

# Martin Heidegger and Kitayama Junyū: Nothingness, Emptiness, and the Thing

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## Abstract

Heidegger's early philosophical project was identified with a nihilistic philosophy of nothingness after the 1927 publication of *Being and Time*—with its depiction of the radical existential anxiety of being-towards-death—and his 1929 lecture “What is Metaphysics?”—with its analysis of the loss of all orientation and comportment in the face of an impersonal self-nihilating nothingness. Heidegger's philosophy of nothingness would be contrasted in both Germany and Japan in the 1930s and 1940s with “Oriental nothingness” by authors such as Kitayama Junyū, a neglected Japanese philosopher active in Germany and an early interpreter of Heidegger and Nishida. In this contribution, I trace how Heidegger's reflections on nothingness and emptiness (which are distinct yet intertwined expressions) become interculturally entangled with East Asian discourses in the early reception of his thought, particularly in Kitayama and the introduction of Nishida's philosophy into Germany, and their significance in Heidegger's “A Dialogue on Language”.

**Keywords:** emptiness, Heidegger, modern Japanese philosophy, nothingness, things

## Martin Heidegger in Kitayama Junyū: Nič, praznina in stvar

### Izvilleček

Heideggerjev zgodnji filozofski projekt enačimo z nihilistično filozofijo ničā po objavi knjige *Bit in čas* leta 1927 – s prikazom radikalne eksistencialne tesnobe biti-k-smrti – in predavanja »Kaj je metafizika?« iz leta 1929 – z analizo izgube vsake orientacije in ravnanja spričo brezosebnega samoničnega ničā. Heideggerjevi filozofiji ničā so v tridesetih in štiridesetih letih 20. stoletja v Nemčiji in na Japonskem avtorji, kot je Kitayama Junyū, zapostavljeni japonski filozof, ki je deloval v Nemčiji in bil zgodnji interpret Heideggerja in Nishide, nasproti postavljali »orientalski nič«. V tem prispevku zasledujem, kako se Heideggerjeva razmišljanja o ničū in praznini (ki sta različna, a prepletena izraza) medkulturno prepletajo z vzhodnoazijskimi diskurzi v zgodnji recepciji njegove misli, zlasti pri Kitayami in uvajanju Nishidove filozofije v Nemčiji, ter njihov pomen v Heideggerjevem »Dialogu o jeziku«.

**Ključne besede:** praznina, Heidegger, sodobna japonska filozofija, nič, stvari

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## Introduction: Heidegger and the Philosophy of Nothingness

How is it that Martin Heidegger became a philosopher identified with nihilism despite his frequent assertions to the contrary? Heidegger's *Being and Time* elucidated a primordial nullity at the heart of human existence as thrown into the world in being-towards-death: "The projection is not only determined as each time thrown by the nullity of its fundamental being, but as a projection it is itself essentially a nullity (*Nichtigkeit*)" (GA 2, 117<sup>1</sup>). After the 1927 publication of *Being and Time*—with its analysis of existential anxiety (*Angst*) in one's ownmost being-towards-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*)—and his 1929 Freiburg inaugural lecture "What is Metaphysics?"—with its analysis of anxiety in the face of the impersonal self-nihilating nothingness (*das Nichts nichtet*), Heidegger's thinking was identified with the prioritization of nothingness. Several European and East Asian thinkers described his thought as a "philosophy of nothingness" (*Philosophie des Nichts* or *Nichts-Philosophie*), a negative ontology or meontology (Wahl 1957, 154), a variety of nihilism (Gürster 1938, 48; Meyer 1936, 86–89), and a European form of Buddhism (Anders 2001, 64). Günther Anders encapsulated these interpretative tendencies in a 1946 essay "Nihilism and Existence" in which he criticized Heidegger's thought as "in a certain sense" a modern European Buddhism that is simultaneously atheistic, skeptical, nihilistic as well as conservative, ritualistic, and melancholically longing for redemption (*ibid.*).

Heidegger's thinking of nothingness in *Being and Time* and "What is Metaphysics?" was critiqued as meaningless in positivism, as bourgeois fascistic irrationalism in Marxism (e.g., Lukács 1955), and for its depersonalizing impersonality in the name of the interpersonal other in Emmanuel Levinas and for the sake of radical subjectivity Jean-Paul Sartre (Levinas 1932; 1982; Sartre 1943).

Rudolf Carnap condemned Heidegger's *Nichts-Philosophie* as reifying negation (which is inherently derivative and secondary to assertion) into a meaningless pseudo-concept of nothingness and denied it even the expressive value of the poetic word (Carnap 1931, 241).<sup>2</sup> Although not yet present in his 1932 essay "Martin Heidegger et l'ontologie", Levinas's 1935 work *De l'évasion (On Escape)* (1982) interrogated the impersonality of the "there is" (*il y a*) of being murmuring in the abyss of nothingness from which we are compelled to yet cannot escape. Sartre contested in his 1943 magnum opus *L'Être et le néant (Being and Nothingness)* the apparent impersonality of Heidegger's "nothing nothings" with the being

1 I cite the collected works of Heidegger (*Gesamtausgabe*), as GA plus volume and page numbers.

2 Carnap's verdict on Heidegger's nothing was shared by numerous positivists in the early 1930s: Oskar Krauss (1931, 140–46); David Hilbert (1931, 485–94); Otto Neurath (1933, 8); A. J. Ayer (1934, 55–58). On their divergent conceptions of the very question of nothingness, see Nelson (2013, 151–56).

(the for-itself of consciousness) that is self-nihilating in the face of the absurdity and superfluity (*de trop*) of being-in-itself (Sartre 1943).

The interpretation of Heidegger as a nihilistic philosopher of nothingness was contested by Heidegger himself as well as increasingly in his global postwar reception. Although the primary narrative is one of the “turn” (*die Kehre*) from *Dasein* to the priority of being, another narrative emerging after the conclusion of the Second World War confirmed the earlier line of interpretation in stating that Heidegger’s turn consisted of a turn away from a “philosophy of nothingness” to a “thinking of being itself” (*Sein selbst*) (Naber 1947). Heidegger himself maintained in his later postscript (1943) and introduction (1949) to “What is Metaphysics?” that he had been systematically misconstrued. His discourse of nothingness challenged rather than advocated nihilism, as it did not conclude with the priority of brute or radical nothingness. The nothingness encountered in attunements of radical anxiety and boredom is primarily a veil of and perspective on being. The transition through nothingness indicates being not only as abyssal (*abgründig*) but more fundamentally an illuminating shining forth of the clearing (*Lichtung*), openness (*Offenheit*), and a kind of emptiness (*die Leere*) of being.

