

Provincializing STS: Postcoloniality, Symmetry, and Method

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1 The Problem

STS is not short of studies on postcoloniality. Collectively the discipline has explored how technoscience works differently in different global locations, and fine case studies have explored postcolonial forms of domination. For instance, we have learned about Indian nuclear power (Abraham 1998, 2000), sub-Saharan therapeutic inequalities (Rottenburg 2009), the extractions of bioprospecting (Hayden 2007), how broken-down European technologies achieve an afterlife in the global South (Beisel and Schneider 2012), the complexities of transnational movements of Chinese medicine (Zhan 2009), how psychotropic drugs open people to spirit attack in Chile (Bonelli 2012), mapping and crafting as alternative modes of knowing (Turnbull 2000), and the entanglements of dogs and people in colonial histories (Haraway 2008).¹ These are just a few of the many postcolonial case studies in STS—and since Euro-America is not a monolith, there also are many analogous studies of the postcolonial within the

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¹ On the issue of differential hybridity—the related idea that hybrid forms of knowledge are valued differently in different locations—see Seth 2009 and Adams 2001.

colonizing countries themselves (see Mol 2002, 2008; Moser 2008; Mol, Moser, and Pols 2010; Singleton and Law 2013).

At the same time, the discipline has usually made use of Euro-American analytical terms, although there are exceptions. Warwick Anderson's beautiful study of the Fore and kuru, which draws in part on Melanesian gift exchange (Anderson 2008), is a case in point.² So too is the writing of Judith Farquhar and Mei Zhan, both of whom ask what it would be like to think through Chinese medicine (Farquhar 2002; Farquhar and Zhang 2012; Zhan 2009). In this article our concern is to follow these writers and scholars such as Marilyn Strathern, Casper Bruun Jensen, and Atsuro Morita. We argue for forms of postcolonial investigation that use non-Western analytical resources.³ Our major concern is thus to ask what might happen if STS were to make more systematic use of non-Western ideas.

The language needed to make this kind of argument is all contested. In particular, it is nearly impossible to avoid unsatisfactory binaries. These include theory on the one hand and practice or case study on the other. They also include such large geopolitical terms as *Western* and *Euro-American* versus *Southern* or *Oriental* or *Chinese*.⁴ The well-recognized difficulty is that postcolonial relations of exchange and extraction are complex, not dualist.⁵ More strongly, the term *postcolonial* is itself contested and unsatisfactory.⁶ So even though we are trying to work away from the term, in what follows we also find it almost impossible to avoid talking about theory. And indeed, the term does useful work too. "Simply put," writes Itty Abraham (1998: 35), "in the metropolis they 'do theory' and in the colonies they gather data." Quite so. He is commenting on George Basalla's (1967) account of the spread of Western science.⁷ But the resonance between Abraham's words about theory and data in technoscience

² And perhaps Shiv Visvanathan's call for "cognitive justice" also counts. See Visvanathan 2003, 2006; SET-DEV Project 2011; and Bijker 2013.

³ The use of non-Western ideas has been explored in anthropology. The notion of "the gift" (Mauss 1991) comes from Melanesia. More recently, Strathern (2011) has systematically used nonbinary modes of comparison from highland Papua New Guinea to rethink Euro-American topics, including kinship (Strathern 1992) and binarism (2011). See also Farquhar and Zhang 2012, Jensen and Blok 2013, and Morita 2014.

⁴ For recent examples of warnings about the dangers of binaries, see Schiebinger 2005 and Abraham 2006: 217. In the context of Chinese medicine, see Zhan 2009 and Farquhar 2012.

⁵ For instance, in his kuru study Anderson (2008) describes an economy of extraction in Papua New Guinea. He writes about medical scientists, anthropologists, and colonial administrators. Many were entirely well motivated. But the anthropologists and the biologists went to the Fore. With more or less difficulty, they extracted stories and brains. And then they removed these to places such as Bethesda, Maryland, or Adelaide, South Australia. There they were transmuted into scientific claims, monographs, and academic reputations. Indeed, they were transformed into a diagnosis, if not a cure, for this dreadful prion-based disease.

⁶ Some areas of the world, including parts of China, were never subjected to direct colonization. Settler states such as Australia, New Zealand, and the United States vary, though as Anderson (2007: 151) pithily puts it, in such countries indigenous people "can have 'culture' or government health services, but not both." Whether colonization has given way to postcoloniality is unclear in many locations. For instance, in Sápmi in northern Scandinavia, partial recognition of Sámi indigeneity is matched (as is common) by the imposition of science-based ecological policies insensitive to local practices (Sara 2009, 2013). The term *postcolonial* (and terms such as *decolonization*) have been rejected for these reasons by some indigenous activists and scholars, but also because they inappropriately center relations of coloniality (Smith 2003). Quite differently, but again raising questions about the large categories of coloniality, the specificities of nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial medicine have given way to those of twenty-first-century bio-prospecting (see, e.g., Hayden 2007).

