Comparing Comparisons

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(Eds.)

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PREFACE

> "Semantic information, then, is a 'distinction that makes a difference'."
> D. C. Dennett. *From Bacteria to Bach and Back. The Evolution of Minds.* Random House, 2017, p. 116.

Comparisons form a core process in knowledge creation. We cannot not compare, when reflecting about or studying what concerns or interests us. Meaning derives from comparing.

The short essays collected in this volume reflect on aspects, methods, benefits and possible pitfalls of comparisons in the social sciences and humanities. They were originally published as blog entries on the open edition platform Hypotheses between May 2020 and May 2021 (https://trafo.hypotheses.org/category/comparing-comparisons). We decided to re-publish them in the compact format of an e-book to make them more easily accessible as a set – and therefore more readily comparable. As there is no inherent thematic sequence among the contributions except for the introduction and conclusion, we sorted them alphabetically by author name.

Singapore and Tokyo, October 2021
James D. Sidaway and Franz Waldenberger

Comparing Comparisons – Introduction and Overview

By James D. Sidaway and Franz Waldenberger

How and why do we compare in the social sciences and humanities? These are enduring questions. On 2nd and 3rd December 2019, a group of scholars affiliated with the Max Weber Research Group at the National University of Singapore and researchers from the German Institute for Japanese Studies (DIJ) met at the DIJ in Tokyo to compare notes on comparisons. Most of the 17 participants were at the postdoc stage of their academic career. They covered a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds (anthropology, economics, sociology, history, geography, psychology, area studies and linguistics), although our title here is inspired by published reflections on comparative law (Chodosh, H. E. 1999, *Comparing Comparisons In Search of Methodology. Iowa Law Review*, 84, 1025–1038) and one of us had previously co-authored an article on comparative methods at the interface of geography and area studies, the meeting was a conspicuously cross-disciplinary event. Each delegate presented their vantage point on/experience of comparison, followed by discussion. Some disciplines, such as anthropology, are more explicit about the way that every single case study contains comparisons, such as the way that the social context of observers stands out and cultural translation is integral to research, analysis, and writing. And some themes, economic trajectories, demography, or marriage patterns, for example, frequently become the basis to stage comparisons. But what do these take for granted? What drives them?

The presentations and discussions on these questions in Tokyo ranged over three broad and intersecting themes.

The achievements, limits, and seductions of methodological nationalism

Comparison is back in fashion. In some fields, urban studies for example, it has spawned a vast literature and become the etiquette for discussions of appropriate focus and methods. The advent of big data and AI debates revolving around this have also rejuvenated comparative quantitative research. In other fields, however, such as economics, comparison peaked long ago. There is a complex and uneven historical variance across disciplines.

Of course, many studies, make little comparative aspiration, yet once published, others may feed them into their own comparison. But even for those with aspirations to do so, and there have been growing institutional encouragement to compare, on the part of funding bodies for example, we frequently struggle to escape national prefixes in research and critical analysis.

Yet, there is often potential for foregrounding other relevant scales and units of analysis, in tandem with, or in lieu of the nation-state, which is so often a taken for granted, default unit of analysis. This includes firms, cities and regions and other analytical axes of divide, notably urban and rural. Or borderland, inter-state, and non-state areas, such as the debates that have been triggered by the idea that highland Asia (termed "Zomia" by some) constituted a distinctive zone of life characterized by resistance to sovereigns. Similarly, transnational, and regional networks and the interrelations of maritime spaces (under and beyond national jurisdiction) offer points of departure.

Yet national scales endure. They have deep roots in many disciplines. Indeed, they are foundational principles for some, such as international relations and so deeply written into others, such as law as to be hard to disentangle ourselves and our analyses from. The influential work of the Dutch social psychologist Gerard Hendrik (Geert) Hofstede (2 October 1928–12 February 2020), based on data from IBM workplaces in the 1970s, is an example of theorization on national (work) cultures that came to exercise enormous influence in business schools. Similarly, the literature on "varieties of capitalism" has become a conventional way – in some cases a method – to frame understanding of business and finance in Germany and Japan vis-à-vis other nation-states.

In the case of the now abundant literature on "varieties of capitalism", the notion developed in a context of prior debates about national variants of socialism, as Moscow's hegemony over communist movements broke down from the mid-point of the twentieth century. Decades on, it is arguably more useful to focus on the intersections and hybridization of forms of capitalism than to keep searching for pure national prototypes.

Yet national comparison retains analytical utility and critical pedagogic potential, in for example, the study of commemorative sites, monuments and events, which are thereby denaturalized. Examples discussed in Tokyo included the 8th May, which is Victory in Europe Day in the UK and France and Liberation Day in Germany. We also compared how the course and memory of the Second World War is differently scripted across Asia. Such examples yielded debate about seeking similarities or differences, likely vs unlikely or surprising comparisons and longitudinal comparisons. The relative value of, to use the jargon of social science, diachronic vs synchronic comparison, looms large is some disciplines, such as linguistics.

However, a more pragmatic approach to scales and comparison is often merited, compounded by the fact that the way national figures are compiled varies. This relates to issues of translation and taken for granted starting points, which often reflect western biases in the social sciences and humanities. Such dilemmas are not easily resolved, notwithstanding decades of critique of the consequences of essentializations, generalizations, orientalism (and its mirror, orientalism-in -reverse or occidentalism) and other exoticisms.

In more mundane ways, at the meeting in Tokyo, problems in comparing, for example, "organic" agricultural production between EU member-states and Japan were an example of incommensurability, given varied certification procedures and regulations. Likewise, per capita seafood consumption cannot be reliably compared, given differences in how seafood is categorized. In the months after we met, the dreadful tally of Covid-19 has served as a salutatory reminder of the power – and the limits – of national comparison. It became clear that national systems of record varied enormously, though the dreadful tabulations of national comparison, infections, mortality, recovery, became the domains of debate in many places, though clearly the vectors of disease had no such respect for national "containers". The limits of methodological nationalism are, sometimes, a matter of life and death.

