The Stickiness of Knowing: Translation, Postcoloniality, and STS

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A language, a culture, or a thought, in its divergence, furnishes other engagements with (another glimpse of) the unthought. And its fecundity is measured by the power of this engagement and this glimpse.

François Jullien, On the Universal

1 Opening Comments

“Provincializing STS” is one essay in a short continuing line of practical intellectual experiments that seek to explore the character of a possible Chinese-inflected STS. These experiments are partial, location specific, and incomplete, and they necessarily fit more or less poorly within standard disciplinary boundaries. They also raise serious problems with terminology and level of analysis (“Chinese”? “Western”?). Unsurprisingly, reactions have been varied: sometimes well received, they also have been seen as wrong-headed, unscholarly, dangerous, mystifying, offensive, weird, or simply uninteresting. We are therefore deeply grateful to Warwick Anderson, Ruey-Lin

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1 By “Chinese-inflected STS” we intend an STS that draws on Chinese (huà wén 華文) or, more specifically, a Han Chinese (hàn yǔ 漢語) intellectual legacy, rather than a Chinese national (zhōng guó 中國) STS. For details of these experiments see Law and Lin 2011, 2015, and 2016; Lin and Law 2014; and Lin 2016.
Chen, Judith Farquhar, Atsuro Morita, and the editors of EASTS for their attention to the issues we are seeking to raise, their generosity of their comments, and their willingness to continue to think collaboratively about the possibilities implied by “Asian,” “postcolonial,” “Chinese,” and/or “Taiwanese” forms of STS. We also are grateful that they let us down gently when we go astray. Anderson correctly implies that the essay is not well located in important parts of postcolonial literature. Chen appropriately warns that Western STS authors should not be encouraged, even implicitly, to ignore the work of their Asian colleagues. Farquhar is right to note the limits to our knowledge of the rich history and contemporary practices of Chinese medicine. And Morita is generous in choosing to treat the tensions between the ethnographic moment of disconcertment and the so-called postcolonial intellectual asymmetry as an occasion for a further and illuminating experiment of his own.

In effect, all four commentators are gently reminding us that the topics we explore are much more complex than the manner in which we open them up. So we are rightly reminded that histories (including academic histories) are different in the different East Asian countries; that the term Chinese is an endlessly ambiguous marker; that the Chinese language is heterogeneous; that Chinese medicine indeed comes in many different forms; that the dualist divisions “West”–“East Asia” are misleading in many ways, but not least because there is a long and continuing history of complex power-saturated interchanges between the West and East Asia; that “the West” itself is scarcely a homogeneous category; that Taiwanese daily experience is not always so unlike that of Europe or North America; that the issue of temporalities, a crucial feature of postcolonial encounters, is in urgent need of exploration; and that in STS, the division between theory and case study is not simply problematic but also has been extensively problematized. Some of these complexities are foregrounded in “ Provincializing STS.” For instance, we worry about the difficulty of using such terms as Chinese or Western and the extreme difficulty of avoiding terms such as these that are aggregating and polarizing. However, if we discuss some of the complexities raised by the commentators, more often we set these to one side, sometimes explicitly but sometimes not.

To say this is not to deny that there also are disagreements. Most obvious, the way in which we imagine STS differs from the vision offered by Chen on, for instance, the issue of language and translation. Far less than Chen do we take it that words and theories or theory versions can be detached from the practices in which they are embedded and moved elsewhere. We share his view that concepts are unlikely to be “national”—this is one of the larger terms that we have indeed sought to avoid. However, our approach to STS assumes that words are embedded within, grow out of, and participate in practices. In our work we therefore usually seek to grasp the character of those practices. This way of thinking suggests that terms unavoidably carry their own only partially negotiable social and intellectual baggage—that they are, in other words, more or less context sticky. If this is right, then a whole series of questions follows. How to detect and think about that baggage? Which parts to carry

