

Mobility as a Category for a Transnational Reception of Heidegger¹

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Abstract: This paper proposes “mobility” as an existential category for studying Heidegger’s transnational reception beyond the limits of national contexts. Drawing on Tetsuro Watsuji’s climatic theory, the concept expands from voluntary travel to encompass forced displacement, enabling recognition of plural historicities, universal orders, and the coexistence of diverse concepts of being. “Mobility” reinterprets Heidegger’s notions of resoluteness and people (*Volk*) through encounters across nations, highlighting plurality as an ontological condition. It also reframes *Schicksal* in terms of homelessness, where the “house of being” remains undecided in-between cultures, offering a phenomenological framework for a plural, transnational understanding of being.

Keywords: Heidegger, Watsuji, mobility, transnationality

In this paper, I propose the concept of “mobility” as an existential category for studying Heidegger’s *transnational* reception. Today, research on the national reception of Heidegger has reached a highly advanced stage of development. However, the development of this research has also elucidated the limitations of national reception studies.

First, it is of course valuable to interpret Heidegger against the background of Taoism, Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism, etc. However, unless we consider *the overall relationship between these different understandings*, we cannot truly consider being in general. This is because being in general is the most fundamental phenomenon related to “entities as a whole.” For example, if we would focus *only* on Buddhist or Taoist interpretations while knowing that there is an Islamic interpretation of being, we could not claim that we are truly aiming at the fundamental question of being.

Second, since the human subject is constituted within a certain “power” in terms of Foucault, the people in which the singular subject is

¹ This work is supported by KAKENHI (24K03349).

rooted must be examined in the context of the social constellation of an era, *including its relations with other peoples*. Therefore, while the reception of Heidegger by a specific nation, such as “Japan,” may offer preliminary insights, it should not be considered an end in itself. Instead, we must acknowledge the plurality of the national reception of Heidegger and reexamine being in general from the perspective of human beings who “move” between nations, that is, from a transnational perspective shared by all of humankind. This paper will consider “mobility” in this sense.

The phenomenological ontological concept of “mobility” and three transnational factors

“Mobility” could be regarded as a transnational extension of Heidegger’s concept of “resoluteness” and the works of art. The resolute Dasein reappropriates its historical situation through a practice of its *Geschick* as artworks manifest the historical situation in its conflict between the world and the earth. Through these, “mobility” reappropriates Dasein’s historical situation in its transnationality. In this essay, I will develop this concept from the Book *Fudo* [*Climate*] (1935) by Tetsuro Watsuji, one of the leading Japanese interpreters and critics of Heidegger. Watsuji traveled by ship to Marseille via Singapore and Aden in the 1920s to study in Berlin. Based on this experience, he distinguished the world’s “climate” into three types: monsoon, desert, and meadow.

This “climate” is not a geographical concept, but rather a phenomenological, ontological concept based on Watsuji’s critique of Heidegger. In *Being and Time*, encounters with intraworldly entities, including nature, are founded upon the understanding of being of Dasein,² and the meaning of Dasein’s own being interpreted as *Zeitlichkeit*.³ Consequently, *Zeitlichkeit* should also form the basis of the spatiality of intraworldly entities.⁴ Watsuji criticizes this entire argument. According to Watsuji, being-in-the-world must have body.⁵ This body must maintain material continuity with its environment in order to interact with tools and natural objects. Being-in-the-world must understand its own being in nature, which is not itself, through the medium of the body.⁶ “Climate” refers to this

² Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1927), 211.

³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 369.

⁵ Tetsurō Watsuji, “Climate,” in *Complete Works of Tetsurō Watsuji*, vol. 8 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1962), 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

nature as a constitutive condition of being-in-the-world, and Watsuji regards it as the embodiment of “historicity.”⁷

However, if you always remain in Japan, you cannot consider “Japanese climate” as such. Therefore, based on his own experience, Watsuji proposed the concept of the “traveler (*Ryokou-sha*).” He says that travelers, for example, by physically moving from Singapore to Aden, experience differences in climate and discover for the first time the plurality of climates — monsoon, desert, meadow.⁸ Since a change in place is an *a priori* possibility of the physical body, both human existence as a traveler and the plurality of climate as the natural foundation of human existence are *a priori* possibilities of being-in-the-world. Of course, a traveler can ignore or be unaware of differences and plurality of climate, as if he always remained in his homeland. Still, his actual body embodies, at root of such *mauvaise foi*, the possibility of traveling and experiencing plural climates.

