

From: *Aesthetics & Art Science*, ed. Taiwan Association of Aesthetics and Art Science, No. 1 (2002), 85-94.

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Rethinking identity in the age of globalization - a transcultural perspective

It's a truism to say that we are living in an age of globalization. It's a truism of almost the same degree to state that one of the most urgent problems posed by globalization is the problem of identity - of personal as well as cultural identity.

I want to address the question of identity in the first part of my paper, linking it with my conception of transculturality.¹ In the second part I will refer to current discussions of Asian identity. Finally, in the third part, I will address the question of Japanese identity in particular.²

I. Identity in a transcultural perspective

1. The older, Herderian conception of culture

There is an older conception of identity and specifically of cultural identity. For the Western world it was most powerfully articulated by Herder towards the end of the 18th century.³

According to Herder's conception, firstly, culture is essentially the culture of a folk - with, say, French culture being intrinsically different from German culture, or Slavic culture from American culture. Secondly the culture of a folk is declared to be homogeneous: all practice, behavior, thinking within it is assumed to be of the same kind - only slightly varied by the members of the folk, without the possibility of any real diversity arising internally. Thirdly, and in an external respect, cultures are supposed to be highly different from and opposed to each other.

Significantly enough, Herder draws on the metaphor of spheres for this conception: according to him, each culture is like a closed and monolithic sphere; and different spheres cannot exchange, communicate or mingle with each other but, as he says, only "*clash with one another*".⁴

1 I have been developing this conception since 1990. The most recent version in English is to be found in *Filozofski Vestnik* (XXII, 2/2001, pp. 59-86), entitled "Transculturality: The Changing Forms of Cultures Today".

2 This essay was first presented at the conference "Art in Asia - External View & Internal Response" at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto, September 3-4, 2001, organized by Professor Tsunemichi Kambayashi. I have retained the spoken form.

3 Cf. Johann Gottfried Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man* [1784-91] (New York: Bergman Publishers 1966).

4 Herder, *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* [1774] (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1967), p. 45 f.

It goes without saying that this conception is nationalistic in shape. Indeed it fostered many nationalisms in the 19th and 20th centuries.

2. Criticism of this conception

This older conception of culture - paradigmatically articulated by Herder but also to be found independently of his influence - is, I think, misleading and wrong in several respects.

I will discuss just one of them. The nationalistic conception of culture omits the fact that traditional cultures were in fact mixed cultures. Just take a look at German culture. Albrecht Dürer is regarded a prototypical German artist. But how did he become himself? By going to Venice and getting acquainted with Italian Renaissance thinking and painting, in particular with the theory and practice of proportions. And he himself was deeply aware how much he needed this other cultural source, and so he even went to Venice a second time (and travelling at that time was by no means as easy as it is today).

In general, artistic movements in European history were not national but European in shape. Styles developed across the countries. The Gothic style, for example, originated in the Isle de France but soon spread out all over Europe and thereby underwent considerable changes, for example with the creation of hall churches. Or baroque painting developed at roughly the same time in Italy, Spain and Belgium and led to a network of exchanges and modifications. - All in all, culture was cross-cultural; it was not of national but of European design.

So when today, in the age of globalization, we witness an interpenetration of cultures, this is not a new phenomenon at all, rather this had already been typical of culture in the past, only to a lesser degree. And not only in Europe. Just consider the case of Japanese culture: it can certainly not be accounted for without taking Chinese and Korean, Indian, Hellenistic or modern European influences into account.

For such reasons I am saying that the nationalistic concept of culture is, firstly, descriptively wrong - and, to emphasize it once again, already with respect to the past.

Secondly, this concept has also proven normatively dubious and politically dangerous, even disastrous. Congruent with its intrinsic logic, it has enhanced animosity and constituted an ideological background for many nationalistic wars.

Thirdly, it is obvious that this older conception of culture is completely inappropriate today: It permits neither understanding of the present constitution of cultures nor development of a viable perspective for the future.