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2 In part we have avoided the term national because we do not wish to imply support for projects of intellectual (including Chinese) nationalism.
3 The focus on practice is central to Euro-American STS. Our particular understanding draws, in particular, on actor-network theory and feminist material semiotics. See, e.g., Latour 1987 and Haraway 1997.
and which to abandon? How to think about and handle the power relations that they imply? How to think about the ways in which the latter set limits to the conditions of the possibility for translation? And what, if anything, might be done to alter those conditions? We touch on these questions in “Provincializing STS” and again below, working in a context that has been shaped by anthropologists, postcolonial scholars, and activists who have been thinking about such issues for many decades.4 How, for instance, to translate a word such as hau—a term that has indeed helped to rework the conceptual architecture of anthropology and more recently STS (Anderson 2008)? Or meacci, a term that means something a little like “landscape” in Sámi but when so translated is both seriously misleading and politically damaging (Mazzullo and Ingold 2008)? Or shi (勢), often translated as “propensity,” which is discussed below? The overall lesson is that translations are simultaneously sites of judgment and locations of continuing, power-saturated struggle.

2 STS, Shi (勢), and Context

In the case of shi (勢), the web of associations and practices that this term indexes fits strangely into Euro-American contexts, practices, and patterns of thinking.5 Unsurprisingly, in attempts at dictionary translation, the term emerges in many different ways into West European languages such as English or French. Indeed, François Jullien devoted an entire book on its associations (Jullien 1995). But, as Jullien also suggests (see the epigraph above), if a language hosts the possible horizons of thought, then its divergences from other languages may point to possible “unthoughts” (Jullien 2014),6 in which case shi (勢) indexes a way of living and knowing foreign to, but potentially productive for, Euro-American traditions.7


5 In what follows, we use the term Euro-American (borrowed and adapted from Marilyn Strathern) as a shorthand for English-inflected North American and West European academic practice and, more particularly, the practice of STS. The argument is therefore both linguistic and institutional. We choose our words carefully because other West European languages are at play in STS, and in some cases these have been profoundly significant. Both poststructuralism and actor-network theory were, for instance, primarily French and French-language creations, and there are real linguistic and conceptual differences between the European languages. For instance, the French term agencement, widely used by Gilles Deleuze and important to poststructuralism and to STS, translates poorly into “assemblage” in English, where process gives way to thingness, noun, or object. There is also a growing body of STS-influenced work on the analytical significance of European language differences. See, for instance, the analysis of eating in van de Port and Mol 2015, a term linguistically fairly different from the way in which ingesting is spoken about in Brazilian Portuguese; the Dutch term lekker, which translates poorly into English (Mol 2014); and the idea of “Western food,” which comes into being not in Europe but in Guatemala (Yates-Doerr and Mol 2012). All these reservations noted, the English language together with its increasingly North American–inflected academic contexts is the most widespread idiom/institutional setting for STS in both North America and West Europe.

6 While we share concerns with and draw insights from sinologists, such as Jullien and David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, our approach is different. Their commentaries are more general and often rest on a philosophical analysis of texts. Though we also make use of texts and cannot entirely avoid generality, our primary concern is to explore specific and located practices.

7 Many observers have made related claims. For one example, see Hall and Ames 1995.
So what follows from this observation in practice? It may be that our STS experiments with this term are simply infertile, but even if this is not the case, how they might be conducted is certainly a matter of (power-diffracted) struggle. What to try to carry with the term? Where to try to do the recrafting? What to leave behind? And why? These are issues that will trouble any such endeavor, and to which we briefly return below. However, one thing is certain: if it is to work at all, then the contexts and the practices, whether in Chinese or English language, that surround the term will need recrafting. No doubt (and we return briefly to this thought below), reworking will need to extend to the very notions of context and practice (though we cannot discuss the latter here). But (to state the obvious) any such reworking will not be easy. An English-language STS that takes *shi* (勢) seriously would necessarily betray many of the ways in which the term is embedded, for instance, in Chinese medicine. Analogously, it would also mean betraying some of the current conventions of Euro-American STS. What, for instance, would count as evidence? What would such evidence look like? What would “the empirical” become? Again, we briefly return to these questions below, but these might look very unlike the already contested conventions embedded in Euro-American STS. However, it is clear that whatever emerged from such experiments would necessarily be a crafted hybrid, simultaneously connected with and disconnected from both its Chinese origins on the one hand and contemporary Euro-American STS on the other. To use the concept proposed by Morita, the notion would have the status of a hinge between reshaped contexts, contexts that have in the past customarily been held apart. Perhaps indeed this is implied in Farquhar’s suggestion that *shi* (勢) might be treated as “situated dispositions of power/knowledge,” a proposal that can be seen as reflecting not only the language of Michel Foucault but also a Chinese legalist reading of the term and the way it is used by Sun Tzu in *The Art of Warfare*.8