⁷ Basalla's account is fifty years old, but Abraham's words still pretty much hold.

and those of Daiwie Fu, founding editor of *East Asian Science, Technology and Society (EASTS)*, is noteworthy: “Haven’t we taught our students STS with good case studies still mostly coming from the West? And haven’t we theorized our East Asian STS case studies also mostly from established Western theoretical perspectives: SSK, SCOT, ANT, Social World, cyborg feminism, bio-medicalization and all that?” (2007: 1–2).

Although things have shifted since Fu asked “how far can East Asian STS go?,” the question still stands before us as a challenge and a provocation. It has been a continuing focus of attention for the authors and editors of *EASTS*, and it also is our point of departure. Thus in most technoscience—but also in STS—we have case studies, Euro-American and Southern on the one hand and theory on the other. But the latter, together with the theory–case study division itself, comes from Euro-America. To frame the problem in this way is neither to detract from the developing importance of the work of the East Asian STS community in general nor to question the significance of *EASTS* in relation to that work. Indeed, as we have just implied, since Fu’s 2007 essay, *EASTS* has become one of the major non-Euro-American platforms for exploring and developing STS alternatives.⁸ Our particular focus, however, is on what one might think of as the analytical-institutional complex of STS, how this works to reproduce postcolonial intellectual asymmetries, and what might be done to tackle the latter.⁹

Dipesh Chakrabarty describes how these asymmetries are particularly difficult for Western-trained Southern intellectuals. In his *Provincializing Europe* (2000), he describes how fifteen thousand tribal people were massacred in Bengal by the British in 1856. After the first deaths the victims kept on coming. But why? The survivors said that their God had told them to fight. He would protect them. The story is brutal and horrific, but Chakrabarty’s particular concern is analytical. As a Western-trained historian he knows that gods are not *really* powerful. But as an Indian this makes him deeply uneasy. Here, then, is the question: To which should he give priority, Western historiographic convention or a world in which gods (not just beliefs about gods) cause actions?

The principle of symmetry catches a part of this. As we know, STS treats all beliefs, true and false, in the same terms. But this catches only a part of the problem, because it tacitly assumes that the discipline will pretty much stick with its own theories. To say this is not to complain. Symmetry between true knowledge claims and those that are false was crucial to the sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK). Its actor-network theory (ANT) extension to human and nonhuman actants by Michel Callon was

⁸ For a recent postcolonial erosion of the theory-empirical divide, see Zhan 2014. In *EASTS* this asymmetry has been examined on many occasions. For example, Gregory Clancey (2009) has argued the importance of taking local materials up into the STS rubric, while Togo Tsukahara (2009) has highlighted relations of dependent-independence; Ruey-Lin Chen (2012a; 2012b) and Jia-shin Chen (2012) have reflected on the distinctiveness of East Asian STS theory; Fa-ti Fan (2012) has suggested the need for critical regionalism; Susan Moon (2012) has foregrounded the importance of intuition; and Warwick Anderson (2012) has tentatively talked of Asia as method. Despite the strong influence of American STS in East Asia (Nakajima 2007), analyses of journal publications show that *EASTS* is only partly influenced by “mainstream STS” theory and has developed “theoretical creolization” (*pīn zhuāng* 拼裝) (R.-L. Chen 2012b, 2014; Fan 2012; Fu 2013).

⁹ To talk of the analytical-industrial complex is to play with Londa Schiebinger’s (2005) “European colonial science complex.”

equally significant (Bloor 1976; Callon 1986), but our suggestion is that it is time to extend it again.

Some caution is needed. Related writing in anthropology reveals there are pitfalls as well as opportunities for those who take this route. It is possible to imagine, for instance, in a version of exoticizing Orientalism, that knowledge from outside Euro-America offers special or privileged access to reality. Alternatively, it is possible to get caught up in chauvinistic “national science” projects.¹⁰ Even so, we want to suggest that STS might do well to explore a third postcolonial version of the principle of symmetry, where the discipline would explore the politics and analytics of treating non-Western and STS terms of analysis symmetrically. This means that it would stop automatically privileging the latter. It would abandon what Warwick Anderson and Vincanne Adams aptly call the “‘Marie Celeste’ model of scientific travel” in which analytical terms (or laboratories or facts) travel silently and miraculously from metropolis to periphery (see Anderson and Adams 2007: 182). Instead, with this postcolonial version of symmetry, the traffic would be lively, two-way, and contested. Or, even better, because there is no single postcoloniality, there would be multiple centers, a variety of postcolonial symmetries, and a series of different STSs.¹¹ As a part of this, STS would need, as Jensen, Blok, and Morita have argued, to think about translation and its betrayals—both linguistic and social (Jensen and Blok 2013; Morita 2014).

