

Spatial Mobility and the Formation of a Modern Academic Discipline in China and Japan, ca. 1850–1911

Joachim Kurtz (Intellectual History), University of Heidelberg (Germany)

Historians of philosophy rarely consider migration and spatial mobility as worthy subjects of inquiry. Unlike historians of science and technology who have fruitfully examined the multiple ways in which movements of scholars and artisans between centers of learning and crafts have shaped the production of knowledge worldwide, students of philosophy have so far failed to recognize the potential of mobility studies. Even among authors specifically addressing the circulation of philosophical ideas, very few have looked beyond the dissemination of books and the translation of texts. As a result, we still know very little about the routes along which mediators of philosophical knowledge traveled, the private and institutional networks that sustained their journeys and sojourns, and the manner in which they reframed concepts and theorems to fit the social, ideological, cultural and linguistic contexts of different localities.

This paper is a first step to reinscribe spatial mobility into the global history of philosophy. It aims to reconstruct the crucial role migrations have played in the formation of philosophy as a modern academic discipline in Japan and China. Tracing the steps of European and American philosophers teaching in Japan, Japanese academics serving as professors of philosophy in China, and Chinese students seeking philosophical instruction in Japan, Europe and North America, I will analyze the complex interactions that have created the initial image of this hitherto neglected field of learning in East Asia and shaped the languages in which philosophy has come to be expressed throughout the region until today.