

Texts and Cosmos: Astronomy and its Rationale in Qing China

Ori Sela

(Tel-Aviv University)

Natural studies became increasingly intertwined with philology, classicism, and history for eighteenth-century Chinese scholars. Various texts were used in order to prove or disprove scientific arguments, and as Western natural studies became more and more available to these scholars, disagreements about the legitimate scope of their use ensued. In this paper I examine debates in the field of astronomy (and its applications) that took place during the eighteenth century, especially among scholars such as Mei Wending, Mei Juecheng, Jiang Yong, Dai Zhen, and Qian Daxin. Such debates concerned the length of the tropical year; ways for calculating it; the shape of the cosmos, and more. I discuss the arguments that each side in these debates brought to the floor; what consisted of a valid or absurd argument; and specifically the authoritative role that texts assumed in the understanding of nature at the time. I therefore also analyze changing scientific practices and understandings during the eighteenth century; cultural motivations and the reciprocal relations between natural studies and scholars' identity anxieties; as well as the philological method and its astronomical bearings.