

Imitation 摹仿

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There are many aspects to the concept of imitation.

First of all, an imitation is a copy or a reproduction of something. To imitate is to copy or reproduce something or someone. In most general uses, it has negative implications of parroting someone or even making a forgery of something, because the one who imitates is assumed to lack originality and that which is the product of imitation lacks authenticity. In Taiwan, the use of theory has often been considered the site of imitation or mimicry of Western theory, implying that there is neither original nor authentic native theory in Taiwan. Because of the assumption that theory is never native, or any native thought will not qualify as theory, imitation has been considered the predominant mode of engagement with theory. Implicit in such a widely accepted generalization is that Taiwan can provide content, i.e., the object of theorization, but not theory itself. In the neocolonial production and transmission of theory, Taiwan therefore occupies a passive position as a recipient who can only imitate, not create. Temporally, imitation implies belatedness (the copy always happens after the time of the original); spatially, imitation happens in other spaces (the copy happens outside the space of origin).

From the perspectives of some strands of psychology and anthropology however, imitation has important functions basic to human learning. Children and students model their behavior after adults or teachers, and they learn through imitation. Imitation is also a kind of social learning necessary for the development and transmission of traditions that constitute what we call culture. Without imitation, there can be no accumulation of practices and habits that constitute traditions of a given culture. In this sense, imitation is a form of production, and reproduction is production. Temporally, imitation is then co-eval with the original; spatially, imitation happens across equalizing spaces that are not determined by the self/other dynamic. We may even argue that this notion of imitation dispenses with the notion of originality altogether. The claim to Western as well as Chinese exceptionalism or originality, then, can be exposed as a ruse, enabled by the complicit operations of knowledge and power. In this sense, it is small and marginalized nations such as Taiwan, in acknowledging imitation as a mode of (re)production and creation, that embody the truth about theory, as itself a form of imitation.