

# Spaces of circulation: Knowledge Production Between China and the West

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Due to a combination of academic, geopolitical, and economic factors, research into the production of new knowledge in and about China has significantly accelerated around the verge of the twenty-first century. Most studies on the period of the early Christian mission in China were based on the assumption that it were the very same actors – mainly missionaries and a very limited number of Chinese scholar-officials – who played an important role for the exchange in both directions. However, our understanding of the developments since the late nineteenth century until about the middle of the twentieth century has remained limited and highly fragmented. While the political and economic transformations of this era understandably have drawn much focus, the inter-connections and complex relationships as well as the role of intermediaries underlying these developments warrant greater attention than they have received so far. This is particularly important given the recent increase in the availability of primary sources, such as archival documents and personal memoirs, as well as the easier access to rare books.



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To make sense of these sources, new analytical tools and more sophisticated methodological approaches are necessary. Fortunately, we can draw on concepts developed within the rapidly growing academic field of the history of knowledge (Burke 2015). While earlier research was guided by concepts such as diffusion, dissemination, transfer, and centre-periphery relations – contributing significantly to valuable insights – the spatial and practical turns in scholarship have led to entirely new and inspiring approaches. It is difficult to discuss knowledge production without seriously considering *lieux de savoir* (sites of knowledge) as emphasised by Jacob (2017), and as demonstrated by several papers in this volume.

Christian Jacob's concerns in the "Sites of Knowledge" approach are, to some extent, reflected in Kapil Raj's compelling concept of "Spaces of Circulation." Raj argues that "circulation" itself can be viewed as a "site of knowledge" (Raj 2013, 345). Building on this idea, we understand the actors involved in knowledge production at these sites as forming emerging epistemic communities. Spaces of circulation are both social and physical. As an analytical concept, they acknowledge the unevenness and asymmetries between actors, while also fostering the emergence of normative similarities. Circulation encompasses processes of encounter, negotiation, reconfiguration, and transformation of knowledge (Raj 2007, 58). These "spaces of circulation" are marked by a high degree of dynamism and entanglement, in which knowledge production has an "incremental aspect" (Markovits, Pouchepadass, Subrahmanyam 2003).

As Raj and others emphasise, knowledge production of such kind is not possible without intermediaries or "go-betweens" (Schaffer et al. 2009). Their role is of central focus in this volume and in all case-studies it is understood as functioning in both directions. Yet, going beyond an understanding of 'go-betweens' as human actors only, we also consider texts and translations as having agency. People, texts, and translations all are travelling actors vital for the creation, imitation, innovation, and adaptation of bodies of knowledge.

The articles in this special issue show that botanists, translators, logicians, linguists, writers, engineers, biologists, Communist Party members, diplomats, philologists, scientists, customs officers, book printers, and sinologists all shaped and participated in spaces of circulation between Europe and China. A first group of papers (Jami, Li, Lioi, Münning) reveals the distributed agency between human actors in a continuous space of circulation. The protagonists, rather than being singular points along a trajectory between China and Europe, or being bound to a specific site, turn out to be in constant come and go, moving knowledge back and forth between various social and physical realms.

They also produced a considerable number of texts – letters, notebooks, printed material, marginalia – which we view as equally or

even more important agents in the processes of knowledge generation. Considering texts as agents was an approach already taken earlier. Renewing the history of libraries, Latour and Hermant (1996) put forward a reading of libraries as “computing centers”, animating and articulating flows of information, which would later be at the heart of the theory of an actor-network (Romano 2014). For scientific texts more specifically, Callon, Law and Rip (1986) were also “suggesting that texts, often in combination with bodies or machines, constitute a crucial method of long-distance control.” For our case, the control of knowledge. Integrating these insights on texts as agents into our model of ‘spaces of circulation’ allows us to even better understand the dynamics of the generation of knowledge between China and the West. A second set of contributions to this issue is therefore primarily concerned with the movement of knowledge materialised in the form of texts (Amelung, Bréard, Bussotti).

Furthermore, equally crucial to our approach and within the given timeframe is to emphasise the complexity of the ‘translation’ operations at work. Rather than understanding knowledge as an immobile abstract entity independent of language, we understand translation not only literally as a contact of languages (Mounin 1963, 7) but also figuratively as a transfer, both linguistically and geographically. It is “a creative act of generating meaning and constructing discourse” in translingual contexts (Howland 2005, 21), operating changes and having a certain impact on the receiving context. Within our theoretical framework, we seek to show that scientific, linguistic, literary, political, and technological knowledge about China is not the result of mere processes of unidirectional ‘translation’ from China to Europe and vice versa, but the outcome of processes of translingual and transnational co-production. The influence of or ignorance towards certain terms or ideas cannot be explained simply by their presence or absence in a dictionary, in a book, or in a library. They came into being through the interventions of subjects in language, culture, discourse, and media material. Our approach allows us to account for their success or failure by studying the social and linguistic contexts in which they emerge, the controversies and negotiations they are part of, and the heterogenous, sinuous, and bumpy roads they travel within spaces of circulation. The production of new terminologies is closely related to the shaping and reshaping of concepts in the emerging epistemic communities. This materialises, albeit not exclusively, in dictionaries. Dictionaries certainly influence the production of terminologies beyond their original linguistic boundaries and still form the nuts and bolts that sinologists are working with today. As a third set of articles (Chen, Pisano, Shen, Wippermann) demonstrates, translations shaped both sinology as an academic discipline and the terminologies that make it up simultaneously.

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