The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
n-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

The Letter as Literature's Political and Poetic Body

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文学の政治的詩的本体としての文字

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Translated from German by Susan Bernofsky

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In November 2006 a new translation of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* appeared that soon had sold 500,000 copies. I knew the translator, Kameyama Ikuo, as the author of a fascinating book on Stalin and the artists of his time.

Just as in other countries, people in Japan have been lamenting since the 1980s (if not much longer) that young people no longer read the classics of world literature. First it was the culture of *manga* and television that was seen as the culprit; later it was the internet, computer games and obsessive text messaging. The number of books sold each year has actually been rising, because manga, the autobiographies of TV stars, internet literature and even text-message literature have come out in book form—but nonetheless people have been complaining that the old canon of world literature is no longer being taken seriously. And so this new Karamazov boom was a pleasant surprise. But I asked how this new translation of the novel could be so different that suddenly hundreds of thousands of Japanese readers were in such a hurry to buy it and were reading it with such enthusiasm. Even in times when literature supposedly had many more readers than today, Dostoevsky was never a bestseller.

The Brothers Karamazov in new Japanese translation

When I was in high school, I read *The Brothers Karamazov* in the translation by Masao Yonekawa. I also bought a Russian edition as a first-year university student, but it was too difficult for me, and so I continued to rely on the Japanese translation. This didn't make me sad, I enjoyed the Japanese words and expressions I hadn't known before. This translation dating from 1927 was linguistically far more unfamiliar to me than, say, the stories written by Kawabata Yasunari around the same time. It seemed to me as if the translator had collected Japanese words from a number of regions, classes, times and places and masterfully assembled them to translate a foreign culture. Therefore this translation made the range of the Japanese language appear much larger than the Japanese literature of the time did. But this quality of the translation also demanded patience, calm and persistence on the part of the individual reader. I would try to extract a cultural concept unfamiliar to me from an unusual combination of two adjectives. Certain concepts would appear in unexpected places and glow. I learned a great deal about the uncompromising nature of a competent translator. Reading a bestseller, on the other hand, I never had the feeling that there was something I couldn't immediately understand. Indignantly I rejected the secret that bestsellers sometimes offered the weary reader as a pick-me-up. I was interested in more radical drugs and looked for them in the Dostoevsky translation, which was difficult to digest.

Can the novel *The Brothers Karamazov* be translated in such a way that it reads smoothly and fluidly like a bestseller? I bought the new translation, read the first hundred pages, and concluded that each phrase used in it appeared easily accessible and had a good rhythm. In this book, the odors and dust of a foreign society are suppressed. The characters are readily distinguishable from one another despite their inconsistencies. Regardless of whether one values these attributes of the new translation, the difference between the new and old translations seemed to me insufficient to explain this explosive boom.

Several months later I happened to have a chance to chat with a young editor from a Japanese publishing house about this new translation. He said that

readers today have developed a manga or text message way of seeing, meaning that their eyes grasp one entire section of text as an image and then go on to the next. For this reason, the sections cannot be too long: ideally, no longer than would fit on the screen of a cell phone or in a single manga picture.

It's well known that the pre-war generation can read today's manga only with effort, they're like a foreign language for these readers. An experienced manga eye, on the other hand, can move swiftly from one image to the next, but this same eye might have difficulty reading a long text passage without paragraphs.

The editor told me that in his opinion the secret of this new translation was that an unusually large number of paragraph breaks had been added to the novel. Manga readers can read the novel by passing from paragraph to paragraph as if from one manga image to the next. They are no less intelligent than their grandparents, but they have a different organ of vision, or a different cable connecting their retinas to their brains.

A Japanese translator I spoke with several weeks later confirmed the editor's theory. She was just translating a book for the world literature series in which the new *Brothers Karamazov* had also appeared, and her editor kept repeating the same sentence: Give me more paragraphs!

You can read a Japanese manga more quickly than most Belgian or French comics because the dialogue is always kept to a minimum and the individual images don't contain so much information. I sometimes have the feeling that a manga picture can be read like an ideogram. Perhaps this is why it isn't considered particularly desirable to print manga in color. The pictures have to be printed in black and white so the eye can automatically read them as script.

