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STS, TCM, and Other Shi 勢 (Situated Dispositions of Power/Knowledge)

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Reading John Law and Wen-yuan Lin's "Provincializing STS," I can only suppose that I am expected to engage with it as a cultural anthropologist who has studied the social life of traditional Chinese medicine in China. Certainly, I am interested in how these authors, both outsiders (like me) to the technicalities of Chinese medicine, have found resources for thinking about the global sciences through experiencing clinical practice in Taiwan. But before engaging with the lives and truths of a non-Western medical system as Law and Lin present it, I want to take up a more fundamental challenge their article presents.

The authors argue that we—historians and sociologists of scientific knowledge and practice, writing mostly in English—push beyond the principle of symmetry in the work of science and technology studies. "Symmetry between true knowledge claims and those that were false," they note, "was crucial to [our earlier colleagues in] the sociology of scientific knowledge" (213). Further, an even-handed extension of agency and efficacy to nonhuman realms has also been important to theory, far beyond STS. Actor-network theory with its distributed agency has led some social thought away from epistemological and cognitive abstractions to encourage a return to history and ethnography. In this turn to the concrete and the particular, the authors display a certain agnosticism about theory and universals. More important, they implicitly historicize a theory-practice or theory-case divide in our methodological assumptions. One outcome of a more serious engagement with other rationalities might be a revived vision of hybrid praxis for a hegemonic Western academy. Though we want more than just "theory from the South" (see [Comaroff and Comaroff 2012](#)), we still don't know the contours of the symmetries we seek in a truly postcolonial STS.

The universalist imaginary of all sciences, including the human sciences—the "one-world world," as [Law \(2015\)](#) has called it—has been made to look provincial well before this moment, especially at the hands of science studies. But Law and Lin in their essay have a polemical point to make against any complacency the field might fall into. They would have our theory relativize even the terms of analysis. There might, in other words, be multiple and incommensurate languages in the analytical

toolbox of the human sciences. The notion of provincializing theory expands our usually taken-for-granted procedures and makes method a self-conscious political project.

Let's go back to symmetry. As a methodological principle, symmetry is not new; in anthropology it even predates the social studies of knowledge writings of a few decades ago. But symmetrical explanation has not been easy to explicate in our teaching or to practice in our scholarship. Students and other novices to epistemology think of symmetry as a kind of facile relativism—to be fair, they seem to hear us say, every belief must be deemed equally true. Because we historicize the sciences and look beyond our campuses for knowledge, they think we are saying that everyone is entitled to their opinion, and all we require to move forward globally is tolerance of others' ideas and cultures. The implication is that truth really doesn't matter that much, I guess, except to scientists. Bruno Latour has written about this: he and all manner of constructivists hear the "do you believe in reality?" question a lot, and in the end there is little we can do besides throw up our hands in frustration. Barbara Herrnstein Smith's critique of objectivism in epistemology, *Contingencies of Value* (1988), locates the problem exactly where it belongs. Our modernist commitment to objective positive knowledge, to truth as the correct representation of reality, is a *value*, assembled from all manner of contingent choices colored by class, gender, and other local interests. And any sympathetic approach to alternative knowledge, any pluralizing of "the" truth, is treated by many as a kind of a crime against nature; certainly it is a crime against the universalist scientific habitus we cultivate in our teaching.

Speaking of Smith, it was she who reminded me most clearly that symmetry in explanation is not easy to practice even in our most classically relativist anthropology. One year in North Carolina we were both members of a PhD student's academic committee. In a committee meeting after we had seen the first drafts of the dissertation, Barbara—ever the close reader—pointed to a difference in the language that had been used to describe and analyze an indigenous medicine and the clinics of biomedicine operating in the same area. Needless to say—this research being contemporary cultural anthropology—in the first draft biomedicine had not come off well. Practice in the public health clinic was highlighted as surprisingly messy, and practice in the healer's household was shown to be surprisingly rational. The author of the dissertation, on Barbara's advice, seeking a more rigorous symmetry, was required to go back to his writing and find less evaluative terms of analysis. He needed to more thoroughly appreciate the social contingencies partly determining *both* styles of doing medicine. On this occasion I was reminded of how nonsymmetrical my own writing about Chinese medicine has been and was prompted to reflect on the aspects of my own scholarly habitus that seem to require a polemical promotion of Chinese medicine. Do I depict Chinese medicine as a superior kind of rationality? Is that explanation symmetrical? Would readers like Hsin-Hsing Chen—who appears in "Provincializing STS" as a critic refusing the apparent irrationality of Law's lectures on STS non-coherence—see my ethnographic poetics of Chinese medical knowledge and practice as an Orientalist "performative practice"?

