

# How to Measure 'Unique' or 'Universal'?

## Comparison in Crisis or Crisis in Comparison

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### Preliminary remarks

Performing comparison is not possible without stable grids – axes of references which would support the operation. Yet in the area of cross-cultural comparative studies, the very relevance of axiological grids themselves has to be put into question. The sole act of authenticating the criteria implies an imperial and/or piratical usurpation of hegemony, especially when it comes with the recognition of the heretofore unrecognized. This process of official recognition differs depending on the area and epoch. It is worth carrying out a closer comparative analysis of such experiences in which the previously under-recognized partook in pre-, mid-, post-, or ex-colonial situations when facing universalist value judgments. This cross-checking requires transnational participation of researchers and creators, not excluding such people as curators and the administrators involved.

The present paper attempts to critically point out some relevant cases in order to enhance the discussion revolving around the issue. I also propose a new definition of a comparative approach: an intentional and constant examination of the crisis, with criticism being the tool of destabilizing and renewing the *status quo* of cultural heritage.







Figure 4. Okumura Masanobu, *Taking the Evening Cool at Ryogoku Bridge*, 1745, Kobe City Museum. Source: Wikimedia Commons Public Domain.

## Contesting Western European originals and their vernacular copies: the case of linear perspective

Linear perspective was invented and perfected in the West during the Italian Renaissance period. It has gained the status of a universal grid for spatial representation. Owing to Western and Westernized academic training, this technique has been applied all over the world. It has started to play the role of canon, as if it were the only relevant way of rationally grasping and measuring the pictorial plane in a scientific manner.<sup>1</sup>

Andrea Posso's treatise *Perspectiva pictorum...* (1693/1712) was translated into Chinese in 1735, when foreshortenings in spatial representation were frequently practiced in Suzhou woodblock prints, managing to achieve the unexpected illusion of a "real" spatial experience. Japanese engravers, such as Okumura Masanobu, followed suit and started imitating a similar effect from about 1740–1748 (Fig. 4).

However, their understanding was limited, and their implementation of the rules was anything but faithful. Instead of unifying the view of the interior with the outside landscape (which lies at the heart of the Western principle and its Chinese iterations), the Japanese simply superimposed Western perspective upon the traditional Oriental water-and-mountain landscape. In so doing, Masanobu successfully obtained a supernatural effect: it looks as if the interior space in the foreground was floating on air. And yet, the contemporary viewers did not seem to be disappointed with the discrepancies; instead, they were happily astonished by the unexpected, new spatial effect (*ukie* or 'floating image' of which Masanobu boasted to be the inventor). What we can see here is a typical case of 'compartmentalization' by way of multi-track juxtaposition.

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<sup>1</sup> The following summarizes (with necessary updates) my earlier paper: Sh. Inaga, "Transformation de la perspective linéaire, un aspect des échanges culturels entre l'Occident et le Japon," *Travaux et mémoires du Centre de recherches historiques sur les relations entre les cultures* 1984, no. 2, pp. 29–62. See also Sh. Inaga, "La réinterprétation de la perspective linéaire au Japon (1760–1830) et son retour en France (1860–1910)," *Actes de la Recherches en Sciences Sociales* 1983, no. 49, pp. 29–49.



Even after obtaining an analytical understanding of the principle of linear perspective, samurai painters nonetheless preferred emphasizing the contrast between near and far, as can be seen in the case of the Akita School of Western-style painting around the 1770s. Instead of implementing a unified pictorial plane and respecting Western canon rules (as the term 'perspective' stipulates), Japanese practitioners reinterpreted and incorporated it into the 'method of far–near' (*enkinhō*).<sup>2</sup> This deviation reached its culmination point with Hokusai, who boasted to “understand” this Western technique. In his approach, the unique vanishing point, which normally should be located in the infinite distance, was instead duplicated, and these two new points were placed at a distance that was both measurable and limited. Thus, Hokusai abolished the original notion of infinity. The horizon line, which should correspond to the viewpoint of the observer, was also declared invalid, as, in Hokusai’s scheme, it no longer served as the absolute criterion. Intentionally dissociated from the line depicting the shore, the horizon line went astray. It was no longer the base level for organizing the entire pictorial plane but was now reduced to one of the two duplicated horizontal guiding lines, so as to “reasonably” subdivide the composition into three parts. Hokusai proudly called it ‘the law of dividing into three’ (*mitsuwari no hō*)<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 5).

