Yoko Tawada, Is Europe Western? (2006)

Abstract

Yoko Tawada (born 1960 in Tokyo) studied Russian literature in Japan before moving to Germany in 1982 and studying German in Hamburg. She has published numerous books in German and Japanese. In 1993 she was awarded the prestigious Akutawaga Prize in Japan, in 1996 the Adelbert von Chamisso Prize, and in 2005 the Goethe Medal.

Source

Tradition and modernity: these are the two favorite words of the presenter, who lives in a box called "TV."

I have several boxes in my apartment. One is called a refrigerator. It hums day and night but says nothing else. Another box is called the washing machine, and often goes crazy. But the language that comes out of the TV is much crazier.

One of the largest Japanese companies producing televisions and other electrical appliances is called "National." A strange name for a company? Perhaps the name is just right because it embodied the emerging sense of nationalism when it was founded around 1920, and after World War II it expressed the pride in industrial production that replaced the shattered pride in the nation.

The end of the war did not lead to the dissolution of national identity. In the name of the nation, people were forced to strive for reconstruction and then for prosperity. Later, the nation also acquired another meaning, namely as a community responsible for history. Because the crime, the war, was carried out in the name of the nation, the nation had to continue to exist after the war as a bearer of responsibility, even if otherwise one would have preferred to get rid of the idea of the nation altogether.

I bought my television set in Germany. The company that made it is called "Grundig," not "abgründig." There is no company called "National" in Germany. The name would not make a good impression on customers.

The word "German" is also treated with care or avoided, just like the word "nation." But there are two topics where national pride is allowed, and they form the areas of life where many men live out their passion: cars and soccer.

Even a self-critical German intellectual who does nothing but criticize his own country would be offended if told that German cars are very bad. It's even easier to insult Japanese people. They are proud not only of the Japanese car, but also of the Walkman or sometimes the Japanese washing machine. Even I, who don't want to be nationalistic at all and have no idea about household matters, am offended when someone criticizes Japanese washing machines. Although I think the washing machine from the German company Bosch is better, because this company has a foundation that supports contemporary literature, among other things, no washing machine can - remove the grease stain of the inexplicable feeling that is connected with the idea of the nation.

In Germany, people are proud of German cars, but the majority of Germans cannot afford a BMW or Mercedes. In contrast, anyone can own a small national flag. You can even buy one in a ninety-nine cent store. There are unemployed young people who find the old form of nationalism with clearer symbols more just than the pride of the upper class in luxury that bears a German trademark but is not affordable for everyone. They feel that they are excluded from the prosperity organized and achieved on the national level.

A few years ago, a new law was passed in Japan requiring the national flag to be flown at every ceremony in schools and universities. It also specified exactly how big the flag should be. Otherwise, some people would get the idea of raising a flag smaller than a postage stamp. It was also precisely determined that the flag must be visibly positioned in the center of the stage. The national anthem must be sung at the ceremony, and in the original version. It has already happened that a music teacher turned the anthem into a piece of jazz and sang it as such. This act triggered an "Ikkyusan" contest. (Ikkyusan is a Japanese Till Eulenspiegel.) The Tokyo College of Foreign Languages, for example, did raise the national flag as instructed, but added a hundred and ten other national flags of other countries. However, it went well only once: the new "improved" law stipulates that no additional flag may be hoisted.

The old form of nationalism, such as the national flag, returned in recent years probably because the substitute nationalism with industrial products no longer works. People are no longer proud of the companies that like to merge with foreign companies and simply terminate their employees in the process. In addition, most corporations no longer belong to a nation.

Lately, you hear the word "European" even more often than before. When I turn on the radio, I hear the word every ten minutes. There's European monument conservation, European pop music competition, European novels.

The two adjectives "European" and "Western," unlike "German," are basically positive. The word "German" is no longer needed. Even the right-wing radicals don't always need it. They speak of "whites," which is inappropriate because they often attack the German-born migrants from Russia, but never speak ill of African-American pop stars. They would like to be racists, but in reality, they practice violence against the people they accuse of poverty.

As a Japanese, you don't want to talk about "Asian" unity. It sounds like Japanese imperialism. Asia is not one, and that is a good thing. There is neither a common religion nor a common political system, not even a common kind of rice. Thais would be very sad if they had to eat Japanese rice and vice versa. The term "Asia" is a child of colonialism, born in Europe and adopted, abused, and abandoned by the Japanese after World War II.