I can only think about such questions by translating the problem of symmetry into a practice of translation. Law and Lin emphasize that STS needs to "think about translation and its betrayals—both linguistic and social" (214), and I agree with them, though I would add that translation's treachery is always also a political situation.

But the betrayals of the ideal of free and true communication (the term in Chinese is *jiaotong* 交通, “exchange-through,” so it is materialist and aspires beyond language), which is invoked by the very idea of translation, are systematic and always already happening. In other words, the “languages,” or worlds, between which scholarship communicates are never symmetrical in practice. Arabic and Chinese language scholarship almost nowhere enjoy equal status with that written in English, French, or German. Nor is scholarship from other worlds—or at least other discursive regimes—ever accorded equal rationality in global debates.

The best consideration of “unequal languages,” and the methodological implications of what might be called actually existing asymmetries, is Talal Asad’s classic article, “The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology” (1986). In it, he too pushes beyond the principle of symmetry, defending an anthropological tendency toward “excessive charity” in our efforts to translate the “intention” of a statement/practice prior to all evaluation. A politically aware translation between worlds would put “subordinate societies” in a position to transform our own modernism and universalism. Law and Lin have seen this too: citing Helen Verran, they demand that we—first-world researchers—prepare to be “disconcerted” by unfamiliar formations of meaning and practice, especially when they are inserted as translations into the normal science of STS research.

Apparently, earlier versions of Law and Lin’s essay have been disconcerting, and not only to those “Western” scholars trapped in the stiffness (Asad’s term) of a modernist historiography (or, should I say, translation practice?). Some who dwell in the elsewhere of Sinophone writing and Chinese medical practice have been uncomfortable with these two authors’ experiments too. I will admit to experiencing frustration myself with this essay’s efforts to take methodological lessons, not to mention “theory,” from a modern clinical practice of a richly archived and incredibly diverse “traditional” medicine. But I hasten to point out that my own comparative work is frustrating in the same way.

In any essay that attempts cultural translation between historically divided worlds, there is space only for some rather broad generalizations, many of which seem to rehearse the standard critiques of modernist power/knowledge. The comparative binary of East and West seems unavoidable, and certainly Law and Lin do not avoid it. Biomedicine, they tell us, is causal and reductive, while Chinese medicine is syncretic and hybridizing, contextual and correlative. The logics of the two medicines (here reified for purposes of comparison) are different, and more important, the “things” managed in therapy are too; the existence of *qi* and meridians for Chinese medicine, for example, renders its knowledge inadmissible to a hegemonic global scientific rationality.

Though readers of the wonderful literature of traditional Chinese medicine might regret the simplifications and distortions inherent in every translation, I think we must respect the force of the argument being made, in this essay and in other work cited by Law and Lin. Insofar as they are right about mismatched rationalities, they identify (again) a stubborn problem that arises when STS tries to learn from Chinese medical theory. But the essay also proposes a solution, one that turns from logic to practice and from theory to method. This solution is *propensity*. Not an especially medical concept, *propensity* can be translated (and, of course, deployed in language worlds far from its origin as *shi* 勢) in a wide variety of ways, as any Chinese-English dictionary will

attest. To conclude this commentary on “Provincializing STS,” let me propose a translation of *shi*: situated dispositions of power/knowledge, a clumsy term that resonates in English with the insights of Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway, and numerous historical epistemologists and anthropologists of ontological politics. Insofar as situated dispositions of power/knowledge are the proper topic of an expanded and extended STS, *shi* enjoins us to attend to strategy, contingency, and materiality rather than truth, reason, and logic. Whatever we learn from entering into the *shi* of a historical situation—like the foot-and-mouth disease epidemic in the United Kingdom, for example—we will never know in advance what we can learn in general and put to use in other situations. Is that a problem?

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