It may be tempting to deride Hokusai’s lack of comprehension. Yet this value judgment is tenable only in so far as one takes Western criteria for granted as something ‘universal.’ In Japan, Western scientific accuracy was invalidated, and the Western analytical device misused; instead, they gave way to the aesthetic effect. The Western desire to project three-dimensionality onto a bi-dimensional surface lost its purpose after its application and adaptation to the cultural climate of the Japanese archipelago. The Western idea of seizing infinity in a homogenized pictorial plane was rejected in Japan. Instead, it was replaced by the tactic of realizing multiple instances of symbiosis of heterogeneous spatial conventions in one pictorial plane. The criteria considered absolute in the West were deconstructed and dwarfed by relativizing pragmatics. In

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<sup>2</sup> *Enkinhō* 遠近法. The Akita School uses only ‘*enkin no ri*’ or ‘the reason of far–near.’ Specialists today would avoid ‘*enkinhō*’ as the translation of linear perspective.

<sup>3</sup> *Mitsuwari no hō* 三ツ割の法.

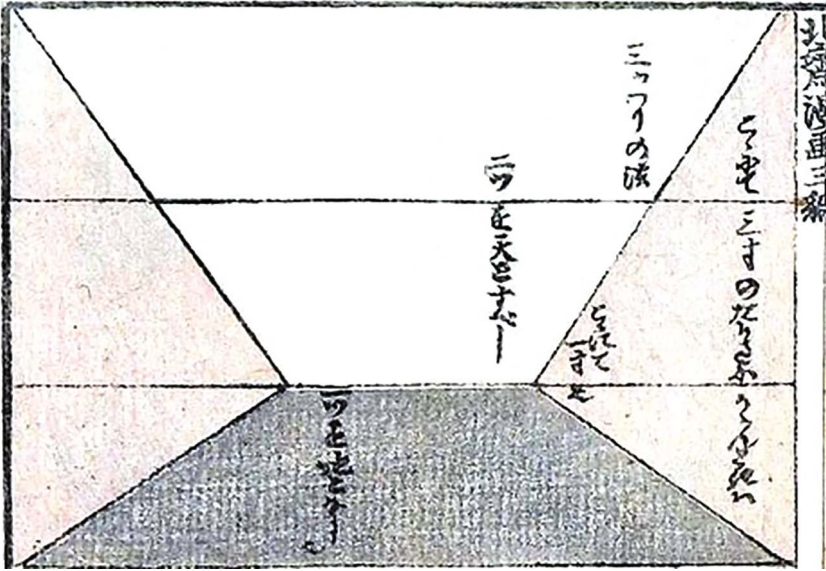


Figure 5. Katsushika Hokusai, *Hokusai Manga*, vol. 3, 1815. Source: Japan Public Domain.

short, the geometrical apparatus for the achievement of spatial coherence was “abused” for the opposite purpose of reinventing an incoherent space of visual representation. Based on this observation, we may deduce the following:

1. The dichotomy between the (Western) original and the (non-Western) copy is not relevant here. We should instead focus on the deviation from the original. Further cross-cultural comparison of similar case studies may prove to be helpful for understanding the relevance and the limits of Western technology as well as its transfer to other cultures. Technology is understood here not only as mechanical advancements but also as a social system and its ideas which are coming from the West and are implemented in the rest of the world. For example, it is worth comparing ideas such as ‘democracy’ or ‘sovereignty’ (as we shall see later in Lydia H. Liu’s Chinese case study) as well as the aftermath of their implementation.

2. The West cannot proclaim itself immune to such ‘deviations,’ as it also faces such incompatible realities. The case of Hokusai can serve as a prime example, as it was his works that became the model for over-

coming Western academic artistic conventions in the context of Japonisme in the second half of the nineteenth century. Here we can point to the works of Édouard Manet. In his seascape, Manet intentionally imitated "la perspective à la japonaise"<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 6) by declaring that "*je n'ai pas moi la même perspective que l'Institut*" ["My perspective is not the same as that of the Institute"].<sup>5</sup> Referencing non-Western practice allowed the Western avant-garde artist to get rid of conventional visual perception. The non-Western 'abnormality' was thus able to defy and put into question the very normativity of the Western norm.

