

Transcript: Into the Kn/own/ - The Invisible Craftsmen

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Guest: Dagmar Schäfer, historian and sinologist

Emily: Let me introduce you to Maya. Maya has studied medicine and then focused on dentistry. She now has her own dental practice.

In her country, Maya's name and profession are documented in registers along with many, many others. MacKenzie, who is a general practitioner. Enzo, dermatologist. Navita, an oncologist.

Then one day, Maya's government decides that it would be much more efficient if these professions would just be summarized under one name. So Maya isn't a dentist anymore. Her dental practice is just a practice, same as MacKenzie's. Enzo's dermatological clinic is just a clinic. And Navita just works at a hospital. All of them are now just named "doctors" - along with all the other dentists, oncologists, dermatologists, general practitioners, neurologists, cardiologists, pediatricians and ear specialists out there. In a sense, Maya is now invisible. As a patient, if you enter her practice, you're not going to know if Maya is the doctor you really need for your ailment.

And to all the historians that may look at that government's register in the future, it will never be discernible that there was once a difference between a dentist and an oncologist.

This probably sounds like a made-up story, and it is. But just for a moment, imagine there was no name for your profession.

INTRO

Emily: Welcome to *Into the Kn/own/*; in this podcast series we invite you to view knowledge and its ownership in a new light and take you behind the scenes of some case studies from the volume "Ownership of Knowledge". I'm your host, Emily Tsui.

Dagmar: "Yòngyǒu. Mhm."

Emily: It's a word that is quite central to the research that historian and sinologist Dagmar Schäfer presents in her chapter "Names for work". It also illustrates how the relation between knowledge and ownership has been, and continues to be, different throughout the world.

Dagmar: "To *have* knowledge and to *own* knowledge uses the same word in classical Chinese."

Emily: In the modern Western context, knowledge and how to own it is regulated through law: Copyrights, patents, certificates, and so on. However, such concepts don't directly apply to classical China. Here, in this case, roughly the time between the 12th and 17th centuries, things were different. Chinese law didn't bother with knowledge, or with protecting it. Chinese scholars of the time based this on the understanding that knowledge could not be shared, as each person had to achieve it by themselves. They viewed knowledge as inextricably linked to and situated within an individual's body and lived experiences.

To know, ergo to have knowledge about something, means to own that knowledge. *Yòngyǒu*.

So, what does all of this have to do with losing the name of your profession? We'll get there.

Emily: Even though no laws regulated how to own knowledge, people still wanted to share, control and profit from it. So, to make this possible, other mechanisms had to be developed.

Enter the literati, China's influential political and scholarly elite. In the 13th century, the literati had to deal with a hard blow: When the Mongols under Genghis Khan conquered China and established the Yuan dynasty, they lost most of their power.

The literati were demoted to a social status similar to clerks. Their ability to read and write turned into a practical task, instead of an academic venture.

The group of people to now rise in the new rulers' esteem were artisans, artists and craftsmen. They owned the knowledge to produce material things, skills that the Yuan admired, and the literati knew it. So they made use of it.

Dagmar: "And what they actually do is giving the names to the kinds of expertise that the emperors need. So they go to the rulers and basically say, we are important, because we can read and write and we can name expertise for you. We can identify it. We can name it and we can document it. And in this way, you actually have access to it. And then, yet again, the literati has a very powerful position."

Emily: By naming the crafts, the literati could provide access to them, and to the people who honed them.

Whilst always being anchored to the artisan's bodies, their knowledge, their craftsmanship and their products became shareable, profitable and controllable.

This also made crafts visible in completely new ways. Officials differentiated not only between categories such as ironsmiths, tanners, carpenters, dyers or weavers. Even more specific professions proliferated as well. Take weaving, for example: Instead of having just general weavers, the field split into distinct roles like waist loom weavers and drawloom weavers.

Emily: However, there were also risks to this, at least from the literati's point of view. Fast forward 200 years: The literati are still the masters of the names, the undisputed intermediaries between craftsmen and the emperors of the Ming dynasty. Business between artisans and rulers is going well - maybe too well, in the eyes of some scholars, such as Qiu Jun. Qiu noticed the ample amount of money the emperor spent on luxury goods: a nicely carved chair here, beautiful lacquerware there, straining the state's budget. According to Dagmar, these growing expenses, invested into the craftsmen instead of the literati's scholarly services, show the level of power craftsmen had in the dynasty. And this influence fuelled the fear of literati such as Qiu that they might, once again, become irrelevant.

Emily: So, literati selected and documented names for crafts, and as such made the diversity and the manifold skills of artisans visible. In the same way,

they could also restrict such names and thereby *not* define expertise. In 1487, Qiu did just that: he limited the diversification of names. And with the strike of a pen these skills and with them these craftsmen were invisible to the emperor and the public. Their knowledge became disowned; because without a name, how could the artisans' work be recognized and accessed?

Dagmar: And finally, and I think that's what made me write this particular essay, also invisible to the historians. Because if there is no name for a certain kind of expertise, then you also don't see it historically. You might see the object, but it's not appearing in writing. And historians mostly tend to deal with writing.

Emily: If and how knowledge is visible is not only important for how we "read" history. Similar mechanisms are also in practice today. Indeed, naming or putting something into words is central to our contemporary approach to knowledge. If we discover a new atom, we find a name for it. If we create a new invention, we patent it under a specific new name. If a scientist stumbles across a plant species in the rain forest, it only becomes visible in the scientific community once she describes it in writing and puts a Latin name to it.

But what happens to knowledge that is not named for one reason or another? What happens, for example, to knowledge that is inherent to our bodies, like dancing, or carving a chair in your own specific way? Today, we can record a video of this and share it on Social Media - and yet, the knowledge stays within your body, in the rhythmic movement of your limbs

while you work on the wood, only ever to be *imitated* by others.

The question is, will we find additional systems of creating visibility for knowledge, that also stand the test of time?

Until then, by *naming*, we have the power to decide which knowledge to make visible and thereby validated as expertise, as something that is worth being owned and shared. This also gives us power over the future. Because in the moment we name something, we decide which knowledge is going to be remembered - and which isn't.

OUTRO

Emily: If you'd like to delve deeper into this subject, make yourself a cup of tea, snuggle up on your couch and dip into Dagmar Schäfer's chapter "Names for work: Crafts, bureaucracy and law in Yuan and Ming China (13th-17th century)" in the volume "Ownership of Knowledge. Beyond Intellectual Property."

It's Open Access and completely free - you can find the link to the book in each episode description.

This podcast is produced by the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science. To learn more about Knowledge Ownership and the History of Science follow us on Social Media and give us a thumbs up on your favorite podcast app. See you next time!