However, only those with leisure and income like Watsuji can enjoy travelling. So “travel” is a narrow concept for exploring human existence. Therefore, I propose “mobility” as a formal concept that can encompass even the “displaced person” in totalitarianism as described by Arendt. This concept should encompass both the “wandering (流浪)” discussed by Chong-hong Pak, a critical interpreter of Heidegger, in relation to his fundamental concept of “we (우리/uri),”⁹ and the “infinite escape (無限に走り続ける /*Mugen ni hashiri tsuzukeru*)” from the homeland depicted by Kobo Abe, a representative postwar Japanese writer.¹⁰

Mobility offers a phenomenological basis for analyzing the three factors of transnational reception of Heidegger. First, mobility is a phenomenological condition for discovering the *plurality* of Heideggerian historicity as the ontological foundation of a *nation*. As Benhabib cited a German district court ruling on foreigner voting rights, a nation is constituted by a sense of “*Schicksalsgemeinschaft*” (community of destiny) more than by language or religion.¹¹ Its ontological foundation is Heidegger’s “people (Volk)” as a historical community constituted by free decision-makers who

⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁹ Chong-hong Pak, “Our Reality and Philosophy: The Limit Situation at This Historic Moment,” in *Complete Works of Chong-hong Pak*, vol. 1 (Seoul: Hyöngsöl Ch’ulp’ansa, 1982), 376; See Minseok Kwak, “Colonial Korea and Hajime Tanabe: A Comparison with Chong-Hong Pak,” in Liao Chin-bin and Kawai Kazuki eds., *The Era of Crisis and Tanabe’s Philosophy* (Tokyo: Hōsei University Press, 2022).

¹⁰ Kōbō Abe, “At the Guidepost of the End of the Road,” in *Complete Works of Kōbō Abe*, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1972), 14f.

¹¹ See Seyla Benhabib, *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents, and Citizens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 201.

28 MOBILITY AS A CATEGORY

stake their own existence.¹² However, while Heidegger was aware that there are plural peoples on earth, he did not provide an existential interpretation of the plurality of peoples in *Being and Time*. His argument is insufficient because “my people” cannot exist without a relationship with other peoples. In contrast, the plurality of peoples is a synchronic and spatial plurality of historicity, which should be discovered through the “mobility” of human existence. “Mobility” itself is of transnational nature and does not belong to any nation. It is, however, through “mobility” of human bodies that the plurality of historicity is phenomenologically disclosed. Furthermore, mobility serves as a means of reappropriating a nation as “my people,” and it should thus be a premise for the process by which pre-national community (such as families, clans, tribes, and local communities) is integrated into the nation as a “*Schicksalsgemeinschaft*”, or for the process by which they are excluded or marginalized by the nation.¹³

Second, by understanding plurality in this way, mobility is also a phenomenological condition for discovering a universal order that is formed by plural peoples. In my opinion, the universality asserted by Western modernity, as in Hegel, should be reappropriated more universally based on the phenomenological origin of the experience of plurality. In other words, as argued by Watsuji, Jilin Xu (1957-) of China, and Shariati Ali (1933-1977) of Iran, “modernity” must be understood not as a Western narrative, but as a plural phenomenon rooted in the history of each nation, and on that basis, we must consider the order shared by all nations.¹⁴ After World War II, Watsuji applied the concept of “traveler” to the ethnic consciousness of Jews, Chinese, and Greeks (such as Odysseus), and then stated that the travels of Europeans in Asia during the Mongol Empire foreshadowed “one world,” that is, a universal world common to plural peoples.¹⁵ Ultimately, a “world state” that unites the wills of all nations beyond the nation-states becomes the fundamental ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) that encompasses all of humanity.¹⁶ In this “world state,” individuality is supposed to be preserved in a tension with universal order of ethical life. Still, individuality is here not equated with

¹² Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 384.

¹³ See Miguel de Unamuno, “En torno al casticismo,” in *Obras completas: nueva edición integral* (Barcelona: Wisehouse Publishing, 2012), 3626f.

¹⁴ See Watsuji, “Climate,” 218f.; Jilin Xu, *In Search of Universal Values: New Trends in Contemporary Chinese Thought*, trans. by Takahiro Nakajima and Qian Wang (Tokyo: Hōsei University Press, 2020), 221ff.; Ali Shariati, “Tamadon va Tajadod (Civilization and Modernization),” in *The Complete Collection of Works* (Tehran: Shariati Cultural Foundation, CD-ROM, 2010). See also Siavash Saffari, *Beyond Shariati: Modernity, Cosmopolitanism, and Islam in Iranian Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), chap. 5.

¹⁵ Tetsurō Watsuji, “Ethics II,” in *Complete Works of Tetsurō Watsuji*, vol. 11 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1962), 337.

¹⁶ Tetsurō Watsuji, “Ethics I,” in *Complete Works of Tetsurō Watsuji*, vol. 10 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1962), 616.

“mobility.” Rather, the mutually negating relationship between “world state” and individuality ontologically presupposes “mobility,” since “mobility” both makes a “world state” open to higher universality and makes room for individual deviating positioning and exile. Further, I do think his argument should be complemented by the international liberative practice of working Dasein, which was advocated by Kiyoshi Miki (1897-1945), a representative of Left Heideggerian in Japan.¹⁷ Anyway, a universal world order that encompasses plural nations in their individuality must become an issue in the transnational reception of Heidegger, and “mobility” becomes the phenomenological starting point for addressing this issue.

