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Method as Method

In 1960 Japanese scholar of Chinese literature Takeuchi Yoshimi gave a pair of lectures titled "Asia as Method," in which he considered how one might engage with Western theory from an East Asian perspective. In this intervention Takeuchi was particularly interested in Western universal values of freedom and equality, noting the manifest tension between these ideals themselves and the imperial legacies with which they are linked. Takeuchi suggested that one response to this tension would be to simply reject these Western ideals out of hand, but he instead proposed that a more productive response would be for Asia to "re-embrace the West" and attempt to improve the West's own ideals by reassessing them from an outside perspective. In order for this to be possible, he concluded, Asia must have "[its] own cultural values." Noting the possibility that "these values do not already exist, in substantive form," Takeuchi concluded that they may nevertheless still be possible "as method"—which is to say, "as the process of the subject's self-formation." He called this process "'Asia as method" and added that it was "impossible to definitively state what this might mean."[1]

Subsequently published in essay form, Takeuchi's lectures have inspired a wide range of critical interventions, including ones that take as their starting point Asia or Asian regions and others that engage with different objects or phenomena. These studies include Mizoguchi Yūzō's "China as Method" (1989), Kuan-hsing Chen's *Asia as Method* (2004), Yu-lin Lee's "Taiwan as Method" (2009), Stephen Yiu Wai Chu's edited volume *Hong Kong (Studies) as Method* (2016), and Brian Bernards's "Malaysia as Method" (2016). More generally, Takeuchi's approach has been applied to an array of other topics and fields. For instance, from the year 2013 alone, we find Neilson and Mezzadra's *Border as Method*, Ruth Levitas's *Utopia as Method*, and Catherine McKinnon's essay for *Signs*, "Intersectionality as Method." In each case the emphasis on method is both programmatic and oppositional, in that each study proposes an alternative methodological approach while also critically interrogating an existing set of analytical practices.

Taking inspiration from these sorts of interventions, this special issue features essays that focus not on specific objects, phenomena, or theoretical frameworks

in their own right, but rather on an underlying set of methodological processes. This attention to method treats analysis as a type of praxis that produces knowledge through a dialectical engagement with its object rather than assuming that knowledge is either intrinsic to the object itself or is generated solely by the corresponding theoretical framework. Our objective, accordingly, is to propose methodologies that can be delinked from the objects or phenomena that inspired them and can be productively applied to a broader array of issues.

Beyond this attention to methodology itself, we are specifically interested in how these methodological concerns take inspiration from—and may be applied to—a set of Chinese topics. The reasons for this focus on China are twofold. First, to the extent that Western critical theory has often tended to view China as occupying a space of radical alterity, by taking China as our starting point we hope to reveal some of the underlying assumptions on which these Western paradigms are predicated. Second, like the concept of *the West* itself, *China* is a fundamentally heterogeneous category composed of countless differentiable elements that each rely on different sets of assumptions and presuppositions, and one of our objectives is to help reassess how these conceptual categories are constituted in the first place.

The essays in this issue can be divided into three groups that address a set of translational processes, ecological paradigms, and mapping regimes, respectively. In the first group, four essays examine processes by which social realities are figuratively translated into cultural representations—and just as discussions of linguistic translation focus not only on what is able to be translated but also on what is left untranslatable, each of the essays in this first group similarly attend, in different ways, to the inevitable gaps that emerge between social realities and corresponding cultural representations. The essays in the second group, meanwhile, all revolve around a set of ecological concerns, in the sense of an interest in the relationships between different elements within a larger ecosystem (either literal or metaphorical)—including relationships that range from being nominally harmonious to parasitic to self-consumptive. Finally, the essays in the third group all engage with questions of mapping, including not only the assignation of geopolitical borders but also processes of conceptual categorization and differentiation—and particularly how we may understand the categories of *China* and *Asia* themselves.