3. Modernity must be redefined. It should no longer be rendered as an expansion of the Western worldview across the world, but rather should be understood as a series of reciprocal interactions and mutual contaminations. High modernism in art and aesthetics consists of multiple realities of inter-cultural fusions and brewage articulated in the 'West-and-the-rest'-type transactions. The universal validity of Western criteria is tested in the process of expansion and colonization. As a logical outcome, modernity itself comes to its terminus (or a dead-end) together with the end of colonialism. The post-colonial, post-industrial, post-modern era bears witness to the limits of Western hegemony. Western modernity depended on the exploitation and consumption of resources acquired from the rest of the world. Now, human beings are witnessing the time limit of worldwide, supposedly universal, consumption of the value system that has been initiated by the West.

## Diplomatic negotiations under unequal treaties: the case of fraternity within the Red Cross

Let us now move on to the second case. A close analysis of this episode, which occurred during a diplomatic exchange, will reveal the inequality inherent to the application of international law, even though it should

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<sup>4</sup> S. Mallarmé, "The Impressionists and Édouard Manet," *The Art Monthly Review*, 30 September 1876, p. 119.

<sup>5</sup> J. Clartie, *La Vie à Paris, 1880–1885*, Charpentier, Paris 1910, pp. XIX, 222. For further references, see Chapters 1 and 3 of Sh. Inaga, *Kaiga no tōhō. Orientarizumu kara japonisumu e* [*The Orient of Painting. From Orientalism to Japonisme*], Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai, Nagoya 1999, pp. 58–59, 148.







Figure 6. Édouard Manet, *Sur la Plage de Boulogne*, 1868, oil on canvas, 32 × 65 cm. Source: Wikimedia Commons Public Domain.

be 'universally valid.' The following issue is also connected to the basic ideas and ideals of the French Revolution, namely *liberté, égalité, fraternité* [liberty, equality, fraternity].

Mori Ōgai (pen name of Mori Rintarō, 1862–1922) was one of the first Japanese medical students to stay in Europe. He was sent to Prussia by the Japanese army in 1884 at the age of twenty-three and stayed there until 1888 (Fig. 7). Today, located at the site of his first lodging in Berlin is the *Mori Ōgai Gedenkstätte* [Mori Ōgai Memorial Center]. Ōgai is remembered as a prolific writer and a German to Japanese translator of many European works of literature; using the original German texts or translations into that language, he produced Japanese-language versions of works by Goethe, Shakespeare, Wilde, Ibsen, Andersen, Schnitzler, Poe, Flaubert, Zola, de Maupassant, D'Annunzio, Hofmannsthal, Dostoevsky, Gorky, and many others. And yet, on top of that, he still managed to reach the top rank of medical doctor and inspector general in the Japanese army. The part of his stay which is of interest to this paper is the conference of the International Red Cross held in Karlsruhe in September 1887, in which young Mori participated during his mission as a military attaché in Prussia.

On the fourth day of the conference, one issue came up in discussion, namely: if a war were to break out outside of Europe, should each of the branches of the European Red Cross be mobilized for assistance? The question was raised by the Dutch delegation. The supposed war, it was assumed, could not be anything other than a clash between the European colonial military powers entering combat with one another and inevitably involving colonized, local rebels. On this occasion, Mori – at the time a young Japanese officer – got permission to speak and presented his opinion as follows.

Firstly, since the issue discussed concerned the European branches only, Japan had to step back from the decision-making process and abstain from voting. This is, of course, the essence of common sense, and this sort of reasoning does not raise any opposition. And yet this example implicitly exposed the inadequacy of the European approach to the issue: they completely overlooked the presence of non-European representatives and their membership in the organization. Japan's abstention amounted to an indirect warning that the proposed resolution would



Figure 7. Mori Ōgai (standing first to the left) and other Japanese students in Germany. Source: Wikimedia Commons Public Domain.

constitute a violation of the spirit of the Red Cross. Mori's voice made it clear to the European delegates that the issue in question posed an imminent threat to the principle of fraternity among Red Cross constituents. The supposed idea, or rather ideal, of equality among its members was called into question.

Secondly, even though Mori made it very clear that it was neither his nor Japan's intention to propose an amendment to the resolution, in principle the issue should have been presented differently. That is, if a war were to break out on one continent, should the Red Cross branches on other continents be mobilized to offer assistance? Mori added that, should the case be phrased in such a manner, Japan would consider it a given that the Japanese Red Cross would act to provide necessary help if a war were to break out on a continent other than Asia (which would include Europe). The French-language minutes from the meeting show that at this statement by Mori, the sound of "bravo" could be heard from the audience.