Third, mobility is a concept of human being that “corresponds (*entspricht*)” to the fundamental fact that plural historicity emerges as a whole. This fundamental fact is *being in general* that is questioned in the transnational reception of Heidegger. This is a very difficult subject matter because this fact manifests a paradoxical situation where the “being in general” of a certain people is bracketed and placed alongside the “being in general” of other peoples. In his dialogue with a Japanese man, Heidegger carefully noted with the subjunctive that a single source (*Quelle*) of the different “houses of being” in the West and East Asia *might* be revealed through dialogue between the two.¹⁸ On this theme, Watsuji, based on his interpretation of early Buddhism and the Kyoto School, defined the concept of “emptiness (*Śūnyatā*)” as the fact that historical communities with plural concepts of being coexist. “Emptiness” can encompass plural concepts of being because it is absolute negativity that nullifies even the metaphysical absolute.¹⁹ At the same time, “emptiness” negates its own negativity and reverses itself into “dependent origination (*pratitya-samutpāda*/縁起/연기)” as concrete historical communities.²⁰ Watsuji’s “emptiness” and the Kyoto School’s “nothingness” are not pure Asian spirituality but hybrid concepts born from the collision between this spirituality and Western philosophy. Through this concept, Watsuji sought to grasp the very fact of the dialogical situation depicted by Heidegger.

I have explained the concept of mobility and its three factors. However, we are of course still bound by a perspective of Watsuji, a Japanese philosopher from the early 20th century. Plurality, universality, and

¹⁷ Cf. Kiyoshi Miki, “Fields of Philosophy and Thought,” in *Complete Works of Kiyoshi Miki*, vol. 19 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1968), 619.

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, GA 12 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1985), 89.

¹⁹ Tetsurō Watsuji, “The Concept of ‘Dharma’ in Buddhist Philosophy and the Dialectics of Emptiness,” in *Complete Works of Tetsurō Watsuji*, vol. 9 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1962), 473–475.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

30 MOBILITY AS A CATEGORY

fundamental facts vary according to historical context. For instance, Wei Xiong (熊偉 1911-1994), who studied in Freiburg, translated *Geschick* in *Being and Time* as “mandate of heaven (天命)” and linked it to the Chinese concept of “heaven (天/*tian*).”²¹ I assume that even within Chinese civilization, which encompasses various ethnic groups, “heaven” would lack spatial plurality, despite changing over time. In contrast, for Watsuji, *Geschick* is spatially plural. Both Xiong and Watsuji are correct because the boundaries between the various *Geschick* “peoples” are accidental historical facts and that plurality can be minimized or maximized. Accordingly, the concept of “being” is also diverse. “Heaven,” which encompasses both the natural sky and the order of the cosmos, should include both Heideggerian “being” and ontic nature. In this case, a single people is *materially specified* by its interaction (相關) with “heaven.” In contrast, the Kyoto School’s “emptiness” and “nothingness” are negativity that does not contain ontic materiality. The plurality of people is endlessly recognized in “emptiness,” but neither the self nor the other exists in “emptiness” itself.²²

Homelessness as *Schicksal* of Mobility

“Mobility” is an existential category that captures the transnational reception of Heidegger, that is, humans who truly reappropriate the question of being. Now, can we think about *Schicksal* in Heidegger’s sense in relation to these humans? In our mobility, we leave or are deprived of our homeland, encounter foreigners, experience the coexistence of plural peoples, and sometimes settle down again somewhere. Therefore, the issue at hand should not be the collective *Geschick* but the singular *Schicksal*.

Schicksal in mobility exists in a *bracketed* state, departing from one’s original *Geschick* and open to becoming rooted in another “*Geschick*.” Taking the Kyoto School as an example, a Japanese man who travels to the West leaves his *Geschick* of absolute nothingness and becomes open to the Western *Geschick* of being in general. He may then return to absolute nothingness (*Heimkehr*) or immigrate to Western being.²³ The same can be said of Westerners and other peoples. This is not cosmopolitanism because mobility allows for returning home to one’s nation or naturalizing elsewhere. Rather,

²¹ Xiong Wei, *Xiong’s Translation of Heidegger* (Beijing: 2004), 75f.; instructed by a presentation of Yoshinobu Shino, “Freedom in China and Heidegger: How Xiong Wei (1911–1994) Read Heidegger,” paper presented at the Heidegger Forum Japan 2024 at Takachiho University (21–22 September 2024).

²² See Keiji Nishitani, “Lectures on Shōbōgenzō,” in *Selected Writings of Keiji Nishitani*, vol. 22 (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1987), 77.

²³ See Yohei Kageyama, “Eschatologie des Nichts: Geschichtsphilosophie der Kyoto-Schule zwischen Nishida und Heidegger,” in *Heidegger und die Kyoto-Schule: Philosophie im interkulturellen Gespräch*, ed. by Neugebauer and Schirmer (Freiburg/München: Alber, 2025).

it is a more fundamental “homelessness (*Heimatlosigkeit*)” than that described by Heidegger. This is because the “house of being” to which one belongs gets undecided in the in-between of the diverse manifestations of the cosmos. This is the *Schicksal* that transnational Heideggerian must “undertake (*übernehmen*)” to reappropriate the indefinite plurality of “home,” including its violence.

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32 MOBILITY AS A CATEGORY

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