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Introduction to “Beyond Comparison: Japanese Colonialism in Transimperial Relations”

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This special issue of *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* examines the history of Japanese colonialism by exploring terrain that extends beyond the conventional territories of East Asian studies. The themes discussed in the issue’s four articles include the nature of the colonial protectorate in the British and French empires, linguistic and education policies in the German Empire, French colonialism in Indochina during the Second World War, and the anti-British activities of Indian nationalists in exile. For an academic journal devoted to the study of the history and culture of East Asia, this is a rather unorthodox mix.¹ The reader might easily expect this issue to be a collective comparative study of Japanese colonialism, identifying its distinctive traits by comparing it with its British, French, and German counterparts. However, this issue is not just another collection of comparative research.² On the contrary, as the issue’s title suggests, it aims to show why the very idea of comparing needs to be *transcended*.

The question of comparison inevitably presents itself whenever we discuss more than one empire. The tide of globalization has affected academia, and we know that the historical study of colonialism cannot remain in the safety zone of one’s own field of research narrowly defined. But many of us are also aware of how the comparative study of empires and colonialisms can be not only technically difficult but also ethically and politically problematic. Breaking from the conventional comparative study of colonialism but without escaping into the safety of area studies, we venture to suggest a new way for specialists in colonial history to treat the Japanese and other colonial empires *at once*, rather than first studying them separately and giving them comparative treatment at a later stage. As a step in this direction, we propose historicizing the very act of comparing, rather than utilizing comparison as a historiographical method. Our focus is on the contemporary connections and interactions among and across different empires and their colonies and on how the various historical actors involved have made use of comparison.

¹ None of the authors of the articles are specialists in East Asian history, making this special issue rather unique.

² For examples of comparative studies of empires including the Japanese, see Yamamoto (2003) and Matsuzato (2010).

All of the articles in this issue tackle the history of Japanese colonialism from these historiographical premises. My own article, “Transimperial Genealogies of Korea as a Protectorate: The Egypt Model in Japan’s Politics of Colonial Comparison,” is not a piece of comparative history: in introducing the theme of British rule in Egypt, the article does *not* seek to characterize Japanese rule in Korea by comparing it with the British rule. Rather, the article shows how Japanese policymakers and intellectuals involved in the making of a protectorate in Korea used comparison with Egypt for their own purposes. Through analyzing relevant first-hand materials, the article not only describes the scope and limits of British rule in Egypt as a model but also aims to reveal the complex motives and agendas of those Japanese involved in the comparative debate.

Nishiyama Akiyoshi’s article, “School Politics in the Borderlands and Colonies of Imperial Germany: A Japanese Colonial Perspective, ca. 1900–1925,” concerns both Japan and Germany as new imperial nations, focusing particularly on language education as a contested site of colonial governance. Again, this article is not a comparative study. Rather, by closely reading relevant primary sources, including administrative reports of the Governor-General’s offices in Korea and Taiwan, Nishiyama shows how a host of Japanese administrators, educators, and linguists took a serious interest in educational developments in the German Empire for the purpose of envisioning a suitable education policy for Japan’s colonial subjects. The article demonstrates how these Japanese contemplated and assessed the German experience of educating the ethnic and linguistic minority subjects in the border regions of Prussian Poland and Alsace-Lorraine as well as in the overseas colonies.

In her article, “French Colonization and Japanese Occupation of Indochina during the Second World War: Encounters of the French, Japanese, and Vietnamese,” Namba Chizuru discusses both French colonialism and Japanese military rule as they unfolded in colonial Indochina. Rather than describing these two regimes of imperial rule through a comparative lens, Namba engages in a detailed examination of historical materials with a view to revealing how they *compared one another* in the context of “joint rule,” which emerged in the 1940s.³ The colonized Vietnamese were caught between the regimes. By analyzing how the Vietnamese were forced to respond to the ideological and cultural policies practiced by these mutually comparing rulers, Namba demonstrates the relevance of comparison to the history of anticolonialism in Asia. The article shows how the Japanese in Indochina sought to marshal the support of the Vietnamese by using the comparative logic of “Pan-Asianism,” which stressed the difference of Japanese rule from Western colonialism, presenting Japan as the “liberator of Asia” from the West.

