

## Translation of Experience into Thought: Mori Arimasa' s “experience” from a cross-cultural studies perspective

メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2021-04-15 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: Rauber, Laurent メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	<a href="https://doi.org/10.14945/00028158">https://doi.org/10.14945/00028158</a>

# Translation of Experience into Thought: Mori Arimasa's "experience" from a cross-cultural studies perspective

Laurent Rauber

## 1) Introduction

Mori Arimasa was raised as a Protestant, specialized at the Imperial University of Tokyo in Pascal and Descartes, and more broadly in modern French thought (particularly of the seventeenth century). After WWII, in 1950, at the age of 40, he went to France for a one-year scholarship. He finally decided not to return to Japan. In France, while working as a teacher of Japanese language and culture in Paris, he wrote a number of personal essays which were published in Japan<sup>1</sup>. In these essays, he developed quite an original philosophical reflection centered on the concept of "experience".

Mori did not go as far as to create a philosophical system, even if it seems to have been one of his purposes, at least at one point. As Deleuze writes, the work of a philosophe is to create concepts<sup>2</sup>. Is the "*keiken/taiken*" (経験/体験) dichotomy (an opposition of two forms of experiences) to be considered a concept? It is very difficult to judge if these two ordinary Japanese words can be referred to as concepts since they didn't clearly manage to gain an independent life as an idea; even more so with "experience", a term Mori frequently used and would have placed at the center of his projected philosophical system.

---

<sup>1</sup> Two series of works are particularly worthy to cite. *By the rivers of Babylon*, which consists of the following works: *Babiron no nagare no hotori nite*, 『バビロンの流れのほとりにて』, 1957, *Nagare no hotori nite*, 『流れのほとりにて』, 1959, *Jōmon no katawara nite*, 『城門のかたわらにて』, 1963, *Sabaku ni mukatte*, 『砂漠に向かって』, 1970, *Arano ni mizu ha wakite*, 『荒野に水は湧きて』, 1979 (posthumous). Another group of essay consists of *Harukanaru nōtorudamu*, 『遥かなるノートル・ダム』, 1967 (Price of Japan's Ministry of Culture, 1968), *Tabi no sora no shitade*, 『旅の空の下で』, 1969, *Kigi ha hikari wo abite*, 『木々は光を浴びて』, 1972, *Tōzakarū nōtoru damu*, 『遠ざかるノートル・ダム』, 1976 (posthumous).

<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie ?*, Les Editions de Minuit, 1991

Regardless, by today standards, Mori was a philosophe, since he did specialize in French philosophy in university, taught it as an assistant professor in the University of Tôkyô, and wrote many papers and books on the subject. It was also his lifetime interest. But we can say that what really makes Mori a philosophe is the dedication to his philosophical reflection and ideas. He never gave up thinking about culture, thought, humankind and the world, and it was clearly an attitude that reminds us of the ancient philosophy, that is philosophy as a morale, Stoicism in particular, in which thought is almost a religious matter that engages all the self.

Even so, Mori's philosophical reflections, although matured through the cultural comparison between Europe and Japan, lack the objectivity that could have made them really valuable in human sciences and particularly in cross-cultural studies. This is the matter of this paper, to make clear the limitations of Mori's philosophy and bring psychology as a tool of reflection for Mori's "experience".

## **2) The problem of ethnocentrism in Mori's "keiken/taiken"**

In "keiken", Mori viewed the "experience" of individuals in an ideal society, where individuals are free and responsible, opposed to each other while linked by a social contract. This "keiken" originates in doubt, possess the principles of Reason (cogito and auto-criticism) and Faith (belief), and is opened to what is heterogenous of it. "Taiken" on the contrary, is the "experience" in a community united by blood or race, where individuals are not really separated from each other but rather are defined relative to one another; as in a family, where the child makes the mother and in return the child is defined by having parents, that is, they aren't independent individuals.

With the "keiken/taiken" dichotomy, Mori succeeded in translating some of the essence of French classical philosophy, that is to say some fundamental part of French culture (at least the part represented by Descartes, Pascal and Bergson, and not unrelated to existentialism), not only into his own subjective framework but also into Japanese. In other words, he managed a profound translation of thought between the two cultures.

Unfortunately, what was self-criticism in the mind of Descartes, Pascal, and Bergson, and aimed at the dogmatism that was (and still is) everywhere in society in general (or French society in particular), became in Mori the matter of a com-

parison of France and Japan, where “keiken” and “taiken” are now separated and respectively given as representative of France and Japan. Thus, France is viewed as a society constituted by free and responsible individuals, while Japan is a community of non-individuals where freedom and responsibility, that is to say subjectivity, doesn’t exist.

