This short essay explores some motives behind the study of European history and historical studies of European interactions with the Japanese in Japan. To discuss the encounter between the West and the East since the very beginning of the modernisation of Japan, we discern three different levels: the level of the topic, the subjects themselves, the level of the theories, methods and concepts behind the historiography, and finally the level of the unexamined Eurocentric biases of Japanese researchers. This essay mainly focuses on the second and the third levels and presents some of these aspects of encounters which are closely linked to the authors’ own awareness and research interests: the comparison of Europe and Japan and the question how the encounters and the views of each other should be understood and interpreted. The former will be illustrated by the work of Kan’ich Asakawa, the first Japanese professor of history in the United States, who compared medieval feudalism in Europe and Japan, and the latter by the example of the research on the influence of German poor systems on the reform of the local poor relief system in Japan.

Since the Meiji-restauration, Japan has been regarded as one of the most successful cases of Westernisation and modernisation among non-Western countries, as a nation
that has caught up rapidly and that is well positioned in the world market in spite of its character as a late comer. This fact attracted the attention of some scholars in the West such as Max Weber, Marc Bloch, and Otto Hintze. Even though, in the last fifty years, modernity is still mainly understood as a product of Western civilisation in Japan: What influenced us most as historians in our youth were Western oriented research in the humanities, Western education systems, and Western methods of research. In comparison to the former colonised regions, the Western influences were more or less indirect in Japan in the sense that the Japanese – to some degree c intentionally imported Western technologies and knowledges and acculturated them through filters set by ourselves. It was, of course, a reaction to the political context of that time beginning in the mid-19th century, especially international politics led by the Western countries. For the Japanese, the first encounter with Europeans was the “request” or demand to open Japanese ports and trade with the West. Thus, it was due to these indirect influences, not to the naked power of violence, that resulted in Japanese society’s adaptation to Western concepts, ideas, and practices. But the process was still shaped by a certain pressure which makes us think about what this pressure meant and still means to us.

Since the 1970s, especially in the era after a decline of the Marxist ideology as a “grand narrative” of Japanese historiography and driven by a critical view of the belief in capitalist progress and growth, a number of new theoretical frameworks and approaches have developed. These include the linguistic turn, the cultural turn, and social, feminist, postcolonial, and global history which have been introduced and adapted in Japan. Japanese historians have thus attempted to create new narratives of historiography, in a few cases in the hope of compensating for the distinct lack of a grand narrative. These attempts, however, show us how difficult it is to overcome, or even at least to be aware of our own inner Eurocentrism, a point we will discuss later. It seems to us that few Japanese historians have made significant efforts to create and develop our own historical theories and methods, rather than just importing them from the West and adopting them to our own historiography.

**Comparative history: Asakawa and Bloch**

One of our main fields of research is the history of Christianity in Europe and Germany, and most of the results we refer to stem from Western scholars, which are viewed, written and evaluated from a European perspective. Although contributions of Japanese scholars exist,\(^1\) they are still a minority and of relatively little influence. This is
partly due to linguistic barriers – most books on European history by Japanese historians are written in Japanese – but partly also due to insufficient theoretical and methodological originality.

We learned European history primarily based on the studies of Western scholars, and we also learned their methods. We viewed Western history as *their* history, as we learned how European teachers and colleagues study their own history. Their works, and also most of the works of our Japanese colleagues, rely on, reflect and nourish an identity of Europe or Europeans’ self-image in a given existing frame. When we write European history, it is European history seen through our eyes. But they are not genuine Japanese eyes, and are already minted and flavoured by the understanding of our teachers and scholars with their own experiences in their past. So, even if we write European history, it will already be in some way a history of relations between Europe and Japan. It reflects how Japanese scholars see Europe through westernised Japanese eyes, the views of which we have internalised as a result of modernisation.

As one relatively well-known example of mutual interest and an attempt to develop a comparative history between Europe and Japan we know the correspondence between Marc Bloch (1886-1944) and Kan’ich Asakawa (1873-1948). But how they were different! The starting point of their relationship was set by Asakawa, after he translated historical documents from Iriki village in Kagoshima into English in 1929 (*The Documents of Iriki*, New Haven 1929). Asakawa, teaching at Yale University, had an idea to cooperate with Bloch (and later also had a contact with Hintze) in order to deepen his project of comparative history. For Bloch, who was also interested in historical comparison, the Japanese Middle Ages appeared to offer superb material for analysing parallel developments that seemed to have taken place without direct contact or transfer. Japanese medieval history was a strange research field which remained as yet untouched by European civilisation. Because of its strangeness it was thought that it could have a special value as a proof for the possibility of a feudalism of its own in the Middle Ages.