This Pan-Asianist aspect of how the Japanese compared their colonialism with colonialist regimes of other empires is the theme of the article by Aaron Peters, “Comparisons and Deflections: Indian Nationalists in the Political Economy of Japanese Imperialism, 1931–1938.” Like the other articles in this special issue, Peters’s work foregrounds comparison itself as an object of historical scrutiny. By discussing within a

³ Namba’s work can also be read as an interesting case study on “joint rule,” potentially an important subfield of transimperial history. On joint rule, see, for example, Stevens (2017).

single frame both the anti-British struggles of Indian revolutionaries abroad and Japanese imperialism in Manchuria, Peters aims not to compare Japanese and British colonialism, nor to provide a comparative discussion of anticolonial movements in the two empires. Rather, his article shows how comparison was used by both Japanese imperialists of Pan-Asianist persuasion and a specific group of Indian nationalists who chose to collaborate with the Japanese by staging their activities from East Asia. This article shows how some Japanese used anti-British rhetoric to justify the controversial establishment of Manchukuo in 1932. The author explains why and how these Indians supported the multiethnic makeup of this new nation-state as an alternative to the kind of racial rule embodied by British rule in India. Through a close and nuanced reading of historical sources, Peters reveals the limits and contradictions of Japan's imperial ideology by showing how the comparative arguments of some Indian nationalists often occluded the issue of colonial injustice and violence within the Japanese Empire.

Thus, this special issue, "Beyond Comparison: Japanese Colonialism in Transimperial Relations," is not a collection of comparative studies intended to describe the supposedly essential traits of Japanese colonialism in sharp relief. Rather, each of the articles included here focuses on the interactive and dynamic relations the Japanese Empire had with other regimes. With this focus, we seek to open up a new paradigm of historical research that serves to overcome the problems of comparative research. We call this new paradigm "transimperial history." The following section elucidates the theoretical scope of this paradigm.⁴

Problematizing Comparison

From Comparative Studies to the "Politics of Comparison"

Why do transimperial historians try to go beyond comparison? What is comparative research, and what does it mean for historians to compare in the first place? Conventionally, researchers use comparison with an expectation that it will provide useful *adjectives* to describe the different empires in question. The comparative approach is supposed to enable historians to carve out the characteristics of the

⁴ Transimperial history includes as one of its pillars, but is by no means exhausted by, the historical study of colonial comparisons. For a fuller picture of its scope and limits as a field of study, see Hedinger and Heé (2018) as well as Mizutani (2018). The theoretical discussion in this introduction is much informed by various case studies presented at three international conferences: "Colonial Circulations: Colonialism in Comparative Perspective" at the University of Bristol, July 4–5, 2011; "The Politics of Colonial Comparison Workshop" at the University of Oxford, September 29, 2014; and "Imperial Comparison" at the University of Oxford, July 8–9, 2016. These conferences themselves indicate the extent to which the kind of historical research focusing on the politics of comparison has been rapidly growing as a promising field of research. I am also indebted to my experience as a co-organizer (with Nadin Heé and Daniel Hedinger) of the international workshop, "In-Between Empires: Transimperial History in a Global Age" held at Freie Universität Berlin on September 15–16, 2017.

different colonialisms concerned, enabling them to determine similarities and differences. But in reality, it can easily foster stereotypes, some of which are ethically problematic, because comparative judgments are often highly value-laden. Statements such as “British colonialism was more exploitative than its Dutch counterpart” or “The Herero in Namibia under German rule were treated better compared with the Algerians in the French Empire”⁵ are bound to be emotionally charged and politically controversial. Such risks might make historians hesitate to engage in comparison, but simply avoiding it and sticking to one’s narrow field of study is not a useful solution. One way to address the problem is to try to provide a more elaborate set of criteria for critically and productively pursuing comparative research.

Another solution is to take a different perspective on comparison altogether. Transimperial history finds itself benefiting greatly from the concept of “the politics of comparison” devised by historical anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler. The full potential of this concept has not yet been fully exploited. Pointing out the extent to which rulers of various empires relied on comparison,⁶ Stoler urges her fellow historians of colonialism to treat comparison “not as a methodological problem, but as a historical object” (Stoler 2001, 862). Put another way, rather than relying on comparison as a source of objective knowledge that will help us describe colonialisms with the right adjectives, we should see comparison as “an active political verb” (Stoler and McGranahan 2007, 16). According to Stoler, we should focus our attention “on the political task of comparing” as much as, or more than, we focus on the object of comparison (Stoler 2001, 863). Thus, the concept allows us to see comparison as an *act*, exposing its *subjective* aspect to scrutiny through historical analysis.

One might worry that this emphasis on the subjective side of comparison might jeopardize the idea of “objective reality” much cherished by historians. Comparisons produced in the past were frequently plagued by inaccuracies or leaps in logic partly because of this subjective aspect. Would such errors give historians pause in taking up the politics of comparison as a topic of research? The transimperial historian would argue that, whether or not the content of a particular piece of comparison truthfully reflected the objective realities of the phenomena concerned, the acts of comparison did occur and were real. Moreover, the comparisons in question had a degree of historical significance that cannot be ignored by historians, as they informed the decisions made by people in charge of governing various colonial situations. Thus, the potential for studying the politics of comparison should not be dismissed from inflexibly empiricist, unassumingly presentist, or both types of perspectives.

While dismissing the narrow kind of historicism, the idea of historical significance itself should not be taken lightly. To historicize the politics of comparison is not the same

⁵ These are purely hypothetical statements randomly created for the sake of discussion.