During the following session, Mori also made it clear (by way of presenting a printed booklet as proof) that the Japanese army had already distributed the Japanese translation of the 1864 Geneva Convention (which dealt with the treatment of prisoners) among its soldiers. Meanwhile, as it turned out, the other European nations, who had signed the document earlier, had not yet distributed or circulated a similar document among their respective armed forces. Mori somewhat proudly noted in his diary that the Russian representative, "Usfaitcheff" [*sic*], had gently touched Mori's shoulder and expressed his "happy amazement." (It should be added here that Russia was in trouble with the other European delegations at the time). From then on, the European delegates' attitude towards Japan improved.

Obviously, the young Mori, only twenty-six years old at the time, made his statement out of a certain racial and ethnic indignation; he perceived implicit Western discrimination against an Asian nation. The young Japanese envoy was able to publicly expose the unconscious European egocentrism. Mori's rational statement, despite being delivered with barely concealed resentment, gained general approval. For it was stated in full respect of the moral spirit which the International Red Cross had been supposed to uphold: universal fraternity on an equal footing. The sentiment of his statement, originally a modest contribution made by a non-European member, was to be later put into practice by the Japanese army as the embodiment of basic moral spirit.

It is well known that Japanese military discipline shown during the occupation of the Chinese capital city, Beijing, at the time of the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901) was highly praised – at least by Western allied forces (in contrast to the later official version of the Chinese Communist Party). During World War I, the treatment of German prisoners sent from Qingdao to Japan was applauded by the foreign press. The Japanese Red Cross aid dispatched to Europe was also highly appreciated – especially the mobilized nurses who, with their self-sacrificial devotion, played an exemplary role in assisting wounded soldiers. By this time, Mori had already become one of the most important individuals in the whole military operation of medical aid.

Naturally, a question comes to mind: why was the Japanese army's behavior so different in the Sino–Japanese War, which started in 1931, and then again in the Pacific War? Why did the Japanese troops systematically neglect the Geneva Convention within twenty years of Mori's retirement and death? When and why did the Japanese military become 'inhuman'? One may be horrified by the fact that one of the origins of the atrocities committed by the Japanese army in China, Southeast Asia, as well as in the Pacific theater of World War II can be traced back (at least theoretically) to the very same conference of the International Red Cross in Karlsruhe in 1887. Violation of the Geneva Convention was a logical outcome and an automatic extension of the Western principle that Mori had previously criticized in Karlsruhe. Namely, if one were to faithfully respect the logic of the resolution proposed in 1887, Japan should be fully entitled to "manage any wars according to its own will," so long as they occurred in Asia.<sup>6</sup>

This historical irony also reveals another inherent egocentricity that lies hidden in the benevolent actions of the Red Cross. The case discussed in the following section inevitably calls for a general reconsideration of the 'universal' legitimacy of such basic notions as 'nation-state,' 'territoriality,' and 'sovereignty,' especially when analyzed from a cross-cultural, comparative perspective.

## Interreligious dialogue under question: kenosis in the East and in the West

A closer look at the previously mentioned Boxer Rebellion will allow us to move to the third and final case discussed in this paper. In English, the Chinese name of this Beijing uprising movement could be translated literally as the 'Battle for Universal Righteousness and Harmony' or the

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<sup>6</sup> This is only a theoretical speculation. The historical reality was that the military command of the Japanese army had intentionally violated and ignored the Geneva Convention during World War II because it was argued to be a Western agreement which the Japanese army claimed to have no obligation to respect. Yet the roots of this willful violation may be traced all the way back to the incident that Mori had witnessed at the Karlsruhe conference.

Yihetuan Incident.<sup>7</sup> Obviously, the Chinese claims of 'universal righteousness' were disdainfully dubbed as 'rebellion' by the allied Western powers. Beneath the irreconcilable confrontation taken up in search of legitimacy and legality lies the question of equivalence in cross-cultural translation. This question is all the more crucial as it directly touches upon the philosophical and religious order administrating the ethical dimension of the issue. To examine it fully, it will be necessary to mention numerous points of contention throughout history. Among the relevant cases that could be recalled in our context is the Chinese Rites controversy between the Vatican authority and the Qing Dynasty regarding the religiosity of rites, which was caused by a lack of equivalence between the Catholic notion of Heaven (as the God Almighty) and the Confucian idea of Heaven.<sup>8</sup> For our present paper, however, we will briefly examine the case of the Buddhist notion of nothingness and the Christian idea of kenosis.