Manga is more enjoyable when you hurry from one section to the next than when you study each image like a painting in a museum. This naturally doesn't apply to the picture series by Hokusai (1760-1849), which are known as Hokusai manga. Unfortunately I have to leave them out of account here, since they don't contain a sustained narrative and therefore are poorly suited to explain the Karamazov phenomenon. I'm thinking more of the genre of the *kibyōshi* (yellow covers) that were produced for an earlier version of manga eyes. A particular sort of entertaining literature written between 1775 and 1806 is called *kibyōshi* to distinguish it from its predecessors, the picture books *akabon* (red books), *kurobon* (black books) and *aobon* (blue books). *Kibyōshi* literature is more than just picture books, but the concept of the illustrated novel doesn't adequately describe *kibyōshi* either, as far as I'm concerned, because it's obvious that the pictures came first—then the text was written in wherever there was space left over. The lettering becomes crooked and thin where space is tight, and the images don't take the text into consideration at all. The text isn't being written on the surface of a depicted object, and thus it also isn't subject to the physical rules of the three-dimensional world. Rather, every available surface in the picture is being used as a two-dimensional space for writing.

Kibyōshi is supposed to be entertaining, but it presupposes the reader's knowledge of Confucianism and traditional literature. Much as manga artist Tezuka Osamu (1928-1989) refers to Goethe's *Faust* in his *Neo Faust, kibyōshi* author Koikawa Harumachi (1744-1789) tells, for example, the story of a man's life using as a model a well-known Chinese story that had already been incorporated into Japanese *yōkyoku* literature. To understand the parody of the Confucius quotes often found in *kibyōshi* stories, you have to know Confucius's sayings. And so we can assume that the *kibyōshi* readers knew Confucius, just as the readers of Tezuka's manga have at least some idea who Goethe was or are themselves potential Goethe readers. If manga readers don't like reading classical world literature, it's more because of preferring text in a graphic form than because of the contents of the stories.

The first time I read a *kibyōshi* story, I experienced a difficulty similar to that of the pre-war generation trying to read the new manga. I saw the direct quotes floating beside or above the image of the speaker. The narrative voice drifts around in the air. Where do I start reading, and where do I go from there?

I don't know whether I myself have manga eyes or not. Sometimes at a manga café in Tokyo I see young men flipping through a manga incredibly quickly. I could never read so fast. At home I secretly measured the amount of time it took me to read a page of Tezuka's manga. Ten seconds per page. Then I measured how long it took me to read the new edition of Karamazov: twenty seconds a page. The old translation, on the other hand, took me nearly sixty seconds. The difference between the manga and the new Karamazov was much smaller than the difference between the new and old Brothers.

Speed readers grasp a text a whole chunk at a time. This technique was surely not developed with Dostoevsky in mind. There's no point speed-reading Kafka either. The same new book series that had brought out the new Karamazov had already published a new *Metamorphosis*, the editor told me, and it was selling well.

In the 1980s I moved to Germany and began to read Kafka again. I read him more slowly than before, not only because it was a foreign language I was reading, but because I read it aloud. The I that was reading split into two persons: the I that was reading the text aloud to me and the I listening to the voice and understanding what it said.

Kafka's Metamorphosis

I tried to reduce the organ of sight to a mere entryway for hearing. In order to understand the text, I had to banish the alphabet from the screen of my retinas. Sometimes this made the letters furious, and then they would return as ghosts and disturb me as I was reading.
I ordered the new translation of "The Metamorphosis" and compared it with the German editions I had at home. The translator Ikeuchi Osamu didn't add any new paragraph breaks, but he did start each line of dialogue on its own line.

The rhythm of manga reading is produced in part by the circumstance that the images alternate artfully with the dialogue. It occurred to me that in this sense I could easily imagine the new translation as a manga. The first picture shows a beetle. In the second picture I see a speech bubble containing Gregor's question: "What has happened to me?" Someone wakes up and realizes that he has a different body than before: a typical manga scenario, familiar from "Astro Boy" or "Black Jack." The third picture is a sketchily drawn view of the room: a wall, a table and textiles. All the pictures are printed in black and white. The fourth picture is a picture inside a picture, which you often seen in manga. Gregor has cut the portrait of a lady out of a magazine and framed it.