⁶ For examples of how colonizing nations used comparison, see Asseraf (2018), Bernhard (2013, 2015, 2017), Betts ([1961] 2005), Bradshaw and Ndzesop (2009), Coghe (2015), Cook (1993), Heé (2014), Kirkwood (2016), Linder (2015), Matsuda (2000), Mizutani (2014), Rappas (2015), and Twomey (2011), as well as the articles by Mizutani and Nishiyama in this special issue.

as merely describing instances of colonial comparison. Nor is the ultimate purpose of this approach to create an encyclopedic or corpus-like repository of all the comparative knowledge ever produced. Rather, the essential goal is to situate each piece of knowledge in context, bringing to light the motives and politics behind its production. Discussing comparative ideas in ways that isolate them from concrete historical settings is not only methodologically unsound but can be positively misleading; such discussion would allow scholars to overestimate the significance of comparison at the cost of downplaying other causal factors. This is not to say that transimperial historians should be zealously selective in their choice of specific comparative acts as an object of study, dismissing other acts because of their failures to influence the course of events. Rather, if a particular comparative idea or theory did not evolve into reality, the role of the transimperial historian is to ask why that was the case and seek to explain the historical reasons behind it. Why was the act of comparing more intensive at certain moments and in particular contexts? Why were certain themes more frequently made an object of comparison than others? These questions need to be asked if the politics of comparison is to remain relevant as a matter of historical study.

Scholars of colonial history, however, might still worry that the focus on comparison and its transimperial circulations could inevitably lead to a relative neglect of the local conditions of a specific colonial situation. However, as transimperial historians, we believe that our approach does not conflict with the kind of historical research that concentrates on one particular colonial situation. The efficacy of the politics of comparison as a concept lies precisely in its capacity to focus not just on the act of comparing but also on the politics involved therein. This attention leads us, in turn, to seeing the extent to which the will to compare—with its underlying motives—was conditioned *locally*, even though comparative ideas circulated globally. Acts of comparison were often shaped by the circumstances of a specific colonial situation, and any study in colonial comparison that does not carefully examine these conditions and clarify their complexities would contribute little to historical studies. Transimperial history does not just point to how comparative ideas traveled across borders. It asks *which* ideas were promoted or disregarded (and for what reasons) in the context of a particular colonial society. Our approach pays minute attention to the locally determined motives and politics of selection involved in the introduction of foreign ideas into a particular colonial context, thus helping us deepen our understanding of the history of the same context.⁷

From “Empire” to “Imperial Formation”

⁷ For example, the colonial policy of Lord Cromer in Egypt emerged as a model that circulated globally across several empires (see, for instance, Kirkwood 2016). Cromer’s model reached Korea, but the Japanese colonial authorities chose to only make limited use of it, a decision informed by a set of complex local conditions surrounding Japanese rule in Korea at that time (see my article in this issue for more on this subject).

The concept of the politics of comparison certainly allows us to handle the problematic of comparison in novel ways. But on a more fundamental level, one might wonder if it is possible to remain completely neutral and free from the pitfalls of comparatism, which is so deeply ingrained in our way of thinking. People habitually distinguish and categorize different things, implicitly making judgments about them. In fact, even if we depart from the comparative research of empires and focus instead on their politics of comparison, there still remains the danger of comparing the empires concerned. We may end up comparing different empires by taking their politics of comparison as their distinctive characteristics. In this way, we might pursue transimperial history while still finding ourselves unwittingly practicing comparison.

This problem arises partly from regarding empires as entities. In this context, Stoler calls for the use of “imperial formation,” rather than “empire,” as a guiding concept in studying the politics of comparison. As put by Stoler, with fellow anthropologist and historian Carole McGranahan, “Empires may be ‘things,’ but imperial formations are not” (Stoler and McGranahan 2007, 8). In analyzing historical acts of comparison, it is not very helpful to behold the conventional image of an empire with a fixed set of characteristics enduring in time. It is more productive to consider an empire in terms of its incessant (trans)formation at each discrete moment. As discussed in the previous section, this does not mean that the idea of objective reality was lost for any particular “empire.” Rather, the concept of imperial formation allows us to see an empire’s historical unfolding in terms of what it was trying to *become* at each moment. The identity of an empire has never been objectively fixed over an extended period; its subjective sense of self was constantly reshaped by the anticipation of, and anxieties about, the unpredictable future as well as by a sense of continuity and tradition inherited from the past. Similarly, the kind of politics of comparison that any given empire played was not fixed; therefore, to characterize the former in terms of the latter is misleading.