The clearing is an opening lighting center beyond beings that encircles all that is akin to the barely known nothing (Heidegger 2002, 30; GA 5, 40). Nonetheless, Heidegger can still maintain in the 1943 postscript: “One of the essential sites of speechlessness is anxiety in the sense of the horror to which the abyss of the nothing attunes human beings” (Heidegger 1998, 238). Nothingness continues to carry a dimension of existential horror and anxiety in relation to the abyss, as explicitly stressed in his 1929 lecture and in the early reception of his thought (and not only in French existentialism). At the same time, Heidegger articulates elements of the abyss that is “neither empty nothingness nor a dark confusion, but the event.”<sup>3</sup> There are dimensions of openness, associated in Kantian philosophy with the sublime, such as the emptying of the clearing and encountering being’s calm that encompasses inexhaustible expansiveness in releasement in, for example, the Japanese Buddhist expression *kū* 空 (“emptiness”) in “Aus einem Gespräch von der Sprache. Zwischen einem Japaner und einem Fragenden” (“A Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer”) (written during 1953/54) or as disclosed in the self-veiling expansiveness of the Siberian wilderness to the two prisoners of war in the 1944/45 “Abendgespräch in einem Kriegsgefangenenlager in Rußland” (“Evening Conversation in a Prison Camp in Russia”) that offers a critique of German nationalism.<sup>4</sup>

3 GA 79, 128. On Heidegger’s notion of the appropriating or endowing event, see Nelson (2007, 97–115).

4 For the former, see Heidegger (GA 12, 80–146); for the latter, see Heidegger (GA 77, 204, 218, 230).

## Heidegger's Intercultural Entanglements with East Asian Philosophy

How did Heidegger's thinking of nothingness become entangled with East Asian philosophies? The question of nothingness and emptiness in Heidegger is an intriguing one considered on its own. This question is also at play in Heidegger's reception in Japanese philosophy and the field of "comparative philosophy" and in Heidegger's reflections on the emptiness of the thing in "The Thing" (*Das Ding*) and language in "A Dialogue on Language" that are informed by Heidegger's intercultural entanglements.<sup>5</sup>

Heidegger had contacts with East Asian philosophy as early as 1919. He has been suspected of borrowing the expression "being-in-the-world" (*in-der-welt-sein*) from the 1919 German translation of Okakura Kakuzō 岡倉覚三, *The Book of Tea* (*Cha no Hon* 茶の本), which he received as a gift in 1919 from Itō Kichinosuke 伊藤吉之助. The German translation remarks of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 that it indicates an "art of being-in-the-world" relating to ourselves in the present.<sup>6</sup> Heidegger's discourse of being-in-the-world reflects no doubt Lutheran discourses of the fallenness, sinfulness, and suffering of "being in the world" ("in der Welt sein" without hyphens) and yet potentially—as suggested in this reading of the *Zhuangzi*—an art of immanently and responsively dwelling with and amidst things within the world.<sup>7</sup>

Heidegger repeatedly noted in the postwar period the special relationship between the discourse of nothingness in "What is Metaphysics?" and his dialogues with Japanese philosophers. Heidegger remarked in a 1969 *Dankansprache* that German and European philosophers had characterized this lecture as "nihilism", and its Japanese translator Yuasa Seinsoke 湯浅誠之助 was one of the few to comprehend what it meant to indicate (GA 16, 712). In reference to the Japanese translation of "What is Metaphysics?" in "A Dialogue on Language" Heidegger marks the shift in his thinking from an anxious existential nothingness to a mindfully attuned opening emptiness. In the 1930s, perhaps aware of the comparisons being made, he is concerned with differentiating his thinking of nothingness and

5 There is already a vast and diverse literature concerning Heidegger and comparative and intercultural philosophy, including (among numerous other works) Buchner (1989); Davis (2013); May (1996); Nelson (2017; 2019).

6 "Die chinesischen Historiker haben vom Taoismus stets als von der 'Kunst des In-der-Welt-Seins' geredet, denn er handelt von der Gegenwart, von uns selbst." (Okakura 1919, 31). Also see Imamichi (2004, 123); May (1996, 118); Davis (2013, 460–65).

7 As described in May (1996), there are various anecdotes of Heidegger reading and referring to the *Zhuangzi* in the 1920s and other apparent influences. Heidegger explicitly and implicitly discusses passages from the *Zhuangzi* in Heidegger (1989) and Heidegger (2010), as illustrated in Nelson (2019, 362–84). On Heidegger's notion of world and worldview, see Nelson (2011, 19–38).

non-being (as being's event) from any form of Buddhism. Heidegger declared in 1935 that his thinking of being was the opposite of Buddhism.<sup>8</sup> This dismissive gesture of rejection is not evident in the 1953/1954 “A Dialogue on Language” or his 1963 dialogue with the Buddhist monk Bhikku Maha Mani. In a discussion concerning the Japanese understanding of *kū* (emptiness), he states that emptiness and nothingness are the same (“Die Leere ist dann dasselbe wie das Nichts”) and the interlocutor responds that for the Japanese emptiness is the “highest word” for what Europeans mean to say with the word “Being”.<sup>9</sup>

Heidegger was introduced into Japan as a philosopher of nothingness. The 1930 Japanese rendition of “What is Metaphysics?” was the earliest published translation in any language of a text authored by Heidegger. His early Japanese reception emphasized this lecture's encounter with nothingness. Yet, unlike his early European reception, the critical side of its Japanese reception stressed how this nothingness was still too beholden to being in contrast with Asian (“Oriental”) conceptions and experiences of nothingness and emptiness; or, more precisely as will be seen below, an intertextually mediated discourse of the Western discourse of nothingness interpreted in relation to modern Japanese appropriations of Buddhist *sūnyatā*.

## Daoist Nothingness and Buddhist Emptiness between East and West

Such an interpretive strategy is particularly evident in Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870–1945), the founding figure of the Kyōto school. He distinguished an “Oriental” philosophy and logic of nothingness from Occidental philosophy and its logic of being.<sup>10</sup> The conception of “Oriental nothingness” has a complexly mediated relation with premodern interpretations of Daoist nothingness and Buddhist emptiness. Formed in response to the critiques of “Oriental nothingness” and nihilism in philosophers such as Hegel and Nietzsche, it was centered on the Japanese understanding of *kū* (Buddhist *sūnyatā*), and—in the discourses of Asian and comparative philosophy of this era—could be extended (arguably beyond Nishida's own intentions) in the geopolitics of Japanese Pan-Asianist discourses (as expressed by Kitayama and other thinkers) to integrate and rank Asian

8 “Kein Buddhismus! das Gegenteil.” (GA 65, 171)

9 “Für uns ist die Leere der höchste Name für das, was Sie mit dem Wort ‘Sein’ sagen möchten.” (GA 12, 103)

10 For an excellent overview of Nishida's philosophy of the nothingness in relation to Heidegger, see Krummel (2018, 239–68).

forms of spirit in a quasi-Hegelian form of historical development.<sup>11</sup> The notion of “Oriental nothingness” was ideologically extended to encompass and fuse a wide range of divergent and incompatible perspectives: South Asian Hindu and Buddhist forms of negativity (from the “*neti neti*” of the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* to the Buddha’s fourfold negation [*catuṣkoṭī*]), Daoist and mysterious learning (so called “Neo-Daoist”) *wu* 無, and the initial pole of nothingness (*wuji* 無極) in interplay with the great ultimate (*taiji* 太極) that emerged in *Yijing* 易經 commentarial transmissions and Neo-Confucian teachings. The ultimate teachings of nothingness were expressed in East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism, culminating in its Japanese forms. As discussed below, no doubt in response to criticisms seen in European thinkers such as Hegel and Nietzsche, Japanese expressions of negativity and nothingness were interpreted as primarily world- and life-affirmative.