But how might this work in practice? To explore this question, we will describe how postcoloniality as an STS issue has unfolded in the work that we have done together.

2 Disconcertment

In 2009 Law was invited to Taiwan to lecture on ANT and its successor projects. The invitation came from Lin, who had worked with Law at Lancaster University as a PhD student. Law then traveled to Taiwan and talked about heterogeneity, relationality, and other aspects of ANT and its successor projects. At the end of the seminar series, he told his Taiwanese audience that the world is not coherent, and he argued that it can be understood only if STS uses methods that also are themselves multiple and non-coherent. For good measure, he added a lesson that he originally learned from Donna Haraway (1991: 149–81): because what we write is politically performative, in a postcolonial world it is important to do this in noncoherent and tension-ridden ways.

The seminar discussion that followed was disconcerting for both Law and his audience. Hsin-Hsing Chen, a professor interested in religious studies, told the participants that he had just taken his students to the final day of the annual outing of the

¹⁰ For a sense of the opportunities for alternative ways of knowing, including academic knowing that is neither chauvinist nor exoticizing, see in particular Viveiros de Castro 1998, de la Cadena 2010, and Blaser 2009b. For a related series of experiments, see Strathern 1992, 2011. For the difficulties, consider the 1998 collection edited by Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell, where indigenous categories are sometimes taken to offer special access to reality. For similar positions in alternative idioms, see Kohn 2013 and Bennett 2010. For comment on the difficulties, see Abrahamsson et al. 2015.

¹¹ In this regard, what we are hoping for differs from Sandra Harding’s otherwise similarly motivated project. See, for instance, Harding 1994, 1998, 2009.

goddess Mazu. The goddess is popular in Taiwan, and an impossible number of people—around a million—had tried to get into her Taizhong temple. Chen and his students got nowhere near the temple, but the crush and the noise were unbearable: “Religion [said Chen] . . . is a theoretical construct, but this isn’t a religion. It is a ritual that ‘doesn’t have a name for itself . . . it is just the way we live.’ [T]his [is a] massive event without a straight or coherent narrative for itself.” He went on: “I was particularly attuned to the messiness of the whole event . . . and . . . I think I [want] to argue that messy method at this moment here in Taiwan, the struggle against grand narrative in general, is not that productive” (Law and Lin 2011: 140).¹²

Helen Verran talks about disconcertment. This, she argues, arises in an embodied form when different metaphysical systems collide. It first happened for her in the form of a belly laugh when she realized that quite different systems of Western and Yoruba numbering were at work in Nigerian classroom practices (Verran 2001).¹³ For Law and his audience, this happened as we reflected on Hsin-Hsing Chen’s comments. Briefly, these crystallized the following obvious difficulty: STS was telling Law that what we know is situated, but he was talking to a Taiwanese audience as if the need for a messy method was a decontextualized truth. To put it mildly, this was uncomfortable.

Perhaps Law should have seen this coming. But what to do about it? It is possible to treat the problem as a formal paradox, to say that the claim that all knowledges are situated is self-contradictory. But more productively, we can also think of it empirically, and this is what we have been exploring since 2008. We have tried to think about the relations between Taiwanese and Euro-American English-language STS. We also have tried to think about what a Taiwanese or a Chinese-inflected (*huá wén* 華文) STS might look like (which, to repeat our earlier warning, is not a Chinese national [*zhōng guó* 中國] STS).

