

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Decentring histories of science diplomacy: cases from Asia

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This special issue brings together a diverse set of cases from Asia with the aim of decentring established historical narratives about science diplomacy. With a critical perspective bringing together the bodies of literature in the fields of the history of science, technology and medicine (STM) and critical Asian studies, we argue that these cases foreground a geopolitical history with multiple forms of sovereignty – often contested ones – and a range of political institutions and actors that enables us to revisit science diplomacy as a means for understanding the relationship between science and international affairs. In doing so, the articles in this issue consciously eschew the normative ‘centring’ of superpowers or Western imperial powers as the primary actors, focusing instead on the agency and subjectivity of actors within Asia, many of whom were prominent in their respective local contexts. Additionally, we argue that the cases presented here, which examine issues from across science, technology, medicine and the environment, collectively demonstrate the further need for the ‘science’ in ‘science diplomacy’ to be interpreted more broadly, incorporating as it does many aspects of human engagement with the material world.

In March 2024, we attended a workshop hosted by Peking University’s Department of the History of Science, Technology and Medicine.<sup>1</sup> This workshop, about the entanglement of science and international affairs seen through the lens of data exchange chiefly in East Asia after the Second World War, had both English- and Chinese-language titles, the former being *Science and Diplomacy: A History of Scientific Data Flows*. Many of the speakers’ presentation slides were similarly bilingual, with their English-language text making frequent use of the term ‘science diplomacy’. Yet there was a small but crucial difference in the nature of the Chinese-language versions of the event title and most presenters’ slides: these used the term *keji*, most directly and often translated as ‘science and technology’ or sometimes as ‘technoscience’.<sup>2</sup> In both these cases, as in much of the discussion,

<sup>1</sup> Peking University, Department of History of Science Technology and Medicine, ‘Seminar to reflect the scientific data held at Peking University–Department of History of Science Technology and Medicine’, at <https://hstm.pku.edu.cn/en/info/1029/1187.htm> (accessed 13 April 2024).

<sup>2</sup> On issues of translation and the entanglement of science and technology see, for example, Meng Yue, ‘Hybrid science versus modernity: the practice of the Jiangnan Arsenal, 1864–1897’, *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine* (1999) 16, pp. 13–52, esp. pp. 15–16.

participants followed a common convention in switching between the dominant term used in each respective language. However, halfway through the workshop, a participant noted this linguistic divergence after one of the presentations, raising the issue of potential conceptual implications for the differences between *keji waijiao* (literally ‘science and technology diplomacy’) and ‘science diplomacy’. Along with many in the room, we had not consciously noted those differences on each side of the event title or slide texts prior to this being raised in discussion. We had taken for granted the distinctions in the terms as used in each language since, as specialists of China (Barrett) and Japan (Homei), we have been so accustomed to automatically translating Chinese *keji* and Japanese *kagaku gijutsu* (‘science–technology’) into ‘science’ in English in certain contexts such as this.<sup>3</sup>

Not only did this prove to be a highly impactful intervention in the workshop discussion, but also its timing proved particularly important for us while working on the writing of this introduction and other final preparations for this special issue, which seeks to ‘decentre’ science diplomacy through examining cases from Asia.<sup>4</sup> On the back of that discussion about language in a workshop environment that categorically put Asia at its centre, we could not help but see ‘science diplomacy’ and its associated English-language scholarship in relative terms. In that setting and in that space, it was ‘science and technology diplomacy’ that sat at the centre, having the most immediacy and relevance in academic activities and in policy making alike. Meanwhile, for all its visibility at the workshop and our own familiarity with it as scholars based at an institution in the English-speaking world, it was ‘science diplomacy’ in its English-language formulation which felt less central, like a variant that needed to be conceptualized and considered in relation to the local context.