In the context of Japanese–German relations in the early 1940s, Nishida’s thought was introduced to German audiences with the 1943 translation *Die intelligible Welt: Drei philosophische Abhandlungen* (*The Intelligible World: Three Philosophical Treatises*). Robert Schinzinger, a student of Ernst Cassirer (PhD in 1922) who helped introduce Nishida to Germany in the early 1940s with his introduction to this translation and in other writings, distinguished Nishida and Heidegger at length in the introduction. He articulated Nishida’s recognition of how being becomes manifest in *Dasein*’s being held into nothingness in Heidegger and the extent to which Heidegger remained captured in the Western metaphysical paradigm of the supremacy of being and its logic (Nishida 1943, 30–33).

Another figure addressed the significant affinities and differences regarding nothingness between Nishida and Heidegger during this period. Kitayama Junyū 北山淳友 (1902–1962) lived in Germany from 1925 to 1944. He initially studied with Edmund Husserl in Freiburg before completing his dissertation with Karl Jaspers on Vasubandhu’s metaphysics in Heidelberg in 1929. In this book *Metaphysik des Buddhismus* (*Metaphysics of Buddhism*), published in 1934, he was one of the first to deploy the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger to interpret Yogācāra Buddhism (Kitayama 1934).<sup>12</sup> A 1935 issue of *Kant-Studien* noted that

11 On “Oriental nothingness” and nihilism in German philosophy, see Nelson (2022, 83–96). Pan-Asianism was, to briefly summarize, typically “anti-colonial” in contesting Eurocentrism and Western colonialism and nationalist in construing Japan as the inheritor, restorer, and culmination of “Oriental” culture and spirit that could defend Asia against Occidental encroachment. Kitayama and Kanokogi Kazunobu 鹿子木貞信 were among the most active pan-Asianist intellectuals in Germany. Kanokogi wrote his dissertation with Rudolf Eucken in Jena in 1912 on “The Religious” and appears much more willing to directly advocate fascist ideology as director of the Japan Institut in Berlin and subsequently in Japan; on Kanokogi, see Szpilman (2013, 233–80).

12 Published in 1934 as Kitayama’s *Metaphysik des Buddhismus: Versuch einer philosophischen Interpretation der Lehre Vasubandhus und seiner Schule*. Kitayama was among a number of rightwing

this dissertation attempted “to interpret and reveal Vasubandhu teachings in the language of contemporary German metaphysical theorists (Scheler, Husserl, and Heidegger)” (Brightwell 2015, 450).

Kitayama was familiar with Heidegger’s thought from his time in Freiburg, thanking him in the preface to his dissertation, and extensively referring to his works (including “What is Metaphysics?”) and utilizing them to phenomenologically interpret Vasubandhu’s philosophy as an elucidation of karmic and samsaric *Dasein*. In his 1934 book, *Yogācāra Buddhism* does not offer a psychologistic philosophy of consciousness but rather an existential “analytic of *Dasein*” of karmically thrown *Dasein* and its constitution and structures of being and the possibility of redemption in “absolute nothingness” exemplified by the path of the Buddha. In suffering, finitude, and mortality, *Dasein* is a question to itself threatened by death and thrown and lost in terrifying nothingness (Kitayama 1934, 78). In the existential emptiness of thirst (*tanhā*) and in encountering the disorienting questionability of relative nothingness, absolute nothingness (*sūnyatā*) is disclosed. It is construed in Heideggerian language as *Dasein* annihilates itself in relation to its own fundamental groundlessness in the illumination of absolute nothingness (ibid., 194–95). In such absolute nothingness, in the radical unknowing of the Buddha, freedom and creative life are disclosed as immanent ways of *Dasein*’s attunement and comportment within this samsaric world. Buddhism was not otherworldly and nihilistic for him but a way of affirming life. Kitayama subsequently stressed in the 1940s the tragic and heroic affirmative moment in Buddhist and Japanese nothingness that confronted this karmic samsaric order by emptying and dismantling the constraints of the individual self for a greater collective self and purpose.

The return from radical nothingness to everyday karmic life is also found in his subsequent interpretations of Dōgen Zenji 道元禪師 (Kitayama 1940, 1–15) and Laozi 老子 (Kitayama 1942) in the early 1940s. As discussed below, Kitayama attributed Heidegger’s expression “the nothing nothings” (“*das Nichts nichtet*”) to Laozi in his 1942 work *West-östliche Begegnung: Japans Kultur und Tradition* (*West-East Encounter: Japan’s Culture and Tradition*). Kitayama’s altered relation to Heidegger is more explicitly stated in a 1943 article on Nishida published

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Japanese intellectuals such as Kanokogi who studied in Germany, were active in Germany, and in German-Japanese relations during the National Socialist period. On his relations with German rightwing discourses and National Socialism, see Brightwell (2015, 431–53). On the intermixture of phenomenological and *völkisch* (racial and nationalist) geopolitical and georeligious tendencies in Kitayama’s philosophy of religion, see Kubota (2008, 613–33). Wolfgang Harich, an East German communist philosopher after the Second World War who had helped Kitayama edit his German publications during the first half of the 1940s, describes Heidegger’s influence on Kitayama and his activities in Germany, in Harich (2016).

in *Kant-Studien*. Kitayama maintained there that “Occidental spirit”, including Heidegger, is anthropomorphic, intellectualist and representational, fixating subject and object and prioritizing the positivity of being (Kitayama 1943b, 268–69). “Oriental spirit” is in contrast cosmic, intuitive, and naturalistic. Taking natural and inter-human relations as its guide, it prioritizes absolute nothingness as encompassing the fullness of all things and discovers reality in “absolute contradiction”. Nishida comprehends the reality of the world in its groundless nothingness through the unity of opposites in the self-identity of absolute contradiction.<sup>13</sup> This explication of the relational interpenetration of all particular things draws on the logic of *Huayan* 華嚴, and the idea of heightening contradictoriness and paradoxicality into the “great doubt” (C. *dayi*, J. *taigi* 大疑) accords with the Zen Buddhist practice of meditating on the *kōan* (*gong’an* 公案).