Tezuka Osamu's Astro Boy

By way of comparison, I took out the translation by Takahashi Yoshitaka, which appeared in 1952. There the lines of dialog aren't even framed by quotation marks, much less set off on lines of their own. Book pages printed without gaps, covered in a small, delicate typeface, making a restrained and at the same time inaccessible impression. *Katakana* script, one of the two phonetic Japanese forms of writing, is ordinarily used only for foreign words and thus rarely appears. And so the text is composed primarily of *hiragana*, the other phonetic script, and ideograms. The new translation, on the other hand, makes conspicuously frequent use of *katakana* script for onomatopoetic expressions. This makes the optical impression given by the text more expansive and varied, which is more comfortable and familiar for manga eyes.

When the legs of the monstrous insect flail about, for example, the old translation uses the common word "mozomozo," tidily written in *hiragana* script, while the new translation has "wayawaya," in *katakana*—this is a more unusual word that is generally not used in this sense, but it works well here in context. In general, manga invent onomatopoetic expressions much more freely than literature. The word "wayawaya" has a manga feel to it, not only because it's a neologism but because it's written in *katakana* and therefore looks as if it's freed itself from its adverbial corset.

There are many pictures in manga that are accompanied only by an onomatopoetic expression like "wayawaya." Maybe manga no longer require nouns. An insect, a table or a lady can be represented in images. Of course, I don't want a manga to tell me what Kafka's insect looks like. The freedom to create one's own images for every concept at all times is guaranteed by the principles of democracy. The freedom is there. But who is able to make use of it?

I always loved the unfocussed, unfinished images that rise from a literary text like steam and then vanish again. They can't be pinned down. But I am finding it ever more difficult to keep the screen in my head free to make space for such images. It's true that this screen was never perfectly free, but now it has been all but destroyed. Two or three years ago I happened to see a science fiction movie on an airplane in which a large number of garish-looking metal beetles were attacking human beings. I didn't like the movie, but I couldn't get this image of the beetles out of my head. It was as if it had made electronic contact with my brain using a technique unknown to me. I had no chance to say no. Like the traces of a chemical dependency that remain with you for a lifetime, this image was burned into my brain. Ever since, I can't help thinking of this image whenever I hear the word "beetle." What should I do. Perhaps I should turn into a monstrous insect and creep across Kafka's text to read it with my two feelers and my many thin legs. I might acquire the ability to stumble over every tiny rip, to strike my head against the ground and thereby set off flashbulbs of my own inside my head.

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The letters lie there like delicate, dangerous fish bones long after the reader has consumed and digested the contents of the text. The useless bones should probably be thrown away, but somehow they look significant. I stare at a letter on the page I've just read and wonder: what are these strange figures here before my eyes? Are they shadows or footprints? They gaze back at me wordlessly, as if they wanted me to remember something. It's no longer the meaning of the text that's at stake. The question, rather, is how to respond to the unsettling presence of the bodies of these letters. Maybe they are the bars of a cage. Who's on the other side of these bars? Am I a prisoner, or is it the other person? And who *is* this person on the other side?

The notion that written language aligns itself with the politics of a country while the spoken language changes along with the culture—a view that no longer really seems self-evident—is something I first heard as a child, it reflected the way the map of the world looked back then. In the Soviet-influenced Mongolian Republic, for instance, the Cyrillic alphabet was used, whereas the same language was written in the Mongolian part of the People's Republic of China using Mongolian script, which was derived from the Uyghur alphabet. After Perestroika, Mongolian script became the norm in the Mongolian Republic as well. Is the way a language is written simply a uniform that can be easily changed when a new government comes to power?

The system of writing in Japan was reformed after the Second World War. The argument for simplifying the ideograms was that they were burdensome and had slowed the country's technological development. There were intellectuals who criticized the reform and rejected it, but most people accepted it without complaint. Usually we associate sudden changes in a country's language with colonialism or government force, but in fact spelling reforms and new ways of writing are quite normal in a democratic society. No one thinks about using legislation to correct the logical flaws in a grammatical system and instituting better rules, but many people do believe there is a more logical way of using letters to express the sound of a word.