The irony in this is that English-language literature on ‘science diplomacy’ – even those contributions which push to ‘globalize’ it – has typically treated that term and its Anglo-American origins as the starting point for any discussion. Thus in that context science diplomacy as a neologism and a concept emerged after the Cold War in the specific context of the US engagement with foreign affairs. Its entry into academic discourse came through interventions by practitioner–advocates, such as Nina V. Fedoroff, whose influential 2009 article for *Cell* foregrounded her credentials as a geneticist and molecular biologist while written in her capacity as science and technology adviser to both the Secretary of State and to the administrator of the US Agency for International Development.<sup>5</sup> The most influential and seemingly inescapable definition emerged from similar practitioner–advocate sources the following year, promoted by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and the Royal Society in a policy report. This conceptualized it as having three core manifestations: first, as ‘informing foreign policy objectives with scientific advice (science in diplomacy)’; second, as ‘facilitating international science cooperation (diplomacy for science)’; and third, in ‘using science cooperation to improve international relations between countries (science for diplomacy)’, with further differentiation into two diplomatic tracks involving state and non-state actors respectively.<sup>6</sup> For all that scholars of the humanities and social sciences have been consistently cautious about such uncritical and under-conceptualized formulations, these – and their

<sup>3</sup> On the history of ‘science–technology’ in the Japanese context see, for example, Hiromi Mizuno, *Science for the Empire: Scientific Nationalism in Modern Japan*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> For a relevant discussion of decentring in HSTM see John Krige, ‘Conclusion: decentering the global North’, in Krige (ed.), *Knowledge Flows in a Global Age: A Transnational Approach*: Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022, pp. 333–43.

<sup>5</sup> Nina V. Fedoroff, ‘Science diplomacy in the 21st century’, *Cell* (2009) 136(1), pp. 9–11.

<sup>6</sup> *New Frontiers in Science Diplomacy: Navigating the Changing Balance of Power*, London: Royal Society, 2010, p. 15.

Anglo-American origins – have invariably been centred time and again in English-language scholarship on ‘science diplomacy’.<sup>7</sup>

And yet, during this same period when ‘science diplomacy’ was gaining popularity in policy discourses and activities in places such as the United States and the United Kingdom, actors from East Asia were actively mobilizing similar – yet distinct – languages as part of parallel pushes to integrate aspects of foreign science and technology policies. Such was very much the case in Japan and South Korea alike, where government-connected bodies were advocating for the advancement of ‘science and technology diplomacy’.<sup>8</sup> Such interconnected and yet distinct development in Asia underscores not just the need for further interrogating and expanding how ‘science diplomacy’ is deployed in English-language scholarship, but also the extent to which the region can indeed be an effective site with which to decentre the concept across multiple key axes.

This special issue brings together a diverse set of cases from Asia with the aim of reappraising established historical narratives about science diplomacy. Among historians of science, technology and medicine (STM), there has been a well-established interest in the interplay between science and international politics which long pre-dates the emergence of the term ‘science diplomacy’.<sup>9</sup> As with social scientists, some have criticized the neat definition provided by the Royal Society/AAAS and its usage in policy as lacking nuance and meaningful historicization.<sup>10</sup> Others have pointed out that the definition comes from a certain vantage point that privileges the perspectives of the anglophone Western world and emphasized the need to globalize our historical understanding of the concept.<sup>11</sup> Crucially, for historians of STM, their engagement with science diplomacy coincided with the rise of the ‘transnational’ and ‘global’ turns in the discipline.<sup>12</sup> This has led them to reappraise and develop further the existing historiography of science and international affairs by considering a transnational movement of a broader range of actors, artefacts and knowledges, in order to come up with a range of

<sup>7</sup> For critical perspectives from leading voices on such practitioner-led discourses in the Euro-American context see Pierre-Bruno Ruffini, ‘Conceptualizing science diplomacy in the practitioner-driven literature: a critical review’, *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* (2020) 7(1), pp. 1–9; Doubravka Olšáková and Sam Robinson, ‘War in Ukraine highlights the enduring myths of science diplomacy’, *LSE European Politics and Policy Blog (EUROPP)*, at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2022/05/20/war-in-ukraine-highlights-the-enduring-myths-of-science-diplomacy> (accessed 8 February 2024); Charlotte Rungius and Tim Flink, ‘Romancing science for global solutions: on narratives and interpretative schemas of science diplomacy’, *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* (2020) 7(102), pp. 1–10.