So as Morita observes, contexts are crucial. The issue, then, is which contexts to articulate. Morita fascinatingly shifts the context of alterity by evoking Japanese colonial history and Takeuchi Yoshimi’s review of Asianism. At the same time, as he also appreciates, the term context indeed carries its own baggage. In the Euro-American tradition, the search for context is chronic, motivating a never-finished search to remedy the possibly incomplete character of whatever it is that is described, is present, or is said to be self-evident (see, e.g., Strathern 1991). Nevertheless (or perhaps therefore), each profession has its own conventions for proper contextualization and corrigibility, and STS is no exception, with its forms of evidence (often the case study) and its preferred theoretical idioms. For instance, in STS we tend to visit field sites and archives, write empirically founded qualitative accounts that draw on these, cite from within a somewhat common canon of recent Euro-American STS and social theory, and frame what we write in terms of particular idioms such as social interest, network, affect, or embodiment. The present exchange conforms to this.

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8 For instance, ancient Chinese legalist Han Fei Tzu (韓非子) proposes that law, strategy, and propensity are the necessary trio for being a powerful ruler (Han Fei Tzu 1964). And some parts of Sun Tzu also follow this path. For example, “It is the nature of logs and boulders that on the flat ground, they are stationary, but on steep ground, they roll. . . . Thus, that the propensity of the expert commander in exploiting his men in battle can be likened to rolling round boulders down a steep ravine thousands of feet high says something about his propensity” (Sun Tzu 1993: 121; we have changed the translation of *shi* (勢) from “strategic advantage” to “propensity”).
Should we be oriented to the past or to the future? To an East Asian, a postcolonial, or a Chinese-inflected STS? Are we staging an encounter between theory and case study? Or are we exploring the role of alterity, ethnographic encounter, and the politics of theoretical displacement? Or, indeed, the location of alterity? These are some of the questions on the table. As we make our different arguments, at the same time we all necessarily make our contexts and offer our own particular prescriptions. Viewed in this way, the issues are always what are appropriate ways of contexting? Where are they appropriate? How are they constrained? And for what purpose or purposes or why?

3 “Provincializing STS”: Context and Style

As Morita observes in “Provincializing STS,” we talk (perhaps too quickly) of an “analytical-institutional context.” Our concern in that essay was to push against what we take to be the contextual inertia of the contemporary Euro-American academic system—a set of arrangements that we suggest is also being reproduced in important respects in Taiwan. Our argument is that these arrangements work to reproduce particular modes of knowing while displacing others. At this point caution is needed. Power saturated though they may be, we are not suggesting that such Euro-American academic ways of knowing are devoid of merit. Nor do we want to make a general argument. (While we appreciate the irony, we need to say there is no “general”—everything is located.) This means that in “Provincializing STS,” our concern is quite specific: to experiment with a possible Chinese-inflected STS in particular Chinese- and English-language contexts. But how to create spaces in which this is possible or thinkable?

To do this we thought it important to find ways of reducing the self-evidence of North American institutionalized academic forms and practices. Here Morita’s diagnosis is correct. The initial context for “Provincializing STS” was Euro-American and predominantly North American—the 2015 annual meeting of the Society for Social Studies of Science in Denver, Colorado. In this context Law chose to talk of postcolonial symmetry in the hope that the notion of symmetry, a term important in the disciplinary history of STS, might attract the interest of an audience that included some who might have had little exposure to postcoloniality. How well this worked is uncertain, and in any case, audiences are diverse. In Denver, some from outside Euro-America or with backgrounds in postcolonial or decolonial studies shared the reservations mentioned by Morita in the present exchange, finding the binary West/Rest divide overdrawn. Or, like Chen and Morita, they did not recognize our characterization of their national higher education systems. Or, again, they were concerned about

