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Discovering Distinctive East Asian STS: An Introduction

Ruey-Lin Chen

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When this journal was founded in 2007, Daiwie Fu's position paper in the inaugural issue initiated a series of inquiries into the meaning of East Asian STS studies. Four comments on Fu's paper, by Sungwook Hung, Hideto Nakajima, Fa-ti Fan, and Warwick Anderson, appeared in issue 2 that same year. In 2008, a panel discussion in volume 2, issue 3, deepened the journal's explorations of the relation between East Asian STS and area studies. That panel stimulated Anderson to rethink East Asian STS studies as a form of area studies in his introduction to the 2009 special issue on Southeast Asian STS (vol. 3, combined issue 2–3). In 2009, Togo Tsukahara reflected on the situation of East Asian STS, and especially Japanese STS, in his introduction to the panel discussion on STS in Japan and East Asia (vol. 3, issue 4). Yung-Sik Kim also expressed his view on the role of East Asian traditions in his introduction to the special issue "Specialized Knowledge in Traditional East Asian Contexts" in 2010 (vol. 4, issue 2). Yet despite all these discussions in the previous issues, Fu's inquiry in his position paper has not yet been answered in a complete form. No formal articles on the subject have appeared in *EASTS* to date. The present special issue compensates for this.

From a synthetic point of view, this series of inquiries can be formulated into the central question that this special issue addresses: *Can there be East Asian STS studies distinct from those that have been practiced in the West?* All the authors in this special issue reply affirmatively yet draw quite different pictures in addressing *what a distinctive East Asia STS would look like*. They also provide different solutions to the methodological problem of *what we should do to construct a distinctive East Asian*

Some articles in this special issue were presented in the session "What Are East Asian STS Theories?" at the 2010 4S conference in Tokyo. Daiwie Fu encouraged me to invite authors to revise and submit their papers to *EASTS*. Warwick Anderson accepted our invitation to write his impressive article after participating in that session. It has turned out to be a very fine collection of articles. I thank all the authors for their excellent contributions. I also deeply thank Daiwie for his encouragement, and the two general commentators, Fa-ti Fan and Suzanne Moon, for all their input.

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STS, in the course of focusing on factors such as East Asian character and theoretical independence that Fan skillfully summarized in his reformulations of Fu's original questions: (1) Is East Asia a useful category for science and technology studies? (2) Are East Asia STS studies simply the application of existing theories from the United States or Europe to East Asia?

Warwick Anderson tries to extend the idea of "Asia as method" in East Asian cultural studies to STS in his article "Asia as Method in Science and Technology Studies." This method suggests that those of us who are East Asian STS scholars should use Asia as the reference point at which we engage with STS studies, rather than treating Asia as an object or a geographic region examined through Western theoretical glasses. The idea of Asia as method originated with Japanese cultural critic Takeuchi Yoshimi, and Anderson follows its recent development in the writing of Taiwanese cultural studies scholar Kuan-hsin Chen. However, Anderson is concerned that Chen's Asia remains restricted to Chinese Northeast Asia. He advises us to enlarge our methodological vision of Asia to include Southeast Asia, New Guinea, the Middle East, Australia, and the Pacific, noting that "it is perhaps heuristically useful to imagine a 'global Asia.' . . . Asia as method therefore requires no negation or denial of Euro-American STS, but rather it allows us to treat the Western body of knowledge and practices as 'one cultural resource among many others.'" Anderson thus reemphasizes area studies viewed through a postcolonial lens as a suitable form of STS study, in which he sees the foundations of East Asian STS theory.