The first group of essays attend to the translational nexus between interpretive frameworks and their corresponding objects. First, in my own essay, I use translation as a prism through which to consider how literary works negotiate their relationship to a set of embedded voices that they seek to represent. Just as translation studies often zero in on the figure of the untranslatable as a limit point of translatability, what is particularly interesting about this focus on processes of translation between various voices within and outside the text is not

necessarily what gets translated but rather what inevitably gets left out of this translational process. More broadly, translation (both literal and metaphorical) functions not merely as the object of analysis; it also becomes a model for understanding the analytical process itself. Next, Christopher Rea turns to fictional works about tricks or hoaxes. If translation, in the abstract, gestures toward the possibility of effectively transposing meaning from one medium to another, the figure of the hoax aspires to the precise opposite—of using one medium to *misrepresent* the contents of another. Through a survey of a wide variety of Chinese literary and cinematic works, Rea proposes eight different categories of hoaxes, and in the process opens up a broader reflection on the nature of creativity and cultural representation itself. To the extent that fiction itself may be viewed as a kind of hoax—an attempt to convince readers to accept (even if only provisionally) a set of counterfactual propositions—literary and cinematic portrayals of hoaxes may therefore be viewed as a microcosm of cultural representation itself, and by focusing representations of misrepresentation, Rae offers a more nuanced inquiry into our understanding of representation.

The other two essays in this first group both take as their starting point phenomena that are closely linked to processes of urbanization in contemporary China, and they use these phenomena to offer a broader reflection on issues of social structure and processes of representation. First Margaret Hillenbrand considers a subgenre of cultural production featuring images of urban waste or refuse. Hillenbrand considers not only how artists take urban waste and transform it into art, but also the striking absence, in many of the works in question, of the people who live in and around these urban waste dumps and struggle to eke out a living by collecting discarded items and putting them back into circulation. From this point Hillenbrand develops a critical reflection on the structural relationship between concepts of waste and precarity. Borrowing Walter Benjamin's figure of the ragpicker, Hillenbrand uses rag picking to describe the methodological approach not only of the contemporary artists seeking to represent urban waste as well as the precariat forced to make a living collecting that same waste, but also of the analysts, like Hillenbrand herself, who attempt to interpret this phenomenon in the first place. In the next essay Yomi Braester turns to a different dimension of urbanization in contemporary China, which is the tendency—found across a wide array of different media—to produce images featuring broad urban vistas. Braester considers the underlying forces and tendencies responsible for producing this phenomenon, which he dubs a panoramic imaginary in contemporary Chinese urbanism. Just as Hillenbrand focuses on rag picking to draw attention to conditions of precarity in contemporary urban China, Braester is similarly interested in using a panoramic methodology to offer insight into how social relations and the possibility of civic engagement are being reimagined and reconfigured in contemporary China.

The second group of essays consider a set of concerns that could be characterized as ecological, in the sense that they are about the interrelationship between different entities and forces within a larger environment. This focus on ecology, however, does not necessarily emphasize a harmonious relationship among the various elements that make up a certain ecosystem, and instead it may emphasize the internal tensions and contestations within that same system.

First Robin Visser considers a collection of Sinophone eco-fiction from or about Inner Mongolia—including works either by ethnic Mongol authors or by an ethnically Han author who lived in Inner Mongolia. In different ways each of these works gestures to the possibility of an indigenous ontology that might present a radical alternative to the agrarian, industrialized logic associated with the majority Han culture, or what Visser calls *Hanspace*. At points these indigenous perspectives suggest the possibility of a radically non-anthropocentric ecological ontology, wherein humanity is simply one element among many.

Next Lorraine Wong turns to a rather different form of anti-anthropomorphism, in the form of cannibalism. In particular Wong considers a recent Hong Kong television series that explores the aftermath of an incident in which three young members of a band consumed the flesh of a fourth bandmate after the group lost their way in a blizzard. The majority of the series is then set eighteen years later, in 2010, and traces the attempts by the surviving bandmates to come to terms with the traumatic legacy of the earlier cannibalistic incident. Treating cannibalism not only as a cultural trope but also as a methodological approach in its own right, Wong suggests that the series uses this act of self-consumption to comment on the threat that China poses to contemporary Hong Kong and also to deconstruct a set of binary oppositions between colonizer and colonized, inside and outside, self and other.

Finally Belinda Kong examines the concept of pandemic, which she suggests is most productively understood not as an autonomous category but rather as a set of discursive relations. In particular Kong notes that US discourses of infection and contagion often tend to target Asian bodies and regions, reflecting a logic that Kong calls bio-orientalism. In this way Kong uses the discursive nexus of pandemic to examine some of the ways in which logics of biosecurity, geopolitics, and neo-orientalism are intricately intertwined with one another.