Some people, however, think that the concept might at least be used to build a critical stance, a position of resistance to the current processes of globalization and their uniformizing threats. But even this hope is in vain. For the nationalistic conception of culture underestimates, and in fact suppresses factual diversity within the allegedly uniform traditions; there were in fact divergent options within every tradition; and they constitute an ongoing potential which, in the short or long run, on this occasion or that, some people will turn to again - with a plurality of options

resulting anew, or the truly cross-cultural character of the so-called 'national culture' coming to the fore again.

3. Transculturality

a. It exists not only on the macrolevel of societies but reaches through to the microlevel of individuals' identity

Let me furthermore take a look at individuals' cultural identity today. What is the shape of our cultural formation like?

Among academics it certainly comprises elements not only of one's home culture but of foreign cultures too. Greek philosophy, South-American literature, Japanese art - to give only a very short list - have had a decisive influence on my cultural formation over the years. And German or French philosophy, Chinese and Russian literature, and the arts from many continents have probably played an important role in your cultural formation, representing strong factors in your world view and way of thinking.

And such formation is found not only with academics or elites, but increasingly applies to almost everybody today. As Amy Gutmann put it: "Most people's identities, not just Western intellectuals or elites, are shaped by more than a single culture. Not only societies, but people are multicultural."⁵

b. New diversity amidst transculturality

All this, however, does not mean that our cultural formations were all the same. For even if two people draw on the same set of cultural elements, they will probably give those elements different weight and a different overall arrangement. And the differences will of course be even greater when people draw on different cultural elements.

In this way a new type of cultural manifoldness is arising. The uniformization intellectuals lament about everywhere today represents at most one part of the picture. In fact a broad range of new differences is developing as well. Transcultural identity networks, woven from partly the same and from partly different threads, aren't all of the same color and pattern.

Consider also a great advantage of this present, transcultural type of identity over the supposedly monolithic national identity in the old, Herderian sense. Transcultural identities, despite their differences in some respects, will in most cases also have a couple of elements in common. So there is overlap between them, and this allows for exchange, understanding and transitions between those networks. Hence identities of this transcultural type are altogether more capable of affiliation amongst one another than the old cultural identities ever were.

5 Amy Gutmann, "The Challenge of Multiculturalism in Political Ethics", in: *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 22, no. 3 [1993], pp. 171-206, here p. 183.

II. The current revival of nationalistic perspectives in Asian aesthetics

1. The nationalistic approach and its flaws

I would now like to apply the perspective outlined so far to the current discussions about Asian identity. In doing so I will mainly refer to views expressed by some colleagues from Asia during the congress on aesthetics in Tokyo-Makuhari at the end of August 2001 but also to some of the more differentiated views brought forward here, during our conference "Art in Asia - External View & Internal Response".

The perspective brought forward in Tokyo-Makuhari was often anti-Western. And it was so for understandable reasons. Asian colleagues have become aware that in doing aesthetics during recent decades they have more or less succumbed to the Western model. Therefore, they say, it's high time to concentrate on their own aesthetic tradition and to develop viewpoints and categories appropriate to it. Thus far I completely agree.

The next step, however, appears problematic to me. Some Asian colleagues characterized their tradition as being fundamentally different not only from the Western one, but also from the aesthetic traditions of other countries within Asia. This often led to emphasizing the peculiarity of, say, Chinese aesthetics as opposed to Japanese aesthetics, or of Japanese aesthetics as opposed to Korean, or of Indian to South-East-Asian aesthetics, and so on. In other words: a nationalist conception was brought forward and prevailed again.

Of course I don't agree with this assessment. For at least two reasons.

First: It seems paradoxical to me to say, on the one hand, that Eastern aesthetics and thinking is devoted to the grand unity of things (as was claimed in many cases) while on the other hand indulging in a discourse on national difference and separation - within the Asian sphere as well as with respect to its overall contrast with the West. I cannot help seeing this as a striking case of self-refutation.

Second: The nationalistic model again cuts down the factual plurality within the traditions (Japanese, Chinese, and so forth) to supposed homogeneity; furthermore it neglects and even deletes from the picture the many cross-cultural links which existed within the Asian sphere.