In their writings on Nishida and contemporary Japanese philosophy, Schinzingler and Lüth warn against a nihilistic interpretation of absolute nothingness and an overly radical reading of absolute contradictoriness in Nishida. They potentially limit its boldness and distinctiveness *vis-à-vis* Western philosophical discourses of nothingness. They construe Nishida’s nothingness as concretion, fullness, and determinacy, differentiating a vacant abstract nothingness defined through negation from the genuine nothingness of the fullness and completion of reality itself (*dharmakāya*) and its Buddha-nature that cannot be restricted to or conditioned by being (Lüth 1944, 99–101; Nishida 1943, 30–32). But this approach is misleading, if such concepts are conceived as positing positive objects or subjects, since Nishida maintains that nothingness is a predicate that cannot be in any way reified into a subject (Schinzingler 1940, 31; Taketi 1940, 283–85; Imamichi 2004, 46). While Carnap warned of reifying negation, because it is derivative to and presupposes assertions about objects, Nishida’s predicate of nothingness indicates the true emptiness of things in which they have—without the fixations of essence, self, or substance—their own self-determination and concrete specificity (Taketi 1940, 285). Nothingness is determinate and has its own specificity without relying on a logic of determinate negation that is ultimately affirmative.

Nishida’s genuine thinking emerges, according to Kitayama, as a genuine philosophy of nothingness that reconceives Oriental nothingness through its confrontation with Occidental being and liberates us from the limitations of Western conceptions of being, including that of Heidegger:

13 See Nishida (1943, 140). On the early German-language reception of Nishida’s philosophy of nothingness: Kitayama (1943b, 274); Lüth (1944, 99–101); Schinzingler (1940, 38), and Schinzingler’s introduction in Nishida (1943, 30–32).



That is why we call it “philosophy of nothingness” in contrast to the philosophy of being of the Occident from Plato to Heidegger. The nothingness that Nishida has reached as the ultimate of all being and of thought is the ancient inheritance of East Asian spirit. It occurs as a problem in both Buddhism and Daoism.<sup>14</sup>

The distinctiveness of Occidental and Oriental nothingness is a key theme in the intercultural philosophy of figures related to the Kyōto School. In a 1940 German article by Taketi, no doubt with Nietzsche’s accusation of life-denying passive nihilism in mind, the radical nihilism of “Oriental nothingness” affirms life, world, and the act from the abyss of the present rather than denying the present as in Christianity and European nihilism (Taketi 1940, 278–79). In the classic account of Hisamatsu Shinichi 久松真一, “Oriental Nothingness” is irreducible to both logical negation and existential nothingness. As self-emptying, it is prior to the existential negativity and logical negation that, respectively, existentialism and positivism deploy to explain or discard nothingness.<sup>15</sup> Hisamatsu elucidated awakening as a return to the moments of ordinary daily life in which (adopting an expression from the iconoclastic Tang dynasty Chan master Linji Yixuan 臨濟義玄, which is in turn drawn from the *Zhuangzi*) the genuine person without positionality or rank (*wuwei zhenren* 無位真人) abides in non-abiding, dwelling without fixation (Hisamatsu 2002, 29–33).

Kyōto school and other Japanese philosophers such as Kitayama deployed an interculturally reshaped Buddhist notion of emptiness as nothingness (linked with the European discourse of nothingness and Chan-Zen Buddhist uses of *wu/mu* 無) to demonstrate the insufficiency of nothingness in Occidental thinking and Heidegger. Nishida and Kitayama appreciated the impersonality (in contrast to the critical readings of Levinas and Sartre that stressed the person and subjectivity) and verbal event character of nothingness in Heidegger. Still, Heidegger’s thinking of nothingness as the way of encountering being (*Sein*) is in so doing restricted just as negative mysticism and theology condition and relativize nothingness by using it as a tool to reveal God. Heidegger’s nothingness is therefore

14 “Deshalb nennen wir sie ‘Die Philosophie des Nichts’ im Gegensatz zur Seinsphilosophie des Abendlandes von Platon bis Heidegger. Das Nichts, das Nishida als das Letzte alles Seienden und des Denkens erreicht hat, ist das alte Erbgut des ostasiatischen Geistes. Es tritt als Problem sowohl im Buddhismus als auch im Taoismus auf.” Kitayama remarked further: “Nishida überwindet diese Krise, indem er auf seinen Ausgangspunkt zurückgreift und im Jenseits von Subjekt und Objekt nicht das Sein, sondern das nur durch das Denken unerfaßbare Nichts sieht. Mit der Philosophie des Nichts beginnt die selbständige Philosophie Nishidas und befreit sich von jeglichem Einflusse abendländischer Philosophen” (Kitayama 1943b, 269).

15 A paradigmatic analysis of “Oriental Nothingness” is found in Hisamatsu 1960, 65–97.

limited in the light of “absolute nothingness” (*zettaimu* 絶対無), which is the self-emptying locus or place (*basho* 場所) of all perspectives and positions, insofar as it still refers to and is bound to being and its implicit yet all too representational subject/object modeling of reality. Heidegger fails to adequately address the absolute nothingness beyond God and being. Far from being pessimistic or nihilistic, the absolute nothingness at the heart of Oriental culture is, according to Nishida, the genuine locus of encountering concrete phenomena just as they are in their suchness and is accordingly world-affirmation (Nishida 1939, 10–11). In absolute nothingness, the mountain is precisely the mountain, water is water, and beings are just what they are (Nishida 1943, 119). Nishida is here referring to the *kōan* attributed to Qingyuan Weixin 青原惟信, a Tang Dynasty Linji Chan Master, which appears in Dōgen’s *Mountains and Waters Sutra* (*Sansui Kyō* 山水經).

After the early entanglements between Heidegger and Chinese and Japanese philosophy from the 1920s to 1940s, Heidegger’s nihilating nothingness was increasingly perceived as a touchstone in the emerging field of comparative philosophy not only in Germany and Japan but in international scholarship in the emerging field of comparative philosophy. Much of this literature was more willing than Kitayama, Lüth, and Schinzingler to accentuate the affinities between Heidegger’s and Nishida’s nothingness.

Takeuchi Yoshinori 武内義範 stated: “A way of thinking akin to Nishida’s is found in the recent development of Heidegger’s philosophy, although there was no direct influence either way” (Takeuchi 2004, 203). Relying on Nishida’s notion of nothingness as identity in complete contradiction, he notes: “Heidegger’s philosophy of Being meets with a philosophy of Nothingness—because Being and Nothingness are identical in their contradiction” (ibid., 204). Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan noted in 1952 how Heidegger gave nothingness “an active function (*das Nichts nichtet*), which influences our being. He even makes it one with absolute being. One is reminded here of the Buddhistic conception of the void (*śūnya*)” (Radhakrishnan 1952, 430). Swan Liat Kwee remarked in 1953 how “the Void” has an active creative function in Heidegger’s “*das Nichts nichtet*” (Kwee 1953, 184). Both statements concerning self-nihilating nothingness show how it is active, creative, and world-generative in Buddhist *śūnyatā* as much as with early Daoist *wu* 無 despite the radical differences between these two concepts.

Heidegger himself did not directly or explicitly attribute generative or creative qualities to nihilating nothingness in his 1929 “What is Metaphysics?” In that context, encountering nothingness in radical anguish and boredom places beings and the being of *Dasein* itself radically into question. Freedom and transcendence into the world are disclosed in this existential questionability and uncanniness.