Locating comparisons and their uses

Whereas some geographers, sociologists and anthropologists enact serial (or longitudinal) comparison, through returning to the same sites or objects of analysis over an extended period, serial comparison is also explicit in the discipline of history. Now and then. Then and there. Historians must negotiate questions about intersecting durations and make decisions over which to work with. Historiographical categories, and periods such as centuries and calendar systems and categories (post-war, post-revolution, post-socialism) are often taken for granted by other human sciences. Moreover, an historical era or moment cannot ever fully know itself by its own consciousness – and so may be viewed very differently in hindsight.

Similarly, another way of approaching comparison would be looking at the same object, but from different scholarly vantage points. This of course is the promise of inter- and multi-disciplinary work. New domains of comparison at the junctures of history, economics and sociology emerged in the twentieth century, examples included Polanyi's writing and modernization theory, the latter bolstered by the violent mix of Cold War, decolonization, and confrontation.

Equally, cultural differences loomed large in the discussions of many delegates. Cultural background and differences in training profoundly configure much research. And the vogue for comparison in some fields yields an impulse to write comparatively, that is, sometimes, only incidentally comparative. In other words, personal connections and pragmatic considerations determine who, where and what is compared as much as anything else. But then, post hoc justifications are imposed to claim they are a useful or valid comparison. Comparison becomes a discursive strategy, a rhetorical device. Such opportunistic and pragmatic underpinnings deserve to be more fully acknowledged. Moreover, much like historical categorizations are only cast in relief when we have stepped outside/beyond them, the idea that individual scholars will transparently know themselves and fully understand the basis on which they decide who/what/where and how to compare is naive.

In discussing alternatives, long established methods of abstraction, that were developed in dialectical analysis, including Marxism entered our discussions. Such methods seek to understand the relational quality of things, to approach them as variously, moments, conjunctures, concrete, abstractions and processes. Dialectics, it was argued by several delegates, needs to be taught to fresh generations of graduate students. The question can or should one compare is thereby replaced with questions about how to compare. Our discussion also explored assertions that some things, in part by virtue of their internal richness (this point has sometimes been claimed by some traditional, canonical, scholarship of Islam) are only comparable with themselves. However, counter-currents frequently come from governments and funding agencies, who – on their own terms – will want us to justify research in terms of policy impacts, which are often based on a thin notion of comparison. Politicians, civil servants – and social movements – will often use comparisons, or instrumentalize comparative perspectives for their own purposes. Nation-state and policy narratives, architects and political parties will invoke historical and geographical comparisons, new Roman empires and Caesarism, revived Silk Roads (accompanying China's Belt and Road Initiative), reanimated Caliphates or the Shah of Iran's invocation of classical Persian empire or the Khmer Rouge's invocation of Angkor are all examples. These analogies and claims are then folded into modernity – they are thoroughly modern. Such process, and the wider invention of tradition invite the critical scrutiny of the political uses of comparison.

Relationalities

A partial and, for several delegates, promising alterative to established forms of comparison is to explore relationalities. This refuses comparison as a starting point and instead focuses on co-production of sites and phenomena. How does social life in city X, for example, rest on different scales of connections that may envelop the globe? Arguably, such research is no less worldly than, for example, a multi-sited study, with globally comparative ambitions. As some delegates noted, the rise of transnational and global history has, to some extent rescaled or displaced earlier comparative impulses in history. Transnational history often looks at transnational networks and discursive spaces, so different opinions or connections within national spaces are in focus, rather than the idea of comparing such national spaces. An example is the interactive and connective discourse about "Asia" between and within Japan, Korea (where Cold War further fractured the debate) and China – and the "overseas" societies where ethnic Chinese (itself a relational category, whose meaning emerged in transnational context) are a majority.

Our closing discussions returned to some fundamental questions about what is signified by triangulation and counts as valid findings or research are invariably comparative issues, implicitly or explicitly. Nothing is beyond compare.

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The Changing Meanings of Comparisons for Sociocultural Anthropology

By Isaac Gagne

"Comparisons are invidious."

I encountered this statement early in my anthropological training when reading classic ethnographies that were written within the framework of evolutionary anthropology. In anthropology's infancy, comparisons were as much about documenting human diversity as they were about validating European imperialism. By comparing the political, economic, religious, and social institutions of mostly agrarian or nomadic societies against the "advanced" industrialized societies, Western-trained anthropologists developed distinctions between "modern" and "pre-modern" societies which imposed a Eurocentric notion of how human societies "evolve" over time. The function of comparison within this evolutionary framework of early anthropology was to place societies along a timeline of development from putatively "primitive" human aggregations to complex modern civilizations. Needless to say, this evolutionary framework is no longer in vogue. However, the central place of identifying similarities and differences and constructing comparisons remains deeply rooted in sociocultural anthropology, and likewise the danger of invidious comparisons.

Comparison as Methodology

Fundamentally, anthropology is built on cross-cultural, comparative study. Methodologically, anthropological study involves working at the micro level but with an eye to the macro contexts, both geographically and theoretically. Conventional anthropological analysis usually proceeds from a single case study, which is "written up" as an ethnographic monograph. As Reed & Alexander (2009 para. 40) note, "even single case studies or ethnographies implicitly contain a comparison, at least to the investigator's own meaningful social contexts, and this comparative consciousness forms an important basis for the development of theory and research." In this sense, anthropological analysis is an implicitly comparative process rooted in what the researcher identifies as being distinctive about their research topic, which influences the kinds of questions they ask and the kinds of findings that they identify as surprising or meaningful.