Although all of the preceding essays focus on topics relating to Chinese society and culture, it is in the final group that we find the most explicit reflections on the categories of China and Asia themselves. Collectively these final four essays ask how we might understand China's relationship to the West and to other Asian regions, as well as the relationship between various different Chinese regions themselves.

The first two essays in this final grouping each take a specific text as their starting point. Shuang Shen looks at the 2013 novel *Crazy Rich Asians* by Singapore-

born and US-based author Kevin Kwan, while Petrus Liu focuses on the 1992 martial arts film *Swordsman II: Asia the Invincible*, directed by Hong Kong director Ching Siu-tung and produced by the Vietnam-born Hong Kong filmmaker Tsui Hark. Shen takes Kwan's novel as a provocation to think beyond a set of conventional East-West boundaries and to rethink the concept of borders in the context of a global Chinese diaspora. Liu takes Ching's film as an invitation to reexamine the significance and ramifications of the Cold War, arguing that the concept (and its corresponding methodologies) should be expanded to include not only tensions within Asia itself, but also phenomena following the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union.

In their coauthored essay "Script as Method," Laikwan Pang and Ko Chun-kit use the Chinese writing system as a lens through which to examine the post-1949 split between Communist China, on the one hand, and Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other Sinophone regions, on the other. Pang and Ko are specifically interested in the ramifications of China's decision in the 1950s to adapt simplified versions of many Chinese characters. Although in principle this simplification process was carried out in order to help increase literacy levels in China, in practice, when combined with the strict censorship policies that China began implementing around the same period, it yielded a system wherein many texts can only be published in one version of the Chinese script and not the other. Pang and Ko focus specifically on works that can currently only be published in the "complicated" script (*fantizi* 繁體字) used in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and elsewhere and not in the "simplified" script (*jiantizi* 簡體字) used in Mainland China.

Finally Hsiao-hung Chang takes Taiwan's recent legalization of same-sex marriage to reflect on the implications of the claim that Taiwan was the "first in Asia" to reach this important legal-political threshold. Through a dialogue with Takeuchi's "Asia as Method" and related texts, Chang proposes two distinct ways of viewing Asia, which she dubs *Area Asia* (i.e., Asia as a concrete geo-historical region) and *bloc asia* (i.e., Asia as a virtual aggregate), respectively. Taking inspiration from Takeuchi's suggestion, in his 1960 "Asia as Method" lectures, that Asia should attempt to "roll back" the West's ideals of universal equality so as to help realize the unrealized potentiality contained within those ideals themselves, Chang suggests that contemporary debates over same-sex marriage in Taiwan offer a similar opportunity to reassess not only the Western ideals of universal equality on which these debates are grounded but also the category of Asia against which these contemporary debates are being played out.

To the extent that all of these essays share an interest in method, accordingly, this special issue itself could be viewed as a meta-reflection on method as method— which is to say, on the implications of taking methodology as an object of focus in its own right. In contrast to approaches centered on texts or objects, which tend to elide theoretical and methodological considerations, and in contrast to

theory-centered approaches, which tend to take for granted the universal applicability of the theoretical paradigm in question, a methodology-based approach attends simultaneously to both objects and theories—including both ways in which objects are constituted by specific sets of theoretical assumptions and the ways in which theoretical paradigms often rely on the objects and localities out of which they emerge. By inviting focus on methodologies rather than on objects or theories, accordingly, we seek to denaturalize both objects and theories, thereby enabling approaches that are more attuned to the ways in which they mutually constitute one another.

