

Yuho Hisayama

Decision-making in a self-evident atmosphere

Reconsidering the Japanese word *kūki* (空気)

Abstract

This paper examines the Japanese word kūki (air or atmosphere) that can influence the decisions of human subjects within it. Drawing on two examples from Natsume Sōseki's novel Kokoro, it explores the fundamental characteristics of kūki that, as a self-evident atmosphere, latently affects the subjects. Then, revisiting Shichihei Yamamoto's critique of the misuse of atmospheric power, this paper proposes a new typology of kūki and points to key cross-cultural tasks for the future of Atmospheric Studies.

Keywords

Kūki, Self-evidence, Natsume Sōseki, Yamamoto Shichihei, Cross-cultural Atmospheric Studies

Received: 27/02/2025

Approved: 06/05/2025

Editing by: Ermelinda Rodillosso

© 2025 The Author. Open Access published under the terms of the CC-BY-4.0.

k0121712+hisayama@gsuite.kobe-u.ac.jp (Kobe University)

1. Introduction

The Japanese word *kūki* (空気) refers not only to the physical substance of “air”, but also to a “mood” or “atmosphere”, which can, by enveloping a human subject, influence his or her decisions (Hisayama 2015). This kind of atmospheric power may be compared, for example, to the English psychological term “groupthink”, first theorized by Irving L. Janis in a short essay, prior to his seminal work on this subject (1982 [1972]), being inspired by George Orwell’s neologisms such as “doublethink.” There, Janis writes:

1984. I use the term groupthink as a quick and easy way to refer to the mode of thinking that persons engage in when concurrence-seeking becomes so dominant in a cohesive ingroup that it tends to override realistic appraisal of alternative courses of action. Groupthink is a term of the same order as the words in the newspeak vocabulary George Orwell used in his dismaying world of 1984. In that context, groupthink takes on an invidious connotation. Exactly such a connotation is intended, since the term refers to a deterioration in mental efficiency, reality testing and moral judgments as a result of group pressures. The symptoms of groupthink arise when the members of decision-making groups become motivated to avoid being too harsh in their judgements of their leaders’ or their colleagues’ ideas. They adopt a soft line of criticism, even in their own thinking. At their meetings, all the members are amiable and seek complete concurrence on every important issue, with no bickering or conflict to spoil the cozy, “we-feeling” atmosphere. (Janis 1971: 84)

The “cozy, ‘we-feeling’ atmosphere” mentioned at the end of this passage bears a strong resemblance to the Japanese concept of *kūki*. Notably, also in his concluding nine “recommendations for preventing groupthink”, Janis uses atmospheric expressions such as encouraging the “open airing of objections and doubts” (1971: 89). Yet, if every decision is taken while within a certain atmosphere, then no decision is completely free from this decisive atmospheric influence. By focusing on the Japanese term *kūki*, this paper reconsiders the problematic of “the cozy, ‘we-feeling’ atmosphere” from the perspective of cross-cultural Atmospheric Studies.

2. *Kūki* in the novel *Kokoro* by Natsume Sōseki¹

The term *kūki* is a relatively recent addition to modern Japanese vocabulary. It began to be used toward the end of the Edo-period (around the mid-19th century) as a translation of the European term for physical air – at first, apparently, as the direct translation of the Dutch word “lucht/lugt” (*Nihon Kokugo Daijiten* 2001: 751). Shortly thereafter, following the so-called Meiji Restoration in 1868, the term started to take on a broader connotation, referring to the decisive atmospheric power.

This chapter investigates the main characteristics of this Japanese word by examining two passages from one of the most widely read novels in Japanese literature, *Kokoro* (1914) by Natsume Sōseki 夏目漱石 (born Natsume Kin’nosuke; 1867-1916). Particular attention is paid to how the novel has been rendered in English and German translation. This novel tells the story of the evolving relationship between a student, the first-person narrator, and his “teacher,” called *sensei* in Japanese. The latter is burdened by a long-standing secret concerning his involvement in the death of an old friend, identified only as “K.” It is only in the novel’s final chapter, which is also the teacher’s testament, that he finally reveals the secret story of his relationship to “K”.

The first-person narrator of *Kokoro* had long aspired to study in Tokyo – a goal he has now achieved. Towards the beginning of the book, he returns to Tokyo after a brief visit to his hometown in the countryside. The following passage² (hereafter referred to as “Example 1”) depicts the moment of his return. Notably, the original Japanese version includes the word *kūki*, whose treatment in translation reveals important nuances:

I intended of course to visit Sensei when I returned to Tokyo [...]. A few days after my return, however, I began to feel less inclined to do so. The atmosphere of the great city affected me a great deal, bringing back memories. Every time I saw a student in the streets, I found myself awaiting the coming of the new academic year with a feeling of hope and tense excitement. For a while, I forgot all about Sensei. (Natsume 2000: 8)

¹ The content of this second chapter partly overlaps with that of my previous paper in German (Hisayama 2015).