Although Asia as method may create a special character, Anderson does not tell us what an East Asian STS theory would look like. He does not suggest the ways by which such a theory can be constructed. It is not fully clear whether a method from cultural studies is suitable for STS studies, since Western science and technology have penetrated East Asian societies more fully than have other forms of Western culture. Moreover, Anderson's use of the singular *theory* (rather than *theories*) raises the question of whether we should have a single East Asian STS theory or more than one. In the second article of this special issue, "Rethinking the East Asian Distinction: An Example of Taiwan's Harm Reduction Policy," Jia-shin Chen seems to express an ambiguous attitude toward this question, because he introduces an assemblage approach originating with the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, on the one hand, yet holds to a theoretical pluralism on the other. Can Chen reconcile the apparent contradiction?

Chen first formulates his question as "How do we make sense of East Asian science and technology studies?" For him, the key issue is "East Asia or its deterritorialization." The notion of assemblage is invoked to solve the problem of the East Asian distinction—that is, the notion that the East Asian distinction is itself an assemblage. Chen holds that "assembling may be seen as a common phenomenon, but the *ways* of assembling practically embody local distinctions." He then cites Manuel DeLanda's development of this notion to characterize the two key features of assemblage: anti-totally and anti-essence, where "totality" refers to an organismic metaphor in which elements in a given society are constituted by the total relation between parts and the whole. For Chen, all assemblages are malleable, ephemeral, extendable, and historical, so they have no totality and essence.

Some readers might be puzzled by Chen's position. In what sense can the notion or theory of assemblage and its applications be East Asian? Is the notion of assemblage

necessary if a theoretical pluralism has been adopted? How is the East Asian distinction itself an assemblage? These interesting questions, which stimulate us to think more deeply, spring from Chen's efforts to address the issue of East Asia or its deterritorialization.

The third article in this special issue is my "A Voyage to East Asian STS Theories; or, What Might Make an STS Theory East Asian." Unlike the other contributors' focus on the distinctiveness of East Asia, I approach this problem from the perspective of theory building. For me, those who focus on the East Asian distinction will formulate the question as "What might lend an STS theory the distinctive features of East Asia?" I argue that although such distinctiveness has been partially realized in some Asian STS journals (such as *EASTS* and the *Taiwanese Journal for Studies of Science, Technology and Medicine*), no theory has emerged to date. Hence, the question should be reformulated as "What might make distinctive East Asian STS studies theoretical?" This will require both a methodology and an identification politics of regional theory building. Such a line of thinking leads me to explore the theoretical features already found in STS studies, after which I suggest methodological and political strategies for building up East Asian STS theories. Those strategies consist of gathering concepts from different theories into a rudimentary theory (or constructing a theory version based on current theories), making it explicit, and developing a family of East Asian versions.

My article invokes a biological metaphor for East Asian STS theories and insists that wholeness be a requirement of such theories. This is the opposite of Chen's notion of assemblage. As I point out, "Mere conceptual assemblage usually fails to realize an 'organic' integration. Moreover, one has to assemble different concepts from different theories in order to fit with different cases. This yields many conceptual assemblages but not a versatile theory suitable for a variety of cases." Is that situation disadvantageous? I imagine that it is, in any case, controversial.

In developing my discourse, I consider the actual practices in two East Asian STS journals. This is an approach shared by the final article on this topic, Ryuma Shineha and Masaki Nakajima's "Trends in STS Communities: A Comparative Analysis of Topics," which must unfortunately await publication in the next issue of *EASTS*. Shineha and Nakajima first make a network analysis of topics in five STS journals, of which two are local (*Japanese Journal of Science and Technology Studies* and *Taiwanese Journal for Studies of Science, Technology and Medicine*) and three international (*Social Studies of Science*; *Science, Technology and Human Values*; and *EASTS*). They then conduct both a local and an international comparative study of communities and differences of topics in those journals. They believe that self-orientalism can be avoided through this form of comparative study when discussing East Asian STS as an analytical category.

Despite the differences of views, approaches, and positions among these authors, they agree on many points, for example, that we should not reject Western theoretical resources, that the construction of distinctive East Asian STS field is a communal or collective effort, and that the heterogeneity within East Asia must be highlighted. Therefore, what this special issue provides is not a final answer but a starting point for more collaborative reflections and constructions in the future.