Tanabe Hajime (1886–1962) was one of the representatives of the so-called Kyoto School of philosophy. His moral responsibility for his behavior during World War II remains controversial to this day. In his final years, Tanabe published *Varerii no geijutsu tetsugaku* [*Aesthetic Philosophy of Paul Valéry*] (1951). In his reading of "La Jeune Parque," Tanabe develops the idea that the concept of nothingness in Zen Buddhism is "equal" (*soku* 即) to love (*musokuai* 無即愛) in Christianity.<sup>9</sup> Jesus Christ's love consists of his abnegation of his divinity (*Heiligkeit*). By separating himself from God, he descended from Heaven and came to earth – the event that is known as his nativity in Bethlehem. By this abnegation the Savior made an advent (coming) to this world and was to be crucified. This self-sacrifice, or the redemption by the Son of God, was indispensable for the salvation of the souls on earth. Paul the Apostle called it kenosis.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Giwadan no ran* 義和団の乱.

<sup>8</sup> *Tenrei ronsō* 典礼論争.

<sup>9</sup> *Musokuai* in Tanabe's terminology. H. Tanabe, "Varerii no geijutsu tetsugaku" ["Aesthetic Philosophy of Paul Valéry"], [in:] *Tanabe Hajime zenshū* [*The Collected Works of Tanabe Hajime*], vol. 9, Chikuma Shobō, Tokyo 1963–1964.

<sup>10</sup> Philippians 2:6–8 (King James Version).



Kenosis (which forms a pair with the theological term of *theosis*) is a Greek word that, based on its etymology, can be translated into German as *Entleerung*, i.e., making oneself empty.<sup>11</sup> If one's body is emptied, this empty vessel can then become a receptacle of divine will. This was the case with the advent of Christ on earth (as understood in Catholicism). By the same token, one can become a receptacle of divine will through the self-abnegation of one's own selfishness (as is the case in Protestantism). This selflessness, or *Ichlosigkeit*,<sup>12</sup> in kenosis is to be likened to the Buddhist idea of 'nothingness'<sup>13</sup> (a Taoist idea later applied in Zen Buddhism). Indeed, this 'limitless emptiness'<sup>14</sup> alone can guarantee *agape* – the limitless, indiscriminate, and gratuitous love, the utmost and sacrosanct mystery of Christianity.<sup>15</sup> This comparison around the notion of *kūmuka* 空無化 was put forward by a Japanese Jesuit scholar, Father Abe Nakamaro, in his PhD dissertation.<sup>16</sup>

This invites another question: how and why can a human body, a container with limited capacity, manage to contain unlimited and infinite love? Is kenosis, or the emptying of one's self, enough for God's will to pour in (*enifüllen*)? Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990), one of the followers of Tanabe in the Kyoto School, asks this question in his *Shūkyō to wa nani ka* [What Is Religion?].<sup>17</sup> Nishitani also equates *agape*, or unconditional and indiscriminate love, with self-emptying or *Entleerung*. In the same

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<sup>11</sup> R. Ōhashi, *Kyōsei no patosu* [The Pathos of Being Together], Kobushi Shobō, Tokyo 2018, p. 379. See also the German edition of the same work: R. Ōhashi, *Phänomenologie der Compassion. Pathos des Mitseins mit den Anderen*, Karl Alber Verlag, Freiburg 2018.

<sup>12</sup> *Muga* 無我 in Tanabe's terminology. H. Tanabe, "Varerii no geijutsu tetsugaku," p. 381.

<sup>13</sup> *Mu* 無.

<sup>14</sup> *Mugen/musaigen* 無限/無際限.

<sup>15</sup> Sh. Inaga, *Sesshoku zōkeiron. Fureau tamashii tsumugareru katachi* [In Search of Haptic Plasticity. Souls Touching Each Other, Forms Interwoven], Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankan, Nagoya 2016, p. 185.