<sup>8</sup> Jaehwan Hyun, Sungsoo Song and Kaori Iida, ‘Historicizing science and technology diplomacy in Japan and South Korea’, *Korean Journal of Science, Technology and Society* (2024) 24, pp. 35–64.

<sup>9</sup> The most enduringly influential of such pathbreaking scholarship includes works such as Gabrielle Hecht, *Entangled Geographies: Empire and Technopolitics in the Global Cold War*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011; John Krige, *American Hegemony and the Postwar Reconstruction of Europe*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006; John Krige and Kai-Henrik Barth (eds.), *Global Power Knowledge: Science and Technology in International Affairs*, special issue, *Osiris* (2006) 21. A similarly seminal discussion of scientists as political actors is Ronald E. Doel, ‘Scientists as policymakers, advisors, and intelligence agents: linking contemporary diplomatic history with the history of contemporary science’, in Thomas Söderqvist (ed.), *The Historiography of Contemporary Science and Technology*, Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 1997, pp. 215–44.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Simone Turchetti, Matthew Adamson, Giulia Rispoli, Doubravka Olšáková and Sam Robinson, ‘Introduction: just Needham to Nixon? On writing the history of “science diplomacy”’, *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences* (2020) 50(4), pp. 323–39.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Matthew Adamson and Roberto Lalli, ‘Global perspectives on science diplomacy: exploring the diplomacy-knowledge nexus in contemporary histories of science’, *Centaurus* (2021) 63(1), pp. 1–16.

<sup>12</sup> On the ‘transnational turn’ in the history of science see Simone Turchetti, Néstor Herran and Soraya Boudia, ‘Introduction: have we ever been “transnational”? towards a history of science across and beyond borders’, *BJHS* (2012) 45(3), pp. 319–36.

critical responses to the now established, yet recalcitrantly simplistic, concept of science diplomacy.<sup>13</sup>

This special issue emerges from such a community of scholars, in particular the members of the Commission on Science, Technology and Diplomacy (STAND). A part of the International Union of History and Philosophy of Science and Technology's Division of History of Science and Technology (IUHPST/DHST), the commission was founded in 2017 at the DHST's Rio de Janeiro congress and has offered a platform to generate conversations connecting the historians of STM with scholars of international relations and practitioners of science diplomacy. A consistent feature of the STAND-supported scholarship has been to emphasize the need for greater global coverage and diversity of perspectives in exploring the history of science diplomacy.<sup>14</sup> This special issue is the result of a long-term collaboration supported by STAND and based on a series of four virtual 'mini-workshops' held between January and May 2021, involving scholars from across Asia, Europe and North America.<sup>15</sup> For the series, participants were invited to circulate and comment on papers on cases examining how the contours of international and transnational politics both within and with Asia shaped science, technology, medicine and environmental practices, and vice versa.

How, then, can cases from Asia contribute to decentring the larger historiography of science diplomacy? First, these cases foreground a geopolitical history featuring multiple forms of sovereignty – often contested ones – and a range of political institutions and actors. On the one hand, much discussion of science diplomacy in the policy arena has adopted a framework that makes the modern state the primary foundation for the practice of science diplomacy. This is in no small part due to the practitioner-derived origins of this discussion, in which the earliest and most influential articulations of the term were put forth by scientists, diplomats and foreign-policy professionals working for 'Western' governments in the post-Cold War period.<sup>16</sup> However, even when state actors are central to the cases covered in this special issue, these do not always neatly align with the normative assumptions or typological expectations embedded in such conceptualizations, such as with revolutionary socialist states like the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), discussed by Michitake Aso, and the People's Republic of China (PRC), discussed by Yue Liang.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, other cases depart even further from those norms, such as in Aashique Ahmed Iqbal's article analysing the role played by aviation diplomacy in advancing the interests of Jodhpur, a semi-autonomous princely state, as it navigated the British imperial system on the Indian subcontinent.<sup>18</sup> Thus the cases from twentieth-