Importantly, this is an entirely collaborative process. Postcolonial STS can be done in all sorts of different ways, but in our work, the benefits of a bilingual collaboration have been crucial. Perhaps even more important is the fact that we are immersed in two different worlds: common sense in Hsinchu is often unlike common sense in Lancaster. Indeed, Lin sometimes feels that his head and his body are in different places, as if he has been intellectually beheaded.¹⁴ Or, to put it less dramatically, he feels that his head is full of Euro-American theory and knowledge while his body inhabits Taiwan. Perhaps Hsin-Hsing Chen and Dipesh Chakrabarty were feeling something like this too. Similarly wrenching bifurcations have been explored in feminist writing (see, e.g., Smith 1987), and they crop up routinely in other forms for those who work in languages other than English (e.g., Mol 2014; van de Port and Mol 2015). But most importantly, this sense of difference has taken us to the analytical-institutional complex mentioned above and how this might be reimagined. Thus, it has taken us to theory: to the possibility of a Chinese-inflected concepts in STS (although the notion of theory works poorly in many Chinese contexts). It has raised questions about methods and writing, because these too are starting to look different. It has led inexorably to metaphysics, because the Chinese-language world often rests on assump-

¹² The present argument is developed more fully in Law and Lin 2011.

¹³ See also Verran 2002 on different environmental firing regimes.

¹⁴ 身首異處: 身, body; 首, head; 異, different; 處, place.

tions quite unlike those that are current in much of Euro-America. It has taken us to institutions and career patterns and, as a part of this, it has taken us to modes of circulation and exchange: to the movements between different versions of STS and in particular to relations in STS between Taiwan and Euro-America.

Nothing that we propose can be treated as a general truth. However, our suggestion is nonetheless that these are the kinds of issues that any postcolonial STS is likely to need to attend to, not just in Taiwan or China but also, for instance, in the Spanish-, Portuguese-, and Hindi-speaking worlds. Thus, our suggestion is that this is likely to be a direction of travel needed for many postcolonial versions of STS.

3 Institution

So what does this mean in practice? One answer takes us back to Verran and Chakrabarty. It has to do with metaphysics, embodiment, disconcertment, and the “intellectual beheading” mentioned above. We return briefly to metaphysics below, but these in turn are necessarily related to matter-of-fact features of institutional contexts. So here are some simple but familiar—indeed almost mundane—observations about institutional structures. (We are talking of Taiwan, because this is the non-Euro-American context that we know best, but similar kinds of observations might be made of many other locations.)¹⁵

- In Taiwan most social science academics undertake PhD study in Euro-America. In practice this means that most travel to the United States or to the United Kingdom, and this usually in turn means that they are writing and working in English, at least during their doctoral study.
- As a part of this, they become affiliated with and expert in the particular theoretical approaches (e.g., social constructivism or ANT) that are considered important in their PhD departments.
- This in turn means that they are well related to international STS, but it also has several less-fortunate side effects. For instance, the (already small) community of STS academics in Taiwan tends to be theoretically fragmented. It also means that, while these researchers may well be responding to Taiwanese concerns, including theoretical creolization (see R.-L. Chen 2012b, 2014; Fan 2012), and publishing with local presses and journals, they also are likely finding themselves on the margins of their particular international academic networks.
- Recently, in an effort to upgrade the country’s university ranking and to facilitate internationalization of local research achievements, the Taiwanese government has encouraged all academics to publish in journals that are well ranked in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI). In practice this means that they are being encouraged to write in English, which in turn means that they have little choice

¹⁵ In the academic communities of Taiwanese science, engineering, and medicine, the importance of “catching up and converging with global/American trends” is taken for granted (Y.-w. Lin 2009; Y.-w. Lin 2012, 2013b). However, in the social science community this is not necessarily true, which raises questions, concerns, and debates (Chen, Chien, and Hwang 2009; Chu 2009; Kang 2009; Fan si hui yi gong zuo xiao zuo 2005; Chung 2015c).

but to write in ways that respond to the intellectual and social agendas of English-language journals and publishers.¹⁶

- Educational structures are variable around the globe, but the pressure on academics in locations such as Taiwan is toward a model of learning and scholarship that mimics those found in Euro-America and especially in North America, which therefore reproduces the same kinds of pressures and incentives.¹⁷

This broad-brush picture needs to be nuanced. For instance, some of these conditions are particular to Taiwan, and as we have suggested, some academics have been resisting their implications for decades.¹⁸ Elsewhere, for instance in Hong Kong, the analytical-institutional complex works differently (see [Chung 2015a, 2015b](#); [W.-y. Lin 2009](#)). Perhaps it works differently for the different Spanish- and Portuguese-language STSs too.¹⁹ There are no doubt many other exceptions, but here is our guess: as we briefly noted above, the conditions of academic production and exchange that we have just spelled out are not confined to Taiwan. To the extent that STS is an international discipline, they are at work in many places outside English-speaking Euro-America. Indeed, this is precisely why it is important to articulate them and why we think they are important. The message then is that in order to think well about postcolonial forms of STS, the discipline will need to think simultaneously about theory and empirical research and about subjectivities and materialities, as well as about some pretty matter-of-fact institutional practicalities. And somehow it will have to shift all of these together. Otherwise, it will carry on reproducing a theory–case-study postcolonial divide, and it will continue to separate minds from bodies for those who do not dwell in the English-speaking world—a bifurcation that at times extends to those who work in other European languages.²⁰