The ideograms in the People's Republic of China were simplified as well. This reform, which took place in 1955, was much more radical than the one in Japan, with the result that the new "shorthand" used in China can no longer be read by the Taiwanese and Japanese without special study. People in Japan who sympathized with Chinese Communism used this shorthand, and so I was able to recognize their handwritten political posters even at a distance. I've long since forgotten what these posters said, but the impression this uncanny writing made on me has stayed in my memory ever since.

My first trip abroad in 1979 included a visit to Poland. As a student of Slavic Studies, I found Cyrillic more practical than the Latin alphabet for writing all Slavic languages, including Polish. I had difficulties with the combinations of consonants that frequently appeared in Polish, for example RZ, SZ or DS, and also with the diacritical marks, the slashes and little hooks that modified the letters. If you used Cyrillic, you generally only needed a single letter for one of these sibilants. There were even German words I would have preferred to write with Cyrillic letters rather than using the Latin alphabet. The cabbage soup with beets will be cold by the time you finish spelling the word "Borschtsch."

Nevertheless, the Latin alphabet used in Polish was a more suitable wrapping paper for me than the Cyrillic in which I preserved my first memories of this country. I saw no icons of the Russian Orthodox church there; instead, I saw many people going to services at Catholic churches on Sundays. Here and there I saw interiors and facades that filled me with a longing for Paris.

It is a happy fate to have as a neighbor a country whose culture of writing was highly developed very early on. To the west of Japan lies China; to its east, the alphabetless Pacific Ocean. If Japan lay not to the east but to the west of China, there wouldn't be any culture now like what we call Japanese culture, but Japan wouldn't have had to develop an unnecessarily complicated system of writing. Japanese would probably have been written either with the Latin alphabet or in Arabic script. The Chinese never forced the Japanese to accept their form of writing, and it isn't actually advantageous to write the Japanese language using Chinese characters, but there was no other choice.

In the old Japanese collection of poems *Man'yōshu* (8th century), the ideograms were primarily used as a phonetic form of writing. This meant reading the sound of a sign and ignoring its meaning. Somewhat later, a Japanese phonetic script was developed, but the Japanese did not completely make the shift to a specifically Japanese phonetic writing, instead they went on writing certain Chinese concepts in ideograms just as in the original and combined them with the phonetic writing.

Theoretically one could write any language, even German, using Chinese ideograms: For example you would write an ideogram that means "mountain" and then simply pronounce the word "Berg." An ideogram doesn't tell us how we have to pronounce it. But how would we mark the distinction between "mountain" when used as a subject and as an object, or between "sleep" and "slept"? Similar problems arise when you write Japanese with ideograms. Therefore all the grammatical connectors and markers that are unnecessary within Chinese grammar have to be written using Japanese phonetic script and inserted.

And so there's no point accusing Japanese linguists of being Eurocentric if they claim it would have been better had Japanese been written in the Latin alphabet. By now people have understood, even in Japan, that Chinese culture isn't the only advanced culture in the world, but it's too late: Over the past one thousand years, the Japanese language has been so strongly influenced by the process of importing the ideograms that separating the language from this originally foreign script has become unthinkable. A separation would be as if you were suddenly to remove half the plants from a biotope just because they'd been added to the others one thousand years later. In the course of history, there have been many attempts at purifying national languages. The Turkish language attempted to remove all the Arabic words from its body. The French and especially the Norwegian language police their borders carefully to prevent too many foreign words from immigrating.

During the Second World War, the use of English-based words was prohibited in Japan. The Japanese inferiority complex vis-à-vis Chinese culture was apparently eliminated and forgotten about in the explosion of military force against China. No one in Japan would have thought about removing the ideograms and the Sino-Japanese words inseparable from it from the Japanese national language, *kokugo*. This wouldn't have been possible, even if nationalists had wished to take such a measure, because concepts like "state," "nation," "military," "populace" and even "Tennō" (Japanese emperor) were always written using ideograms rather than the Japanese phonetic script. If these words had been written out phonetically, they would have lost their authority. Since before the Middle Ages, when Japanese phonetic writing was reserved for women, this form of writing has been considered feminine and private. Female authors in the eleventh century like the court ladies Murasaki and Sei Shōnagon used this writing, which made it possible for them to describe their feelings and thoughts more individually and concretely. Their male colleagues, on the other hand, were forced to use Chinese writing, which had not yet been integrated well enough into Japanese. Therefore their works remained insignificant imitations of Chinese literature and were soon forgotten. Female authors in the middle ages were officially excluded from instruction in the classics of Chinese literature. But we know that they sometimes unofficially sat in for their brothers in class and thus learned both the classics and the script in which they were written. Some were better students than their brothers, and so they wrote the phonetic script with a knowledge of ideograms.