Multi-sited fieldwork and transnational fieldwork has also become a common methodological feature of anthropological research. The internet has helped facilitate this, and with the global disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been an even greater attention to how so-called digital anthropology and anthropological research from a distance can be conducted (e. g., Blum 2020). The pandemic has also raised new interest in the possibilities for collaborative, inter-disciplinary, and transnational comparative research, such as on different experiences of and responses to the pandemic between Asian and Western nations, or among urban and rural areas within the same country (e. g., Chaturvedi 2020; see also the Pandemic Insights webpage of the American Anthropology Association).

Interrogating Theories and Concepts through Comparative Research

Apart from methodological and conceptual comparisons, comparative research in anthropology also includes theoretical approaches, such as comparing configurations of local value systems among different communities within a single society, or between different societies, in order to reveal which taken-for-granted dimensions are actually dependent on certain sociocultural configurations and why. I will illustrate these two comparative approaches with two examples from my research. First, in the case of an internal comparison within a society: when we compare social welfare configurations of rural and urban Japanese communities, we see different attitudes towards responsibility towards neighbors, and by extension, differing notions of moral responsibilities for care within the same society (Japan). These findings reveal the relationship between urbanization and notions of community, and they also aid in constructing locally relevant policies and practices (Gagne 2021). Second, from a cross-cultural comparative perspective across different societies: in the case of the influence of religions in society, comparing American and Japanese notions of religious authority reveals how many values that are religiously influenced in the U. S., such as notions of charity, legal norms, sexuality, and attitudes towards right and wrong, are not governed by or primarily influenced by religious authority in Japan (Gagne 2017; 2013). Cross-cultural comparison thus provides a method of locating the socioculturally constructed contours of value systems, institutions, and practices. This enables us to identify areas of divergence that can destabilize hegemonic concepts and lead to better analytical frameworks and additional topics for future research.

Crucially, making cross-cultural comparisons intelligible involves the act of "cultural translation," which is implicitly connected with structures of power among researchers and subjects, professional knowledge, and languages of discourse. Thus, as Asad (1993) has cautioned, anthropologists must always be ready to critically interrogate their own position: to translate their findings in ways that are also intelligible to the communities themselves and to be ready to open up their own languages of discourse to a comparative project of translating assumptions, norms, and conceptualizations. The comparative nature of cultural translation—of describing or analyzing concepts and social practices from one sociocultural and linguistic context in a way that is intelligible to others—often entails applying, or creating, meta-level concepts (such as "religion") to describe social practices or formations in a language familiar to the researcher and scholarly community; but this practice is always at risk of creating false equivalences through invidious theoretical or conceptual comparisons. To give a specific example, this problem has bedeviled the study of religion in Japan (and elsewhere), where in the lives of many individuals, certain public rituals, secular self-cultivation movements, and private spiritual-cultivation practices overlap with and often transcend explicitly religious organizations and belief systems, blurring the boundaries between the religious and secular distinctions that are conventional analytical frames in religious studies. This has given rise to endless debates between scholars of religion about whether this or that organization or practice is really "religious," or whether the category of religion itself is a Western concept with no straightforward equivalent in Japan (e. g., Larsson 2019). While this debate is far from settled, rather than describing and analyzing practices simply by forcing them into categories that we are familiar with, from an anthropological perspective it may be more productive to keep in mind Asad's call for us to "test the tolerance of [our] own language for assuming unaccustomed forms" (Asad 1993: 190) in order to diversify and enrich our own repertoire of ethnographic knowledge.

In sum, by moving between theoretical abstraction and critical analyses of local differences while guarding against invidious comparisons, anthropological comparisons—in their most powerful and meaningful forms—allow us to stretch, refine, nuance, and challenge theories, norms, and concepts through case studies. In turn, this yield points of comparison for other researchers as part of an ongoing scholarly conversation.

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Cross-Country Comparative Research and Quantitative Data Analysis

By Markus Heckel

In my field of research, which combines Economics and Japanese Studies (trained at the University of Bonn), it soon became clear that eventually I would have to deal with cross-country comparisons. Even for quantitative analysis, which deals with statistical data, the challenges of cross-country comparisons – not to mention the time intensity – should not be underestimated. First, one needs "comparable" data. To assess whether data sets are really comparable, one has to understand how the data were collected. To interpret and explain differences in the data and in the statistical analysis, one has to control for differences in the respective national contexts. Here, difficult decisions have to be made as to what differences should be considered and how they should be operationalized and controlled for.

My most recent endeavour with cross-country comparisons was a journal article which I wrote together with Yuji Genda (University of Tokyo) and Ryo Kambayashi (Hitotsubashi University) (Genda et al. 2019). For this research, I visited the Institute for Economic Research (IER), Hitotsubashi University several times between 2015 and 2017. We were interested in what kind of employees did not know about their labour contracts, especially about the duration of their employment.

In Japan, employment contracts tend to be opaque. This contradicts the national labour law, which provides employees with the right of a labour contract specifying among other things the length of employment. Genda (2016, 2018) had already found that 8 % of Japanese employees did not know their contract length. We termed this group of employees DNK. We used the data set of the Employment Status Survey (ESS), which provides basic data on Japanese employment structure including the variable that interested us: the knowledge of employees on their contract length.

Our assumption was that DNK is a Japan-specific problem. We wanted to confirm this by comparing the situation in Japan with that in another OECD country. It proved extremely difficult to find a country with a comparable set of data, but in the end, we were successful. In Spain, the Economically Active Population Survey (EAPS) provides similar data. For comparative reasons, it was also advantageous that both countries shared a similar labour market structure in terms of a high ratio of non-standard employment.

At first glance, our assumption seemed correct. Spanish data suggested that only 2 % of the employees were DNK. However, after carefully checking and controlling the data, it turned out that the comparable figure was actually 11 % – a number even higher than for Japan. This was a big surprise and meant that our assumption proved wrong. DNK seemed not to be a Japan-specific problem, but to be of more general relevance.