<sup>16</sup> N. Abe, "Nihon ni okeru 'Kami no jikomuka'" ["The 'Gelassenheit' of God in Japan"], PhD diss., Sophia University, 2009. See also N. Abe, "Mu o meguru Kirisutokyō shingaku oyobi Bukkyō no hikaku kōsatsu" ["A Comparative Study of Christian Theology and Buddhism around the Notion of 'Nothingness'"], [in:] *Hikaku shisō kara mita Nihon Bukkyō* [Japanese Buddhism from a Comparative Perspective], ed. F. Sueki, Sankibō Shoin, Tokyo 2015, pp. 246–298.

<sup>17</sup> K. Nishitani, *Shūkyō to wa nani ka* [What Is Religion?], Sōbunsha, Tokyo 1961; see also R. Ōhashi, *Kyōsei no patosu*, pp. 380–381.

passage Nishitani makes an almost literal paraphrase from Meister Eckhart, referring to Eckhart's idea of *Abgescheidenheit*.<sup>18</sup> Nowadays, *Selbstäußerung* or *Sich-Entäußerung* is usually given as German translation for the Buddhist notion of emptiness as an equivalent of the notion of kenosis that was preached by Paul the Apostle.<sup>19</sup> Let us add that the notion of kenosis had also been translated into German as *Gelassenheit*, which Martin Heidegger analyzed in his study of Meister Eckhart in 1951, and the term *Gelassenheit* was then translated into Japanese as *hōka*<sup>20</sup> by borrowing the term from Zen Buddhism. Finally, Nishitani also proposes referring to 'emptiness' (Sanskrit: *śūnyatā*, Japanese: *kū*<sup>21</sup>) in place of 'nothingness' (Japanese *mu*<sup>22</sup>).

In order to help facilitate understanding of these seemingly impossible equivalences, Ōhashi Ryōsuke (b. 1944) resorts to the Jewish Kabbalah's notion of *tzimtzum*.<sup>23</sup> For God Almighty to reveal himself, he had to first make some reduction in his dimensions so as to make room for his own revelation. This initial contraction from infinite God to his finite manifestation is referred to as *tzimtzum*. By this recession, God creates an empty space into which his Infinite Light then floods. As the Bible says: "Then God said, 'Let there be light': and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good."<sup>24</sup> Kabbalah tells us that the Unlimited Light, because of its infinite intensity, destroys most of the vessels available to receive it (*Shvirat HaKelim*). Yet, it is only through the human effort of restoring the remaining fragments of those broken receptacles that human beings can perceive traces of God's initial light, or at least some remnants of its lost traces.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> R. Ōhashi, *Kyōsei no patosu*, p. 381.

<sup>19</sup> R. Ōhashi, *Kyōsei no patosu*, p. 327, note 8.

<sup>20</sup> *Hōka* 放下. The pronunciation '*hōka*' is proposed for the translation of Heidegger in Japanese, to be distinguished from the same Chinese term, which has been traditionally pronounced as '*hōge*' in Zen Buddhism.

<sup>21</sup> *Kū* 空.

<sup>22</sup> *Mu* 無. See Sh. Inaga, "'Hi' no sesshoku hensei to 'Kū' - Kenosis no kanōsei to Daijō Bukkyō to Yūdaya-Kirisutokyō shingaku o kakyō dekiru ka" ["Compassion in Contact Metamorphism and the Possibility of 'Emptiness' as Kenosis. Can We Bridge the Gap between Mahayana Buddhism and Judeo-Christian Theology?"], *Book Review Press* 2019, no. 3402.

<sup>23</sup> R. Ōhashi, *Kyōsei no patosu*, p. 384.

<sup>24</sup> Genesis 1:3–4 (King James Version).

<sup>25</sup> Sh. Inaga, *Sesshoku zōkeiron*, p. 59, note 14.

By this logic of Judaic esoterism, the truth (the way to salvation) can only be suggested by its absence – a void which is left behind as a negative by the initial revelation. The divine creation reveals itself through the loss it has inscribed by the way of self-negation. Here is what we could call *kenosis Gottes*.<sup>26</sup> In his *Totalité et Infini*, Emmanuel Lévinas explains this mechanism: “*L’infini se produit en renonçant à l’envahissement d’une totalité dans une contraction laissant une place à l’être séparé.*”<sup>27</sup> And Nishitani dares to compare this *kenosis Gottes* to *taihi*<sup>28</sup> or *mahā karunā* (Sanskrit) in Mahayana Buddhism, which Ōhashi translates as ‘compassion,’ borrowing the term from the English standard translation of the corresponding notion.