<sup>13</sup> For example, Kenji Ito and Maria Rentetzi, 'The co-production of nuclear science and diplomacy: towards a transnational understanding of nuclear things', *History and Technology* (2021) 37(1), pp. 4–20; Maria Rentetzi, 'With strings attached: gift-giving to the International Atomic Energy Agency and US foreign policy', *Endeavour* (2021) 45(1–2), pp. 1–10.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Adamson and Roberto Lalli (eds.), *Global Perspectives on Science Diplomacy*, special issue, *Centaurus* (2021) 63(1); Lif Lund Jacobsen and Doubravka Olšáková (eds.), *Diplomats in Science Diplomacy*, special issue, *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* (2020) 43(4); Sam Robinson et al., 'The globalization of science diplomacy in the early 1970s: a historical exploration', *Science and Public Policy* (2023) 50(4), pp. 749–58; Giulia Rispoli and Simone Turchetti (eds.), *Science Diplomacy*, special issue, *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences* (2020) 50(4); Simone Turchetti and Matthew Adamson (eds.), *Science, Technology and Visual Diplomacy*, special issue, *BJHS* (2023) 56(2).

<sup>15</sup> For more information on the events see 'De-centring science diplomacy: cases from Asia mini-workshops', at <https://sciencediplomacyhistory.org/2021/07/08/de-centring-science-diplomacy-cases-from-asia-mini-workshops> (accessed 24 February 2024).

<sup>16</sup> For example, Fedoroff, op. cit. (5).

<sup>17</sup> Michitake Aso, 'Performing national independence through medical diplomacy: tuberculosis control and socialist internationalism in Cold War Vietnam'; and Yue Liang, 'Technology diplomacy in early Communist China: the visit to the Jingjiang Flood Diversion Project in 1952', this issue.

<sup>18</sup> Aashique Ahmed Iqbal, 'Jodhpur and the aeroplane: aviation and diplomacy in an Indian state 1924–1952', this issue.

century Asia considered in this issue allow for the consideration of the impacts and influences of a plurality of actor types operating across a range of contexts.

As such, we propose that Asia is a productive space to test the utility of science diplomacy as a heuristic device with which to conduct what Zuoyue Wang in this issue's 'Concluding conversation' has called 'meso-level analysis', one that bridges the gap between global and transnational levels.<sup>19</sup> The 'meso-level analysis' enabled by this formulation of science diplomacy permits us to identify the ways in which scientific objects, personnel and expertise travelled across national borders through dynamic interactions of both state and non-state actors without losing sight of the various contours of different political units – be it a sovereign state, an empire, a colony or an intergovernmental or inter-regional organization – that shaped the transnational scientific exchange.<sup>20</sup> As a region, Asia is especially effective for this type of analysis precisely because its modern history showcases the intricacy of such political units, some of which do not easily conform to the assumptions in the existing literature, which tends to focus on the US or European cases. In particular, we see a variety of imperialisms at play in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Asia, not least the Japanese Empire as 'homegrown', and the world's only non-European modern empire having a significant presence in international affairs.<sup>21</sup> By emulating the European colonial powers but simultaneously asserting its uniqueness – especially taking advantage of the perceived racial affinity with the colonial subjects – the Japanese Empire complicated the geopolitics inscribed in the scientific exchange within and beyond the region. Moreover, Asia also had China, which, although officially maintaining its sovereignty throughout the modern period, had a special status with the treaty ports as 'hyper-colonies', and from 1932 with Manchukuo as a 'puppet state' of the Japanese Empire.<sup>22</sup> Even the areas subjected to European colonial rule at times defied the simple 'colonizer–colonized' dichotomy. As Iqbal's paper shows, the structure of British colonial rule in South Asia created a space in which Jodhpur as a princely state acted as a critical actor of both diplomacy and transnational exchange for technological innovation.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, in the mid-twentieth century, as the Japanese Empire collapsed and US imperialism expanded its sphere of influence in the Cold War, Cold War geopolitics and the rise of the developmentalist discourse further subdivided sovereignties in the region according to 'capitalist–socialist' and 'developed–developing' dichotomies.<sup>24</sup> This, in turn, later

<sup>19</sup> 'Concluding conversation: decentring science diplomacy', this issue.