In other contributions, however, it became evident that historically those traditions were in fact neither monolithic nor separatistic. Quite the contrary: they encompassed a multitude of stances within the single traditions and cross-cutting influences, references and similarities between them.

So the national pattern once again proves unfaithful to the facts and far from appropriate or helpful. The nationalistic construction of culture doesn't provide solutions - either for historic or contemporary purposes - it leads into dead ends.

I hope the "Asian Society for Art" will avoid falling into this trap. And I'm sure it will. Its manifesto opposes "understanding art as the place which is the exaltation of a narrow racial

consciousness", and many papers during the conference in Kyoto explored Asian identity beyond national biases.

So what do I suggest instead? Let me first repeat that I completely share the interest in developing a fuller picture of cultural and aesthetic approaches, one not modelled on European ideas alone, but encompassing and doing justice to the richness of Asian arts and cultural traditions. But it seems to me that this is to be achieved only in a transcultural perspective - one open to factual plurality and interpenetrations.

2. An epistemic argument

I would now like to introduce a further argument. It's kind of an epistemic argument.

a. Presence

When we praise cultural positions, artworks or worldviews of whatever kind, what is it that causes our fascination with them and eventually leads us to advocate them?

Confronted with such works or views we sense a *mea res agitur*. As distant as those works or conceptions may be in time and space, we yet feel, strangely enough, that it is *we* who are at stake here. Irresistible fascination is the outset. We sense a radiation emanating from these objects: though not made for us, they seem to approach us, to address us, we are strongly attracted and even fascinated by them. They appear to bear a promise - one, perhaps, of unexpected insight or of future enrichment. In any case a promise we should respond to. They seem to bear potentials able to improve and enlarge our sensitivity, our comprehension and perhaps even our way of being.

Attracted in this way, we turn to them, observe them more closely, explore them more intensively. Which means we take them, whatever the distance in time or space may be, to be *present* challenges, or treasures comprising a potential to make *us* more sensitive, open to things thus far neglected, more comprehensive, more human.

So we do not lock them within history, rather we feel or expect *ourselves* to be freed through them to a broader and richer picture of the world, to a deeper understanding of ourselves, of others, of things worldly, and to more appropriate present and future orientation.

This is the first aspect I want to point out: In this elementary stage of aesthetic or cognitive fascination we take cultural items to be relevant to *our* orientations. - Ultimately, I see no other reason for turning to things past or distant and for dealing with them.

This aspect of *presence* is of course not to be equated with a simple functionalization of these things for present purposes. Rather what's at stake here is that such purposes might be transformed. And even if one thinks that these exceptional cultural artifacts belonged to a Golden Age which we shall never see again, then this view will be part of one's perspective on the present state, and so represents a viewpoint which one holds more true than the standard views one finds in the cultural desert surrounding oneself. Even this (on one's own assessment clearly

untimely) viewpoint, then, is a part - and perhaps even the decisive part - of *one's present* view on the world.

In the light of this argument from *presence* I deeply mistrust references to cultural entities where someone praises traditional goods but obviously doesn't make anything of them for himself, or even provides evidence that they don't mean anything to him. I have sometimes witnessed emphatic presentations of historic models - yet with the subject matter praised completely lacking influence on, for example, the speaker's mode of presentation. Thesis and attitude were in sharp contrast, contradicting each other even. I consider such cases examples of an academic (or historicist) disease.

b. The fascination is not culture-bound, rather it is transcultural

The second aspect I want to point out with regard to this phenomenon of attraction and fascination is the fact that the power of great works or conceptions is evidently not limited to a specific cultural context, such as that in which they originated. Rather their force is transculturally effective.

I take this to be very important. Basically I think it is evident - yet it tends to be overlooked in current reflection. For in modernity we got used to thinking that everything is strictly bound to its cultural context. We take all experience and cognition to be strictly determined by their cultural framework and hence restricted to it. This is the typically modern axiom - or dogma - behind the contemporary relativism, contextualism and culturalism dominant in the humanities and in cultural studies today. But with this axiom we are blinding ourselves theoretically to the obviously non culture-bound, but transcultural potential of outstanding works or conceptions.

