

# Crossing Epistemological Landscapes: On the Global Circulation of Therapeutic Objects and Practices

*Panel to be held during the 14th International Conference on Science in East Asia  
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Circulations lie at the core of recent attempts to explore the making of ‘global’ knowledge and the encounters between socially and culturally distant worlds. This notion has been instrumental in analyzing processes of hybridization beyond essentialist or structural claims of heterogeneity. A problematic issue with the circulation paradigm is that it tends to mask uneven and power-laden relationships. This problem is, however, partially addressed in postcolonial science studies, a subfield that examines the relationship between techno-scientific knowledge and postcolonial orders. In this way, issues of mobility, asymmetries and power relations are revealed. This panel proposes to go a step further. It will examine the circulation of medicine in a way that builds upon – but does not limit itself to – the concept of hybridity so dear to science studies, and that of hierarchy and power so central to postcolonial studies.



We thus aim to add complexity to the current understanding of Asian medicine by focusing on the changing epistemological landscapes that a therapeutic product or practice passes through as it circulates globally. These shifting environments are instrumental in forming hybrid objects and they also modify expressions of power and bring about new hierarchies. Our primary interest, however, lies in the fact that this reordering produces therapeutic knowledge since it (re)defines, even determines, what a therapeutic object is, how it changes attributes and relates to others.

Focusing on the tangible trajectories of drugs and healing practices, the participants in this panel will examine the way epistemological frameworks and local environments of use create or transform the meaning, value, agency and power of specific therapeutic materials and practices. In order to foster comparative study, this panel will gather together historians and anthropologists working in the Chinese, Tibetan and Indian worlds.

Convenors: Jean-Paul Gaudillière and Laurent Pordié (Cermes3, Paris)

## Contributions

### **Asymmetrical Traffic: Pain, Commodities, Techniques**

Guy Attewell (French Institute of Pondicherry)

In this paper I examine the enabled and constrained mobilities of two different kinds of therapeutic objects – pain relief products, in particular medicated oils (thailam), and bandaging techniques employed for the effective alignment of fractured limbs. I focus on the products and techniques of one clinic famed for non-surgical fracture reduction (outside the biomedical establishment) and the relief of bodily pain in rural Andhra Pradesh (southern India). I trace the emergence of these objects and their trajectories, through regional, and in the case of their thailam, transnational networks, in order to highlight the uneven conditions of possibility for what kinds of medical knowledge and practice can be mobilized in contemporary settings in southern India and connected worlds. How do they articulate with other products and practices, and how are they (re)configured through practice? Their trajectories raise questions that are at once epistemological (as they are (re)constituted within and across matrices of knowledge of the body in pain) and historical-ontological (as emergent objects) within relations of power that shape thresholds of credibility and expertise. I use the metaphor traffic to capture the propulsions, constraints, obstructions and detours of mobility.

### **How to Make Medico-Botanical Knowledge Circulate between South Asia, the Indian Ocean and Europe, 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Centuries**

Kapil Raj (EHESS, Paris)

Most knowledge and knowledge-related practices, instruments, objects and skills need significant efforts to make them move. These range from creating networks of common interests, techniques of manipulation and forms of use. They also include finding or even creating overlapping languages for knowledges and objects to move between socially and culturally distinct milieus. By examining three attempts at expanding the spaces of circulation of Asian local and regional medico-botanical knowledge to include the Indian Ocean and Europe between the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries respectively, this talk will attempt to identify the multifaceted social, political, material, philological and editorial investments and controversies mobilised in the process.

### **The New Ayurvedic Menopause: Aging Women, Clinical Targets and Poly-herbal Pharmaceuticals**

Jean-Paul Gaudillière and Laurent Pordié (Cermes3, Paris)

Taken broadly, this paper is about the global circulation of menopause both as a biomedical concept and as a target for pharmaceutical intervention. In western industrialized countries, menopause has since the 1970s become an important medical issue defined in terms of hormonal deficiency, symptoms like hot flashes or insomnia and increased risks of depression, osteoporosis, cardiovascular disorders; all of which are handled through the prescription of steroids. In India, however, considering the cessation of a woman's reproductive ability as a medical problem is uncommon, especially in rural areas. Hormonal change does not qualify the end of the fertile phase of a woman's life either. Moreover, the conception of menopause prevailing within the epistemological landscape of biomedicine finds no equivalent in Ayurveda, which rather frames the problem in humoral terms. Given this context, creating and marketing an ayurvedic drug that addresses the post-menstrual life of Indian women using the biomedical idiom implies serious challenges. This is nonetheless what a leading multinational ayurvedic firm headquartered in Bangalore has attempted. This paper thus

examines more specifically the creation and trajectory of Menosan, a poly-herbal drug introduced by this firm in 2002 on the Indian market. Menosan is a typical example of the shifts and translations involved in the contemporary reformulation of ayurvedic knowledge: it is an innovative industrial product which stems from classical ayurvedic catalogues; it targets a biomedical problem but provides an alternative, herbal response to the practice of hormonal replacement therapy (HRT). However, in spite of a fortuitous but timely launch at the peak of the medical critique and public contestation of HRT, Menosan has not fulfilled the manufacturer's expectations. The sales of this pharmaceutical compound are low. To face this situation, the firm developed aggressive scientific marketing to make of menopause a medical issue and to create a specific pharmaceutical market. This paper discusses the emergence of contemporary ayurvedic menopause by focusing on the epistemological heterodoxies involved in the studied pharmaceutical product and in the construction of new clinical targets.