Like the Japanese, the Koreans used Chinese ideograms mixed in with their own phonetic writing until the country was occupied by the Japanese. During the occupation, they were forced to use Japanese exclusively. After the country was liberated, they returned to their own language and Korean writing was declared to be the country's sole official form of writing. There wasn't much interest in ideograms anyhow, since they represented a characteristic shared with the Japanese language. Increasingly nationalistic sentiment required the elimination of the ideograms so as to achieve liberation from the longstanding Chinese influence. In North Korea, the ideograms were definitively eliminated in 1948 when the country was founded. At first the North Koreans appeared to be more radical and consistent than the South Koreans, who preferred a more gradual transition. But in 1968 North Korea reinstated the study of ideograms as a required subject in school. People in South Korea started saying that the ideograms should be reintroduced. In 1998 a monthly magazine described the endless debate surrounding the ideograms as the "Fifty Year Writing War." The example of Korea shows us that the shift from ideographic to phonetic script isn't a natural process of development, and therefore it is possible to reverse it.

When you think of all these debates surrounding the choice of script in the wide swath of land between East Asia and Turkey, it seems rather astonishing that people who use the Latin alphabet never seem to question their own choice of script. I am surely one of the few authors in Europe who often asks herself whether European languages couldn't also be written using different forms of writing. Writing with European ideograms would be an art project I haven't yet put into practice, but it's already had an influence on my writing.

In 2003 I heard a lecture in Sofia about the debate over the form of writing used in Bulgaria. In the aftermath of Perestroika, people have been wondering even in the birthplace of the Cyrillic alphabet whether they shouldn't switch to a Latin writing system. The lecturer provided two reasons for this. His first reason struck me as being one of those suspect arguments that use modern technology as an alibi to cover up a political agenda or business plan. This argument claimed that in the Internet Age it was a disadvantage to use any form of writing other than the Latin alphabet. I didn't find this convincing, since it's long been possible to send e-mails and text messages in Japanese. I have no idea how a couple thousand characters could possibly have been crammed into a tiny cell phone, but there'd definitely be enough space for the Cyrillic alphabet.

The introduction of the computer in Japan gave rise to a new ideogram boom. The historical ideograms that had almost been consigned to oblivion began to be used more frequently, since one could now instantly load even the most rarely used, complex character, which previously had to be laboriously looked up in a thick, dusty dictionary. In school you learn approximately two thousand characters; some people learn many more than this. It's easy to forget the characters that aren't often used—but a computer never forgets any of them. Until the use of computers became widespread in Japan, there was a tendency to use fewer and fewer ideograms. But the computer helps support older people's memory and increases the pleasure that young people in particular take in the visual side of these characters.

Back to Bulgaria. The second reason for changing to the Latin alphabet, the speaker claimed, was that Cyrillic writing could call up associations of Communism to one's international business partners.

Indeed it's true that a foreign form of writing can activate a certain combination of memories in us and influence our emotions before we've thought things over critically. It's difficult to fend off the effects of a foreign script. It's similar to the way we might react to a person's clothing. Certain geographical, historical or class-specific associations in the observer's head can prompt him to pass a snap judgment on the person. The problem isn't necessarily in the speed with which we take in an image, it has more to do with the complexity of the image. When the alphabet itself is foregrounded, the text becomes an image.

A few years ago, a Japanese journalist told me that newspaper readers in Japan are no longer able to read lengthy articles. Articles in the papers are becoming ever shorter, while the characters they're printed in get larger and larger and the color photographs take up more and more space. It can be assumed that these readers are increasingly seeing not only the photographs but the text itself as images, particularly the headlines. The fonts used for headlines are now so subtly differentiated that they can influence a reader's attitude toward an article even before he's read the first sentence. A certain font can be instantly recognized as having to do with earthquakes, while a second one suggests poverty in the so-called Third World, and a third awakens readers' curiosity because it's used to recount sweet little stories, for example about young schoolgirls saving the ducks in an industrial canal. Right from the start, the reader is forced to become part of an audience united by a particular mood: witnesses to a natural catastrophe or a political event. Most readers find this not coercive but helpful. The information is perfectly presented in graphic form and therefore makes a sealed-off impression. I try to find a weak spot in this wall of typefaces in which I can insert the first sentence of my text, but there isn't one.