This conference should provide an opportunity to become aware of the shortsightedness of this stance and to get beyond it. We would not have gathered here if we weren't in fact attracted by arts or aesthetic conceptions from contexts we are not familiar with. And we should give an appropriate rendering of this context-transcending force of artworks instead of spiriting it away through belief in cultural boundness.⁶ I suggest elaborating a theory which draws on this transcultural power and is able to explain it - such theory, it seems to me, doesn't yet exist.

Let me give an example: If you come to Japan for the first time and visit the *Ginkakuji-temple* here in Kyoto, you may not understand much, but you will feel the strong magnetism of the place. To be sure, one can withdraw from this and just enjoy the site as one of several highlights within a sightseeing program. But if you open your mind and body to the magnetism and spirit of the place, you may experience a kind of initiation.

You may still not be capable of explicit understanding. Maybe you need expert friends or you will have to study books in order to achieve an elaborate understanding. But the magnetism will already have influenced and modified your way of seeing, walking, sitting, talking, thinking, touching. And in any case, experiencing the place in this way is the only path to arrive at any

6 During the conference in Kyoto, Professor Osamu Yamaguchi's paper "Towards cultural transrelativism through sound" beautifully demonstrated this force.

understanding. Books cannot replace it.

My point is that this primary attraction obviously works independently of familiarity with the respective culture. The power of the work is, to repeat it, not culture-bound but transculturally effective.

To be sure, there are many stages you will still have to go through, supported by more information, by study and reflection. But this is no different in principle to what you need to do when confronting similarly outstanding works in your homeland. There too, a great deal of information - contextual information and specific information - is required, and you will have received only part of it by growing up and being educated there. A Parisian childhood and studying say at Paris-VIII (St. Denis) doesn't by itself give you a deep understanding of the St. Denis Cathedral.

So the requirements for understanding something in one's homeland and in a foreign country are different at most in degree, but not in principle. Not everybody in one's homeland will have a relevant understanding of its major works, while many people from abroad do. This shows how slight obligation to the cultural context is.⁷

In any case - to conclude this second part - the argument from fascination is obviously similar in effect to the transcultural one explained above. It points out a feature of context-transcendent connectedness on the aesthetic and cognitive level, as the transcultural argument did on the level of cultural formation.

III. Japanese identity - transcultural as a matter of course

In the third and last part I will now try to address the issue of Japanese identity in particular.

Of course, I'm at great risk here. I will be drawing on quite personal observations made five years ago when thanks to a generous invitation by Professor Kambayashi I was able to visit this country for the first time and became involved with it. A further pair of observations is more recent. But my experience is, in any case, quite limited - and so my views may be too. It's certainly not always the case that we can grasp the essence through a few experiences. (Not many Buddhas around, I guess.) Nevertheless I'd like to give the topic a try.

The thesis I want to put forward is the following: Japanese identity, it seems to me, is exceptionally prepared to be transcultural - perhaps it even *is* transcultural in its structure.

One sign of - or precondition for - this is the fact that Japanese people put emphasis on things' being relevant, being close to them - no matter where the things in question originated from. Japanese people don't (as seems natural for Europeans) base their access and judgment on the

⁷ Another point: Contextual knowledge is not really helpful in every case for fully grasping the intensity of an outstanding work of culture. Knowing the stories behind the construction of the Tenryu-ji garden, for example, does not, it seems to me, intensify experience of it, rather the deep, 'fusing' effect of it is completely independent of this background.

distinction between own and foreign, but rather on the viewpoint of proximity.

Let me explain this using an example. On my second day in Kyoto Japanese friends took me to a "typical" Japanese restaurant. Everything was supposed to be genuinely Japanese. Upon entering, I immediately liked the restaurant. But I saw, all over the room, a piece of furniture very familiar to me: the chairs. I have the same ones in my dining room at home, and I know they are Italian.