The next step was to analyse in more detail the economic and social factors characterizing the DNK, possibly explaining why this group tended to be ignorant about an important aspect of their employment contract. To do so meant deciding what factors would be relevant, how they could be operationalized, whether comparable data sets would be available and, if not, how to work around such incompatibilities. In the end, it turned out that DNK in both countries could be characterized by the same socio-economic variables: Women, singles, and less-educated workers were in both countries more likely not to know their labour contract duration. Different data sets revealed, that in both countries this group tended to be dissatisfied with their current job, more likely to search for other jobs and less likely to seek more work in their current employment. It was striking how similar the results for both countries were despite their geographic distance and institutional and cultural differences. Regardless of the consistency of most of the results, there were also non-negligible differences in some of the variables and results. We constructed two additional data sets to combine the advantages of both data sets. We took an important lesson from the results and concluded that despite the different institutional design of their labour markets, Japan and Spain shared similar structural problems. Over time, the ratio of employees not knowing the length of their labour contract stayed the same or even slightly increased, which underlines the severity of the issue.

Overall, we concluded that a better education – starting in school and continuing in the work place – possibly supported by work councils or unions – is necessary to raise awareness among workers about their legal rights as employees. So, although cross-country comparisons are extremely challenging, the results can be highly rewarding. On a more basic level, we also learned that one should never be content with attributing seemingly non-rational results to country-specific cultural factors.

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A 'Conversation' on Comparisons between Japanese Studies, Contemporary History and Medieval Art History

By Nora Kottmann

While studying political science at Heidelberg University's South Asia Institute, I was always told to refrain from making comparisons if and when I would become a researcher. Comparative research, it was said, is an extremely complex research methodology, difficult to realize and terribly time-consuming, expensive, and labor intensive. In Japanese Studies, comparisons are further complicated by language and cultural contexts. Thus, I have never done any kind of a 'classic' comparison (and, indeed, I also have warned my students of these difficulties and not to be tempted to attempt comparative research). I have, however, come across comparative research in my field of interest – family sociology – that has made me reconsider my reluctance to use comparative methods, notably a comparison of single women in Tokyo, Hongkong and Shanghai by anthropologist Lynne Nakano (Nakano 2016). Despite being convinced (and fascinated) by this comparison, I found the idea of doing comparisons still rather intimidating – especially when considering my own abilities and resources. However, in the process of co-editing a handbook on methods in social science research on Japan (*Studying Japan. Handbook of Research Designs, Fieldwork and Methods* with Prof. Dr. Cornelia Reiher, Freie Universität Berlin, 2021) and reviewing the nearly seventy contributions, I began to think about comparison(s) from a slightly different perspective.

The contributions clearly show that 'Studying Japan' itself is inherently comparative (either implicitly or explicitly): in order to make our research rigorous and relatable for researchers of other disciplines and to make any broader arguments and contributions, we have to compare in the widest sense of the term. Simultaneously, doing research on and teaching 'Japan' can be "transformed into the incentive for critically apprehending larger ideological discourses", as Ioannis Gaitanidis argues. He elaborates how 'Japanese examples [can be] used […] to consider the contingency of frequently used, fundamental terms", an approach he calls "Critical Japanese Studies" (based on Eva Illouz' understanding of an 'impure' critique) (2017: 4). Furthermore, with intensified focus on transnational entanglements and global flows of communications, commodities, finance, people and pathogens, traditional national and disciplinary boundaries are challenged (not only) in Japan-related research. This, however, reinforces the need (and the opportunity) to contextualize and rethink 'Japan' in various realms – historic, geographical, and disciplinary – to put it in context and to 'compare'.

For further elaborating on the topic of comparisons and for literally addressing the issue of 'Comparing Comparisons' I asked two friends and colleagues about their perspective on and experiences with comparisons.[1] Both work in completely different disciplines – Contemporary History and Medieval Art History respectively – and focus on the European context. Dr. Agnes Laba (Contemporary History, Bergische Universität Wuppertal), whose current research project is based on a comparison of gender-specific everyday life practices under German occupation during the Second World War in France and Poland states: 'Nowadays, historical comparisons form an established part of the field of transnational history.' Jun.-Prof. Dr. Julia Trinkert (Medieval Art History, University of Düsseldorf) takes a similar stance and argues that 'comparisons are indispensable in the medieval art history of Europe.' However, their understanding of what comparisons are, why and how to apply them (and what to actually compare) differs in an interesting way.

Agnes Laba elaborates on 'historical comparisons [that] are usually understood as the systematic juxtaposition of two or more historical units in order to explore similarities and differences.' 'Yet', she argues,

> *historical comparisons aim at going beyond a mere description of the involved entities. Instead, they aim at contributing to a deeper understanding of them and at developing typologies. In so doing, comparisons can offer new perspectives on a research field. One example is the analysis of gender-specific everyday life practices under German occupation during the Second World War in different countries; a topic that has long been researched from a mere national perspective. The comparative analysis in the select countries shows that despite diverging [Nazi] occupation policies in both countries, the occupational situation had similar effects on the gender-specific male everyday practices and male identities. Consequently, this comparison leads to a deeper understanding of the so-called 'crisis of masculinity', which is often associated with the Second World War but seldom analyzed in detail.* (Email correspondence)

[1] Inspired by Farrer, James / Liu-Farrer, Gracia (2021): 'How to present findings: Presenting and publishing'. In: Kottmann, Nora / Reiher, Cornelia (eds.): *Studying Japan. Handbook of Research Designs, Fieldwork and Methods*. Nomos: Baden-Baden.