Heidegger's thinking, which appears to evoke Daoist nothingness (the empty earth, vessel, and thing) and at times Buddhist emptiness (empty form and sky), became interculturally entangled in comparative philosophy with generative interpretations of nothingness. This is not without sources in Heidegger's own path of thinking that shifts from a focus on existential nothingness to nothingness as the potentially generative emptiness of the between and the clearing.

## Heidegger and Kitayama: Nothingness, Emptiness, and the Spacing of Things

Several anecdotes by Heidegger and others testify that Heidegger engaged in conversations about Japanese thought and Zen Buddhism with visiting students and scholars from 1919 to near the end of his life. Nishitani Keiji 西谷啓治 reported that he and Heidegger had extensive discussions about Zen Buddhism during his time at the University of Freiburg from 1937 to 1939. Heidegger is reported to have said after reading a book by Daisetsu Teitarō Suzuki 鈴木大拙 that: "If I understand this man correctly, this is what I have been trying to say in all my writings."<sup>16</sup>

Echoing a Zen Buddhist teaching, Heidegger's Japanese interlocutor in "A Dialogue on Language" states that in emptiness, the mountain appears. The entire conversation and its questions center on emptiness and gathering. How are nothingness and emptiness "the same" (*dasselbe*) and "other than all presence and absence" ("das Andere zu allem An-und Abwesenden") as stated in the questioner's reply (GA 12, 103)? What is the emptiness in respectful distancing and withdrawal (*Entziehen*) and in the stillness and silence (*die Stille*) that calls and in which one can listen?

The two interlocutors delineate and enact a kind of emptiness in which words and memories arise, gather, and disperse. Emptiness is seen as informing ostensibly "elemental" Japanese expressions such as *iki* 粋, which became familiar to Heidegger through Kuki Shūzō 九鬼周造 (GA 12, 80–86).<sup>17</sup> In the Noh theatre, the empty stage allows gathering to occur (GA 12, 101). Deploying well-known Buddhist imagery, *kū* is described as the limitless expansiveness like that of the sky (GA 12, 129) and as the open and emptiness of the sky (GA 12, 136). The clear transparent sky is the classic Buddhist image for *sūnya*, and clouds are images of arising and disappearing colors, forms, or phenomena. Note that clouds

16 Compare Buchner (1989, 169–72), Davis (2013, 460–65), and May (1996, 109).

17 On Kiki's aesthetics, see Nara (2004).

indicate “colors” in this conversation, as color or form (C. *se*, J. *iro* 色) is the translation of *rūpa* (form) in Sanskrit. The emptiness of hearing allows the gathering of words in language, and the dialogue concludes with the gathering of that which endures (Kuki, the long-departed friend) in conversation and remembrance (GA 12, 143, 146).

Given Heidegger’s phenomenology of the thing in his early and middle works, how can emptiness be the gathering and place of the thing in the 1949 *Bremen Lectures* and in the 1950 essay “The Thing”? Is there an emptiness, as Heidegger pursued in the 1935 *Contributions to Philosophy* (GA 65, *Beiträge zur Philosophie*), that signifies something else than the failure of anticipation and expectation or the empty intentionality, which may or may not be fulfilled, of classical phenomenology (GA 65, 381–82)? Is there a more specific relation between the nothingness depicted in 1929 and the emptiness of language and the thing in his postwar writings that helps illuminate his statement that they are the same?

One contextual clue is found in Kitayama’s works, which were widely cited in German discussions of Japanese thought during the National Socialist era, including by the geopolitical theorist Karl Haushofer and Paul Lüth whose 1944 book *Die japanische Philosophie* relies on Kitayama’s delineation of Nishida’s philosophy of nothingness (Lüth 1944, 97–108). Kitayama’s 1940/1942 book *West-östliche Begegnung: Japans Kultur und Tradition* (*West-Eastern Encounter: Japan’s Culture and Tradition*) was first published in 1940 and substantially revised in a second edition printed in 1942.<sup>18</sup> Kitayama elucidates an East Asian philosophy of nothingness that is inspired not only by Buddhist emptiness but also by Daoist nothingness (*wu* 無), the primordial ground of being, of Laozi (Kitayama 1942, 40). Nishida in his 1939 article had critiqued the fixation and radicalization of nothingness in Daoism, contending that the teaching of absolute nothingness is only adequately achieved in Mahāyāna Buddhism (Nishida 1939, 17).<sup>19</sup> Kitayama shares this prioritization of Mahāyāna teachings (Kitayama 1943a, 3). He is, however, more willing to embrace Daoist teachings of nothingness and the thing, as he depicts them as shaping the formation of East Asian and Zen Buddhist thought and culture.

The *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* texts expressed a variety of naturalism for early twentieth-century Japanese interpreters—such as in Anesaki Masaharu 姉崎正治 (1915), Okakura (1919), and Kitayama (1942)—who emphasized its constitutive role in Chan Buddhism and the East Asian aesthetic that embraces naturalness

18 Kitayama’s *West-Östliche Begegnung: Japans Kultur und Tradition* was first published in 1940 and revised and expanded in 1942.

19 On the “Nishida circle’s”, as it was earlier designated, understanding of being and nothingness in early Chinese thought, compare Imamichi (1958, 54–64).

through emptiness. Anesaki construes Daoism as a harmonizing repose in nature and the great primordial mood of the way (Anesaki 1915, 55–56). Okakura interpreted it as a naturalistic this-worldly relativism and an art of adoptively “being-in-the-world” (Okakura 1919, 27–32). Kitayama defines it as a “naturalistic nihilism” in which freedom is intuited in nothingness in a comportment of stillness and non-acting action (Kitayama 1942, 40–41). Nothingness is the generative beginning of heaven and earth, and being the womb of the myriad things (ibid., 174). This nothingness is the ground of all entities, silent and wordless, unspeakable and unconceptualizable, and approached only through a practice of becoming empty and clear (ibid., 24, 38–41). Speaking of the Tang dynasty painter and poet Wang Wei 王維, Kitayama delineates how in the emptiness of solitude and silence, real space can be encountered and the fullness and self-being (*ziran* 自然) of things speaks to the poet and appears to the painter: “We translate this explication of space with the words of Laozi: ‘The nothing nothings’” (ibid., 160). It is space that is emptying through things, which evokes and yet is very distinct from how Heidegger elucidates the same eleventh chapter of the *Daodejing* and the “emptying” of the thing as will be considered below.

Kitayama contends that nothingness (*Nichts*) and the non-self (*Nicht-Ich*) form the essence and unity of Far Eastern culture (Kitayama 1942, 183). East Asian philosophical and aesthetic-poetic sensibilities reflect in his account the insight that: “The nihilation of the nothing (*das Nichten des Nichts*) is the activity of space that, from the human perspective, is given as form or appearance.” Each reality is the appearing of a shadow in light and each thing, such as the mountain or the stone, is a throw (*Wurf*) through the nihilation of space (ibid., 161). The expression “the nothing nothings”, attributed to Laozi apparently in reference to *Daodejing* 11, is a characteristic of the spatiality in which the thing appears as shadow and throw as a nihilation of the nothing. The nihilating activity of the nothing is construed by Kitayama as a primordial spatiality in which things arise. The expression *wuwu* 無無, which he seems to have in mind here, could be construed as “the nothing nothings” or the functioning of/arising from nothingness in the *Daodejing* commentary of Wang Bi 王弼.<sup>20</sup> This expression is not found in the transmitted text of the *Daodejing* but only in subsequent Daoist and in East Asian Buddhist sources, in which it is entangled with the emptiness of emptiness (*kongkong* 空空).