² The Japanese original (Natsume 1994a: 11-12) reads: 私は無論先生を訪ねる積で東京へ帰つて来た。[...] 然し帰つて二日三日と経つうちに、鎌倉に居た時の気分が段々薄くなつて来た。さうして其上に彩られる大都会の空気が、記憶の復活に伴ふ強い刺激と共に、濃く私の心を染め付けた。私は往來で学生の顔を見るたびに新しい学年に対する希望と緊張とを感じた。私はしばらく先生の事を忘れた。

Als ich nach Tokyo zurückkehrte, hatte ich selbstverständlich vor, ihn wiederzusehen [...]. Doch schon wenige Tage nach meiner Ankunft hatte meine Zuneigung für ihn erheblich an Intensität verloren. Zudem faszinierte mich das verwirrende Treiben der Großstadt, alle möglichen Erinnerungen stiegen wieder in mir auf, und ich überließ mich den Anregungen und Verlockungen des Alltags. Sah ich auf der Straße Mitschüler und Studenten, so erfüllte mich das neue Schuljahr mit Hoffnungen und Spannung. So geschah es, dass ich den Sensei für eine Weile vergaß. (Natsume 1994b: 11-2)

In the English translation, the word *kūki* is translated with the term “atmosphere”, whereas the German version opts for the striking term “Treiben der Großstadt”, which could be translated into English, for example, as the confusing hustle and bustle of the big city. The word “Treiben”, derived from the transitive verb *treiben*, would mean “to drive” or “to compel” something. This choice captures an important nuance: for, indeed, the atmosphere in this context can be regarded as something that has a mighty, affective, and “compelling” effect on people. The air, in the sense of *kūki*, has such a strong atmospheric power that is able to affect and “compel” the first-person narrator.

This passage also makes it clear that the power of *kūki* can be regarded as autonomous. *Kūki* is not simply the inner mental state of a subject, but rather the in-between atmosphere that envelops individuals and exerts influence over them. Such a conception allows for a displacement of agency: the narrator’s failure to visit his teacher, despite having intended to do so, can be ascribed not to personal forgetfulness or weakness, but to the atmospheric pull of the *kūki*. In the logic of the Japanese expression in this passage, the burden of responsibility for this forgottenness falls not on the individual, i. e. the first-person narrator, but on the *kūki*.

In my previous work (Hisayama 2015), I tried to understand *kūki* as a kind of *quasi-thing* (Halbding), drawing on the neo-phenomenological vocabulary of Hermann Schmitz³. While the idea of quasi-thing can be helpful in regard to *kūki*, since this term denotes such a quasi-thing-like atmospheric power, there is a further character to *kūki*, which I would like to stress in this paper: much like physical air, *kūki* is so fundamental and self-evident that it surrounds our daily lives, frequently unnoticed, yet constantly there. This distinguishes it from other examples of quasi-things in

³ I had also tried to analyze the Japanese word *kehai* from a similar perspective (Hisayama 2014: 62-75).

Schmitz's system, such as strong winds or the voices of others, which typically become perceptible the moment we encounter them. *Kūki*, by contrast, tends to elude us.

Due to this character, the *kūki* of the present moment is difficult to objectify. Interestingly, in example 1, Sōseki also uses the term *kūki* precisely to describe an atmosphere that feels unfamiliar to his protagonists. The first-person narrator has become able to perceive the “air” of the new academic year in Tokyo, because that *kūki* has become somehow alien to him, since he had left the city for some time. In this sense, we might describe such a *kūki* as an atmosphere of “natural self-evidence” (cf. Blankenburg 2012).

The second example from *Kokoro* comes from the teacher's testament, in which he, the *sensei*, recounts his youth and reflects on a former classmate of him who was known as a notorious troublemaker, often involved in fights. This passage⁴ (hereafter referred to as “Example 2”) reads:

The police were ready to report him to the college [...]. You went to college in more gentle days, and so you must feel contempt for such rough doings. I also, when I look back on those days, feel that we were all pretty silly. (Natsume 2000: 131-2)

Die Polizei setzte sich mit der Universität in Verbindung [...]. Da Sie in der viel kultivierteren Atmosphäre unserer Zeit aufgewachsen sind, verurteilen Sie natürlich solche Ausschreitungen, und im Grunde empfinde ich genauso wie Sie. (Natsume 1994b: 198-9)

In the English translation by Edwin McClellan, the word *atmosphere* does not appear, while Oskar Benl's German version explicitly employs the term “Atmosphäre”. The English translator added instead a short conditional clause – “when I look back on those days” – even though this is not directly present in the Japanese original. Nevertheless, this editorial choice may be justified: indeed, it was likely thanks to this temporal difference between present and past atmospheric conditions that the *sensei* became able to perceive the *kūki* of his earlier life. More generally, due to the self-evident character of *kūki*, we need some spatio-temporal gap to become aware of the *kūki* of the here and now. Conversely, those who remain within a particular place or time may take the “air” they are immersed in

⁴ The Japanese original (Natsume 1994a: 161) reads: 其男はもう少しで警察から学校へ照会される所でした。[...] 斯んな乱暴な行為を、上品な今の空気のなかに育ったあなた方に聞かせたら、定めて馬鹿々々しい感じを起すでせう。私も実際馬鹿々々しく思ひます。

for granted – consciously or unconsciously.