Julia Trinkert, in contrast, focuses on 'comparisons based on perception'. She explains:

> *Since most art works from the medieval era are neither signed nor assignable to a specific author through written sources, one can usually not speak of 'artists'. In this context, stylistic comparisons between art works often serve as the basis for understanding their genesis. Yet, the method of style criticism, which has a long tradition dating back to the 19th century, often leads to very subjective and constantly criticized assessments. Therefore, when applying this type of comparison based on perception, I argue that it is imperative to bear in mind the subsequent steps (1) connoisseurship and (2) interpretation, which build upon each other. Far too often, artistic, technical and stylistic features of individual objects are exaggerated to fit the artwork into a pleasing interpretation scheme. To conclude: comparisons based on perception are a great method of art history, but they have to be carried out in awareness of the shallows of the steps 'connoisseurship' and 'interpretation'.* (Email correspondence)

The above 'conversation' highlights three points. Firstly, it shows that 'Comparing Comparisons' enhances our understanding of comparisons and helps us to 'study comparisons': different perspectives on comparisons, divergent understandings of 'comparing' and a variety of dimensions along which to compare become apparent. Secondly, it highlights the general relevance of 'comparisons' in such a wide understanding: When done well and when choosing a suitable research design, comparing (whether implicitly or explicitly) can lead to new perspectives and findings on an empirical, a methodological, a hermeneutic and/or a theoretical level. Finally, (and perhaps most importantly) comparing can lead to and stimulate inter- and/or multidisciplinary discussions and collaborations – both being key criteria for dynamic and relatable research!

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Comparative research in/of Southeast Asia

By Shaun Lin

As a geographer, comparative research is central to my training. In particular analyzing the similarities and differences in spatial transformations (both visible and structural) in two or more places. Spatial transformations influenced by the same factor(s) may result in highly diverse outcomes. Whilst similarities are easier to be identified and made sense of, uncovering the differences in various places are more challenging and require detailed locality studies. As such, Evans' (2002: 161) argument that comparative research should be encouraged to chart "thematic issues, 'deep analogies', and contextual meanings" is helpful to understand why and how such differences in spatial transformations, specifically in terms of their different intensities and natures arise, change, or persist in various places.

Comparative research is rewarding in Southeast Asia as a region shaped geopolitically by colonial powers, the Cold War, and now to a large extent, Chinese interests and responses to them, where it has resulted in intriguing patterns across the region as changes unfold in various permutations and responses to these changes vary tremendously. I would like to echo what van Schenedel (2002) pointed out in his call to "pay close attention to the academic politics of scale that create and sustain area studies" and place it in the context of comparative research. Elsewhere, Sidaway (2013: 992) states that "it has been more common to compare and contrast the geopolitics and development of East and Southeast Asia than, for example, those of Zomia [a term used to refer to marginal highland areas in Asia] and the Indian Ocean". Hence, the question of what to compare exactly and why select or to some extent favour certain issues to compare merits careful reflections.

I refer to one example in mainland Southeast Asia to (re)examine an issue that we could "favour" and "promote" for further comparison. In recent years, the worsening environmental problems of the Mekong River in mainland Southeast Asia, particularly its prolonged droughts and China limiting the water flow in the upper portions of the river have led to some discussion in op-eds (for example, Kausikan, 2020) arguing that this issue should be seen as significant as the regional issue of the South China Sea between Southeast Asia and China. Whilst the South China Sea disputes draw in some of the maritime/island Southeast Asia states such as

Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines (along with substantial international maritime transport taking place in this body of maritime space) to justify a supposedly "bigger" significance in terms of geography, it is argued that the Mekong issue is of a rapidly growing worry implicating a water crisis that affects millions and should be viewed and regarded as an international concern (ibid). Comparing in this sense is fruitful as changing circumstances on the ground should encourage us to relook at certain places and cast new lens on them as we re-evaluate the situation. After all, the situation of the Mekong Southeast Asian riparian states also relates to a common actor in China as seen in the South China Sea, but it demands a more nuanced understanding of the regional and international politics surrounding it considering it is transboundary water management and water and food security and not sovereignty and fishing rights matters (South China Sea). As Sidaway (2013, 996) noted: "it is imperative, however, to supplement historic and history with geographic and geographical, signifying spatial comparison, perspective, and position". In this light, the Mekong River deserves more critical attention as its problems escalate spatially, including manners that the river was, for some years, considered for the wider Belt and Road Initiative and part of the Lancang Mekong Cooperation plans of riverine transport aspirations at the expense of local environmental degradation (Lin and Grundy-Warr, 2020). On a wider perspective in area studies, one could also alternatively view the historic and contemporary region names of Indochina and mainland Southeast Asia more aptly as Mekong Southeast Asia as the river winds through all five countries of Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam (in running order).

Whilst I may think it impossible to achieve a unified or agreed approach to comparative research in geography, let alone the wider humanities and social sciences, it is crucial to sustain the aspiration for doing comparative research.

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The Comparative Society

By Felix Mallin

Comparison – or the mental faculty of distinction – is one of the most fundamental ingredients of autonomous life. It aids us in the quotidian tasks of decoding language, emotions, or smells, as well as in making sense of the society and world around us. Similarly, for any form of social scientific inquiry, comparison stands as an irreplaceable methodological principle. Indeed, to state the importance of comparison seems almost trivial.

Yet not all comparison is necessarily meaningful. The value of comparison is determined by the logical framework and premises applied in the development of distinct categories. Where categories are weakly conceived, comparisons may generate little more than tautologies and truisms. Even if they were carefully developed at some point and allowed for illuminating insights, the same categories may no longer be applicable in another time or a different space. To avoid such trappings, we need to ruthlessly and repeatedly critique the premises for each comparative scheme, be they our abstractions of the nation-state, the global financial system or local cultures of exchange. Beyond doubt, this process is time-consuming, never follows a generalisable template, and sometimes requires a high degree of willingness to overthrow once dearly held assumptions.

Comparisons are more than academic thought experiments

In our personal lives, the effects of academic comparison are most felt when they serve political decisions. Once translated from the realm of ideas into policy, legislation, and economic programmes, the political execution of ill-conceived comparative logics is bound to produce damaging implications for society. A case in point is the "quantitative revolution" that took hold of various social science disciplines in the 1960s and has been reanimated in the advent of "big data". The excessive focus on quantifying all aspects of social life posited that one could make the human experience legible by comparing large aggregate datasets.