So I asked my friends if they really thought everything there is genuinely Japanese, including the chairs which we were just sitting down on. The friends were astonished by the question, even a bit annoyed, and hastily assured me that everything there - including the chairs - was completely Japanese. But the chairs were the model "Cab", designed by Mario Bellini and produced by Cassina in Milan. Of course I didn't address the matter further. Still less did I dare to mention that the crockery we were eating from some minutes later were Suomi series plates produced by Rosenthal in Germany - these too I have at home.

For days I was puzzled by this experience. What was astonishing, was of course not that European furniture and crockery should be found here, but that my Japanese friends held those items to be genuine products of their own culture. How could they not sense that these items were foreign? How could they *think* and *feel* that those in fact foreign items were genuinely Japanese?

It took me weeks to understand. I've already indicated the line of explanation I finally developed before telling the story. To the Japanese the foreign-own distinction or, to be more precise, the foreign-own distinction *with respect to origin* is not relevant at all. Their basic perspective is that of proximity. If something fits neatly it *is* Japanese - no matter where it comes from. This is why things foreign can be considered the own as a matter of course.

I admire this attitude. To me it seems a golden path to happiness, particularly in contemporary conditions.

I should perhaps repeat one clarification. I am not saying that the Japanese don't distinguish between own and foreign at all. I'm only saying that they do so not with regard to origin, but to proximity.

My assessment of the matter helped me understand a couple of other things too. For example: Some Europeans say that the Japanese aren't open, that rather they are closed on themselves. I'm not advocating this view here, but if it were true, it would certainly become understandable using the distinction of two types of ownness which I have suggested: one seeing the own in terms of origin or provenance, the other one in terms of proximity or closeness. If you adhere to the latter type then you can very well be open while appearing to be closed.

Another point: A colleague said - apparently joking, but probably deeply seriously - that Japanese people don't need to go abroad, for they have everything in Japan. Europe for example: the Inside Sea is their Mediterranean Sea, and they also have their Germany, north of their Alps of course, in the region around Niigata; as the Kansai region, south of the Alps, corresponds to Italy, and so forth. (And they probably have the US all over the country.)

Another friend, this time from Tokyo, made a remark which at first seemed bad. The Japanese, she said, haven't invented anything. But then she added: they have, however, developed a better, a more refined version of everything that came to their country. And this is certainly true.

All this, it seems to me, perfectly congrues with the smooth transculturality of Japanese mentality and identity which I have been trying to describe⁸ and for which, on my understanding, dropping notions of origin and focusing instead on closeness is the main requisite.

One last point: As you know, in Japan different cultural or aesthetic or philosophic styles and models have coexisted throughout history. Once something was established it remained. Buddhism didn't outdo Shintoism, and modernism didn't outdo tradition. Professor Kambayashi's paper during this conference powerfully demonstrated this for the case of aesthetics: there was an ongoing play and interplay of two options: one modernist, one traditionalist; and another lesson one could draw from his paper was that applying the foreign-own distinction in the origin-related sense doesn't lead anywhere, it didn't do so at the end of the 19th century and certainly will not at the beginning of the 21st century.

This coexistence of different models (quite uncommon in the West) certainly paved the way to future transcultural blending. People are used to having several models, they aren't afraid of manifoldness, they don't have to acquire a new mentality in order to come to terms with contemporary plurality - as seems to be a tough requirement elsewhere.

Tadao Ando said in his presentation during this conference that the successful development of Japan after World War II was largely due to the abilities of its people. I guess, I've just tried to suggest an explanation of this.

8 I find this beautifully expressed by Ryōsuke Ōhashi - a great scholar and best friend who helped me so much in becoming familiar with Japanese culture - when he writes: "The self-identity of Japanese culture is not a `hard' essence [...], but a `gentle' self-identity, like similar to water that doesn't itself change while taking on the form of the most variant of containers" ("Die Selbstidentität der japanischen Kultur ist kein `hartes' Wesen [...], sondern eine `sanfte' Selbstidentität, dem Wasser gleichend, das sich selbst nicht verändert, während es die Form der unterschiedlichsten Gefäße annimmt"; Ryōsuke Ōhashi, *Kire - Das `Schöne' in Japan. Philosophisch-ästhetische Reflexionen zu Geschichte und Moderne*, Cologne: DuMont 1994, p. 32).