To capture an empire at its moment of becoming helps us to understand how it relates to other empires. One advantage of transimperial history adopting the prefix “trans-” over others—such as “inter-”—is its emphasis on the temporal, rather than only the spatial, aspect of seeing relations between different empires. Unlike “inter-,” which means “between” or “among” and has spatial connotations, “trans-” (as in “transimperial history”) has a temporal dimension. “Trans-” implies a state of transience, and thus the transimperial is not just about the relationships between empires with unchanging characteristics but about how these empires and their people were transformed over time through these relationships. Here, we concur with the approach of historian Daniel Brückenhaus as described in one of his works:

I have chosen this notion over the related term inter-imperial because it puts an emphasis on the fact that such encounters of empires did not simply occur in a space “in between” them. Rather, the internal

structures of these empires were frequently transformed through such exchanges. Instead of regarding empires as closed entities, the chapter therefore argues that in the first half of the twentieth century, the borders between them were surprisingly porous. (Brückenhaus 2015, 171)

Transimperial history does not see the relationships between empires as existing between entities with predetermined characteristics. Rather, it tries to clarify how empires emerged, grew, and disappeared through mutual awareness and interactions, constantly comparing themselves with others at each moment of their becoming.

The Subjects of Comparative Acts and Transimperial Border-Crossing

Another advantage of adopting “trans-” instead of “inter-” is that it makes the scope of “transimperial history” wider than that of what might be called “inter-imperial history,” which may be understood—like “international history”—to be concerned primarily with the relations in between the *states* of various empires. Naturally, the primary protagonists of “inter-imperial” historical narratives would be the politicians and administrators in charge of running these states. By contrast, *transimperial* history counts as its actors a wider range of people, including whoever moved “across” or “through” imperial boundaries, whether literally or imaginatively. It includes state as well as non-state actors, including religious missionaries, journalists, academics, legal and medical professionals, business professionals, engineers, artists, farmers, laborers, sex workers, and so forth, and the spouses and children of all these people. It also includes people from colonized societies—students, revolutionaries, political exiles, merchants, laborers, and so forth—who also moved beyond borders, though not as freely as those from colonizing nations.⁸ Because the colonized had comparative visions of their own, the act of comparing was not just a privilege of the people from colonizing nations.⁹ There were, for example, those who actively opposed colonial rule. To frame and articulate their resistance, colonized people also looked sideways beyond imperial boundaries and engaged in their own version of a politics of comparison. Like their rulers, they also searched for analogies, whether as emulative models or as examples of failure to avoid in the future.

Because none of these people were directly responsible for the dealings between imperial governments, they are less visible in the realm of the “inter-imperial.” However, those of us engaged in the *transimperial* cannot doubt their significance. Less constrained by the official ideologies and policies of the empire from which they came,

⁸ On how people from colonized societies moved beyond borders, see, for example, Azuma (2005, 2019), Sohi (2014), and Yoshida (2018).

⁹ For examples of how colonized people used comparison, see Chester (2011), Davis (1980), Mizutani (2015), Sharp (2013), Silvestri (2009), and Rockower and Cheema (2010), as well as the article by Peters in this issue.

these people often found themselves in transimperial terrain in ways that were not always contained in the terms of inter-imperial cooperation or antagonism set by the powers that be.

This emphasis on the significance of non-state actors risks implying that transimperial history ignores or downplays the relevance of state actors. It also could lead one to think that transimperial history takes a “cultural” turn at the cost of neglecting themes related to politics, diplomacy, administration, and law. On the contrary, to transimperial historians, states remain extremely important as objects of analysis, not least because state policies deliberately and structurally curtailing democratic political representation tended to affect people’s lives more deeply in colonial than in metropolitan situations. Indeed, failing to address the question of state power would make transimperial history ineffective as a critical practice. We *do* need to historicize how the agents of state power practiced their politics of comparison. What is important is that we do so in ways that reflect the often uncertain, ambivalent, and shifting nature inherent in any imperial formation. These state actors, particularly those working in the field as colonial administrators, often found themselves ill-equipped to deal with the everyday problems of government, and were often ready to go beyond imperial boundaries for the acquisition of knowledge and skills instead of keeping themselves within the political culture of their own nation.¹⁰

Likewise, our emphasis on transformative border-crossing should not lead us to assume that comparative imaginations could always travel freely and without limit. It is important for a transimperial historian to explain why certain kinds of comparative ideas did not circulate as extensively as others. The absence of transimperial circulation is just as important. Why were certain kinds of comparative knowledge more widespread than others? Whose comparative knowledge was more influential? This line of inquiry is indispensable, because we are dealing with colonialism, a regime of intuitions and ideologies that operated ultimately on the asymmetrical relationship between the colonizer and colonized. This relationship affected the way and the extent to which colonized subjects in different empires were able to utilize comparison for their common goal to resist colonialism. Imperial actors were often sharply aware of the dangers of comparison being utilized by those who opposed their colonial rule. Colonial surveillance frequently restricted the movements of colonized subjects across borders, and colonial censorship structurally limited their politics of comparison.¹¹ Thus, the task of transimperial history is not just to describe the circulations of comparative knowledge but also to shed light on the mechanisms that blocked these very circulations when the knowledge in question was

¹⁰ These administrators readily tried to learn from the experiences of other colonizing nations. For example, a French colonial administrator in French Indochina might frequently look to the experiences of the British in India in search of models and inspirations. In their intellectual practice, they did not always respect the boundary that formally existed between the French and British empires (see Mizutani 2014, 435–443).