In Europe, people like to talk about Asian cuisine, Asian medicine, or Asian philosophy, because they would like there to be something like a unified Asian culture. Otherwise it becomes uncertain whether there is a European culture. In Asia, however, people are happy that there is no Asian culture for very different reasons.

I cannot speak of an "eastern world" either. The idea of the "East" is very Western European. This word was first used to mean the Middle East, then also China and Japan, sometimes Russia, and not infrequently also the Central European countries or the former GDR. The idea of the "East" had always been necessary to make the image of the "West" appear concrete. This has long been known thanks to research on Orientalism. And someone who assumes that the Orient is a fiction must actually be aware of the fictional character of Europe.

The other day there was a radio program about Islam in Germany in which the presenter said that the politics of Islamic fundamentalism should not be recognized as a different culture because the fundamentalists had imported their ideology and strategy from Europe, from Stalin or Hitler. Later, however, the moderator spoke of the "Western" political tradition of democracy, as if totalitarianism had not been a part of that tradition. In between she said that the West, of course, did not always behave in a Western way, but she did not broach the subject of the word "Western," nor did she dispense with the word. On the contrary. The word provided a seemingly safe ground for her arguments. She did not use another term, such as "European-American," probably because she wanted to exclude South America. Moreover, the term "Western" can be used to further reserve the possibility of excluding Eastern European countries, especially Russia.

I often wonder why my tongue does not like to pronounce the word “Western” and “Eastern”. I have nothing against the word “European,” although I also rarely use it because in some cases it means nothing. Is there a European food? Spaghetti? But have Europeans, for example Norwegians contributed more to the tradition of Italian pasta culture than the Chinese? I say “European” literature when I am too lazy to list the individual languages. Even the word “German” does not correspond to reality in some cases. Can we still speak of German literature today? And what about the German food culture? Didn't potatoes come from South America? - Nevertheless, I like the words “German” and “European” better than “Western” because they force me to think more concretely. The term “Western,” on the other hand, contains an insidious concept. It wants to sell something ideological in a geographical package: Whoever is in favor of democracy, freedom, and individualism is Western. And if this person comes from the geographical West, they live in their own tradition. If not, the person has left their own tradition. Thus, they are modern, but no longer themselves.

People like to imagine the tradition of “Western” culture as a single line of development. But this line is a fiction that has been laboriously shaped. For example, one likes to consider the ancient Greek culture as an important part of this line, for that one likes to exclude the influence of Arabic mathematics and natural sciences. But I have never seen a trace of ancient Greek culture in Hamburg. In contrast, in a temple in the Japanese city of Nara, the terminus of the Silk Road, one can see an ornament of grapes handed down from Greece. The stone fruits are still not rotten, although they are over a thousand years old and had been on the road for over a thousand years before that. Cultures on this earth have always consisted of one network rather than several parallel lines.

I can no longer use the expressions like “our culture” because I don't know who is supposed to belong to this “us” and who is not. For example, I would not think of calling Noh or Butoh theater “our” culture. And if I did use the word, I would not mean the Japanese, but the people who are involved in this theater.

The presenter on TV today is playing the same scenario again, no matter what “foreign” culture he shows us. If a girl lives with her family in a country that is foreign to the presenter, is sweet to her mother and has no boyfriend, they say she is living according to tradition. If she falls in love, quarrels with her parents about it and leaves home, it is said that she has been influenced by Western modernity and has decided to live her own life.

When the Americans came to Japan at the end of the 19th century, new laws were passed in Japan to modernize the country. Among other things, mixed public bathing, public nudity, and homosexuality were then banned for the first time in Japanese history. Modernization had nothing to do with freedom or individualism, but rather with the Puritan-oriented industrialization attempt and militarization of the country. After that, when the Japanese chose Prussia as a model to further modernize the country, the typical Japanese mentality emerged, which was so typically Japanese that it had to be imported from Prussia. Or one can also say: some characteristics that already existed in Japanese culture, such as the ethics of the samurai, the collective way of working of the rice farmers, the belief in authority or hierarchical thinking were selected as suitable building elements for modernity and - processed in a Prussian way.

The presenter shouted from the TV box that Latin America was contradictory, East Asia was contradictory, Saudi Arabia was contradictory because modernity and tradition coexisted there. But it is rather normal that a country has been industrialized without having completely destroyed the pre-industrial culture. Even in England, where industrialization started very early, not all ghosts, scary stories and magic disappeared. But the presenter never says that England is a contradictory country because modernity is Western in and of itself.