<sup>20</sup> In this respect, we follow Patricia Clavin's emphasis on the 'porous' nature of such political units permitting transnational exchange. Patricia Clavin, 'Defining transnationalism', *Contemporary European History* (2005) 14(4), pp. 421–39. See also Mark Solovey and Christian Dayé (eds.), *Cold War Social Science: Transnational Entanglements*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021, which provides a similar interpretation of the modern state.

<sup>21</sup> Toru Sakano and Togo Tsukahara (eds.), *Teikoku nihon no kagaku shisō shi* 帝国日本の科学思想史, Tokyo: Keisō Shobō, 2018; David G. Wittner and Philip C. Brown (eds.), *Science, Technology and Medicine in the Modern Japanese Empire*, London: Routledge, 2016. See also the *Teikoku no gakuchi* 帝国日本の学知 series published by Iwanami Shoten in the 2000s.

<sup>22</sup> On the concept of a 'hyper-colony' see Ruth Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Iqbal, op. cit. (18).

<sup>24</sup> On the long-term trajectory and various manifestations of the US imperial presence within different parts of Asia in relation to STM see, for example, Warwick Anderson, *Colonial Pathologies: American Tropical Medicine, Race, and Hygiene in the Philippines*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006; Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America's Cold War Battle against Poverty in Asia*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013; Yuka Tsuchiya Moriguchi, Shin Kawashima and Somei Kobayashi (eds.), *Knowledge Production in Cold War Asia: US Hegemony and Local Agency*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2025; and Inderjeet Parmar, *Foundations of the American Century: The Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller Foundations in the Rise of American Power*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012, pp. 124–48.



coalesced into the shorthand dualism of ‘global North–global South’ that has remained pervasive in present-day developmental discourses.<sup>25</sup> Jaehwan Hyun’s article shows how, in this Cold War context, ‘victory over communism’ provided the fulcrum for transnational scientific exchange in South Korea, while Michitake Aso’s article shows that socialist internationalism provided the basis on which tuberculosis experts from the DRV deployed the intertwined projects of medical diplomacy and nation building.<sup>26</sup> At the same time, Reiko Kanazawa’s paper illustrates how experts from the World Health Organization (WHO) were compelled to navigate layers of often conflicting interests in countries in South and South East Asia, which, though appearing at first glance to be predicated on the hierarchical relations of the ‘developed’ global North versus the ‘underdeveloped’ global South, were in fact more complex.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, mid-twentieth-century Asia was also a hotbed of the non-aligned movement.<sup>28</sup> In this context, some sovereignties within the region sat awkwardly in the dichotomies mentioned above, as indicated in Kenji Ito’s paper on the making of the Science Council of Japan.<sup>29</sup> Asia through modern history with multiple and contested sovereignties points to the limitation of adopting existing categories for understanding the political institutions that played a major part in science diplomacy. It is this point that makes cases from Asia a particularly effective tool with which to test our decentring agenda.

Furthermore, these cases from Asia contribute to the growing effort instigated by historians of science, medicine and technology to move away from the normative ‘centring’ of superpowers or Western imperial powers as history’s primary actors. These efforts feature a multiplicity of new actors and perspectives, as attested by recent works which have focused on actors from Asia in particular.<sup>30</sup> Following in the footsteps of these works, in this issue, we will focus on the agency and subjectivity of actors within Asia, many of whom were prominent in their respective local contexts. For example, Liang’s article foregrounds how the political elites of the Chinese Communist Party in the 1950s set out to establish the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as an exemplar of ‘peaceful development’ through initiatives such as the Jingjiang Flood Diversion Project on the Yangzi river.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, cases in this issue continue this process of shifting focus by contextualizing the activities of non-local or ‘foreign’ actors in Asia. Kanazawa draws attention to the rank-and-file officers dispatched from the WHO to Thailand and India for narcotic-substance control, showing how their trajectories dramatically diverged due to distinctive local circumstances.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, by detailing the ground-level negotiations using

<sup>25</sup> On the ‘global North/South’ dichotomy and science diplomacy see Derya Büyüktanir Karacan and Pierre-Bruno Ruffini, ‘Science diplomacy in the Global South: an introduction’, *Science and Public Policy* (2023) 50(4), pp. 742–8.