Let us ask a question here: in the final analysis, are these notions compatible or commensurable with each other? And what exactly would compatibility or commensurability mean here?

This case induces us to ponder the nature of equivalence in the reciprocity of cross-cultural translation of religious notions. As Lydia H. Liu points out in a different context, the establishment of this equivalence cannot happen without tautology. “The tautology of difference as value within a structure of unequal exchange victimizes that difference by translating it as lesser value or non-universal value on an assumed ground of equivalence.”<sup>29</sup> Hence comparison is constantly in crisis, as it cannot be conducted without overlooking this methodological tautology. In other words, crisis inherently creeps into any tentative attempt at comparison. Liu goes on to declare that until recently, “the ground of equivalence in

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<sup>26</sup> R. Ōhashi, *Kyōsei no patosu*, p. 379.

<sup>27</sup> “Infinity is produced by withstanding the invasion of a totality, in a contraction that leaves a place for the separated being.” E. Lévinas, *Totalité et Infini, essai sur l’extériorité*, Martinus Nijhoff, La Haye 1965, p. 67. English translation quoted after E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., trans. A. Lingis, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht 1991, p. 104. See also R. Ōhashi, *Kyōsei no patosu*, p. 499, note 337.

<sup>28</sup> *Taihi* 大悲. See R. Ōhashi, *Kyōsei no patosu*, p. 386.

<sup>29</sup> L.H. Liu, “Desire and Sovereign Thinking,” [in:] *Grounds of Comparison. Around the Work of Benedict Anderson*, ed. Ph. Cheah, J. Culler, Routledge, New York–London 2003, p. 213.



unequal exchange is one of those areas that has received very little philosophical attention."<sup>30</sup>

Let me go a step further by pointing out one more tautology emerging together with the notion of equivalence. In any translation between different languages, formal (i.e., morphological) identity is automatically lost between the language of departure and that of arrival,<sup>31</sup> so long as the linguistic transfer is worthy of the name of translation (otherwise, translation work is not needed from the outset). As formal identity (on the level of *signifiant*) is fatally lost, it is at least expected that 'equivalence' in its semantic 'effect' (if not of *signifié* then at the least on the level of *signifiance*) be retained between the start and end point, despite linguistic transfer and morphological alteration in the course of translation.

In this guarantee of equivalence lies the very definition of 'relevance' in translation. In the monotheistic tradition of religious revelation, any act of translation has to face a fundamental dilemma. That is, being faithful to the epiphanic revelation may rule out any form of translation, as it inevitably alters the original message sent from God. (For example, Islam would not recognize as authentic any translations of the Qur'an from Arabic.) Yet the propagation of beliefs to people of different, foreign tongues cannot happen without translating the prophecy. Philo of Alexandria is known to have played an important role in this area. The notion of equivalence as faithful and reliable translation stems from his efforts of bridging Hebrew and Greek in the Holy Scripture in the aftermath of its first Greek translation (the Septuagint) two centuries earlier.

## Towards a conclusion

Thus, translation inevitably has to be suspended between (imagined) fidelity and (real) infidelity. Equivalence here becomes a prerequisite for maintaining the (illusory) belief among peoples speaking different lan-

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<sup>30</sup> L.H. Liu, "Desire and Sovereign Thinking," p. 213.

<sup>31</sup> I would like to point out here that I deliberately do not use the terms 'source language' or 'target language' as they automatically efface the tautology I am discussing.

guages (hence the Tower of Babel<sup>32</sup>). An imaginary community of common beliefs is sustained among foreigners by this illusion of sharing an equivalence bridging different translations of the original prophecy. However, equivalence here is no longer a matter of verification by way of comparison, but rather an issue of recognizing scriptural authenticity and religious authority. It no longer belongs to the realm of knowledge but becomes proof of religious acknowledgement. To put it in a different way, equivalence can by no means be established in translanguagual semantic migration (let alone in its phonetic and typographic identities), but is surreptitiously replaced by the question of belief: a confession of either assuming a particular translation is equivalent to the orthodox text or rejecting this identification as heresy.