¹⁶ For more specific explorations, see [Su 2004](#) on the fragmentation and marginalization of the sociological community in the citation network, [Huang 2009](#) on the influence of the SSCI system, and [Lin 2014](#) for the biasing and shaping of local medical sociology. For general criticism of the analytical-instructional complex, see [Chen, Chien, and Hwang 2009](#); [Chu 2009](#); [Kang 2009](#); [Fan si hui yi gong zuo xiao zu 2005](#); [Chen et al. 2004](#); [Liu et al. 2003](#); and [Chung 2015c](#). At the same time, related effects are also at work within Euro-America. Even European STS academics, including native-English-speaking British STS academics, find that North American publishers ask for books and edited collections to be made more international, where *international* in practice means more oriented to North American concerns and/or the inclusion of North American case studies. No doubt such market-oriented parochialism is also at work in other locations.

¹⁷ Again, although we write of “Euro-America” as if this were a single whole, North American models have been exported not only to other regions of the world but also to Europe. Over the last three decades the so-called Bologna model for doctoral study has displaced alternative European doctoral practices in a single “best-practice” model.

¹⁸ In the Taiwanese social science community, there have been enduring decade-long efforts as well as critical works on the “Sino-ization,” indigenization, and localization of social science ([Fu 1991, 1995](#); [Yang 1993](#); [Yang and Wen 1982](#); [Yeh 2001](#); [Tsou and Su 2009](#); [Tsai and Hsiao 1986](#)). See also the ongoing press and policy debates in a countersignature website created by Taiwanese academics to resist the government policy since 2010 ([Joint Statement 2015](#)). The Taiwan-initiated and -based *EASTS*, albeit working in English to facilitate intra-Asian communication, can be seen as one of the more recent attempts at resistance. See also n. 8.

¹⁹ We cannot read Spanish or Portuguese, but the English-language publications of authors such as [Mario Blaser \(2009a\)](#), [Marisol de la Cadena \(2010\)](#), [Arturo Escobar \(2008\)](#), and [Ivan da Costa Marques \(2014\)](#) suggest that this may be the case.

²⁰ For analytical differences between different European languages, see [Mol 2014](#) and [van de Port and Mol 2015](#). One of the many inconveniences of binarizing Euro-America and its Others is that both categories get homogenized. But just as there are multiple practices in technoscience, so too are there endlessly many

4 Explanation

If this is correct, then institutions and asymmetrical modes of circulation work in ways that tend to lock Taiwanese STS—and those in similar situations—into positions of subordination within Euro-American-ordered disciplinary structures. Indeed, and as a part of this, they also have tended to erode alternative modes of knowing and learning that predated the arrival of the first Euro-American adventurers.²¹ That is our first point. Our second point is about alternative non-Western explanatory logics. We want to say that, as STS theories get carried to locations such as Hsinchu, such alternatives tend to get locked out of the discipline, both in Taiwan and elsewhere, and this has real explanatory consequences. To show what this might mean, we turn to an ethnographic moment in a Taiwanese consulting room.

Dr. Lee is a distinguished Chinese medical practitioner who is popular with her patients. Like many new-generation practitioners, she has been university trained in both Chinese medicine and Western biomedicine, and, unlike some of her older colleagues, she *works* with both, too. We take this from our field notes: “Your pulse is like a guitar string. That means you have ‘depleted-fire’ (xū huò, 虛火) in the liver (meridian). . . . You are busy and stressed; you’re exhausted and irritable. Your emotions relate to fire in the liver (meridian), because the liver (meridian) is like the general in the body. It governs your emotions and your determination” (Lin and Law 2014: 812). This is in a world that belongs to Chinese medicine. Our notes continue:

The [patient’s] biomedical scan revealed no sign of arteriosclerosis. . . . Dr. Lee [says that] “The tests have eliminated some possibilities. . . . We’ll stick with my previous diagnosis . . . the pulsation at the ‘chi’ position (chǐ, 尺) . . . shows that you are constantly drawing out energy to keep your body going on a daily basis. . . . The pulsation tells us about the overall dynamics and function of the meridians, but it doesn’t tell us about all somatic morbidity. So we can also make good use of biomedical tests.” (Lin and Law 2014: 809)

Note the last thing she says: “We can *also* make good use of biomedical tests.” This is important because it tells us Dr. Lee’s practice includes biomedicine but that it does not fit with its logic. To state the obvious, there is no room for meridians or *chi* in biomedicine, because they cannot be found anatomically or physiologically—they simply don’t exist. But in Dr. Lee’s world, there is room for both scans and

practices within “Euro-America.” See Latour 1993, Mol 2002, Stengers 2008, Singleton and Law 2013, and Waterton and Tsouvalis 2015.