9 We try to note this carefully in the extended paper on shi (勢) (Law and Lin 2016). Any argument about the need to change ways of knowing needs itself to be specific and contextualized. If, as some have suggested, we are entering a “post-truth” era in North American and European political discourse, then the possible disadvantages in many northern contexts of quickly abandoning the modes of knowing broadly associated with the Western academy are self-evident. And, as Chen implies, there may also be reasons for holding onto these in the academy in a country such as Taiwan. Quite differently, it is important to note that there are also many interesting and experimental ways of knowing within or adjacent to the Euro-American academy.
the gendering implied in some Chinese-language practices for knowing. Obviously we take responsibility for any instances where this broad-brush approach was inappropriate, but at the same time, we also appreciated that the task of making space for experiments in a Chinese-inflected STS was never going to be easy. This is because, as we implied above, it is not just words that are context sticky but modes of knowing too. Indeed, we touched on this in “ Provincializing STS” when we wrote, “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” (217). This was one of the core points that we wanted to press home at the Denver meeting. But how, then, to think about and resist the stickiness of knowing?

One response is to ask two STS-inflected questions: What is entailed in knowing, and what are the contexts that provide for knowing? What we have suggested points to one way in which this might be done within the idiom of Euro-American STS: it becomes a matter of understanding the practices that make up what we might think of as “knowing spaces” (Law 2016; Lin 2015, 2016a) and exploring and characterizing the constraints and affordances—institutional, practical, material, conceptual, stylistic, normative, epistemological, and ontological—embedded in those spaces. We have worked in this way elsewhere in an idiom that therefore conforms to the major conventions of Euro-American STS, and versions of this strategy have shaped the present exchange up to this point. Thus, as we noted above, Morita productively recontextualizes alterity in the alternative context of the history of Japanese social thought, and we have responded in similar style. But as we also have suggested, the notion of context carries its own Euro-American baggage: the sensibility that whatever is being discussed is incomplete and in potential need of remedial contextual supplement. Productive though this strategy is, it also rests on a very particular conceptual habit, that of dividing whatever is of interest from its explanatory background. That is, it works by locating the object of interest. As we have implied, there is much to be said for this strategy of location, but it is scarcely universal. Indeed, and to come to the point, thinking through shi (勢) works quite differently. It does not first distinguish objects or things in their incompleteness and then seek to rearticulate them by contextual means. Although it is not clear what a noncontextual STS might look like, the likelihood is that any such creature will breach many of the conventions of Euro-American STS. And this, indeed, is exactly the kind of issue that we are seeking to explore as we experiment with a shi (勢)-inflected STS. Accordingly, to conclude this response, we offer a flavor of what we are attempting by touching on two of these experiments. The first concerns a particular set of practices in Taiwanese Chinese medicine. Here the focus is on what is lost in translation if we use apparently appealing STS vocabularies of analysis in a Chinese context. The second puts aspects of the 2001 foot-and-mouth epidemic in the United Kingdom in dialogue with features of shi (勢). The latter experiment is bolder both because it uses a Chinese term to think about a

10 So, for instance (and putting to one side for a moment the difficulties of binary generalization), it becomes possible to point to some fairly consistent differences between particular traditional Chinese practices of authority—apprenticeship with its emphasis on the located character of what is known—and the corresponding and very different understandings embedded in and carried by Euro-American forms of higher learning.
Western case and because it potentially leads to a style of analysis quite unlike that of contemporary Western STS.

4 Thinking from Shi (勢); or, Lost in Translation

Dr. Hsu is a popular and a doubly licensed Chinese medical doctor. He publishes English-language Science Citation Index papers on Chinese medicine, finds ways of helping cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy and radiotherapy, and has modified a traditional herbal complex formula into the herbal Kuan-Sin-Yin decoction to work against qi deficiency in cancer patients. Additionally, he organizes patients’ associations so that those with cancer can support one another, he leads them to Buddhism, and he teaches patients that living with cancer is a karmic reward. All of these are ways of supporting the correct qi for patients in order to alleviate a vicious circle of physical, medical, social, and spiritual deterioration.¹¹

Hsu seems to work very hard as he moves between bodily corporeality, medical materiality, human sociality, and the spiritual or religious. At the same time, he is clear that he simply seeks to follow the propensity of things: “I just follow the nature of things (shùn qì zì rán, 順其自然)… When predestined relations come together (yīn yuán jù zú, 因緣俱足) things just happen. My CM [Chinese medicine] career, PhD work, Buddhism, the Kuan-Sin Yin, group, lectures, and the association are all the same. Everything including the patients leads me forward.” So what to make of this? How to understand what is happening in STS terms?