In classical Indian Theravāda and Mādhyamika teachings, emptiness means to be empty of substantial selfhood (*ātman*), self-nature (*svabhāva*), and form (*rūpa*) in dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*). Emptiness operates as a world-constituting primordially in dharmadhatu, tathāgatagarbha, and Vajrayāna teachings, in

20 On Wang Bi’s philosophy of generative nothingness, see Nelson (2020, 287–300).

which it is given a generativity and creativity that continues to resonate in Kitayama who clarifies the “absolute” self-nihilating nothingness in the very different contexts of Laozi and Nishida. Notwithstanding his father being a Pure Land Buddhist priest and his early studies of Yogācāra Buddhist philosophy, teachings in which *sūnyatā* does not play as all-pervasive a role as in Mādhyamika, “Buddhist nothingness” (as an interculturally mediated concept informed by Buddhist and German philosophy) assumes a fundamental cultural and social-political orientation in his German writings of the 1930s and 1940s on Buddhism, Daoism, and—as with other Japanese nationalist intellectuals of this era—Shintōism and the “way of the warrior” (*bushidō* 武士道).

There are abundant instances of the problematic social-political character of the philosophy of nothingness in Kitayama’s works. We mention two of them here. First, in Kitayama’s 1943a booklet *Heiligung des Staates und Verklärung des Menschen: Buddhismus und Japan* (*Sanctification of the State and Human Transfiguration: Buddhism and Japan*), Mahāyāna Buddhism occupies a crucial role for him in providing the Japanese people a universal geopolitical and georeligious teaching of compassionate world-redemption that justifies their global mission (Kitayama 1943a; Kubota 2008, 622). It is specifically the Mahāyāna teaching of nirvāṇa (nothingness as sublime infinite generative source) that sanctifies and is embodied in the Japanese imperial state led by a heavenly Emperor that transfigures and emancipates humanity through its world-historical role (Kitayama 1943a, 31–32). In this modern Japanese nationalist context, nothingness is constructed to imply the Emperor, evoking but moving beyond traditional Buddhist political theologies, akin to how nothingness ultimately signifies God in negative theology.

Second, a “heroic ethos” of nothingness is unfolded in his 1944 book *Heroisches Ethos* (*Heroic Ethos*).<sup>21</sup> As typical of a number of Japanese thinkers during this era, Japanese Buddhism and Zen become forms of heroic self and world affirmation in contrast to Indian Buddhism. In his interpretation of the concluding fifth book on emptiness of *The Book of Five Rings* (*Gorin no Sho* 五輪書) by Miyamoto Musashi 宮本武蔵, an ethos without principles or norms emerges in the spirit of this “real nullity” (*wirkliche Nichtigkeit*), in which there is nothing at all, no knowing, and no evil but only the functioning of the good. Whereas “relative nullity” counters the seduction of the false and illusory, real nullity is articulated—assimilating a long series of images of perfectly attuned action from the *Zhuangzi*’s Butcher Ding nourishing life in cutting up the ox through Zen Buddhism to this heroic ethos—as a

21 The relationship between nationalist politics and the idea of nothingness in the Kyōto School is a highly contested one. On Kitayama’s political context and tendencies, see Brightwell (2015, 431–53); Kubota (2008, 613–633). On the social-political problems of the Japanese discourse of “absolute nothingness”, see Ives (2009).

spontaneous and detached comportment and ethos that transcends the boundaries of skill and technique (Kitayama 1944, 110–11). Absolute nothingness is the unobstructed good. Kitayama’s philosophy of nothingness is problematic given its historical and social-political positionality—in the intersections of Japanese-German intellectual and ideological exchanges in the 1930s and 1940s—and due to its commitment to the priority of an ethos of detachment and indifference rather than an ethics of responsive compassion to others and things through nothingness.<sup>22</sup>

## The Emptiness of Words and Things

Questions of nothingness and emptiness are at play in Heidegger’s various discussions of the emptiness of the thing that, depending on the text, explicitly or implicitly refer to the empty vessel of *Daodejing* 11. As in the German edition of Okakura’s *Book of Tea*, Heidegger calls the vessel a jug (*Krug*; the English translation has pitcher). Although Heidegger extensively engaged with the two Daoist classics in different German translations, one must wonder about the reoccurring themes from Okakura’s book that he received as a gift in 1919.

It is uncertain to what extent Heidegger is cognizant of the specificity of Japanese arguments and debates concerning his conception of nothingness beyond the general acknowledgement and appreciate that he noted in 1953/1954 and 1969 (as described previously above). Heidegger was aware of Carnap’s positivist and Sartre’s existentialist responses to it, denying their appropriateness while—due to shifts in his own thinking—transitioning from the existential nothingness of the late 1920s (which Kitayama categorized as relative) to nothingness as the generative clearing and emptiness of the “in-between” of beings (*Seiende*) and being (*Sein*). Heidegger’s mature thought evokes yet has an unclear relation to Daoist nothingness, Buddhist emptiness, and Japanese discourses of absolute nothingness. For instance, Kitayama construed being as the womb of things arising from nothingness in his analysis of the *Daodejing*; Heidegger posited nothingness as the middle term between being and things. He stated in the late 1930s that nothingness is a saying of being more primordial than somethingness. Nothingness signifies for Heidegger not “not-beings” but Being. It is an originary saying of Being and its immeasurable answerless yet ontological event.<sup>23</sup>

22 There is a rich literature on the intersections between German and Japanese thought, and Japanese philosophy and politics, during this era, including Brightwell (2015); Kubota (2008); Ives (2009).