Even textbooks in Japan are becoming more colorful and less text-centric every year. They give visual form to the material being taught, working to fit in with the culture of manga, anime and Nintendo. At first glance, the pages of the books look welcoming, easily accessible to children, but I find it difficult to actually read the text once my eyes have accustomed themselves to manga mode.

Back in the 1980s, people in Germany often asked me why the Japanese hadn't yet eliminated ideograms. Some saw all systems of writing not based on the Latin alphabet as symptoms of an illness. A country, they thought, had to be archaic, fundamentalist or Communist if it didn't accept Latinate writing. Some people are simply convinced that the Latin alphabet is more practical and easier for children to learn than ideograms. One counterargument heard a lot in Japan in the 1980s was that children who have to learn so many ideograms get used early on to spending an hour alone each day sitting at their desks. This made them do better in all their school subjects. Besides which, it was argued, Japan had the lowest rate of illiteracy anywhere in the world. And so illiteracy couldn't be combated by simplifying the writing system. This conviction remained prevalent as long as the economic system seemed to be flourishing. But even back then linguist Tanaka Katsuhiko was saying that the Japanese should do away with the ideograms. Tanaka, a scholar of the German language who had studied Linguistics and Philosophy in Bonn and explored the Mongolian language in the Soviet Union, found it regrettable that the Japanese language remained inaccessible for most foreign students because it was clothed in ideograms. He wrote that the people who used the Mongolian language were lucky that they quickly abandoned all attempts to incorporate Chinese ideograms in their system of writing. The Uyghur script that was used instead shared the same cultural basis as the Mongolian language, which therefore retained its ability to accommodate neologisms well into the modern period. And so new words were created based on agricultural or religious roots, to signify "Socialism," "capital" and "business." In Japan, on the other hand, words like this were cobbled together out of Chinese ideograms, not using older Japanese vocabulary. As a result, these newer concepts can still be felt as foreign elements in the body of my mother tongue.

It's been ten years now since I've had a European ask me why the Japanese still haven't given up their ideograms. Instead, I've noticed a growing interest in ideograms. The children at the German schools where I've given readings have shown far more interest in the Chinese characters than my texts. Maybe this has something to do with the texts. Even when I write in German, image-based script in the broadest sense is still present in my texts. I don't know if the growing interest in ideograms can be explained more by the interest in manga culture or China's economic growth. No matter whom I come in contact with—employees at a computer store, academics, people at arts organizations or the artists themselves—everyone wants to know more about ideograms. Perhaps this is part of a global process in which visual thinking is taking on a more central role.

When I'm writing, I've often found myself inspired by German words like "Stern-kunde" (star-science, or astronomy), "Schrift-steller" (script-placer, or writer) or "Fern-seher" (distance-viewer, television). It always seemed to me as if two ancient Germanic ideograms were being joined together to make a new word. Romanic languages surely sound more melodious and colorful than German. English has a spare, modern elegance that German sometimes lacks, and my love of Slavic languages will never vanish. But for me the building blocks of German words have an ideographic character that seems to be crucial for my writing.

When I write Japanese, it disturbs me to see how many Anglicisms and stiff Sino-Japanese words have crept into the language, but this doesn't mean I would want the Japanese language to be completely pure. On the contrary. The Japanese spoken today seems to me like the garbage can of linguistic history, and this is one reason why I like the language so much. A garbage can is an important source of inspiration, because often we throw away what is most important. Without making the acquaintance of the German language, I never would have noticed that I am in possession of a garbage can that can be my treasure chest.

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This article originated as a lecture presented at the Cornell University Lecture Series on Contemporary Aesthetics series hosted by the Institute for German Cultural Studies.

See also: Tawada Yoko, Is Europe Western?

Recommended citation: Tawada Yoko, "The Letter as Literature's Political and Poetic Body," The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 34-1-09, August 24, 2009.

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