One way of responding to these questions is to note that there are commonalities between Hsu’s clinical and research practice and the theoretical vocabularies of material-semiotic STS. Thus, his approach is arguably relational, process-oriented, heterogeneous, and situated. Clearly, then, the vocabulary of material semiotics conveniently catches and translates at least some important features of Hsu’s practice. But while this translation has its merits, it also is asymmetrical. Chinese medicine terms are being translated into a quite different Western theoretical vocabulary. Something is being lost—or distorted—in translation, so we also are witnessing a process of asymmetrical mistranslation. The issue, then, is how do we want to translate? Or, since any translation is also a necessary mistranslation, how do we want to mistranslate?¹² Where do we want to bend STS terms of theory on the one hand and those of shi (勢) on the other? How? And to what purpose? We can sense the flavor of the issues that arise if we look briefly at the four terms listed above.

- **Relationality:** Yes, Hsu’s practice is relational, but Chinese medicine relations are not simply material-semiotic; they also are expressions of shi (勢). Hsu’s practices reflect and express the tendencies, inclinations, dispositions, balances, and countermanding movements of rebalancing that are implied by the term. However, all these disappear if we simply talk about relationality in a material-semiotic mode. Obviously, this is a substantial mistranslation.

¹¹ For details and discussion of Hsu’s practice, see Lin 2016b.

¹² Mistranslation is inevitable; see the cites in note 5, as well as Callon 1986.
- **Process**: Here the issue is which should have priority, position or passage? Western intellectual practices may be changing, but as we have just suggested, they tend to first prioritize position and thing before turning to the question of how these are related and offering a contextual account of those relations. Thinking from *shi* (勢) is different. Nothing exists in and of itself. Everything is changing, ebbing and flowing, and balancing and rebalancing. There is, to repeat the point, no framing context. For Hsu’s Chinese medicine, each moment of movement is different, and each intervention correspondingly becomes a one-off moment of rebalancing. Most of this specificity is lost if we talk of “process” in a material-semiotic mode. This, then, is a second mistranslation.

- The STS term *heterogeneity* poses similar problems because the idea that things are different in kind is foreign to Chinese medicine. For instance, Hsu believes Buddhism and the decoction go together: both support the correct *qi* for the patient. Perhaps differences in kind also are foreign to material semiotics. Bruno Latour indeed writes that “nothing is, by itself, the same as or different from anything else” (1988: 162). But even these much more promising words don’t catch what is implied if we think from *shi* (勢). This is because the latter attends to specific forms of transformability. For instance, according to Hsu, disease, decoction, patient associations, and Buddhism are all continually changing, and “the same” herbs work in different ways in different complex formulas. To translate this working of disposition and propensity as *heterogeneity* is once again to mistranslate.

- **Situatedness**: There is no question that knowing is radically situated for both material semiotics and Hsu’s Chinese medicine. However, for the latter, situation—for instance, in the creation and modification of decoctions—again relates to the specificity of *shi* (勢), dispositions, and particular displacements. This, indeed, is what a situation is: the working of *shi* (勢), of propensities. But there is no hint of this in STS’s *situatedness*, which usually works to return us to one particular context or another. Once again, the term is an asymmetrical mistranslation of a Euro-American STS term that does quite different work in an alternative explanatory tradition. Our argument, then, is that for Hsu, the contours of knowing from *shi* (勢) elude the material semiotic language of STS.