¹¹ On imperial surveillance and censorship, see, for example, Brückenhaus (2017), Mizutani (2015), and Sohi (2014).

found to contain something inconvenient or disruptive for the imperial authorities. The use of comparison was a common feature across empires, but the fact that its distribution was uneven reflected the very nature of colonialism as a form of domination.

The Historiography of Japanese Colonialism and Transimperial History

Having outlined the potential of historicizing the politics of comparison from the perspective of transimperial history, this introduction now considers the relevance of transimperial history to historical research on Japanese colonialism. What are the difficulties and merits of studying Japan's colonialism in terms of its relations with those of other nations? How can the historical study of Japanese colonialism enhance our understanding of the histories of other colonialisms? More broadly, how can we study Japanese colonialism in ways that contribute to the historiography of colonialism in general?

Anglophone Theories of Colonialism and East Asia

Does any single historiographical framework exist for studying various empires? Is such a framework possible or even desirable in the first place? In anglophone academia, given the use of English as its lingua franca, it is hardly surprising that the British Empire—including the settler colonies in the present-day United States—has attracted more attention than others. At the same time, there has been a call for more comprehensive and inclusive studies, promoting a universal understanding of colonialism by bringing together scholars who specialize in various imperial and colonial contexts, including those of non-Anglo-American empires. For example, the past two decades have witnessed the publication of a number of anthologies for colonial and postcolonial studies, including the three-volume series *Imperialism: Critical Concepts in Historical Studies* (Cain and Harrison 2001), *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies* (Schwarz and Ray 2005), and, more recently, *Postcolonial Studies: An Anthology* (Nayar 2016). These otherwise admirable works have been limited by a peculiar kind of exclusivity: the theoretical reflections on colonialism in these volumes are based mostly on the experiences of just a few colonial empires that originated in Western Europe—namely, the Dutch, French, and British empires. Looking at the historical documents and research articles included in these anthologies, one soon realizes that an overwhelming majority of colonial situations discussed therein concern those three empires, with the Victorian Raj—British India in the nineteenth century—receiving more attention than others.¹² Some of the historiographical concepts presented are heavily

¹² See Cain and Harrison (2001), Goldberg and Quayson (2002), Loomba et al. (2005), McLeod (2007), Nayar (2016), Schwarz and Ray (2005). There are some important exceptions, however. For example, many chapters of both *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century* (Elkins and Pedersen 2005) and *The Ashgate Research Companion to Modern Imperial Histories* (Levine and Marriott 2012) deal with empires other than the “classical” empires of Britain, France, and the Netherlands.

influenced by postcolonial theory, most explicitly in the cases of the later phase of subaltern studies and certain strands of new imperial history. Excluded from this construction of historiographical frames are the experiences in other empires, including not just the Japanese, but also the Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Belgian, and Russian empires.

Clearly, this lacuna is partly due to limitations imposed by language barriers. The vast amount of historical research on Japanese colonialism that has long been published in Japanese, Korean, and Chinese has largely been excluded from the historiographical debate on what colonialism is.¹³ But even if relevant works are available in English, whether in translation or because they were originally written in English, these tend to be regarded as examples of East Asian studies. It might not occur to those working on British, French, or Dutch colonialism to look into Japanese, Korean, or Chinese studies to find useful historiographical models or inspiration. This gap contrasts sharply with the frequency with which the field of subaltern studies, for example, is consulted for theoretical insights by historians working in East Asian studies.¹⁴

The problem is not just that the historical experiences of colonial rule in East Asia have been excluded from the construction of theory. Another problem presents itself when one feels pressured to use these anglophone concepts to write on Japanese colonialism.¹⁵ This problem is sharply articulated by Tani E. Barlow in her introduction to *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia*:

If colonialism is said, in a categorical sense, to be best exemplified by the English Raj, and all other forms of colonialism are understood in reference to that historical model, then not only are all other formations derivative but conditions fundamentally unlike that originary design might indeed be inconceivable or unseeable—on precisely the same grounds as the critique of colonial discourse holds European epistemes responsible for overriding the consciousness of the subaltern. (Barlow 1997, 6)

As for the treatment of Japanese colonialism, the former has a chapter on the historiography of Japanese colonialism, and, in the latter, five of the fifteen chapters are on Japanese colonialism. Finally, *Imperial Formations* (Stoler, McGranahan, and Perdue 2007) is exceptional not just in its attention to “other” colonialisms, but also theoretically in ways that have deeply influenced me.¹³ There is a huge need to introduce works on Japanese colonialism written in Japanese, Korean, Chinese, or other non-English languages, to English-speaking scholars. In this regard, *Cross-Currents* performs a great service publishing reviews of non-English monographs on East Asia. I have had the fortune to review a book by Komagome Takeshi, an extremely important study on Japanese colonialism in Taiwan that has a number of theoretical insights for anyone interested in colonialism (Komagome 2015; see Mizutani 2017).