For Asakawa, the parallel between Japanese and European feudalism meant much more. If feudalism could be understood as a precondition for the further development or evolution to modernity, Japan should be on the path of this development. Despite its late departure, the way to the world civilisation was still open for Japan. For Asakawa as a Christian, Western civilisation appeared as universal, as accessible and adaptable also to Japan and the Japanese. In his mind, this had clear implications for the position of Japan and its future role in the international society at the beginning of the 20th century.
Although the comparative view between the West and Japan was, consciously or unconsciously, was inevitable for every Japanese academic in almost every field at his time, Asakawa’s use of comparison was original and acquired through his everyday experience as a Japanese scholar in the US. That means, it was not unconditionally shared among the historians in Japan. The problem that Asakawa confronted when sharing his results with Japanese historians, besides a lack of understanding of comparative legal history as an academic method, included the comparing of the concepts rooted in the different cultures, and, crossing linguistic barriers.

When he published an article “The Origin of Feudal Land Tenure in Japan” in the American Historical Review in 1914 as a summary of his doctoral thesis at a US university, Japanese historians in Tokyo reviewed it in the Japanese Historical Journal (Shigaku Zasshi). In the review the title of his article was translated as “Japanese Manor,” although Asakawa had been eager to stress the difference between the European “manor” and the Japanese “shō”. In fact, clarifying the parallels, but also the differences, between the two systems was his main argument and theme. His Japanese colleagues who read his thesis in English, however, didn’t grasp this point. The common character and the differences were the main issues of his thesis, but if “shō” was directly translated into “manor”, his idea and argument were almost lost. The translation testified to the lack of understanding of the author’s argument.

The problems of translation and mutual transmission between different languages and cultures remain to be considered seriously. Can we really understand a concept without distortion caused by cultural differences? Asakawa’s project was historical research to understand different cultures in depth, while remaining conscious of the fine differences between terms and concepts including their cultural bases, and then to look for the possible commonality in the world beyond superficial similarities and apparent particularities.

**Comparative history and global conceptual history**

Why, how, and with what goals do we make use of comparisons between Europe and Japan in our own research? What are the challenges and what is the heuristic potential of such an approach? Hideto studied local poor relief systems in Germany and Japan from the latter half of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century. The process of the conceptualisation and implementation of a modern poor relief system in
Japan at the beginning of the 20th century involved cultural transfer and translation processes. These included creation of new laws and institutions, systems of value and norms and certain forms of behavior that differed from those in the industrialised societies in Europe. For example, on the level of the Japanese recipients, these processes of transfer and translation began with the perception of a certain problem situation – in this case, with the emergence of a social question – which seemed to be unsolvable by conventional Japanese means and ideas. By the early 20th century, Japan attained a high level of urbanisation and industrialisation. These processes were also accompanied by high rates of fluctuation in the urban population and an intensification of social problems. Furthermore, the disturbances to the local order and, even more so, the political system of rule, e.g. the emergence of Taishō-democracy and the labor movement, were becoming increasingly noticeable. The local administration faced increasing demands by the population to pay attention to their concerns and take measures against the impoverished conditions. With regard to the local structures of rule though, the local dignitaries, who traditionally took care for maintaining order, security and the wellbeing of the local society, had already lost their power and influence over local politics before the turn of the century.

In this situation, Japanese experts looked to Western societies in the search for new solutions, especially to the United Kingdom and Germany. The self-descriptions of motives and perceptions in these translation processes should therefore be located in the transnational or global context to begin to analyse them. But on an analytical-methodological level, one faces another difficulty, namely the problem of translation. First, since linguistic sources of the object of comparison, as well as concepts and ideas, have to be translated into another language, there is a danger that part of the interpretative content of the concepts will be lost, because they remain inseparably tied back to the original language. Second, there is also the danger that one simply translates a term into an apparently analogous word of the second language without taking sufficient account of concrete fields of interpretation and linguistic traditions, so that one inevitably comes to erroneous conclusions. Furthermore, the evolution of the modern Japanese language since the mid-19th century was accompanied by the massive import of European ideas and concepts through translation into Japanese. Third, modern Japanese history was by no means free of the colonial context. The unequal power relationship between Japan and Western countries needs to be taken into account in the analysis of transfer and translation processes.

Japanese historians use the same language, both as subjects of historical research and as scholars who conduct this research. Here again, the bias of Eurocentrism matters. It is not only because the language we use has historically been shaped by European
ideas and concepts. At the same time, our Eurocentrism is to be understood as a political and social process of negotiation that is fought out primarily by linguistic and discursive means. It would be therefore useful to take an approach of global conceptual history into account. This would enable us as historians to locate the respective interpretative content of the concepts in the concrete social, political and cultural contexts – a synchronic approach – as well as to discuss their change of meaning in a historical long-term perspective – a diachronic approach. This approach would allow us to analyse how these concepts historically form and re-form our thinking and behaviour. It would also help us to confront our inner Eurocentrism in order to differentiate our own national images and interpretations of the self and the other. In this sense we speak Western history as our history. It is true that this is one of the many answers to the question of why we Japanese still concern ourselves with European history. This is not primarily a critique of Eurocentrism from the perspective of non-Europeans, however, but rather a critical self-reflection on the bias of unreflective Eurocentrism in the tradition of Japanese scholarship.

1. The field of medieval European studies is still one of the few exceptions in Japan. Since 2017 an English online-journal is published once a year by the Japan Society for Medieval European Studies (JSMES), http://spicilegium.net/.