Does this mistranslation matter? It depends. If the concern is simply to extend the explanatory reach of material semiotics and its terms without bending the latter in a *shi* (勢)-like manner, then it is of no concern. Obviously, to work in this way would also be to sustain the asymmetry between Euro-American “theory” and the subaltern “case study.” We would simply be observing another “application” of (say) actor-network theory and reproducing the distinction between object and context. If we wanted to be skeptical, however, we might then ask: What is being learned when we apply an STS terminology in this way? What is new? What is happening if a theoretical idiom does not reshape and rework itself as it encounters new cases? There are plausible answers to all these questions that have to do with the scope and the power of explanation. But they also suggest that a material-semiotic mistranslation

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13 For Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2004) this would be an uncontrolled equivocation: the use of a single term (e.g., *heterogeneity*) to point to different realities.
of the specificities of Hsu’s practice is simultaneously asymmetrical and in some sense uninterested in many of those specificities. In a more symmetrical intellectual project, material semiotics would start to change as its terminology was displaced in a *shi* (勢)-sensitive manner.

A full discussion of what this might mean takes us beyond the scope of this essay, but let us briefly note that this has potentially significant conceptual consequences. Thus, in alternative STSs that are neither Euro-American nor Chinese, there would presumably be displacements too, but these would be different yet again. The implication is that STS would become theoretically situated and specific. In such an STS, similar terms of art would work in different ways in different locations. Terms and their uses would be partially connected and partially disconnected, responsive to the variety of practices and locations that they encountered. We would be watching the explicit creation of an STS multiple.14

5 Thinking from *Shi* (勢): Aphorism, the Implicit, and the Unthought

We have just suggested that, if we use an unmodified material-semiotic vocabulary, *shi* (勢) is lost in STS translation. But as we have noted, there are additional and possibly more radical ways of thinking about this. In a postcolonially symmetrical STS, there is no concern to be “true” to the theory of the discipline. On the other hand, neither is the issue a matter of discovering or articulating authentic versions of Chinese medicine or Chinese metaphysics, whatever these might be. Instead, the concern is to shift the terms of intellectual trade by drawing from and adapting both STS and *shi* (勢). Mistranslation needs to run in both directions. So how else might a *shi* (勢)-inflected STS differ from existing forms of STS?

This is open for debate and discussion, and there can be no one right answer. But consider, for instance, the character of the empirical, where the issue is what might count as an appropriate account of events. Elsewhere we have explored this issue for the UK 2001 foot-and-mouth epidemic (Law and Lin 2016). There are, of course, many—including academic—accounts of that epidemic, and unsurprisingly, given the chronic Euro-American search for framings, the contexts that they enact are varied and contested (see, e.g., Woods 2004; Ward, Donaldson, and Lowe 2004). At the same time it also is possible to imagine a *shi* (勢)-inflected narrative by drawing on and adapting Lao-tzu’s epigrammatic style. The results might be startlingly unlike anything that currently finds its place in STS. Consider, for instance, the following hypothetical description:

From one pig to another, from pigs to sheep, and from farm to farm. What is it? Scientists can say it is a virus, the farmers find sick animals, the media hunts for striking images, the village finds itself confined and helpless, while epidemiologists and policy makers are called upon to control it.

14 It could be argued that this simply describes the state of affairs in current STS. As we know (via Thomas Kuhn) from Wittgenstein, terms do not describe their applications, and the articulation of new applications is a creative process. Perhaps, then, the difference is less in substance than in the recognition of this contextualized multiplicity. On multiplicity, see Mol 2002.
Everything has its propensities. But viruses, fears, information, knowledge, animals, people, everything is now flowing at different paces and in different directions.

How to stop this and move back to ebbs and flows? No transportation, no contact, no regular flows any more. Is this heaven’s way of benefiting without harming? (天之道利而不害). The answer is that we don’t know. Slaughter is the last measure. Massive and radical, it is. Everything is halted. Life, love, fortune, peace, and harmony. A brutal victory is a funeral (戰勝以喪禮處之). Indeed.