<sup>26</sup> Jaehwan Hyun, ‘Negotiating conservation and competition: national parks and “victory-over-communism” diplomacy in South Korea’, this issue; Aso, *op. cit.* (17).

<sup>27</sup> Reiko Kanazawa, ‘The politics of medical expertise and substance control: WHO consultants for addiction rehabilitation and pharmacy education in Thailand and India during the Cold War’, this issue.

<sup>28</sup> The literature on the non-aligned movement abounds, but for a recent work that productively and creatively contextualizes Afro-Asian transnational cultural interactions in relation to the wider political movement see Su Lin Lewis and Carlien Stolte (eds.), *Other Bandungs: Afro-Asian Internationalisms in the Early Cold War*, special issue, *Journal of World History* (2019) 30(1–2).

<sup>29</sup> Kenji Ito, ‘Transnational scientific advising: occupied Japan, the United States National Academy of Sciences and the establishment of the Science Council of Japan’, this issue.

<sup>30</sup> Such works include Mary Augusta Brazelton, *China in Global Health: Past and Present*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023; Yi-Tang Lin, *Statistics and the Language of Global Health: Institutions and Experts in China, Taiwan, and the World, 1917–1960*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023; Robinson *et al.*, *op. cit.* (14); Harry Yi-Jui Wu, *Mad by the Millions: Mental Disorders and the Early Years of the World Health Organization*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021.

<sup>31</sup> Liang, *op. cit.* (17).

<sup>32</sup> Kanazawa, *op. cit.* (27).

Japanese- as well as English-language sources, Ito challenges the existing interpretation in the historiography that the American scientific delegate visited Japan under the Allied Occupation with the intention of establishing the Science Council of Japan.<sup>33</sup> By foregrounding such diversions and unintended consequences accompanying their actions, such cases show the inherent messiness, multidirectional nature and historical contingency of science diplomacy, even when discussing examples involving power differentials between those involved.

The final dimension of our decentring agenda, linked to the episode at the beginning of this essay, is to take an intentionally broad definition of ‘science’ when we talk about science diplomacy. In part due to the dominance of the focus on post-Second World War diplomacy, certain scientific domains, particularly nuclear science, have played an outsized role in existing discussions on the history of science diplomacy.<sup>34</sup> In this special issue, partly inspired by East Asia’s modern history with ‘science–technology’, we have chosen to consciously step back and consider science diplomacy in terms of an umbrella of approaches and practices, involving science, technology, medicine and the environment. Our inclusion of medicine and environment is especially important here because of the burgeoning bodies of scholarship on ‘health diplomacy’ and ‘ecological diplomacy’, distinct and well-developed literatures that can be conspicuously absent from discussion on science diplomacy, despite their clear relevance.<sup>35</sup> This agenda to bring these literatures into explicit dialogue has been central to this special-issue project from the very beginning, not simply by bringing together scholars from across those subdisciplinary specialist divides who developed their articles alongside one another through mutual discussion and input via ‘mini-workshops’ as part of the writing process.

Taken together, the interconnections and mutual relevance of the articles in this issue call into question the utility of conceptualizing science diplomacy as a distinct form, separate and unrelated to health diplomacy or environmental diplomacy. Instead, we argue for ‘science’ in science diplomacy being deployed in a similar manner to a long-established perspective in the history of STM that considers science to also incorporate various human efforts to modify and improve things, their bodies and what surrounded them.<sup>36</sup> Thus each article contains multiple connections and crucial parallels to other articles in the issue, some already highlighted in this introduction. Yet there are many others besides. For example, much as Ito’s article upends established narratives about the relative levels of American versus Japanese influence in the formation of the Science Council of Japan, Aso’s similarly subverts expectations about inter-regional power relations in his article on tuberculosis control.<sup>37</sup> In it, Aso demonstrates that the DRV’s leveraging of socialist internationalism was not simply to enhance its ability to solicit medical assistance, but also simultaneously to establish itself as an exporter of medical assistance in

<sup>33</sup> Ito, *op. cit.* (29).