### **From Field to Fork: Transnational Negotiations of Chinese Medicine**

Arielle Smith (Cermes3, Paris)

Differing social, political and economic conditions facilitate localized, emergent practices of Chinese medicine around the world; hence, the global authority and 'value' of Chinese medicine is presently negotiated vis-à-vis post-national and transnational processes. For instance, Chinese medical producers, physicians, entrepreneurs, researchers and consumers often rely on materials (raw, or in various stages of processing) produced in the People's Republic of China and various sites in Southeast Asia. They must therefore negotiate—and in some cases help to establish—import, export, authentication and Good Manufacturing/ Agronomic Practices within a transnational field of operations, carefully balancing profit and private interests with the public good. Tracing the flow of one or more items from the Chinese materia medica from field to fork in East and Southeast Asia, this research analyzes the emergence of Chinese medicine within 21st century political economy and techno-scientific epistemology. Its central concern addresses the extent to which the globalization of Chinese medicine—often described in terms of standardization and industrialization—is facilitated by enduring Euro-American notions of 'modernity', scientific discourses, neoliberalism and global health priorities.

### **Globalization through Trials: Regulatory Pathways Toward Modernization and Greater Adoption of Medicinal Herbs**

Wen-Hua Kuo (National Yang-Ming University, Taipei)

This paper aims to investigate a technical yet crucial aspect of herbal medicines as they spread beyond national boundaries—specifically, clinical trials. Representing three pathways through which herbal medicines are incorporated into global biomedical systems, three drugs—Diao Xin Xue Kang capsules, Tian Xian (Tien Hsien) liquid, and PHY906—are chosen for our investigation. Originated from plants believed in healing discomforts in the context of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), these herbs have their therapeutic characteristics and positions in its "web of knowledge." As the trend of using herbs as complementary to biomedicine, these drugs have experienced various transformations in preparation, forms, and, as a part of the modernization of TCM, standardization in dosage and usage. Clinical trials, in this sense, complete such transformations by turning these herbs into "adoptable" products for global use. This study is not interested in whether these drugs really work, neither is it in how these herbs are "relocated" from the knowledge web of TCM to that of biomedicine. Rather, it traces the "biography" of these herbs and focuses on how clinical trials facilitated their travel beyond their medical cultural. From the perspective of science, technology and society studies (STS) that pays attention to the political economy of artifact and knowledge, this study will reveal the heterogeneous networks that consist of herbs, markets, developers, and regulators to determine the role that clinical trials play in the expansion and transformation of those networks that cross national boundaries. In constructing these biographies, TCM and biomedicine are not always in

contraction thus “symmetrical” discourses are favorable. Paying respect to the multi-aspect of medicinal plants as food/poison/cure, this paper demonstrates the materiality of these herbs, tracing the changing constitution of medical traditions in terms of modernization and regulations on botanical drugs in biomedicine while incorporating them into clinical practice. Through these biographies, this paper expects not only to achieve a better understanding of the history of these drugs; it will also enable historians of medicine to capture the meaning of globalization by herbs that connect, intellectually, history and STS studies.

## **Between Standard Substitution and Reformulation Regimes - Continuities and Changes in Values and Meanings of Substitution in Tibetan Medical Formulas in Past and at Present**

Mona Schrepf and Olaf Czaja (University of Westminster, London)

The substitution of medical substances has a long tradition in Tibetan medicine. There were various reasons for a need of substituting certain ingredients of medicaments. Depending on the local environment and time, some ingredients could be very rare while other substances were traditionally imported from regions adjacent to Central Tibet, which could make them rather expensive or inaccessible. Today, national food and drug regulations as well as global regulatory regimes of safety and quality impact on the way in which substitution, safety and efficacy are understood and practiced. In this paper, we present and discuss characteristic features as well as changing epistemologies and regimes employed by Tibetan doctors in the past and also by private pharmacists and factories at present, based on a choice of specific formulas in Tibetan texts and ethnographic fieldwork on different production styles and regimes of value of Tibetan medicine in Qinghai Province, China. Several relevant Tibetan sources will be used, among them the *Tshab yig yongs kyi bcud bsdus sman dbul sel ba'i nor bu* by De'u dmar Bstan 'dzin phun tshogs and the *Blun po gso rig la 'jug pa'i sgo byis pa dga' ba'i bstan bcos bzang sman rnyed par dka' ba'i tshab tu sngo sman gtong rigs dang ngos 'dzin phran bu bcas* by Padma bstan 'dzin.

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### **Venue**

Main Venue (6, 7, 9, 10 July): EHESS, 105, Boulevard Raspail, 75006 Paris.

Alternate venue (8 July) : BULAC Auditorium, Pôle des Langues et Civilisations, 65, rue des Grands Moulins, 75013 Paris