23 Heidegger states: “das Nichts anfänglicher und wesender (ursprünglich das Seyn er-eignender) als das ‘Etwas’? ... Nichts hier besagt: überhaupt nicht ein Seiendes, sondern: Sein ... Das Nichts entspringt nicht aus der Ab-sage an das Seiende, sondern ist anfängliches Sagen des Seyns, Sagen der Neinung in der Er-eignung.” (GA 74, 24)

Heidegger himself repositions his argumentation in “What is Metaphysics?” as a confrontation with and moment toward the potential overcoming the “philosophy of nothingness” and the nihilism that he locates at the core of modernity. Nothingness is increasingly linked with the “not” of beings (*Seiende*) in Being (*Sein*), which is not merely negative or negational in the sense of a *nihil negativum*, and with the ontological difference: “The nothing is the ‘not’ of beings, and is thus being, experienced from the perspective of beings” (Heidegger 1998, 97). To the degree that being (even as the Being that is not beings in the ontological difference) remains the epicenter of his thought, Heidegger remains beholden to the Occidental paradigm of being and has not yet arrived near the vicinity of Nishida’s genuine locus of nothingness (as interpreted in Kitayama, Schinzinger, and Nishitani, among others).<sup>24</sup> Nothingness remains for Heidegger a perspective on being; nothingness and emptiness are “the same”; and yet, at the same time, emptiness is potentially (since it is spoken by his fictionalized Japanese interlocutor) the highest name for being (GA 12, 103). While Heidegger could comprehend the interlocutor’s claim in his own discourse, as he too has thematized a kind of emptiness of being, the questioner responds by expressing hesitation, reserve, and stepping back from the identification of the emptiness of *kū* and *Sein*. Heidegger’s expression of reticence is appropriate given the continuing distances between nothingness in his own and Buddhist and Japanese discourses.

Heidegger’s “A Dialogue on Language” centers on the untranslatability of a language, as the questioner repeatedly withdraws and holds back from describing *iki* in the Occidental philosophical language of aesthetics, *kū* in the Western language of being, or *kotoba* 言葉 as language (*Sprache*). Such hesitation and reserve have been interpreted as an arrogance standing against crosscultural communication and as humility and modesty toward the other. It is presented in this dialogue as enacting an emptying and stillness that allows for a listening and entering the other’s saying instead of a mere speaking about language and communication (GA 12, 147–49). The encounter transpires through the emptiness of language, which undoes fixations, and yet not without language to the extent that there can be no openness of beings, of that which is not a being (*Nichtseienden*), or of emptiness without language (Heidegger 2002, 46; GA 5, 61).

In what sense then can one attribute emptiness to being in Heidegger’s postwar thinking? He maintained in the 1951 version of “Overcoming Metaphysics” that the emptiness of beings (*Seiende*) is the distance and forgetting of being (*Sein*), while the emptiness of being in which beings arise can never be filled up with the

24 Note the discussions of Heidegger’s nothingness in Nishitani (1989; 1983).



fullness of beings (GA 7, 94). Heidegger states in several iterations of his philosophy of the thing that emptiness not only allows the gathering of a plurality of things, which constitute a lingering moment and a local region or place, but the gathering (*Versammlung*) of the singular thing that allows it to be as the specific thing that it is.

Heidegger's later elucidation of the empty thing is repeatedly meditated by his reading of the empty vessel of the *Daodejing*. It is distinctive from the hermeneutics of the emptiness and self-nihilation of space that Kitayama attributed to Laozi. Whereas Kitayama construes the thing in response to Heidegger as a temporary transient throw, a shadow, and a fold arising through the activity of self-nihilating spatiality, Heidegger addresses emptiness as the gathering of elements, and the fourfold (*Geviert*) of sky and earth, mortals and immortals that allows the thing to be as what it is. Hisamatsu noted in a conversation with Heidegger on May 18, 1958 that the Occident conceives the origin as being and Zen as empty formlessness in which there is freedom without restriction. Heidegger concurs in his response that emptiness is not a negative nothingness nor is it a lack. Spatial emptiness, which does not exhaust emptiness, is a clearing as granting (*das Einräumende*) the gathering of things (GA 16, 555).

The empty jug receives, gathers, and offers wine (fusing imagery from Hölderlin and the *Daodejing*) precisely in its emptiness. What then is the relationship between Heidegger and the *Daodejing*? It is the most frequently mentioned non-western text in his works and it is evoked through indirect references. It is well-known that Heidegger extensively engaged with the *Daodejing* in the early 1940s, even attempting a translation of the text with Paul Shih-yi Hsiao (Xiao Shiyi 蕭師毅). Heidegger initiates his reflections on the emptiness of the thing in relation to *Daodejing* 11 in the conclusion of the 1943 essay “The Uniqueness of the Poet” (GA 75, 43–44). Emptiness is portrayed there as “in-between” (*Inzwischen*) which he elsewhere described as “the openness” (*die Offenheit*) of being and the spacing of “the between heaven and earth” (*das Zwischen von Himmel und Erde*).

In a series of reflections from the 1940s and 1950s, Heidegger engages the image of emptiness and the “empty vessel” (expressed in *Daodejing* 4 and 11, and reimagined by Heidegger as an empty jug) more powerfully evoking the *Daodejing* than in his 1943 essay while no longer directly naming Laozi. In the first dialogue of the 1944/1945 *Country Path Conversations* (GA 77), the first 1949 Bremen lecture (GA 79), and the 1950 essay “The Thing”, emptiness proves to be the condition of gathering of the elemental and of materiality itself in the thing. As gathering: “The thing things world” (“Das Ding dingt Welt”) (Heidegger 1971, 178; GA 7, 182). The thing no longer requires the artwork and creation to mediate it, as in the

mid-1930s; the thing itself can disclose and open a world such that without the thing there can be no disclosure and openness (GA 5, 54).<sup>25</sup>

Heidegger described in “The Thing” how when we fill the jug or pitcher, the liquid flows into and from its emptiness as it retains and gives. The emptiness is not a mere container. It is what conditions and contains the materiality of the container. This emptiness, as a nothingness belonging to the pitcher and making it what it is, is what the pitcher, as a containing container, is. This means that: “The vessel’s thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the emptiness that holds” (Heidegger 1971, 167; GA 7, 171). This emptiness is its own emptiness or self-emptying, not the voidness of generalized physical space, which we must allow to be in its encounter and “let the jug’s emptiness be its own emptiness” (Heidegger 1971, 168; GA 7, 173).

The emptiness, or the void as *die Leere* is translated by Albert Hofstadter, is what constitutes the vessel’s holding. The empty space, this nothingness of the jug, is what the jug is as the holding vessel. Yet as the holding is enacted by the jug’s emptiness, the potter who shapes and forms the vessel on the potter’s wheel does not create, make, or produce the vessel, but shapes the materiality and emptiness in which the artisan works. Things are shaped rather than fabricated by human practices and techniques. In not only shaping the material clay, but its very emptiness, the potter participates in the forming and shaping of emptiness into form. It is in the specificity of this emptiness that the vessel’s thingliness genuinely lies.

## Two Readings of Emptiness

As we have seen, Heidegger should not be considered a thinker of emptiness as a static or spatial voidness but instead of the illuminating clearing and emptying that unfixes, clears, and frees the way. Emptying plays a twofold role in his writings of the 1950s that calls back to the methodological emptying of “formal indication” (*formale Anzeige*) in the 1920s that destructs reifying abstractions and fixations and allows encountering things in their myriad concrete ways of being. In the conclusion to “The Thing”, Heidegger reflects on both the emptying that constitutes the thing and the emptying comportment that allows the thing to address us as the thing that it is in its own way of being in emptiness. There is accordingly: (1) the emptying that is the gathering of the thing, and (2) the

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25 Much more should be said (than can be said here) about the complicated relationship between “work” and “thing” in the 1934/1935 “The Origin of the Work of Art” (GA 5) and the 1950 “The Thing” (GA 7).

emptying that allows the (no longer only worldless as in 1929/1930) thing as world-gathering and disclosing to be encountered.

