

An Editorial Note

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Although we received the hard copy of EASTS issue 2 this June 2008, there had already been 3 years since our Taiwan and East Asian teams began working on EASTS. Our Taiwan EASTS editorial board then liked to have a “birthday party” on June 15 to celebrate both the publications of the first two issues and our 3 years hard and happy works. Meanwhile, there were two important STS events unfolding in that birthday party. One is the keynote speech “From Medical Tourism to Egg Donation: Reflections on East Asian STS” by Professor Charis Thompson of UC Berkeley. The other is a round table discussion entitled: How Technology Traveled from Old Oriental to New East Asia? STS and Area Studies, with four engaging panelists: Professor John Lie, Dean of the Area Studies School in UC Berkeley, Professor Charis Thompson, Professor Chen Dung-Sheng of National Taiwan University, and myself. Now, we have three very interesting, albeit short, articles ready, which are originated from that round table discussion, and I am very pleased here to briefly introduce them in this panel discussion section of the current EASTS issue (vol. 2, no. 3).

In EASTS’ position paper in issue 1 “How far can East Asian STS go?” and also in the title of this round table “From old Oriental to new East Asia”, I had raised two rhetorical questions related to area studies and problematised the relationship between East Asian STS and area studies. The first question is “what’s the difference between EASTS studies and East Asian ‘area studies’ that apply Western STS perspectives, or area studies that apply supposedly universal STS theories?” The second question is more historical: “how had technologies or technical artifacts travelled or been transformed from old oriental (or the semi-colonial “Far Eastern”) contexts to the new East Asian contexts?”

If we consider the following three short articles/commentaries as partial responses to the two previous rhetorical questions, fascinating new perspectives emerge from these engaging interactions. Firstly, Lie seeks to question, or at least to untablize,

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the conventional boundaries between area studies and universal social theories. It is interesting to see that, while important sociological theories are usually outgrowth from privileged area studies of Europe or England herself, “theoretical breakthroughs may be based on a case study of England but not Ingushetia or Ethiopia.” But gradually, theorizations from marginal area studies can be more and more important, as testified by the achievements of Barrington Moore, Jr., Albert O. Hirschman, and Clifford Geertz; so could be the case of EASTS.

Secondly, Chen adopts the social network perspective to consider the various boundaries of Taiwan’s IC industry, Taiwan’s sociology discipline, and East Asian STS communities. He found that a balance “of local and global interorganizational ties avoids lock-in effects in these networks while contributing to the receipt of new information and facilitating path-independent technology collaboration.” This is another different formulation of area studies or “studies in East Asia,” which intends to transcend the more traditional configurations of area studies, with their colonial origins. Moreover, Chen nicely uses the immigration flows from South East Asia to East Asia societies as an example to show an emerging transformation of what we conventionally take to be East Asia; thus, “Because these new immigrants have become an important minority group in Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan, East Asian STS researchers need to incorporate their worldviews when examining issues such as the social construction of scientific knowledge, risk perception of science and technology, and science and democratic participation.” This is particularly important. Though EASTS are going to publish a double issue soon on the emerging South East Asian STS, we have yet to fully address upon what Chen has suggested in this round table.

Finally, viewing East Asia perceptively from California, Thompson offers a historically and geographically complex picture, which implicitly problematizes the two rhetorical questions themselves raised above, and which also shows how misleading it might be when applying the conventional global North–South categories to East Asia and conversely how unique and potentially fruitful East Asian STS could be. She writes “There have been and to a certain extent remain several (all compromised) contenders to Empire (or occupation or colonial or imperial influence) in the region, from European nations, to Japan, to the United States and China, several of which use science and technology..., as significant territorializing substrates and substitutes.” Thus, like it or not, “East Asia, then, is not the figure of the colonized Other or the global South.” While core members of EASTS often originate from Japanese colonial heritages and their postcolonial reflections, Thompson reminds us the bigger complex and complexities.

As if a final note for this short editorial, I cannot but cite another two sentences from Thompson, in order to serve as a communicative bridge between East Asia and those “outside East Asia” (actually the fourth editorial branch of EASTS: OEA). She summons, a bit poetically, “Those of us writing from the United States today find ourselves in a situation where being powerful on the world stage is currently so overdetermined that it is hard to talk about the less powerful within, the powerful without, and solidarities with the less powerful without. Following EASTS’ lead, perhaps we can destabilize this.” Yes indeed, and let us work together.