The cover image of this special issue illustrates the volume's twin concerns with methodology, on the one hand, and with reexamining a set of transregional and transcultural hermeneutic practices on the other. The image is a reproduction of a 2003 painting titled *Fan Kuan—Cezanne N*, by the New York–based expatriate Chinese artist Hongtu Zhang 張宏圖 (fig. 1). Part of a series of works in which Zhang uses the distinctive painting styles of famous modern European painters to re-create iconic paintings from premodern China, this particular work uses the post-impressionist style of Paul Cézanne to re-create a work attributed to the Northern Song dynasty landscape painter Fan Kuan 范寬 (ca. 950–ca. 1032), who is best known for his painting *Travelers among Mountains and Streams* 谿山行旅圖 (Xishan xinglü tu)—a monumental mountain-scape with a tiny mule train in the foreground (fig. 2). This iconic work is widely regarded as a classic in the Chinese landscape tradition and has been endlessly reproduced and imitated. The painting that inspired the work used as the cover image of this issue, however, is not *Travelers among Mountains and Streams* but rather *Sitting Alone by a Stream* 臨流獨坐圖 (Linliu duzuo tu) (fig. 3). Although traditionally attributed to Fan Kuan, the work in question does not bear his seal or signature (though it does feature a large array of collector's seals and inscriptions, documenting the subsequent circulation of the painting itself), and furthermore some of the work's stylistic features suggest that it was produced by some later artist working in the Fan Kuan style. In particular, while *Sitting Alone by a Stream* shares compositional elements with *Travelers among Mountains and Streams*, other elements, such as the brushwork used for the rocks and for the human figure in the foreground, are incompatible with the style found in Fan Kuan's known paintings or other works from his period.

In his own contemporary painting, however, Zhang takes these specific points of stylistic divergence between an authentic Fan Kuan painting like *Travelers among Mountains and Streams* and a historically and stylistically proximate work like the extant version of *Sitting Alone by a Stream* and turns them on their head. Instead Zhang has created a work that hews quite closely to the compositional model of the earlier work but radically diverges from it in stylistic terms—in that nearly all the stylistic elements of the original (e.g., brushwork,
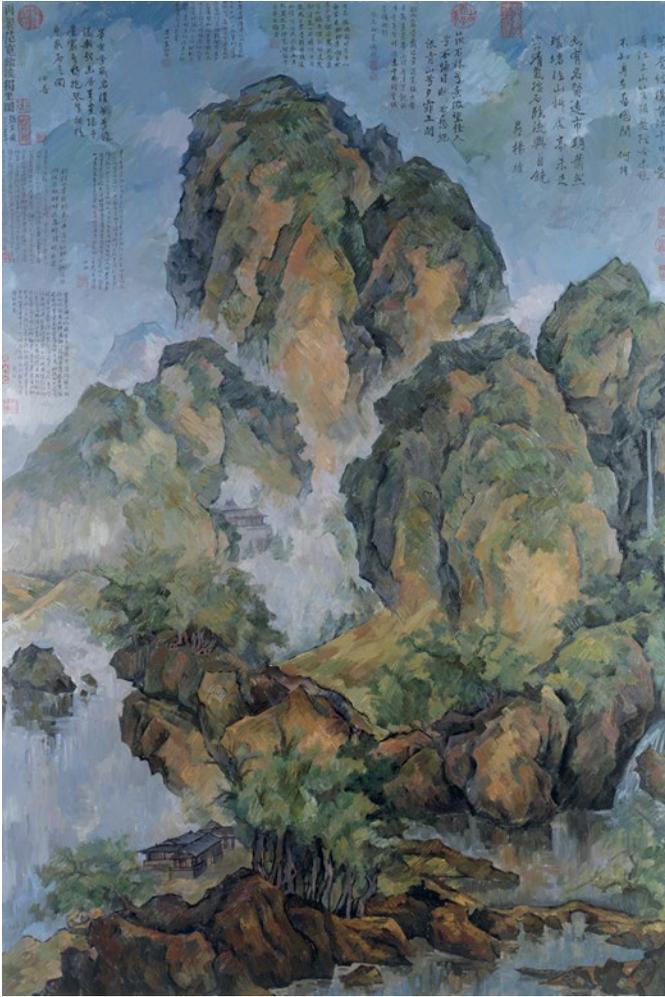
FIGURE 1. Hongtu Zhang 張宏圖, *Fan Kuan—Cézanne N.* Oil on canvas, 70×48 in., 2003. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

texture, and coloration) have been replaced with elements inspired by the work of Cézanne (the work may be compared, for instance, to Cézanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, which has a rather different compositional arrangement but similar stylistic features as Zhang's contemporary work) (fig. 4).