Emptying is an undoing of fixations and the preparation of a pathway and the clearing of the thing is its self-emptying that requires a respectful and reverent (if arguably inadequately responsive) distance and reserve that avoids absorption and consumption. Japanese aesthetics (as interpreted by Kuki) understands respectful reserve in the encounter as detachment (compare Nara 2004). In Heidegger's step back (*Schritt zurück*), in allowing distance and the genuine between (*das Zwischen*, which the modern loss of distances and uniformity of space has disrupted) to reappear with the thing, one is called by the thing as thing, and then perhaps can begin hear and more appropriately listen and respond.

The distinctive yet overlapping notions of emptiness and nothingness operate in Heidegger as the highest expressions for being. These notions are entangled with his understanding of Daoism and Zen Buddhism and with his philosophy's East Asian reception. In the emptiness of being, the thing and its sense are not annihilated, but rather it can be as the thing in the fullness of its own way of being. Heidegger once again appears to echo East Asian discourses, as in the sentence from the kōan attributed to Qingyuan Weixin and mentioned by Nishida: in the awakening of emptiness, mountains are directly mountains, and waters are directly waters (Nishida 1943, 119).

Kitayama's 1940 German translation and commentary on Dōgen's *Genjō Kōan* 現成公按 clarifies the movement from things to nothingness back to things through the forgetting and falling away of the self and its constructs that divides it from things. This is the self-illumination of a holistic relational selflessness in which each thing is singularly itself just as the slightest dewdrop can reflect the entirety of the moon (Kitayama 1940, 4, 10–11). Yet this does not imply a static abstract harmony. The logic of the *kōan* that confronts the self is antinomian. It leads the meditator into a dead-end (*Sackgasse*) without any recourse that is fractured in a breakthrough in which the obstructing duality of being and knowing, object and subject, falls away (Kitayama 1940, 15).

According to Kitayama's 1943a Nishida article, with its critique of Occidental spirit and its fixation on being, Heidegger's thinking of being still thinks the nothing in an Occidental manner and precludes the illumination of absolute nothingness that is unrestricted by and otherwise than being no matter how radically it might be thought (Kitayama 1943b, 268–69). This is not the decay of difference into an "empty unity of opposites unconcerned with one another", of which Heidegger warned in his analysis of the essential relational strife of earth and world (Heidegger 2002, 26; GA 5, 35). Kitayama portrays Nishida's absolute

nothingness as indicating/an accord in complete contradiction—that is to say, a self-determination and self-identity encountered in the intensification of cacophony, contradictoriness, and multiplicity of singular phenomena—and reality itself.

Heidegger and Kitayama are not cultural purists, perhaps despite their own intentions, insofar as they offer highly mediated, interculturally, and intertextually entangled conceptions of nothingness, emptiness, and the thing. Engaging Kitayama's philosophy of nothingness, which draws on Heidegger, Nishida, and classic East Asian sources, resituates and contextualizes the formation of an increasingly intercultural discourse of nothingness. In this contribution, I have presented an historical overview of the relationship between nothingness and emptiness in Heidegger in relation to aspects of his interactions and entanglements with Chinese and Japanese philosophy. Heidegger's interests in and entanglements with Chinese and Japanese philosophy emerged in 1919 and the early 1920s and continued throughout his life.

## Conclusions

Early Daoism and Zen Buddhism fascinated Heidegger to the degree that scholars accused him of plagiarizing from their sources (Imamichi 2004; May 1996). The *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* were texts to which he recurrently returned in the context of communication and exchange with East Asian students and intellectuals and their German interlocutors. His direct and indirect references to the two Daoist classics of the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*, which fascinated the younger and mature Heidegger, focus on a threefold configuration of questions that are operative in the center of his own thought and his broader engagement with Chinese and Japanese philosophy: nothingness/emptiness, thingliness, and the way.

In this interculturally mediated context, Heidegger's encounters and entanglements with Daoist and Japanese thought can be said to be neither a fleeting and accidental curiosity (to be dismissed as done by Eurocentric readings of Heidegger) nor can they be appropriately understood as constituting a far-reaching "Daoist" or "East Asian" reorientation in his philosophical journey (as in overly optimistic comparative and intercultural interpretations). Due to limits of space, I will examine elsewhere questions concerning whether radical nothingness necessarily entails or is a consequence of nationalist politics, if the phenomenological and political aspects of Heidegger and Kitayama can be disentangled, and whether the philosophy of nothingness can have a critical emancipatory potential in dismantling reified structures and disclosing freer relations and possibilities. While the partial deployment of nothingness empties and dismantles the individual,

who is left vulnerable to a reified collective identity, a more persistent practice of emptiness would also contest such fixating collective identities.

The present restricted study of a distinctive era in the intercultural history of the philosophy of nothingness leaves additional questions that can only be further addressed elsewhere. These concerns include the politics of nothingness and “Oriental nothingness” in German and Japanese discourses and, to step beyond that history, the ethical and philosophical adequacy of a critical philosophy and ethos of nothingness. First, the latter would not only empty the fixations of the individual self but contest and empty fixating collective identities. Second, the distinctiveness and radicality of Daoist generative nothingness and Buddhist self-emptiness is obscured in Hegel’s dismissive analysis of “Oriental nothingness” and in twentieth-century justifications of it that remain beholden to Hegel’s logic of identity and affirmation. Third, given the ongoing ideological functions of universalism and multiculturalism, a more adequate conception and practice of intercultural critique is needed that contests the misuses of both.

In the different yet interconnected cases of Heidegger and Kitayama, one can repose Levinas’s concerns about Heidegger formulated in the 1930s and the interrogation of the politics of Buddhist nothingness in imperial Japan by critical Buddhist scholars such as Ichikawa Hakugen 市川白弦 (Levinas 1932; 1982; Ives 2009). One can well question if Heidegger and Kitayama, respectively, attained an appropriate ethics and politics of the other. If they express the “perfection of wisdom” in emptiness given how *śūnyatā* is not only a tranquil attunement with and a letting releasement of things but intrinsically intertwined with an ethics and responsive practice of compassion (*karuṇā*), loving-kindness (*maitrī*), and generosity (*dāna*) toward the suffering world as evident in classic teachings of the bodhisattva-path such as Śāntideva’s *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra* and that Schopenhauer recognized, albeit in the language of an ethics of sympathy (*Mitleid*), in his interpretation of the Buddhist dharma.<sup>26</sup>

## Acknowledgement

I acknowledge and thank the RGC Humanities and Social Sciences Prestigious Fellowship Scheme (36000021) and HKUST Innovative Exploratory Grant (IEG20HS01PG) for the generous support that helped make this research and publication possible. I am also grateful for comments and questions received on earlier versions of this paper.

26 These points about Buddhism and Schopenhauer are developed in Nelson (2022, 83–96).

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