In this paper, I want to think about the placement and movement of “Asia” – whether as an object of research or more widely as epistemological location – through diffusion theory. My main model is the diffusion of law, which is one of the most salient paradigms in comparative law. I want to demonstrate that the project to decolonize knowledge in order to “rediscover Asia” as self-determining, can benefit from lessons learned in the debates on legal diffusion. Three “translations” are possible, I suggest. First, legal diffusion or transplantation often thrust import and export legal systems toward epistemic equivalency. The relevant question, then, becomes whether it is possible to reframe the order of knowledge distribution in terms of the image of diffusion, rather than always a unidirectional distribution from center to periphery along the grids of power? Second, legal transplantation theories often throw up the concerns about reception, mimicry, balance, repetition, and of course, translation and transposition. How comparative law resolves the complexity of these processes can shed light on how competing systems of knowledge travel. Third, the mobility of law speaks to the wider sociocultural and political context of change. The relevant question is: how might we more clearly map the macro- and micro-contexts in which a higher degree of mobility of Asia-based knowledge can be engendered? All of these translations would call for a reconsecration of the very idea of “Asia” in new ways, including the imaginings of “thick Asia” versus “thin Asia.”

John Nguyet Erni is Fung Hon Chu Endowed Chair Professor of Humanics, and Head of the Department of Humanities and Creative Writing at Hong Kong Baptist University. He was elected President of the Hong Kong Academy of the Humanities (2017-18). A former recipient of the Rockefeller and Annenberg research fellowships, and many other awards and grants, Erni’s wide-ranging work includes international and Asia-based cultural studies, human rights legal criticism, Chinese consumption of transnational culture, gender and sexuality in media culture, youth consumption culture in Hong Kong and Asia, and critical public health. He is the author or editor of 10 books, most recently Visuality, Emotions, and Minority Culture: Feeling Ethnic (2017, Springer); (In)visible Colors: Images of Non-Chinese in Hong Kong Cinema – A Filmography, 1970s – 2010s (with Louis Ho, Cinezin Press, 2016); Understanding South Asian Minorities in Hong Kong (with Lisa Leung, HKUP, 2014). Currently, he is completing a book project on the legal modernity of rights.