Contrary to the intentions of Descartes, Pascal, and Bergson to show the way to teach the reasons for people to be more open-minded, Mori condemned the Japan that couldn’t and wouldn’t be like the West. Although he wasn’t the only one at the time, the fact Mori stayed out of Japan from 1950 to 1966 (returning only once in 1955 to divorce), and didn’t see the tremendous changes of the country that occurred after 1955, can partly explain why he maintained this critical discourse. Meanwhile, Japan was on the road to becoming the “number one” economy, and intellectuals were starting to reevaluate Japanese culture with more confidence and self-esteem<sup>3</sup>.

Unlike the character from Aesops’ fable, *The Man and the Lion*, Mori turned the unfair comparison of Japan and the West (or France) to his own country’s disadvantage. At the time of his departure in 1950, Mori carried with him Japan’s intellectual climate, with its overriding postwar negativity against Japanese culture; and his negative attitude only grew stronger in France as a sort of negative “cultural reaffirmation” (Dan Matsumoto, *Culture and Psychology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2000).

As mentioned above, this attitude of negativity was proclaimed by Japanese intellectuals at the time of Mori’s departure from Japan. Sociologist Aoki Tamotsu describes the atmosphere surrounding Japanese intellectuals directly after the loss of Japan in the Pacific War, and while some were Marxists and others Modernists, all shared the same fundamental view and criticized Japan for its pre-modern, irrational, undemocratic elements and feudal rests:

The way of “positioning Japan” in the world “since the Meiji period” has been accomplished by Japanese “intellectuals” – they defined the place of Japanese society and culture by opposing it to the West=American society’s model of “modernization” and “democratization” – This was emphasized

---

<sup>3</sup> Aoki Tamotsu 青木保, *Nihonbunkaron no henyô* 『「日本文化論」の変容』, Chûôbunko, 1999.

once again in postwar Japan, as their “worldview” set during the war which had placed the “race of Yamato” as the superior race in the world and had labeled the “English and American barbarians” as inferior, was reversed again, this time urging [Japan] to admit the “specificity” of the “negatively (否定的) and inferiority” of its society.<sup>4</sup>

The reason that can explain Mori’s despair is that he considered the passage from “taiken” to “keiken” impossible. It is also an idea inspired by French culture and the idea of “disproportion” (which appears in Descartes, Pascal, and Bergson)<sup>5</sup>, and which is surely to be connected in a larger view with the Judeo-Christian’s tradition of the revealed religion, which has itself influenced French culture (and the West to some extent).

Moreover, Mori’s ethnocentrism is clearly to be paralleled with the opposition between “civilization” and “culture”, where only civilization (= the West) is universal. This is an idea that matured in the French Enlightenment period (eighteenth century), and needless to say, is still vividly living in French republicanism. The connection of Mori with this ideology of Enlightenment is clear:

When I say civilization, I mean a culture which contains at least in a sense a universality, like Greek civilization, Roman civilization, Byzantine civilization, Tang civilization or Gothic civilization of the Middle-Ages. Accordingly, France gave birth to a civilization.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, “thought” (思想) itself is regarded as European property:

Actually, thought constitutes the essential part of European civilization, and because there is clearly the consciousness that thought is European themselves, consciously or even unconsciously, the possession or the absence of

---

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>5</sup> See Laurent Rauber, “Mori Arimasa no ‘Keiken no tetsugaku’ ni okeru eikyô to sôzô” 「森有正の『経験の哲学』における影響と創造」, in *Ritsumeikan gengo bunka kenkyû* 「立命館言語文化研究」, v. 28, n. 3, 2017, p. 221-231.

<sup>6</sup> Mori Arimasa 森有正, *Babiron no nagare no hotori nite* 『バビロンの流れのほとりにて』, in *Mori Arimasa zenshû* 『森有正全集』, v. 1, Chikuma shobô, 1978, p. 20.

thought is, in fact, a marker to distinguish Europe from what is not Europe.<sup>7</sup>

We can see that Mori's comparison legitimates a quite ethnocentric and biased conception:

What is important is that those possibilities are on the side of the West and not on the side of the aforementioned Eastern civilization, and it should not be missed at any price.<sup>8</sup>

Katayama Kyôichi, a Japanese writer who seems to share this point of view, tells us more about this despair. For Katayama, "[Mori] became able to see objectively, from Europe [we underline], Japan and Japanese people, and from that moment, he was still gripped by a feeling of despair for Japan and Japanese people who were reflected in his eyes"<sup>9</sup>, adding, "If you stand in front of the Collège de France and you think about Japan, it is impossible not to feel some wretchedness."<sup>10</sup> Katayama continues:

I think that all Japanese have already felt more or less an impression of inferiority and despair facing European civilization. Even today, we tend to say the exact opposite of the West by emphasizing Japanese Buddhist art against Christian religious art, Japanese woodblock prints against modern paintings, Hôryûji against Notre-Dame, Murasaki Shikibu against Proust. In fact, by the composition of comparison or contrast, we try to land on our feet in the singularity and the uniqueness of Japanese culture and tradition. By giving up, by falling in with it somehow and making things vague, we deflect the problem.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> *Keiken to shisô* 『経験と思想』, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

<sup>8</sup> Mori Arimasa, *Nagare no hotori nite* 『流れのほとりにて』, in *Mori Arimasa zenshû* 『森有正全集』, v. 1, *op. cit.*, p. 292.

<sup>9</sup> Katayama Kyôichi 片山恭一, *Doko e mukatte shinu ka* 『どこへ向かって死ぬか』, NHK shuppan, 2010, p. 127.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>11</sup> Katayama Kyôichi, "Mori Arimasa" 『森有正』, in *Kodawari jinbutsu den* 『こだわり人物伝』, v. 5, n.11, NHK shuppan, 2009, p. 110.

To sum up, Mori subscribed to the stereotype opposing the individualistic society of the West versus the collectivistic society of Japan, which was at the time regarded as the reasoning behind the superiority of the West.

Now, however, it is accepted as fact that each society or culture encourages the creation of its own particular self-construct, for example by giving value on one side to “socially disengaged emotions” and on the other to “socially engaged emotions”, and thus demonstrating that the above-mentioned stereotype may be utilized by both sides in a variety of ways to justify the superiority of their values. However, a number of studies have also suggested that the Japanese could be in fact be judged equally individualistic or perhaps even more so if tested on criteria that are more meaningful in regard to Japanese society. They also reveal that the interrelated (interpersonal) and isolated (independent) aspects of the “self” are intertwined, and are both important in the development of a “mature self”.<sup>12</sup>

Mori tried to view Japan from a French perspective (and why not?), but there was a fundamental problem of ethnocentrism in his view (without even mentioning other problems like the false “equivalence” (Matsumoto’s term), in the comparison between France and Japan, where France, Europe and the West are typically blurred all together). We will see the consequences of such a prejudice.

### 3) “Experience” as the universal human reality

Akiyama Shun perceives a problematic point while reading Mori, and especially *Tôzakarû Nôtoru-Damu*: “experience”, being of the same kind for any individual (i.e. universal), expresses itself at the same time in different cultural models that are quite different from each other, and lead Mori to talk about a “Japanese experience” and an “European experience”. It seems then there is both “experience as an elementary principle of all human experience, and [different] experience in Europe and Japan”<sup>13</sup>. From one perspective, there is a “human experience” (universal experience), and from another perspective, the opposition between European experience and Japanese experience, namely the dichotomy “keiken/taiken”, but it seems, and it is the point of this paper, that Mori didn’t make clear enough

---

<sup>12</sup> See David Matsumoto, *Culture and Psychology*, Wadsworth, 2000, chap. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Akiyama Shun 秋山駿, “Experience is the ground for life” [経験こそ生きることの根底], *Mori Arimasa’s complete works*, v. III, Annex n° 4, p. 18.

the separation of these two perspectives, associating more or less “experience” on the universal level and “keiken” (as a proper European experience), thus blurring the difference between an universal fact and culturally defined values.

From now on, however, we will consider only this universal “experience” (as separated from the other level and thus European experience). Mori writes:

Descartes, the father of modern rationalism, has separated the domains of mind and matter distinctly. Rationalism was established when the dimension of the mind, which control pure concepts and logic, and the dimension of the matter which is the object of science, was separated. But then, Descartes left in a summary way the methodological research of logic and science about “man”, where mind and matter are bound and mixed. He found out after that there is only experience to guide man. And one can only grasp the principles and the structure of that experience a posteriori. Experience cannot be investigated methodologically. What I call “experience” is essentially that.<sup>14</sup>

If Descartes didn’t pursue his research on “experience”, as Mori puts it, it is clearly because it can’t be approached with satisfying scientific methods (by which all science is bound to study one homogenous dimension or object, and “experience” is something too heterogenous to study as such). In addition, for the philosophe of La Flèche, experience isn’t reality, the latter to be rather objectively inherent to “ideas”. This is the paradoxical point in the thought of Mori, as we pointed out previously, to attribute himself a conceptual inheritance from Descartes even though their thoughts seem quite divergent from the beginning<sup>15</sup>. As for Mori in *Experience and Thought* (*Keiken to shisô*, 『経験と思想』) for example:

It was the discovery that I, my entourage, Japan, the international scene, everything was an experience that includes them all. Let me repeat – I’m

---

<sup>14</sup> Maruyama Masao 丸山正雄, Kinoshita Junji 木下順二, Mori Arimasa, “Experience, Individual, Society” 「経験・個人・社会」, in *Tenbô* 『展望』, Chikuma shobô, Jan. 1968, p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> See Laurent RAUBER, “Le paradoxe de Mori Arimasa à propos de l’expérience”, in *Ritsumeikan gengo bunka kenkyû* 『立命館言語文化研究』, v. 28, n. 1, 2016, p. 291-302 (in French).

not at all saying it was *my* experience. It means that for me, *reality* itself is *experience*, and in return, *experience is reality* itself.<sup>16</sup>

...

But the fact that reality itself is experience was in me since the beginning, I think.<sup>17</sup>

We have already mentioned that this sentence is very similar to the words of Nishida Kitarô in *Zen no kenkyû*.<sup>18</sup> They share together the understanding of “experience” as the fundamental human reality, and since Nishida is influenced by the Japanese Zen tradition, Mori is closer to the Japanese thought that he described himself. Notably, he sometimes talks about “place” (*basho*) of “experience”, a term which reminds us of Nishida.<sup>19</sup>

Both of them understand universal “experience” as something unknowable by science (that is to say neither predictable nor explainable by concepts or words or measures); it is something that has a “chimerical appearance”, which undergoes transformation, and which is revealed to us a posteriori. In other words, “experience” is unintelligible as such, although it constitutes the true personal portion of each individual.

And this is based on the particularity of “experience” which is an extremely embarrassing thing that refuse all explanation, but without which the ultimate essence of the individual is fundamentally lost.<sup>20</sup>

Elsewhere, we can read Mori’s developing thought:

---

<sup>16</sup> *Keiken to shisô, op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18

<sup>18</sup> “Le paradoxe de Mori Arimasa à propos de l’expérience”, *op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> Mori nevertheless affirmed his difference with Nishida. As we explained in “Le paradoxe de Mori Arimasa à propos de l’expérience” (*op. cit.*), the finality of Mori’s and Nishida’s philosophy are different and even opposed. That is to say, as also shown by Morita Mime, the formation of an individualistic self is at the center of Mori’s philosophy, contrarily to Nishida (Morita Mime, “Mori and Kierkegaard: experience and existence”, in *Kierkegaard and Japanese thought*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Mori Arimasa, *Harukana nôtoru damu* 『遥かなノートルダム』, in *Mori Arimasa zenshû*, v. 3, Chikuma shobô, 1979, p. 78

By the expression “virginity of sensations”, I mean a direct contact with Things, without the intermediary of concepts, proposition or ideas. The recognition of this contact itself is what I call “experience”, and “sensations” are not only part of “experience”<sup>21</sup>.

In this passage, Mori states clearly that “experience” consists in the acknowledgement of the direct contact between human and things and that the content of “experience” consists in the sensations themselves, our feelings, a change in ourselves.

Mori also rarely evokes the “inner solicitations” (内的促し), a feeling or urge to do something, as the origin of “experience”. “Inner solicitations” initiate the growth of an “experience”, which in turn, through the process of “definition” (定義), i.e. to give fresh meaning to words with our own “experience”, become an original “thought”.

#### 4) To understand Mori’s “experience” with Vygotsky

Let’s pause here and talk about Lev Vygotsky, who from my perspective is a key thinker to understand Mori. Mori didn’t actually know the works of Vygotsky, notably because Vygotsky wasn’t translated in the West before Mori’s death, and more importantly, because Mori rejected psychology, something unbelievable not only today when talking about studies of culture and human being, but also in his time. Nevertheless, Mori and Vygotsky have some points in common.

Firstly, Vygotsky was a psychologist who read many philosophers and writers and cited them in the very heart of his psychological studies. Vygotsky was also a literature critic, and his first major work was about art. Thus, Descartes, Bergson and Dostoevsky are the few of a many that occupied a central interest to both Mori and Vygotsky. Secondly, Vygotsky and Mori were “outsiders” respectively in psychology and philosophy. Both were more interested in the methodological process of their domain, in other words, about what should be the subject of the study in their field. Last but not least, Vygotsky’s lifelong preoccupation was to understand

---

<sup>21</sup> Mori Arimasa, *Kigi ha hikari wo abite* 『木々は光を浴びて』, in *Mori Arimasa zenshū*, v. 5, Chikuma shobō, 1979, p. 47.