The outcome was an expansion of indicator-driven politics (i. e. evidence-based policymaking), where far-reaching political decisions began to hinge on indices, some of the most well-known being the gross-domestic product (GDP), human development index (HDI) and Gini coefficient. Since their inception earlier in the twentieth century, countries and their citizens have been placed on global scales of rich to poor, developed to undeveloped, educated to uneducated, with little heed to other forms of geographical or cultural differentiation. Sweeping "development" schemes were deployed on the basis of these indices and continue to do so up to the present day. Even societal well-being was henceforth presented to us as points or vectors on a graph.

Almost ironically, the impetus of quantitative comparison has made its way back to regulate the professional freedom of academics, in large part commanded by the competitive logics of our economic system. In a world where metrics are constantly created and easily available, it is not uncommon to find intellectual pursuits increasingly governed by considerations of citation metrics, successful funding rates, and university league tables.

The long trend of quantifying all facets of reality has not gone unchallenged. As a response to such abstractions of the qualities of time, space, and society to numbers, scepticism about quantitative predominance grew in disciplines such as geography, in the form of a revival in humanist thought and qualitative reasoning. Many scholars began to reject quantitative comparisons for the ways in which they overrode concrete lived experience. Instead, they sought refuge in philosophies that placed primary importance on individuals' narratives. Some opined that the only tool to understand reality (if there existed one) was to juxtapose the mosaic of different perspectives against each other. Comparison, in these views, was essential because there is no universal, only relative or situated, truth. The corresponding rejection of universality meant that moral principles could no longer be attributed to an inherent human nature. This mode of social scientific inquiry was thus neatly bound to the premise that societal phenomena could only be explained by their specific parochial contexts, rather than a common human experience, such as the expansion of the capitalist market economy or relations of class struggle. Yet, one need only look at the simultaneous emergence of mass protests and civil unrest in many parts of the world during the past two years to be reminded that universal experiences may still hold some weight in academic postulations.

We ought not to compare for comparison's sake

In this entry, I have briefly reflected on two polar ends of comparative thinking: one, comparison as the extreme quantification of lived reality; and the other, comparison as mere juxtaposition. In the former, the objective appearance of computed quantitative models run the risk of overwriting social reality. In the latter, one could polemically argue that little is left for us to meaningfully compare in a world where every narrative is only relative to any other. The recent vogue for and wide proliferation of comparative research across the social sciences and humanities holds promise in bridging these intellectual divides. Ultimately, however, our emphasis should be on constantly questioning the actual rationale for comparison, each with its unique set of premises, lest we risk comparing for comparison's sake.

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From Implicit Towards Explicit Comparative Research

By Hendrik Meyer-Ohle

When I was an undergraduate student in the 1980s, majoring at a German University in Japanese Studies (contemporary Japanese society, politics and business) and business administration, there was broad consensus among scholars of Japanese Studies not to engage in explicit country comparisons but instead to concentrate on analyzing Japan in its own institutional context and complexities. Depending on the research topic, this required knowledge of the relevant discipline and its methods combined with openness towards other disciplines. Additionally, good knowledge of Japanese was expected, to be able to capture the empirics and to understand wider discourses among policy makers, in society, the media or among Japanese academics. Achieving this level of understanding was challenging. Detailed country studies were welcome given a perceived need to learn more about Japan in the context of its increasing economic importance. Research could therefore be straightforwardly justified by reference to the need to better understand Japan or the need to rectify what had been wrongly assumed until then. Often, disciplinary treatments of Japan felt somewhat crude, especially in business studies where Japan was openly welcomed as the grand other, fundamentally different from the West and with these differences, in and outside of Japan, often rather vaguely attributed to cultural than properly historically traceable institutional contexts and developments.

I thus chose Japan's retail sector as the topic of my doctoral thesis and examined how a sector that had hitherto been perceived as backward, merely a pool for unwanted labor or even an overprotected barrier to international trade, had in reality been a place for entrepreneurship, innovation and progress (Meyer-Ohle 2003). Of course, whilst seeking a more nuanced understanding of Japan, implicitly comparison was always present, asking how the situation in Japan fit with or differed from other countries, whether Japan would develop in the same direction as elsewhere and how far theoretical frameworks developed elsewhere were relevant to Japan. For my studies on Japanese retailing, this concerned matters such as deregulation of planning regulations for the retail sector, the changing influence of wholesalers and manufacturers on the retail sector and the prospects for foreign retailers. Yet, dealing with relatively large issues and seeking to explain the logic of the situation in Japan as such, I did not see the need to set up a comprehensive comparative research framework and to conduct empirical research on the situation beyond Japan. Instead, I found it sufficient to implicitly frame my study and discuss my findings within patterns of development that previous research on the US and UK had identified, asking whether these patterns had explanatory value for Japan, and if not, to come up with suggestions for more suitable explanations.

As the international reputation of Japan as an economic success faded somewhat after the 1990s research on Japan was less able to find receptive audiences. At the same time, research on Japan generally moved towards more detailed questions. In these contexts, I see the need and opportunities for more detailed explicit comparative research.

First, from an educational perspective, teaching in a Department of Japanese Studies in Singapore, yet still largely having to rely on texts that more or less openly assume an underlying comparison between Japan and the West, I would welcome more comparative work across Japan and other Asian countries. Trying to learn about Japan, but as prerequisite having to decipher the implied assumptions of authors about the situation in the US or other Western countries, is not only demanding for my Singapore-based students but also does not do proper justice to the rapid economic development elsewhere in Asia; a comparison with these countries now possibly leading to more relevant frames of reference.