Waxing and waning. Flowing and ebbing. Halting the movement of the tides. Living with the ever-stronger changing tidescapes (形勢) of technology, markets, and food production of the twenty-first century. The United Kingdom is not a simple country with a small population (小國寡民). The piled-up carcasses and the flames strike at us as well as the enemy. How many more drastic measures are we prepared for in the future? How might we live a life with or without the farms that have such propensities? Is it possible not to fight the disease but to live with its changing propensities? Has the epidemic also arrested the tidescapes (形勢) of our previous knowledge and strategies, the conventions we have drawn on before? Are we efficacious?

There are still lessons to be learned.

Contingent hint, indirect aphorism, implicit knowing, detours that assume nothing about absolute truth or the possibility of general solutions—these are some of the ingredients of this particular invention that draws rather directly from the *Dao De Jing* (Lao Tzu 2004). There are, to be sure, many possible alternative ways of writing a *shi* (勢)-inflected foot-and-mouth narrative that might look quite different, although many would be equally far removed from the empirical case-study accounts of contemporary Euro-American STS. Or, one might imagine crafting hybrid narratives, for instance, of the kind sometimes offered to patients by Chinese medicine practitioners such as Hsu. Perhaps (we are not sure) the latter might look more like STS empirical accounts. Nevertheless, such an STS might conceive of detouring movements toward living and knowing as immanent but shifting vectors; it might be sensitive to balance (中), flow, and counterflow; it might imagine relations as tidescapes, attending in particular to imbalances and blockages; it might distinguish between effectiveness and efficacy (功效), privileging the latter as a reflection of unfolding relational dispositions; and it might, therefore, also be essentially normative. In the absence of the concern with context mentioned above, the distinction between description and theory might disappear, and in the hope of making space to sense propensities, fixed empirical description might give way to thinking through the contingent detour of contradiction.15

These suggestions are all for discussion, and in any case they do not come as a job lot. They also are radical in varying degrees. For instance, it might be relatively easy to talk of tidescapes within a somewhat modified *shi* (勢)-inflected STS. The essential normativity of STS also might be similarly assimilable for a large part of STS that in

15 “Dao that can be put into word is not really dao. And naming that can assign fixed reference to things is not really naming” (道可道也,非恆道也。名,可名也,非常名也) (Lao Tzu 2004: 77; we have changed the translation of dao [道] from “way-making” to “dao”).
any case imagines itself that way. However, other items on the list (like the Lao-Tzu-like invention above) imply more radical departures from STS as it is currently constituted. The “empirical” (if it still made sense to use the term) would come to look quite different.16 Perhaps, too, the notion of the theoretical also would evaporate along with the reframing contextualizations that are embedded so deeply in STS habits.17 That something would be lost if we made such a move to epigram is self-evident. As we noted above, caution is appropriate. But here is the challenge: If something were being lost, what might the corresponding gains look like? What would we be learning? Until the experiment is attempted, we will not know.

6 Concluding Words

Our experiments are just that—experiments. They may be variously treated as attempts to understand how STS sustains the power of its understandings of reality; to reduce the power and self-evidence of its current institutional forms and their ways of knowing; to provincialize STS by arguing that forms of explanation do not necessarily have to travel in one direction from Euro-America to the south or the east; to articulate the possibility of a “Chinese-inflected” STS; or, the particular point of our experiments, to begin to imagine the scope of a possible shi (勢)-inflected STS and then, as a part of this, to undo the disciplinary power of remedial contextualization within STS. But although these concerns overlap, they also may be teased apart. To be clear, this means that postcolonial worries about the Marie Celeste of social theory (Anderson and Adams 2008) imply commitment neither to an epigrammatic STS nor to one that is Chinese inflected. Other experiments are needed too, including what Morita calls lateral analysis: other encounters between different contingent practices and ways of knowing. What we most hope for is the creation of interstitial and non-dominatory spaces that will (again to cite Jullien) “furnish . . . other engagements with (another glimpse of) the unthought” (2014: 154).

References


16 For the complexities of making sense of the experiential-empirical in contemporary Chinese medicine, see Farquhar 1994, Lei 2002, and Zhan 2014.

17 Theory as abstraction had little place in Chinese medicine until the latter was modernized into traditional Chinese medicine. See Farquhar 1994 and Nappi 2009. Jullien suggests that the notion of truth is relatively unimportant in Chinese classical thought compared with wisdom. See Jullien 2002, 2014.


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