¹⁴ For example, in *Colonial Modernity in Korea* (1999), edited by Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson, some of the authors draw on the works of subaltern theorists, such as Partha Chatterjee and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

¹⁵ For a brief exploration of the question of anglophone concepts as applied to the history of colonial Korea, see Itagaki, Tobe, and Mizutani (2012, 285–299).

The fact that there has been a general lack of theoretical interest in Japanese colonialism in Korea, Taiwan, or Manchuria is further problematic. It is even more problematic when the history of Japanese colonialism is represented using a historiographical framework imposed from outside. One explicit example of this problem is found in views on the Japanese Empire by Robert Young, one of the most influential scholars in postcolonial studies. In *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (2001), Young represents Japan not so much as a colonizing oppressor in its own right as a model for colonized people worldwide in their anti-imperial resistance. According to Young, Japan embodied “the strategy of combining the west through reform and self-modernization,” serving as a model “for admiring Indians, Irish and others aspired to emulate” (Young 2001, 374). This aspect of the rapid modernization of Japan is undeniable, but the overall presentation of Japan is unjustifiably unbalanced. When Japan is discussed, it is represented primarily as a radical subversion of Western hegemony, much admired by anti-British revolutionaries (Young 2001, 100, 162, 178–179, 374). This representation of Japan as an anticolonial force is marked by a relative absence of accounts of Japan’s own imperial rule and the histories of anticolonial struggles *against Japan*. As I will discuss in the next section, Young’s typically “exceptionalist” view of the Japanese colonial empire is disturbingly similar to that of Japan’s Pan-Asianist imperialists in the 1930–1940s¹⁶ and of present-day right-wing apologists for Japan’s imperial past. This view gets repeated in compressed form in a passage in his preface to the Japanese translation of his *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (2003). In that preface, Young discusses the supposed world-historical significance of modern Japan in stimulating anti-imperialist movements around the world. As for Japan as a colonizing nation, Young stresses its difference from its Euro-American counterparts. According to Young, unlike those counterparts, Japan served to industrialize the societies it colonized, which in turn contributed to the “miracle” of their economic growth in the postcolonial era (Young 2005, vii–ix).

Young’s view runs counter to that of scholars who take a critical stance with regard to Japanese colonialism on account of the violence and exploitation it inflicted on its colonized people. Insofar as East Asian scholars see postcolonialism as a radical intellectual movement, it is ironic that Young—one of the architects of that very movement—is insufficiently critical of Japanese rule. Young undoubtedly had good intentions in writing critically about Western colonialism: it is likely that the omission of Japanese colonial oppression was unintentionally caused, at least in part, by his not having considered the intense historiographical debates in and across Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese, and Chinese academia. These complexities of East Asian history may lie outside the scope of Young’s expertise in European colonialism. But the problem cannot be ignored, insofar as it seems to stem from specific ways of theorizing on both colonialism and anticolonialism. By Young’s definition, “postcolonialism” means a class

¹⁶ For the ideology of Japanese Pan-Asianists, see Mizutani (2019) as well as Peters’s article in this special issue.

of beliefs and actions “united by a common political and moral consensus towards the history and legacy of *western colonialism*” (Young 2001, 5; emphasis added). With his definition of colonialism as something necessarily issuing from Western Europe, it is as if anything not reducible to Western norms and values automatically implies its potential for resistance. In this scheme, Japan as a “non-European” nation emerges as an inspiration and model for Asians in their struggle against Western Europe. Such a formulation of the postcolonial loses the complex histories of how Japanese imperialists learned the technologies of colonial governance from Euro-American colonialism but justified Japanese rule in the name of Asia’s struggles against the Eurocentric world order.

Leo Ching, a historian of colonial Taiwan, sharply points out this problem of crudely imposing anglophone concepts on the historiography of East Asia. In *Becoming “Japanese”: Colonial Taiwan and the Politics of Identity Formation* (2001), Ching questions Young’s influential idea of history itself as a “white mythology” (Young 1990) underpinning colonialism and therefore something that needs to be deconstructed:

I want to stress the need to be cognizant of our complacency in reifying and essentializing imperialism and colonialism as solely a “Western” problematic in Euro-American academia. This indifference to the only non-Western colonial experience in the general critique of imperialism and colonization underscores the West’s persisting obsession with its authority to constitute itself as a body of knowledge and the author of its own criticism. It is as if the very thought of a non-Western, nonwhite perpetrator of an equally reprehensible colonial violence is unfathomable in the Eurocentric consciousness. Ironically, radical anti-Eurocentrism turns out to be the ultimate consolidation of Eurocentrism. (Ching 2001, 30–31)

With the experiences of Japanese imperialism excluded at the outset from the theorization of postcolonialism, its blind application to East Asian history can become a kind of violence in its own right. This problem perhaps is not peculiar to East Asia, and it serves as a reminder that any unqualified critique of Eurocentrism can itself be Eurocentric in ways that effectively silence the sufferings of those who struggled under forms of imperial rule other than Western European regimes.