Man as a whole (not specifically mental illness or typical psychological issues, for example), and particularly the process of thought, as with Mori.

The main ideas Vygotsky exposed in *Thought and Language*<sup>22</sup> can be summarized as follows: thought and verbal speech (use of language) are in an intertwined relation but are not the same thing; thought finds not its expression, but its realization in speech, that is to say, verbal expression (in a phrase or a book) isn't a mirror of thought, but the thought made flesh, i.e. "thought is born through words".

As anyone can agree, that process from thought to speech is a difficult one. For Vygotsky, "Thought must first pass through meanings and only then through words". Thought is neither meaning nor words (oral or written language), but there is a mediation between thought and words: word meanings. However, thought itself originates in "motivation" (e.g. desires, needs, interests, emotions). Thus, we can establish a similitude of structure between the models of Vygotsky and Mori as shown in the table below:

For Vygotsky	motivation	thought	word meanings	speech
For Mori	inner solicitations or sensations	experience	definition	thought

We can see now that Mori's understanding of the process from sensations to expression in words has fundamentally the same structure as Vygotsky's. Although they recognized that society and culture influence the individual through language, they believed the individual retains fundamental independence by means of his singular "inner solicitations" (Mori) or "motivation" (Vygotsky).

## 5) The translation of experience into language

We have mentioned Vygotsky words, "thought is born through words", and the way he describes "speech" as the "realization" of "thought" ("experience" in the case of Mori). Vygotsky says also that thought has its own grammar, different from

---

<sup>22</sup> Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (Revised and expanded edition), The MIT Press, 2012.

the one of a peculiar language. That means that for Vygotsky, experience to language is a *transformation* from non-verbal feelings to speech or writings, through meaning and words.

On the contrary, Mori considered the passage from “experience” to “thought”, the step he calls also “definition”, as a “*transparement*” (透明化).

Thus, Mori held the same confusion as Emile Benveniste for example: comparing Japanese and French, he viewed the multiplicity of personal pronouns used depending on the relation between the locutor and the interlocutor in Japanese (“watashi”, “ore”, “boku”, ...) as the proof of the non-existence of a one true “self” (each pronoun standing for a “relative self”), while in French the one and only personal pronouns for oneself, “je” (“I”), stood for him as the marker of a “unique self” thus the “ego”. It didn’t come to his mind that words aren’t just superposed to thoughts, and that it is not because a language use many different personal pronouns or none in the sentence, that the person who speaks do not have a clear consciousness of himself<sup>23</sup>.

Mori saw in “je” the direct and transparent expression of the one and true “ego”, when the various pronouns “watashi/ore/boku/...” stood for him as the proof for the non-existence of a true self.

*Mori considered the translation from “experience” to “thought”, of feelings into words, as a process of transparency, and not as a process of transformation.*

From this point, it was easy to conclude that “keiken” and its “I” stood for the true “experience”, and “taiken” only for a deformation, in which one cannot trace back an independent individual “I=ego”, thus condemning Japanese society or culture as a whole.

In fact, it was just his mistake, to superpose or confound the universal “ego” in “experience” with the word “je” (“I”) in written or spoken “thought” (or in Vygotsky’s terms, to confound the “I” of “thought” with the “I” of “speech”, the two belonging to different grammars).

That is why in Mori, the word “keiken” stands sometimes for something universal (transcending cultures), and sometimes for something particular (found in

---

<sup>23</sup> For Benveniste, one has to say “I” to be an “I”. Emile Benveniste, “De la subjectivité dans le langage”, in *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, v. I, Gallimard, 1996, p. 260.

French culture), as Akiyama remarked.

## 6) Conclusion

In this paper, we showed the ethnocentrism underlying his cultural comparison between Japan and the West, which is biased by ideological prejudices and limited by a lack of a psychological description of the relation between culture and individual.

Mori has concentrated his reflection on the problem of “experience”, then compared two types or forms of it, “keiken” and “taiken”, which he opposed to each other, as the intelligentsia of the Enlightenment did with “civilization” and “culture”.

It is a shame Mori didn’t adopt a more relativistic and psychologically informed cross-cultural perspective.

The transparent process from “experience” to “thought”, that Mori sought in European “keiken”, opposed with the deformed “taiken” of Japanese culture, appears to be irrevocably erroneous, just as the distinction between “keiken” and “taiken”, that is to say “civilization” and “culture”.