²¹ Shiv Visvanathan (2006: 167) cites Dharampal, who devastatingly argued that “agriculture in India was an *epistemology* that the colonial British destroyed.” Perhaps there is a case for breathing life into a term that has only rarely been found in STS: *epistemocide*. See Scholte 1983: 250 and Bonelli 2014: 108. On the other hand, the complexities of nonbinary exchanges may mean that often the fate of ways of knowing and being, albeit embedded in dominatory relations, is more subtle. The argument is that practices, knowledges, and the grounds for knowing were all undone together. For the complex struggles in medicine to come to terms with the professional, political, epistemic, and metaphysical requirement of relating to Western technoscience and its versions of reality, see Farquhar 2012, 2015 for the People’s Republic of China and Adams 2001 for the People’s Republic and Tibet. Also see Lin and Law 2015 for an alternative understanding of *international*.

meridians. This tells us that the logics of the two systems are profoundly different. To make the argument quickly, biomedicine is reductive. In practice it is probably different (see [Mol 2002](#)), but in principle biomedicine takes for granted that the body of a patient is a particular way: it tries to describe this, and it searches out background causes. Medical anthropologist and STS scholar Judith [Farquhar \(2015: 230\)](#) puts it this way: “A signified must be supplied for the signifier, an object must come forward for every noun to make the technical term consistently meaningful to a large group of interlocutors.” In a beautiful phrase, she elsewhere describes this as epistemological foundationalism ([Farquhar 2012: 153](#)). This is a way of knowing and being in which “facts are facts are facts” ([Farquhar 2015: 227](#)). And that is the end of the story.

In contrast, by Euro-American standards the Chinese system is syncretic.²² It works by hybridizing, it looks for patterns of association by seeking out analogies, it searches for contextualized propensities and imbalances, and it is situated in the sense that objects are contextual. They are “gathered,” as it were, relationally: “Dui-xiang things,” writes [Farquhar \(2015: 232\)](#) drawing on [Latour 2005](#)) when describing the work of Chinese practitioner Guangxin Lu, “are our partners *in* perception, not the mere objects *of* our perception” (emphasis added).

None of this is news. Postcolonial anthropologists such as Mario [Blaser \(2009b\)](#) and Marisol [de la Cadena \(2010\)](#) have worked on analogous issues²³ and sinologists and medical anthropologists such as [Farquhar](#) and [Zhang](#) have explored these kinds of differences and considered their Chinese-inflected explanatory potential ([Farquhar 2002](#); [Farquhar and Zhang 2012](#); [Zhan 2009, 2014](#)). Indeed, [Farquhar](#) and [Zhang](#) use STS language to articulate Chinese medicine for a Euro-American readership (drawing on [Latour 2005](#)), and, as we noted in our introductory remarks, both have explored the question we are asking here: What might it be to understand the world through the lenses of Chinese medicine?

But what would happen if STS also started to think symmetrically? What would happen if this way of thinking were absorbed into our academic work? No doubt there are many possibilities, but one answer is that a Chinese-inflected STS would not go looking for causes or strong explanations. Instead, it would observe what goes with what situationally and (if we push the argument a step further) it would ask questions about whether or not what is being observed is in balance. It would, in short, work more like Dr. Lee’s Chinese medicine than like biomedicine.

So what might this mean in practice? Again, this is for discussion, but one answer is that it gives us two radically different postcolonial STS stories about the intersection of biomedicine and Chinese medicine in Taiwan. We know that biomedicine is being used with Chinese medicine in Dr. Lee’s practice, and we can understand this in at least two ways. In version one, we can treat it as an expression of biomedical, colonial, and postcolonial power. This story is pretty persuasive; it’s even more convincing if we add that, after fifty years of Japanese colonization, a postwar period of Americanization (see [Hwang, Wang, and Huang 2010](#)), and the subsequent creation of a public health insurance system, 96 percent of Taiwan’s health care budget is spent on biomedicine, with just 4 percent allocated to Chinese medicine. The argument is

²² The English-language term *syncretic* is scarcely neutral, but we cannot discuss this here. See [Law et al. 2014](#).