<sup>34</sup> Recent examples of this trend include Matthew Adamson, ‘Science diplomacy at the International Atomic Energy Agency: isotope hydrology, development, and the establishment of a technique’, *Journal of Contemporary History* (2021) 56(3), pp. 552–542; Maria Rentetzi and Kenji Ito (eds.), *The Material Culture and Politics of Artifacts in Nuclear Diplomacy*, special issue, *Centaurus* (2021) 63(2); Simone Turchetti, ‘Trading global catastrophes: NATO’s science diplomacy and nuclear winter’, *Journal of Contemporary History* (2021) 56(3), pp. 543–62.

<sup>35</sup> Examples of these include Ilona Kickbusch, Graham Lister, Michaela Told and Nick Drager (eds.), *Global Health Diplomacy: Concepts, Issues, Actors, Instruments, Fora and Cases*, Springer: New York, 2013; Lino Camprubí, ‘Birds without borders: ecological diplomacy and the WWF in Franco’s Spain’, *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences* (2020) 50(4), pp. 433–55.

<sup>36</sup> John V. Pickstone, *Ways of Knowing: A New History of Science, Technology and Medicine*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000, remains a classic articulation of this perspective, although its focus categorically is on the West.

<sup>37</sup> Ito, *op. cit.* (29).

its own right.<sup>38</sup> This duality between domestic development and international outreach in the DRV's medical diplomacy analysed by Aso had both distinctive characteristics and deep parallels with the technological diplomacy being deployed by its much larger northern neighbour, the PRC. Focusing on delegates' visit to the Jingjiang Flood Diversion Project as part of the 1952 Asia-Pacific Peace Conference, Liang demonstrates how the PRC sought to use it to showcase to a non-specialist audience the fledgling revolutionary state's approach to development, one that purported to pursue modernization through leveraging 'vernacular technologies'.<sup>39</sup> Crucially, the PRC's utilization of technology as part of its engagement with the international peace movement came while the country was a combatant on one side of the early Cold War's most formative international conflicts, the Korean War. As with Aso on the DRV and Liang on the PRC, Jaehwan Hyun's contribution considers a case involving contested sovereignties. Yet his article does so from the perspective of biologists from the Republic of Korea, thereby exploring a case of ecological diplomacy from the other side of the Cold War's ideological divide. Examining their engagement with the International Union for Conservation of Nature, Hyun shows how nature conservation activities became an active vehicle for competition between the two Koreas and reflected the relationship between ideology and politics in Asian developmentalism.<sup>40</sup>

Crucially, while we focus on the cases of Asia, we are not taking 'Asia' at face value. On the contrary, we acknowledge that the world region has been constructed historically, thus the contours of what constituted 'Asia' differed through history. In particular, we want to remind ourselves that the categorization of Asia into the subregions of East, South East and South Asia that have political currencies today is itself a product of US-led science diplomacy during the Cold War.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, we are not uncritically celebrating Asian identities even as we foreground the importance of the local subjectivity. As Claire Edington aptly points out in the 'Concluding conversation' in referring to Aihwa Ong's book, biomedical science in Singapore, for instance, has served to consolidate the idea of an 'Asian disease' while at the same time constructing the notion of 'Asian populations' that defied the earlier colonial narratives that pathologized Asian bodies.<sup>42</sup> The complexity of postcolonial identity formation in Asia and how that was entangled with the ways in which science, technology and medicine were made has been pointed out by some scholars who propose adopting Asia as a heuristic device through which to seize a global history of STM and the environment in a decolonial manner.<sup>43</sup>

Mindful of this trend in the area-specific scholarship, this special issue considers Asia as more than a shorthand that refers to a geographical world region. Kanazawa's paper shows Asia in the mid-twentieth century as a site of intervention in the global politics of socio-economic development, one in which the nature of intervention varied

<sup>38</sup> Aso, op. cit. (17).

<sup>39</sup> Liang, op. cit. (17).

<sup>40</sup> Hyun, op. cit. (26).