Second, research on business in Japan has advanced to increasingly specific questions and also my own research has increasingly moved into directions where it has become difficult to make clear assumptions about the situation outside of Japan, this making it difficult to frame, evaluate and communicate comparative findings. For example, I have found that when compared to the development of retail formats such as department stores and supermarkets the study of the development patterns of shopping malls is far less advanced. Yet, the shopping mall has become the dominating modern consumption format in many non-western countries and here the existing predominant discourse that critically discusses shopping malls as places of exclusion and control seems to be far less relevant (Salcedo 2003). Yet, at the time when I was interested in this topic, alternative points of reference were still missing and this resulted in my only explicitly comparative study so far (Meyer-Ohle, 2008). Research on human resource management has largely focused on clear differences between Japan's internal and Anglo-Saxon external labor markets, taking the Anglo-Saxon system largely for granted and then asking for Japan questions such as whether Japan's employment system would converge towards this model or continue to show distinct features. This framing has continuously proven itself robust enough to accommodate the discussion of new developments. For example, we have discussed the recent tendency of Japanese companies to recruit graduates fresh out of universities outside of Japan into careers in corporate headquarters in Japan. Applying the framework of internal vs. external labor markets allowed us to focus empirical research solely on Japan, without having to resort to comparative empirical research of recruitment practices outside of Japan (Conrad and Meyer-Ohle, 2019). Yet, while conducting this research, we found that we lacked an understanding of the workings of the human resource departments of Japanese companies and this led us to an explorative interview study on this topic. The results are challenging to interpret. For example, we found that there is intensive communication between HR managers of different and often competing companies in Japan in a situation where companies struggle to adjust their human resource strategies. We think that this finding reflects the wider logic of Japan's business system. Nonetheless, it is difficult to judge the significance of the findings without detailed information on the situation in other countries. The concrete workings of HR departments and especially questions of organizational learning in HR are an understudied field and the discussion on professionalism in HR management is generally confused by normative undertones. Thus, driving research towards more detailed questions leads to the need for more and "equal-level" comparisons. With this come questions about the scale and scope of comparison. Admittedly, personally being deeply socialized and invested in area studies, comparison also comes with concerns with regards to establishing equivalence in data collection, understanding and analysis in terms of data availability and linguistic abilities.

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Studying Comparisons

By Simon Rowedder

If we remember that those we study are also studying us as well as themselves, and that they are all engaged in the human exercise of understanding the play of cultural difference and similarity, we may be able to contribute to making comparison the fruitful, congenial, and open-ended conversation that the discipline's ethical as well as intellectual commitments demand.

(Herzfeld, 2001, pp. 272–273)

The Scholarly Privilege of Comparison and Representation

Anthropologist Michael Herzfeld importantly foregrounds the role of ethnographic interlocutors in contributing to highly reflective comparative research. However, as it becomes apparent throughout his article, his call for a "reflexive comparativism" is largely confined to the scholar's (i. e. mostly his) reflection on his own personal background and academic trajectory. In the end, interlocutors are left with their passive role to merely react to theories prominently voiced by the respective scholar. Thus, deploying "an unself-conscious standardization of vocabulary" (Anderson, 1998, p. 33), it is the scholars who are privileged to translate empirical observations into the self-referential language of their and their readers' epistemological familiarity.

In area studies, or in Southeast Asian Studies in which I have been institutionally trained and am currently conducting research and teaching, the standardized vocabulary for possible comparison largely relies on spatial constructs across local, national and regional scales within a certain area. Scholarly spatial constructions are thus almost the only dimension along which we compare and make sense of our research subjects. Academic—not necessarily the interlocutors'—understandings of space, area or region determine research questions and directions. The unquestioned areal reliance is also visible in the current, seemingly innovative, push for inter-area or comparative area studies. Attempts to transgress, or scale up, arbitrarily area or nation-state boundaries across China, South Asia and Southeast Asia through novel spatial imaginations such as "Zomia" (van Schendel, 2002) or the "Southeast Asian Massif" (Michaud, 2000) again arise from deep-rooted scholarly intuition of primarily spatial comparison. In turn, these yield specific research directions and agendas which all powerfully claim to explain or to make sense of living conditions and practices through respective external scalar and spatial interventions. It remains the privilege of the scholar to re-invent and re-define areas and regions—to use a "new grammar of representation" (Anderson, 1998, p. 34)—in order to draw, or imagine, comparisons which are meaningful, at least to themselves. In this sense, comparative research impulses mainly result from, and respond to, scholarly representation, while running the risk of ignoring empirical variations and deviations.

Towards an Ethnography of Comparison

Therefore, we should pay more serious attention to the voices of the people we study. Instead of conveniently bringing their voices into dialogue with—or, strictly speaking, attaching them to the monologue of—academic comparative frameworks and representations, we should strive for an ethnography of comparison, crafted by our interlocutors in their own terms. Before pondering on how to locate ethnographic observation within suitable and intuitive comparative coordinate systems, we should carefully observe how, and whether at all, the people themselves, who we claim to study, are comparing. Taking vernacular discourses and practices of comparison seriously as an empirically central research object, and not merely as necessary, and often institutionally demanded, methodology, might yield "counter-intuitive" insights necessary for genuinely fresh ways of understanding, and eventually critically scrutinizing and theorizing, areal constructs such as Southeast Asia "inside out". As Benedict Anderson (2016, p. 126) argues, "the most instructive comparisons […] are those that surprise." We should be open to these surprises, and embrace the fact that these do not necessarily result from our scholarly genius alone. While there is certainly no methodological manual available, we can rely on open-mindedness, cognitive and interpretive flexibility and creativity to conduct meaningfully comparative ethnography. Being open enough to better integrate—and not subordinate—the comparative frames of our ethnographic interlocutors, we might be indeed able to realize Herzfeld's call to make "comparison the fruitful, congenial, and open-ended conversation."

This heightened ethnographic sensitivity would force us to go beyond treating our empirical cases merely as ornamentation of our well-established grand, "serialized" (cf. Anderson, 1998) narratives. Before we can "compare comparisons", we need to "study comparisons" – not only within scholarly spheres, but even more so in the "vernacular realm" where ethnography ultimately takes place.

