relationship between language, discourse, and experience was facilitated by post-Marxist theoretical inflections from literary criticism (e.g. via the

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[1] For a helpful discussion of this trend, see Cunningham and Williams (1993).

[2] For an authoritative collection of essays on the "cultural turn", see Bonnell and Hunt (1999). For critical responses to this volume, see, for example, Suny (2002), Bratlinger (2002), Handler (2002). For a critical assessment of the cultural turn in history in relation to the social sciences, see Sewell (2005).

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work of Hayden White and others).[3] One of the most obvious consequences of this "cultural turn" is that *identity* became a key site of historical and historiographical interrogation. Gender, race, sexuality, class—and the list could be extended easily—together helped consolidate this organizing principle of historical inquiry. Interestingly, some postcolonial historians, as well as a growing number of historians of gender and sexuality, have responded by staking new grounds for post-identity history writing.[4]

The field of the history and philosophy of science bears an interesting, reciprocal relationship to this "cultural turn". On the one hand, the field takes direct advantage of the turn when issues of gender and race, for instance, are addressed much more explicitly in subsequent scholarship. This suggests that the so called "cultural turn" plays a somewhat exogenous role in history and philosophy of science—that the former simply influenced the latter. On the other hand, the turn itself could also be understood as something that directly grew out of some of the now classic texts in the field, such as the writings of Michel Foucault and even Thomas Kuhn.[5] Foucault's and Kuhn's critical insights concerning the historical production of scientific knowledge highlight the social constructiveness of the nature of such processes.[6] Foucault's works in particular offer unique conceptions of power and its relation to knowledge via the notions of "discourse" and "technologies of the self".[7]

For identity and subjectivity to become a dense location of historical scrutiny and historiographical contestation, a primary concern of historians shifted to what could thus be identified as the politics of naming and defining in a manner like never before. The politics of naming and defining "science" is where I hope my various reflective trajectories will ultimately converge. And it is also in this sense that I still find elements of Foucault's work indispensable. The point from which I hope to depart for my methodological and theoretical considerations is actually the politics of naming and defining "sexuality" in the context of twentieth-century China. I will focus specifically on only one typology of sexuality, namely homosexuality, as the central research problem that drives my historiographic reflections.[8]

2. "Style" and the history of homosexuality

When I began my research project that explores the historical relationship between science and homosexuality in Republican China (1912–1949), I realized that I had both too much and too little relevant secondary literature to start me off. The number of articles and monographs on the relationship between homosexuality and science in the context of European and North American history is overwhelming.[9] As far as East Asia is concerned, however, up to 2006 there are only a handful of sporadic book chapters that address this topic to a degree comparable to the work done on the Western context.[10] Apart from concerns about quantity, the quality of this thin body of secondary literature on sexology and homosexuality in twentieth-century China varies greatly. While some can be quite superficial, others are more sophisticated but still fail to answer the guiding question that appears to me at once perplexing and most intriguing: what are the conditions under which the notion of homosexual *identity* could emerge in China?

Subsequently, I turned to the scholarship on Europe and North America for appropriate methodological and theoretical frameworks. For the Western world, the most prominent scholars arguing for the social constructionism of homosexuality include Jeffrey Weeks, Jonathan Ned Katz, and David Halperin.[11] Their social constructionist view argues that before the concept was coined in the late nineteenth century (in 1869, to be more precise), homosexuality in the way we understand it today simply was not something around which the social, cultural, and political landscapes of individual thinking and experience could be organized.[12] Halperin went so far to title one of his most influential books *One hundred years of homosexuality*, implying that when one talks about "homosexuality" one is talking about a concept that has no more than only one hundred years of history. Especially evident in Halperin's works, the intellectual genealogy of this thesis can be best traced to the scholarship of Michel Foucault. On the example of homosexuality, to quote two of the most famous sentences from the first volume of Foucault's *History of sexuality*, 'We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized ... The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; *the homosexual was now a species*'.[13] According to Halperin, 'Foucault did for "sexuality" what feminist critics had done for "gender"'.[14]

This historicist argument invited both warm receptions and sharp criticisms. To cite here just one of the most poignant critiques of Halperin, queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the closet* argues that 'an unfortunate side effect of [the antipositivist finding of the Foucauldian shift] has been implicitly to underwrite the notion that "homosexuality as we conceive of it today" itself comprises a coherent definitional field rather than a space of overlapping, contradictory, and conflictual definitional forces'.[15] In defence of historicism, Halperin responded a decade later by saying that 'Despite the accusations of Foucauldianism levelled against it, the problem with the book [*One hundred years of homosexuality*], as Sedgwick's critique made clear, was that *it wasn't Foucauldian enough*: it retained too great an investment in conventional social history and made too little use of Foucauldian (or Nietzschean) genealogy.'[16] To continue this historiographic reflection, I

[3] See White (1987). Other, and some would even argue more important, influences in history and philosophy of science over the consideration of "culture" than White include the works of Roger Chartier, Robert Darton, Clifford Geertz, and Stephen Greenblatt. Here, I understand "cultural politics" in the way it is used by Gayatri Spivak (1988a).

[4] See, for example, Spivak (1988b), pp. 197–221; Prakash (2000), Marcus (2007), Chiang (2008d, 2009).

[5] Foucault (1972 [1969]) (1988 [1961]) (1990a [1976]) (1990b [1984]) (1994a [1963]) (1994b [1966]), and (2006 [1961]; Kuhn (1996).

[6] Golinski (2005).

[7] Another related popular concept from Foucault is "governmentality". See, for example, the wide ranging essays exploring this notion collected in Burchell, Gordon & Miller (1991) and in India (2005). See Rose (2007) for a recent reflection on the ramifications of the biomedical sciences in the early twenty-first century.

[8] The methodological and theoretical considerations raised in this paper draw on my experience in conducting the research for Chiang (Forthcoming). For a preliminary report of the significance of the findings, see Chiang (2008b).

[9] The literature is too vast to cite and give full acknowledgement here. For the most representative studies, see Bayer (1981), Duggan (1993), Dixon (1997), Hansen (1992), Somerville (1994), LeVay (1996), Mondimore (1996), Rosario (1997,2002), Eder et al. (1999), Terry (1999), Minton (2002), Crozier (2000, 2001, 2008).

[10] On China, see Dikötter (1995), pp. 137–145; Sang (2003), Ch. 4; Kang (2006), Ch. 2. On Japan, see Pflugfelder (1999), Ch. 5. Even the only other monograph on Japanese sexology, Frühstück (2003), barely touches on the topic of homosexuality.

[11] Weeks (1977,1981,1985), Katz (1983), esp. pp. 137–174; Halperin (1990, 1995, 2002). Out of the three authors mentioned here, Katz stands out as the most notable one who shifted from articulating an earlier "essentialist" position (1992 [1976]) to later adopting a "social constructionist" position. On the social construction of homosexuality, see also Greenburg (1988) and Reed (2001).

[12] For a useful essay on the social constructionism of sexuality, see Vance (1989).

[13] Foucault (1990a [1976]), p. 43; my emphasis.

[14] Halperin (1990), p. 7.

[15] Sedgwick (1990), p. 45.

[16] Halperin (2002), p. 13; original emphasis.