<sup>41</sup> On the critical area studies see David Szanton (ed.), *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. For discussion of these issues from the various regional specialisations reflected in this special issue see Chua Beng Huat, Ken Dean, Ho Eng seng, Ho Kong Chong, Jonathan Rigg and Brenda Yeoh, 'Area studies and the crisis of legitimacy: a view from South East Asia', *South East Asia Research* (2019) 27(1), pp. 31–48; Masao Miyoshi and Harry D. Harootunian (eds), *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002; Sinderpal Singh, 'Framing "South Asia": whose imagined region?', Working Paper No. 9, Institute for Defence and Strategic Studies, Singapore (2001), pp. 1–30.

<sup>42</sup> 'Concluding conversation', op. cit. (19). Aihwa Ong, *Fungible Life: Experiment in the Asian City of Life*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.

<sup>43</sup> For example, see Warwick Anderson, 'Postcolonial specters of STS', *East Asian Science, Technology and Society* (2017) 11(2), pp. 229–33; Fa-ti Fan, 'The global turn in the history of science', *East Asian Science, Technology and Society* (2012) 6(2), pp. 249–58.



considerably.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, as Homei points out in the ‘Concluding conversation’ and elsewhere, Japanese actors in international cooperation in family planning flipped the image of Asia to their own benefit, to justify Japanese bilateral cooperation with other Asian countries and to establish Japan’s position in international communities.<sup>45</sup> Therefore a crucial aspect of the agency exerted by multiple actors from Asia involved leveraging their own positionality, intra-regional power dynamics and knowledge of discourses or assumptions about Asia.

The papers that follow interconnect and intersect with one another in a range of ways that are neither simple nor static; the primary interlinkages that appear between them shift and reset depending on the vantage point from which they are being viewed. As such, they collectively challenge the notion of there being a singular, straightforward definition of a science diplomacy that can fit all cases and encompass all contexts. Our aim in this special issue is not to articulate an alternative science diplomacy applicable only to a particular region, actor, period or domain. Nor is it to simply refine or replace existing universalist definitions such as that advanced by the Royal Society and the AAAS. Instead, this exercise in decentring can be characterized as a conceptual disruption aimed at stepping away from what Kate Sullivan de Estrada describes as utilization of ‘cases and concepts and categories as fixed mental furniture’.<sup>46</sup> This intervention is not only relevant in terms of its characterization of the issue’s agenda, but also because of the context in which it was articulated: as part of a multi-positional, multidisciplinary dialogue in this issue’s ‘Concluding conversation’. Rather than a summing up from a singular vantage point or voice, the final element of this issue is a reflective conversation, drawing on the expertise and perspectives of three established scholars who each approach the discussion of science diplomacy and the articles in this issue from their own perspective. Consequently, that contribution of Sullivan de Estrada’s was made in response to and building on Claire Edington arguing for science diplomacy having utility as a means of ‘contemplating points of connection or entanglements between different places, politics, kinds of expertise’.<sup>47</sup> The special issue aims to do precisely that. The cases explored here offer such accounts of connection and entanglement, ones that point toward a notion of science diplomacy as fundamentally dynamic. Truly globalizing our understanding of science diplomacy requires decentring that understanding and, in doing so, embracing the extent to which aspects of this concept can change and be reconfigured based on context.

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<sup>44</sup> Kanazawa, op. cit. (27).

<sup>45</sup> Aya Homei, ‘Transnationalism through the lens of inter-Asian medical collaborations’, in Kevin N. Cawley and Julia C. Schneider (eds.), *Transnationalism in East Asia*, Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 2023, pp. 239–54; Aya Homei, ‘Between the West and Asia: “humanistic” Japanese family planning in the Cold War’, *East Asian Science, Technology and Society* (2016) 10(4), pp. 445–67.

<sup>46</sup> On conceptual disruption see Kate Sullivan de Estrada, ‘IR’s recourse to area studies: siloisation anxiety and the disruptive promise of exceptionalism’, *St Antony’s International Review* (2020) 16(1), pp. 207–14.

<sup>47</sup> ‘Concluding conversation’, op. cit. (19), pp. 4–5.

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