²³ See also [Hetherington 2009](#). For commentary from an STS perspective, see [Law 2015](#).

that Chinese medicine has been pushed to the margins, and (as in Dr. Lee's practice) in those places where it is hanging on, it is under pressure to absorb biomedical realities.

That is postcolonial version one. But in version two—in a Chinese-inflected STS—the story starts to look quite different. Why? The answer has to do with hybridity, the refusal to embrace reductionist forms of explanation, and the assumption that objects are relational, not given. For instance, two-thousand-plus years of Chinese medical history show that this has always worked by absorbing newcomers. When something new came along, this did not overturn previous practices or ideas; instead, it was added to the canon. For instance, the classic *Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon* (e.g., Anonymus 2002)—the oldest major Chinese medical text, assembled between two and five centuries before the Common Era—is itself a hybrid of five schools of ancient medical practice. And this is a logic of addition that has been at work ever since.

So what does this history of accretion imply? The answer is that biomedicine is not very special. Indeed, from a Chinese medical point of view, it is nothing more than the most recent arrival, and like its predecessors, it has found its place within the syncretic, nonreductive, and object-as-relation world of Chinese medicine. The conclusion is that if we do away with the epistemological foundationalism described by Farquhar, then what we are seeing in Taiwan has as much to do with Chinese medical business as usual as it does with biomedical domination.

Much more might be said,²⁴ but at its simplest, we are suggesting two kinds of postcolonial STS are at work here, and we are in the presence of two versions of understanding.²⁵ To be sure, neither is pure. In this conjoined world, both work by bringing STS and Chinese realities together, but they do so in very different ways. One absorbs a Chinese explanatory sensibility. Chinese-inflected, it does Chinese-related explanatory business as usual. It starts to undo Anderson and Adams's "Marie Celeste" mode of theoretical travel, and it starts to undo the center-periphery distinction. By contrast the other, which uses STS explanation as usual, does not.

5 Method

Most recently—although this is a work in progress—we have sought to explore this postcolonial symmetry one step further by asking what would happen if we were to reverse the STS terms of analytical trade. What would happen if we used a Chinese term to make sense of a European case? Again, there are complexities. For instance, as we noted earlier, the term *theory*—and the theory-empirical divide—simply fails to work in Chinese medicine. For reasons explored by Zhan and Farquhar and mentioned

²⁴ Interesting here, for instance, is the issue of scale. It is tempting to say that the macrosocial distribution of the Taiwanese health care budget tells the real story, while particular practices, such as those of Dr. Lee, though interesting, are microsocial phenomena and thus tell us little about domination or hegemony. This argument works well, but only if we also buy into the scaling assumptions—the macro-micro distinction—upon which it depends. But scaling can itself be understood an effect of practices, and it is not clear that it works in this way in many Chinese—or, indeed, Euro-American—practices. For discussion see Law 2000.

²⁵ See also Lin 2013 for a similar double reading of patients' actions from ANT and displacement theory. A related way of reading the result of the analytical-institutional complex mentioned above is between (passive) intellectual subordination and (active) theoretical creolization.

above, the terms of art of the latter are essentially practical.²⁶ However, this suggests in turn that a Chinese-inflected STS might be quite unlike its English-language cousin.

To get a sense of the possibilities, we have taken a Chinese term of art, *shi* (*勢*),²⁷ moved it to Europe, and used it to explore features of the 2001 foot-and-mouth disease epidemic in the United Kingdom.²⁸ The term *shi* means something like “propensity” (Jullien 1995). In many Chinese contexts, including medicine, things have propensities to shift and change their form. When the changes and the flows that run through them are blocked, this leads to imbalance. Such is the basis of much Chinese medicine: diagnosing and undoing blockages and imbalances. But propensities aren’t fixed. Things don’t “have” propensities; instead, the latter are situated and relational, ebbing and flowing between nonbinary opposites. (For Euro-American readers it may be helpful to think of yin and yang.) There is a methodological point here: the art of knowing and intervening well is the cultivation of a sensibility to propensities and their changing ebbs and flows, and working with them rather than against them.