Perhaps Europe suffered the most from industrialization or already from the Enlightenment. And to ease their own pain, they equated the Western with modernity.

It is perhaps a good thing that the Germans use the word Western. That way, they don't have to fret unnecessarily about the influence of the USA. Otherwise, the presenter would also have to report about his own culture in exactly the same way as he recently reported about a country from the so-called Third World: “How sad that the beautiful, German, traditional university system is slowly being lost. The Germans have to switch to the modern American system for financial reasons. It is sad, but individual freedom in the free market is more important to them than their own tradition. It is similar with the change in the regulation of store closing hours. It is better if everyone can buy everything at any time. Such freedom did not exist in Germany until recently because their religion forbade it. God did not work on the seventh day, the Bible says, so people should not work either. But slowly they are freeing themselves from the traditional notion of Sunday and enjoying a free life as consumers without a guilty conscience. However, some citizens will continue to suffer from the gap between tradition and modernity.” This is the one scenario the presenter always uses when reporting on a non-Western culture.

There are different forms of modernity. There are different forms of television sets. You could talk about Japanese technology being different from Chinese technology or American technology. For example, you could see a principle in Japanese technology that the smaller a machine is, the more beautiful it is. So the transistor radio, Walkman and other small devices were invented and produced in Japan. But Japanese technology is as easy to adapt as European technology. Now the smallest cars in the world are not Japanese, but European. Also, the largest computer in the world is Japanese, and Japanese technicians are not ashamed of it. So there seems to be no point in talking about a national technology.

One could also speak of the Japanese form of democracy or freedom if one considers them not as a blueprint but as concrete houses to be built from wood, straw or stones found in the place. But talking about the differences does not mean insisting on the existence of the national character.

It is the same with theater. Modern Japanese theater is not only Japanese. Nor is it the case that only theater groups from Japan are Japanese. Non-Japanese players have just as much opportunity to work with Japanese tradition. National borders are just the edges of the lens of a microscope that you use when you want to observe certain phenomena more closely.

In order to get rid of the idea of national culture, one could emphasize the regional ones. “We don't want German literature anymore, only Bavarian literature.” Most would not find this statement creative or interesting. But why do these same people find it immediately appealing when they hear that a “traditional” theater group made up of actors of a so-called minority from the so-called Third World is staging a performance? People allow themselves to speak of a culture's “true” tradition when that culture has been excluded from modernity.

In today's world, however, every culture has its own modernity. There is no culture that stands completely isolated. Every culture reacts – directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously – to the phenomena that take place outside it.

Oddly enough, I encountered regionalism rather than globalism in the USA. I don't mean minorities like Amish people who have remained “authentically” European, but ordinary students at provincial universities. They live outside globalism, while we often blame Americans for destroying the diversity of cultures. In Missoula, when I asked a University of Montana student if there was a Starbucks cafe in town, he proudly replied, “No!” Apparently, America has not yet been Americanized everywhere. There are 141 Starbucks cafes in Tokyo, 1414 in California, 8 in Berlin and none in Missoula. This student was born in Montana, is studying there and wants to work there after graduation. He has been to a small town in Japan before, but never to New York, for example. He does not live in the U.S., but in Montana. The conflicts between the culture of the big city and that of the province concern him.

People from the big city despise the province like Montana, but he wants to stay true to his tradition.

I had to smile when he talked about tradition in Montana, but actually what he said is not funny. Tradition is always a fiction. You make it after the fact. If you don't make it, it's not there. The Japanese tradition is no less fictional than the tradition in Montana. When the Japanese government opened up the country in the late 19th century, they quickly activated the ancient Shinto ceremonies that had not been practiced for over three hundred years. The cultural tradition was needed to form the national identity. This was not necessary as long as the country had no direct contact with the outside world.

Because the tradition is fictitious, there is no reason to feel genetically attached to a tradition. Anyone may work with any fictitious tradition. Every artist is allowed to work with all elements that can be found on this earth. Whether one can create something new and exciting out of it is up to the performance of the individual artist and not to his origin.

Source of the original German text: *Trajekte*, April 2006, pp. 34-38. Reprinted in: *Transit Deutschland. Debatten zu Nation und Migration*, ed. Deniz Göktürk, David Gramling, Anton Kaes. Munich: Konstanz University Press, 2011, pp. 726-732.

Translation: GHI staff

Recommended Citation: Yoko Tawada, Is Europe Western? (2006), published in: German History Intersections, <https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/migration/ghis:document-123> [October 15, 2026].