Transfiguring Historiographical Frames

How can the asymmetry in the construction and dissemination of historiographical ideas be rectified? How can the historical study of Japanese colonialism be opened up from the confines of East Asian studies as a field of study without blindly applying concepts? These are big questions, and offering definite solutions is beyond the scope of this special issue. However, the authors of the four articles believe that the kind of

transimperial history that is attentive to the politics of comparison can offer at least some possibilities in that direction. These four case studies will attract not just specialists of the Japanese Empire but also those interested in other empires. The articles demonstrate the extent to which the experiences related to the Japanese colonial empire were multilayered and transregional in ways that were intermeshed with contemporary developments in the various colonial situations in and across other empires, including the British, French, and German.

For example, historians who specialize in British colonialism will find my research relevant to their own, because it concerns British “indirect rule” and its manifestations in several contexts, including Egypt as an informal protectorate. This strand of British colonialism has already been studied extensively by historians in the fields of both British imperial history and related area studies (such as South Asian studies and Middle Eastern studies). My article in this special issue may provide these scholars with an opportunity to reexamine the ideas and practices of British colonialism in terms of how they had historical significance beyond the colonial contexts located within the British Empire. Similarly, Nishiyama’s article will be of interest to historians of German colonialism. It indicates the extent to which German colonialism was not simply about the German Empire itself, as its strategies of governance in the field of education influenced how people in other empires contemplated their own colonizing practices. Peters’s article allows historians specializing in India’s independence movement—one of the most widely researched topics in anglophone academia—to reconsider it from a thoroughly fresh perspective. Although the history of those Indian revolutionaries who staged their anti-British activities from Japan during the Second World War has been well studied, Peters takes a new step by giving it a transimperial treatment. With its focus on the involvement of these Indian activists in Japanese imperialism in Manchuria—effectively an imperial possession of Japan—Peters’s article indicates the possibilities of rethinking Indian anti-British activities abroad in light of their connections with Japan’s colonies, rather than just with Japan proper.¹⁷ No scholar interested in the history of anticolonialism in French Indochina in the early 1940s can afford to ignore Namba’s work. As inscribed in its cultural policy toward the Vietnamese, the propagandist ideology of French colonialism during this period was much affected by the French politics of comparison played against the Japanese counterpart. Japan’s own politics of comparison was couched in a Pan-Asianist rhetoric of freeing Asia from white domination, however self-contradictory that rhetoric was.

These four articles indicate the presence of two seemingly opposite strands in Japan’s politics of comparison. On the one hand, Japan relied heavily on comparative borrowing in defining the nature of its imperial rule, as well as in formulating its specific colonial policies.¹⁸ On the other hand, Japan also used comparison to project its empire

¹⁷ Recent research shows that one of these Indian activists, Rash Behari Bose, was also involved in the 1930s in affairs in Korea, another colony of Japan (Mizutani 2019).

¹⁸ An interesting question for future study is whether Japanese colonialism served as a model for other colonizing nations. Not much research has been done on this point, but there are

as distinct and exceptional, claiming the superiority of its form of colonialism over those of other empires. These are important components of Japanese imperial formations, the understanding of which is indispensable for any discussion of Japanese colonialism. However, as transimperial historians, we are not arguing that these formations made the Japanese empire historically unique. Neither are we interested in determining which of these two modes of Japan's politics of comparison was more dominant and thus historically significant. In focusing on Japan's use of comparison, our purpose is not to *characterize* its colonialism, or define once and for all what the Japanese empire *was*. As Stoler and McGranahan put it, "Claiming exceptionalism and investing in strategic comparison are fundamental elements of an imperial formation's commanding grammar" (Stoler and McGranahan 2007, 12). It is not that some empires were more prone to learning while others were characterized more by their exceptionalism. Both elements existed in each empire. All colonizing nations searched for comparative models *and* claimed to be exceptional, and the two characteristics were not necessarily contradictory. Read collectively, our articles on Japanese imperial formations demonstrate how this was the case. The double-sided, oscillating nature of the politics of comparison exposed by this special issue should be interpreted as orienting us toward what the Japanese Empire was trying to *become* at each historical moment under the specific circumstances of that moment.¹⁹

The widespread prevalence of the politics of comparison indicates that there are common themes, which historians specializing in different empires can share. This common ground, in turn, should help us go at least in some distance in trying to rectify the aforementioned problem of asymmetry in the development and flow of historiographical ideas. It is not that anglophone frames should be *replaced*. Rather they can be *transfigured* in ways that make the historical study of colonialism a more inclusive arena for collaborative research. The articles in this special issue do not just show that Japanese colonialism was neither purely derivative nor exceptional; they also indicate, albeit indirectly, that European empires—including the dominant ones, such as the British and French—also were not so original or self-contained. All these empires existed within their interactive relations, whose terms constantly shifted between

possibilities that Manchukuo, for example, inspired fascist empires like Italy that proclaimed to challenge the Anglo-American imperial order. Hedinger's work on the relationship between Italy, Germany, and Japan is insightful in this regard (Hedinger 2017).