Methodologically, the implications of this shift are potentially profound if we take them into STS. Representation becomes relatively less important, and sensibility more so. A relational version of “the empirical” is important in Chinese medicine, but Farquhar’s epistemological foundationalism is not. Also, the sensibility is not simply about bodies: it is at work in social and material relations too. It is easy to see this in classical Chinese philosophy. Here, accounts of the world—usually in the form of advice to princes—look quite different. Indeed, they don’t look like descriptions at all. For instance, the Daoist *Dao De Jing* is paradoxical, aphoristic, allusive, and poetic (Lao Tzu 2007). This is because the world and its propensities are not fixed, cannot be pinned down, and are contextual and therefore elusive to representation. Our thinking about this is work in progress, and we do not wish to create an STS based on the world of classical Daoism, which has many analytical and political inconveniences. Nevertheless, we have been experimenting with *Dao De Jing*-inflected accounts of the British foot-and-mouth epidemic, and some of these look as much like aphorism as empirical story. The conclusion, then, is that in a Chinese-inflected STS, the empirical might be quite profoundly unlike the current STS case study.

But there are also more straightforward potential methodological implications. For instance, Sun Tzu’s *Art of Warfare* is one of the few Chinese classics to be found on the bookshelves of Western business schools (e.g., Sun Tzu 1993). For Sun Tzu, military strategy was about maximizing advantage by detecting and working *with* propensities/*shi* rather than against them. Once again, subjectivities are on the move. Putting this logic into practice, a great general becomes someone who cuts an unheroic figure. He (always “he”) does not flaunt himself but turns himself into an invisible, subtle, and flexible manipulator. He influences circumstances precisely in order to avoid battle.

²⁶ This is somewhat ironic, because the theory-empirical divide should not really work in Euro-American STS either. STS practitioners usually argue that theory and practice cannot be teased apart. But here (forgive us) our disciplinary practice trails behind our theory.

²⁷ Bearing in mind the notorious dangers of Orientalism, we appreciate that “culture” might not be the most favorable candidate for thinking STS by other *EASTS* researchers (Fu 2013). Nevertheless, we mobilize the cultural resource of *shi* to treat it as a practical conceptual tool. Our object is to experiment with it to see how an alternative logic of practice might reimagine Anglophone STS. See Lin 2016 for an empirical examination of how to think about Chinese medical practices in terms of *shi*.

²⁸ The following discussion sketches the argument. See Law and Lin 2016 for details.

Indeed, in this world, slaughter in warfare is always a sign of failure. Applied to the 2001 UK foot-and-mouth epidemic, the story that emerges is distinctive. The disease was eradicated, yes, but in this *shi*-inflected way of thinking, the mass slaughter immediately tells us that the strategy used to achieve this was catastrophic: effective but, as Sun Tzu might have said, inefficacious and unwise. And the supposed heroism of the politicians? This simply underlines the fact that they were second-rate generals commanding a strategy that was equally flawed. There are, of course, many people in the United Kingdom who would agree with this for other reasons, but the *shi*-inflected story starts to tell the story in a different way.

6 Conclusion

In this essay we join the decades-long efforts of Taiwanese social scientists and the more recent endeavors of the East Asian STS community by imagining the creation of a Chinese-inflected STS. As a part of this—indeed, a precondition to it—we also hope that scholars in similar situations might find ways to leverage themselves out of the grip of the Euro-American analytical-institutional complex and its attendant epistemological foundationalism. But the point of the present essay is not to suggest that the rest of the STS community should take up a Chinese-inflected STS. Most people in the discipline (including one of the authors) do not speak Chinese, and such an ambition would make no sense in other contexts. Instead, our broader object is to suggest that STS is surprisingly parochial and to show that it is possible to provincialize it by imagining it in different modes in different contexts.

We are not, then, proposing separation or intellectual compartmentalization. Indeed, we believe that STS should be proud of its collective work. It has developed powerful tools for understanding and raising critical questions about technoscience practices. As a part of this, it has developed a healthy theoretical pluralism. It has studied and questioned postcolonial knowledges and practices. But what it has not quite brought into focus is the way in which its character as a discipline remains a creature of place and time. Of course it is not wrong that it started in Euro-America, nor is it wrong that it is now substantially English-inflected and makes use of English-language tools and sensibilities. Our argument is that it would be wise to make our terms of international analytical trade a topic in their own right. The issue is neither the creation of national STSs nor the generation of hegemonies in other forms.²⁹ Rather, it is to think about the implications of exploring the postcolonial symmetry that we propose here: the idea that our terms of art might not come only from English-language Euro-America, and to think about STS in ways that are indeed Chinese, Spanish, and Hindi inflected.

This will not be easy. STS is currently dominated conceptually, linguistically, corporeally, metaphysically, and institutionally by provincial Euro-American and especially English-language practices. But if we do succeed, then we will have created

²⁹ This point is made by Anderson (2009: 394), drawing on Abraham 2006: 210 where he talks of the dangers of Hindu nationalism in India.

a plurality of intersecting STSs and sensibilities, and we will be able to say that we have undone the provincialism of STS.

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