Philosophers (such as Tanabe Hajime, Nishitani Keiji, and Ōhashi Ryōsuke) may well speculate on the possibility of equating kenosis in Christianity and nothingness in Zen Buddhism, i.e., *Śūnyatā* or *mahā karunā* in Mahayana Buddhism. These were the 'unique' Japanese intellectual endeavors in search of the universal. Exegesis on the issue may be developed in terms of compatibility or commensurability. Ultimately, however, the approval or denial of this equivalence is no longer the task of comparative philology or comparative religious studies. Rather, it relies on the decisions made by the religious authorities concerned. The discussion of 'equivalence' in translation thus results in the logical bankruptcy of 'equivalence' itself. Our exercise has so far demonstrated, I hope, that the notion of 'equivalence' is no longer a reliable/relevant scholarly technical term.<sup>33</sup>

By its very nature, comparison is always in crisis and crisis is by nature embedded in any attempts at comparison. A comparative approach is constantly floating on this unstable terrain. To return to the first part of the present paper, the comparative approach is therefore doomed to lose sight of any relevant perspective, either monocular or stereoscopic, and is open to ambiguous, transcultural polysemy – the polysemy being the 'margin' which allows for creating an illusion of successful communica-

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. J. Derrida, "Des tours de Babel," [in:] idem, *Psychè, inventions de l'autre*, Galilée, Paris 1987, p. 210.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. A. Chesterman, *Memes of Translation. The Spread of Ideas in Translation Theory*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam–Philadelphia 1997, pp. 27–34, 123–133.

tion. The case of Mori Ōgai in the second part of the paper has revealed the hidden side of this illusion in Western claims of universality.

However, it is for this very reason that comparison is indefinitely capable of uncovering fallacious illusions of universality (the third part of the present paper is dedicated to revealing this purpose); it manifests its capacity of questioning and renewing the *status quo* of cultural heritage in humanities. In lieu of compensation, however, every methodology in comparative studies testifies to its own relevance at the very moment when it turns out to be invalidated. By revealing its irrelevance and by its own failure, comparison allows us, at its extreme limit, to understand the nature of the illusion, thereby revealing the gap – ‘empty’ 空 and ‘void’ 無 space 空間 – between the ‘unique’ and the ‘universal.’ Ultimately, here lies a unique way of questioning the universal.

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## Abstract

### *How to Measure “Unique” or “Universal”? Comparison in Crisis or Crisis in Comparison*

Is Japan contributing to world civilization? If yes, then to what extent? Is this contribution beneficial or negative? In order to examine these questions, the paper addresses three cases of cross-cultural transfers analyzed from a comparative perspective. First, we will examine the adoption of Western linear perspective as an example of a technological transfer in the Far East. Second, we will look at a legal issue in the field of international diplomatic negotiations. Finally, the third case discussed will deal with the intricacies of inter-religious understanding. The first case dates back to the second half of the eighteenth century, the second – to the end of the nineteenth century, while the last one became a topic of conversation in the mid-twentieth century. We hope that these three examples will help to elucidate the worldwide geopolitical circumstances as well as historical vicissitudes in which Japan's contribution to worldwide civilization can be measured. Applying a comparative approach and analyzing both the positive and the negative sides of the issues discussed will help us make a critical assessment of Japanese studies in the international dimension.

**Keywords:** linear perspective, Okumura Masanobu, Édouard Manet, Mori Ōgai, Red Cross, Sino–Japanese War, kenosis, Yihetuan Incident, Boxer Rebellion, Tanabe Hajime, *agape*, Nishitani Keiji, Ōhashi Ryōsuke, Christianity, nothingness, Zen Buddhism

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The first volume of texts resulting from the international conference celebrating 100 years of Japanese Studies at the University of Warsaw opens with two texts paying homage to the history and tradition of researching Japan in Poland. In the subsequent chapters, researchers specializing in the field of Japanese studies discuss the uniqueness or universality of Japanese philosophy, history, aesthetics, and visual arts, reflecting on Japan's contribution to world civilization in relation to the globalizing world of blurred boundaries.

“The theme of this volume is a discussion on whether Japanese culture is unique or universal. Naturally, to give an answer to this question, it is necessary to understand what the term universal means and, consequently, what the term unique means in comparison to universal. For example, the phrase *mono no aware* (as defined by Motoori Norinaga) is thought to be a key word to understanding the nature or the criteria of beauty shared by the Japanese people. However, *mono no aware* is also thought to encompass humans. In the modern age, freedom and independence of the individual have been recognized as supreme values. However, having taken this approach, can it also be said that the view of an individual in *mono no aware* is universal?”

From the chapter by Wakui Yōko