¹⁹ These points are highly relevant to the ethical problem of how historians of Japanese colonialism should contemplate Japan's responsibility for colonial injustice and violence. How can we talk about the responsibility of the "West" for the suffering of Asians without invoking the Pan-Asianist rhetoric that Japanese rule was exceptional because its aim was to protect them from the racist regimes of European nations? How can we talk of Japan's responsibility without invoking the Euro-American discourse of enlightenment and civilization, which has the effect of sounding as if British or American colonialism was less violent or exploitative because of underlying liberal values, making the colonizers seem more humane and egalitarian? As Komagome argues, we need to come up with an approach that allows us to simultaneously criticize the colonialisms of Japan as well as other nations (Komagome 2001).

cooperation and tension. Such canonized ideas as “hybridity” and “subalternity” need to be revisited in view of this transimperial condition of the age of modern empires. Future research should test and reassess these concepts in ways that problematize and modify what makes them Eurocentric in the sense that they sprang from unqualified critiques of Eurocentrism. In this way, the study of Japanese colonialism from the perspective of transimperial history can contribute more generally to a deeper understanding of colonialism.

Toward Transnational Research Collaboration

By publishing the results of our research, the authors of the articles in this special issue hope that more scholars will be interested in focusing on transimperial history in the future. But some practical issues need to be addressed, if only to invite more scholars into this new paradigm of research. Transimperial history inevitably concerns two or more empires, each of which had its own colonial contexts with dense and complex histories of their own. Engaging with just one of these histories is demanding enough for any individual historian, as it requires advanced levels of specialized knowledge and skills, including the ability to read relevant texts in multiple languages. Historians specializing in colonialism might find the politics of comparison interesting as an approach but hesitate to conduct empirical research because they feel, rather humbly, that they are not qualified to talk about other empires of which they do not have expert knowledge. We all live in the age of academic compartmentalization and the division of intellectual labor, and this institutional setup affects all academics in undeniable practical matters, including the need to secure research funding, an academic position, or both. These historians might find themselves running the risk of being criticized or marginalized by their colleagues for doing research on areas, periods, or themes in which they have not been formally trained or “disciplined.” At the present moment, it seems unlikely that transimperial history will secure a regular institutional foothold in academia, which makes collaboration among individual scholars a more realistic alternative.

Yet, as far as the case of Japanese colonialism is concerned, conducting collaborative historical research within any single country is difficult. In Europe and North America, a number of history departments have academic staff specializing in the colonialism of one of the Euro-American empires. However, there is a relative dearth of scholars specializing in Japanese colonialism. In the history departments of East Asian universities, particularly Korean and Taiwanese, the work of a great number of historians concerns Japanese colonialism. However, few specialize in the colonialism of any Western empires, including even the British and French empires. Curiously, Japan is somewhat exceptional in this regard. In addition to the historians working on themes related to the Japanese colonial empire, a small number of university researchers study the colonialisms of Western empires in Asia, the Oceania, Africa, and the Americas.²⁰ But

²⁰ No doubt, the evolution of area studies in Japan itself reflects Japan’s past as a colonial empire.

scholars have not fully taken advantage of this situation, and collaborative research on colonialism has been relatively infrequent.²¹ For these reasons, researchers would need to create a transnational platform for collaborative research.

Collaboration is necessary in part because many instances of the Japanese politics of comparison in the imperial past were themselves products of collaboration in one way or another. Imperialist policymakers, intellectuals, and journalists made liberal use of comparison as a strategy. This strategic use of comparison was made possible partly by organized efforts—sometimes through the colonial governments—to translate foreign texts deemed relevant to Japanese colonial policy. Texts on various empires and colonies—written not just in English but also in French, German, and other languages—were translated into Japanese and widely circulated, feeding the comparative imaginations of those who administered the empire. Colonial comparisons were pursued with little respect for what are today regarded as respectable boundaries of expertise. To go beyond comparison, therefore, we must move beyond the barriers of language and expertise by assisting one another across national and institutional boundaries.

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²¹ One example of this kind of collaborative research is DOSC (Doshisha Studies in Colonialism), a research forum based at Doshisha University in Kyoto, established and run by Itagaki Ryūta, Kikuchi Keisuke, and myself. Another example is Teikokushikenkyukai (Association for the study of empire histories), organized by Hirano Chikako at Musashi University in Tokyo.

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