On the surface, Zhang's work may be viewed as an allegorical commentary on a process of Western appropriation of non-Western cultural elements, particularly in the modern period (for instance, it is well known that the Impressionist movement took inspiration in part from Japanese ukioyo-e woodblock prints). In context, however, the situation is somewhat more complicated, insofar as Zhang, throughout his career, has explicitly positioned himself at the interstices of Chinese and Western art, using a strategic dialogue between these two traditions as a site of artistic creativity and social critique. Moreover, in using a later artistic style (Cézanne's) to reimagine an earlier one (Fan Kuan's, or that of the

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FIGURE 2. Fan Kuan 範寬, *Travelers among Mountains and Streams* 谿山行旅 圖. Hanging scroll, ink and light color on silk, 206.3×103.3cm., tenth to eleventh century National Palace Museum, Taipei. Public domain.

FIGURE 3. Artist unknown (sometimes attributed to Fan Kuan 范寬), *Sitting Alone by a Stream* 臨流獨坐圖. Hanging scroll, ink and light color on silk, 156.1×106.3cm, eleventh century. National Palace Museum, Taipei. Public domain.

unidentified later Song dynasty artist working in the Fan Kuan tradition), Zhang is invoking an artistic practice with deep roots in Chinese art history. That is to say, whereas imitations in the context of Western art are often viewed as either a form of apprenticeship (part of an artist's training) or a form of deception (plagiarism), in a traditional Chinese context this is viewed as a highly valorized form of artistic creativity in its own right—wherein artists simultaneously pay tribute to earlier masters while at the same time using the process of imitation (or imitation with difference) to develop their own distinctive stylistic attributes.

Known as *fang* 放, or "imitation," the Chinese artistic practice Hongtu Zhang is imitating in his contemporary work can be seen as an exercise in pure method, wherein the painting's artistry lies precisely in its performance of a multiple overlapping processes of imitation—an imitation of Cézanne's style, an imitation of
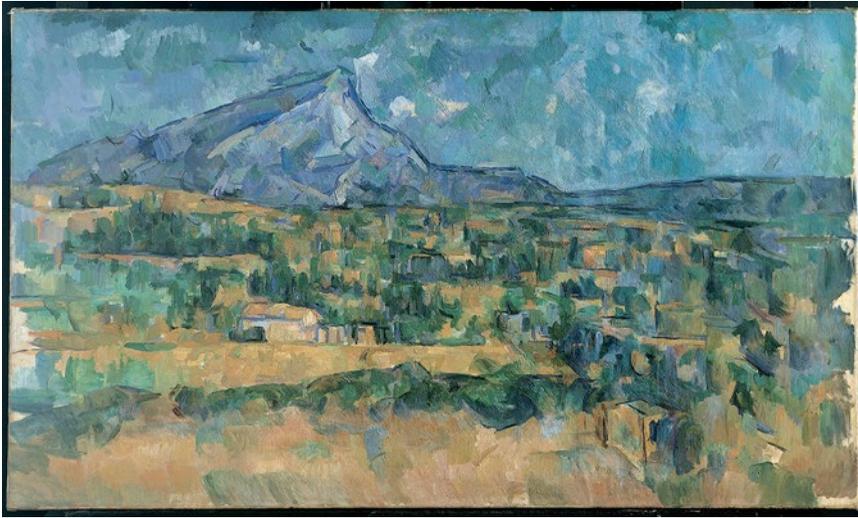
FIGURE 4. Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire (La Montagne Sainte-Victoire)*. Oil on canvas, 57.2×97.2cm, circa 1902–6. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Public domain.

Fan Kuan's compositional qualities, an imitation of the unidentified Song artist's imitation of Fan Kuan's work, as well as an imitation of the Chinese artistic practice of *fang* itself. In this way Zhang offers a reflection on the complicated interplay between tradition and modernity, Chinese and Western practices, form and content, creativity and reproduction. In deploying imitation as a method, he simultaneously makes it an object in its own right while also positioning it as the potential basis for a theory of artistic practice and cultural negotiation.

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Note

1   Takeuchi, "Asia as Method," 165.

Reference

Takeuchi, Yoshimi. "Asia as Method." In *What Is Modernity? Writings of Takeuchi Yoshimi*, edited and translated by Richard F. Calichman, 149–65. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.