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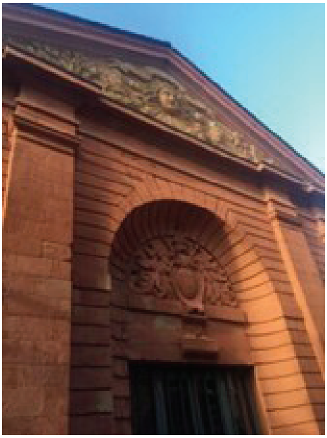
Who compares? The commodification and decolonization of comparison

By James D. Sidaway and Franz Waldenberger



German gate – part of the former French fortress in the city of Landau, constructed between 1688 and 1691 under the guidance of Vauban, military engineer of Louis XIV | Picture: F. Waldenberger.

Knowing from comparing

The German gate of the fortress in the city of Landau, the hometown of one of the authors of this blog entry, shows the head of Louis XIV of France depicted as the sun with the Latin inscription "nec pluribus impar". The phrase is usually translated as "not unequal/inferior to many". School kids in Landau and visiting tourists were long told that this meant there was nothing or nobody to compare the Sun King with. But there seems to be no straightforward interpretation and some obviously frustrated scholars concluded that the words are perplexing or without clear meaning. So, the three words seem to either negate the possibility of interpersonal comparison, or at the semantic level to not be comparable to any meaningful statement. However, no matter what conclusion one prefers, it can only be reached by trying to compare. The incomparable presupposes comparability. You cannot not compare.

The seven contributions to our blog offer variations of this theme as the authors reflect on and draw examples from their respective areas of specialization – anthropology, ethnography, Japanese studies, political geography, economics, cross-cultural studies, business and management research. They highlight some pitfalls of comparisons – choosing wrong measures, imposing one-sided, culturally predefined concepts and frames and/or neglecting (local) contextual factors. But they also emphasize the invaluable benefits such as gaining insights via finding common patterns or by being able to make sense of observed differences. One general conclusion from comparing the various scholarly accounts of comparative research would be: You can do it wrong or be seduced by too easy comparisons, but you cannot easily do without some.

The general conclusion holds irrespective of what methods or methodologies are applied. We sometimes explicitly emphasize comparisons when we conduct cross-cultural studies, comparative institutional analysis or comparative linguistics. But any kind of inquiry implies comparisons. It means comparing the newly discovered, observed, heard or read with the already known. When the "new data" fit our existing knowledge, they are understood and recognized. If we need to adjust or revise what we had known so far, we learn. If no integration is possible, we will either continue our research hoping that at some stage we will understand or learn, or we decide to discard the new data as "irrelevant" or exceptional, as something we cannot and perhaps do not need to understand. In some sciences, it may be flagged as an exception, meriting further investigation or as an example of non-replication. There are growing questions in social and physical sciences about why many studies are difficult or impossible to replicate or reproduce – and why these are more often cited (Serra-Garcia and Gneezy, 2021).

The inseparability of the subject and the object of comparisons

Either way, in humanities and social sciences, comparisons enable us to discern commonalities and differences, but they do not always instruct us about what should be considered as common or different. This needs to be decided, otherwise we will not know what to compare and how. It is shaped by who we are, our training, our interests, our expectations and aims, our capabilities and the cultures of the institutions and fields we work in and how our work is appraised. These reflect wider structures.

Hence, when asking what is compared, questions of by and for whom also loom large. The geographer David Harvey (1974, 23) once argued that "The debate over relevance in geography was not really about relevance (whoever heard of irrelevant human activity?), but about whom our research was relevant to [and its effects]". In similar context, we need to ask who compares, what, how, where and with what effects?

NEW TRENDS – RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Commodification: Whereas the seven contributions to the blog work through a range of disciplinary vantage points, we want to close with reflections on the social relations and history of comparison. In regard of the former, state agencies and scholars are often the focus of discussions about who is assembling data, performing surveillance and comparing who with what. But much comparison – and the data on which it rests – are in corporate hands. The development of "big data" and AI are multiplying this. The scale and commodification of comparisons and their uses – refracted back into public discourse through social media and patterns of movement and consumption yields what Shoshana Zuboff (2018) termed Surveillance Capitalism. It raises a series of questions about what kind of comparisons are being made, who owns the data on which they are established and to what uses is comparison being put?

Decolonialization: The rise of the West and the imperial cultures that accompanied it tended to make the West the object against which the rest were compared. This became entangled in discourses of "religion", "civilization" and "race", especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is part of what Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh (2018) call the "the colonial matrix of power". Critical work on orientalism and under the banners of postcolonial and decolonial theory contains a wealth of alternatives. They include what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) termed *Provincializing Europe*, so that narratives of the non-Western and the precapitalist are no longer simply reduced to what Kevin B. Anderson (2016, vii) terms "a mere adjunct" to the theorization of Western capitalist societies.

To decolonize comparison entails a series of struggles, possibilities and moves. The first is to historicize comparison, excavating its genealogies. When and how did categories, oppositions and hierarchies used to establish the basis for and then stage comparisons emerge? How do these relate to imperial power? Who benefits? This vital historicization is in tandem with a second step, asking what alternative traditions exist, who formulates them, where and why? In turn, what are the implications of starting with and elaborating alternatives? The question of why, what and how to compare is thereby supplemented with ones asking on whose terms is comparison made and with what consequences? Whilst there are many pathways for such moves (see for example, Steinmetz, 2006 on Decolonizing German theory), writing, as the two of us are, between Singapore and Tokyo, we will close with a short quote that explores the path of *Asia as Method* (Chen, 2010, 212):

> *The potential of Asia as method is this: using the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchoring point, societies in Asia can become each other's point of reference…. On this basis the diverse historical experiences and rich social practices of Asia may be mobilized to provide alternative horizons and perspectives. This method of engagement, I believe, has the potential to advance a different understanding of world history.*

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