This latent *kūki* can foster a sense of common belonging to certain situations in a so-called “affective society” (cf. Kuwayama 2023: 220-7). Often, by sharing this common but hidden “air” almost unconsciously, we can experience a collective “atmospheric we” feeling aroused by felt-bodily resonance – a phenomenon Tonino Griffero (2021: 85-103) has investigated in relation to new phenomenology. While the sense of common belonging to the city of Tokyo is vividly expressed in example 1, the key point is not about Tokyo itself but about the “feeling of hope and tense excitement” associated with the beginning of the academic year, i.e. a particularly emotionally charged situation for students. In this example, one could read the hidden, perhaps even unconscious desire of the protagonist not only to be surrounded, but also to be immersed in this *kūki*, in order to belong to the special “air” of the new academic year. Then, out of his desire for this “air”, he forgets about his plan to visit his teacher.

Such a hidden desire to belong to the *kūki* can also be found in example 2. This passage juxtaposes the uncultivated *kūki* of the past with the more refined and gentler *kūki* of the present. However, the teacher’s final remark – “I feel that we were all pretty silly” – could be retracting his earlier critique. Beneath this nostalgic reflection lies an admission: he, too, once belonged to that common, “pretty silly” atmosphere; he also used to belong to the common mood of the day.

To support this analysis, it would be important to note that the Japanese word *kūki* itself is not inherently plural. As Corbett (2000: 297) notes: “German and English are [...] similar in that number is an obligatory category. But in many languages, like Japanese [...], the plural would be used if the speaker wanted to draw special attention to the quantity, but is not obligatory”. In the case of *kūki*, the grammatical form indicates “either that the noun is singular or that number is not important” (Corbett 2000: 74). In this context, it would be better to say that the number itself is not determinable. (In a phenomenological sense, it may also be true for the English words “air”, “wind” or “atmosphere”, and for many corresponding aerial terms in other Indo-European languages.) This quantitative ambiguity characteristic of the Japanese language could play an essential role in reconsidering the *kūki* phenomenon: from this perspective, the *kūki*, understood as the self-evident basis of our life, would be neither singular nor plural, since it is also beyond the numerical distinction between “I” and “we.”

This point about number can be linked to the unique original character of the notion of *ki/qi* (*ki* is the Japanese version of the Chinese *qi*). The

word *kūki* consists of two components: *kū* (空), which can mean “emptiness”, “void” or “sky”; and *ki* (気), which is almost identical in origin to the Chinese term *qi*, with connotations such as “air”, “breath”, “life-energy”, and “atmosphere”. Here I would like to stress the second component. Both spiritual and material, *ki* escapes the dichotomy of inside and outside; it precedes prior to the differentiations between self and others, between subject and object (cf. Hisayama 2014).

Reflecting these broader connotations of *ki/qi*, the term *kūki* can be understood in two contrasting ways. On the one hand, it can be seen as an expression of the atmospheric copula that connects people and creates an intimate human collective common: thus, the atmospheric *kūki* would be the foundation of our sense of belonging to a community, aligning with one of the earliest theories of atmosphere proposed by Hubertus Tellenbach, who traced the atmospheric roots of belonging to the olfactory image of the “nest” and/or “home” (Tellenbach 1968: 52). On the other hand, however, *kūki* could also correspond to something akin to “groupthink” or even to a subtle, conscious or unconscious, form of totalitarianism: a common atmosphere, *kūki*, so powerful that it suppresses individual freedom and absorbs personal agency into a collective unconscious.

3. Yamamoto’s *kūki*-study and the typology of *kūki*

Emphasizing the more negative potential of *kūki* as a decisive atmospheric force, the Japanese essayist Shichihei Yamamoto (1921-1991) wrote a book titled *Kūki no kenkyū* (A Study on *kūki*), which remains a classic treatment of this topic, despite its non-academic style⁵. In this work, Yamamoto tries to understand *kūki* as an absolute, almost God-like atmospheric power that has profoundly influenced Japanese society, both during and after the Second World War (Yamamoto 1977: 76-94, cf. Kuwayama 2023: 215-9).

As a characteristic example of the usage of the word *kūki*, Yamamoto cites a postwar reflection statement by the Vice Admiral of the Imperial Japanese Navy, Jizaburō Ozawa (1886-1966), regarding the Battleship Yamato’s reckless final sortie: “I then thought and still today think that the general *kūki* has been such that the suicide mission was justified” (Yamamoto 1977: 12). Yamamoto comments: “On one hand, all those who call

⁵ All the English translation of Yamamoto’s work here are my own.

the Yamato's sortie reckless had detailed data, i.e. clear reasons, for declaring it reckless. On the other hand, those who claimed that it should be justified had no such data or evidence at all, and their justification is based solely on *kūki*" (Yamamoto 1977: 12). According to Yamamoto, in this account, *kūki* overrode rational deliberation; the primary concern was not logical reasoning but conformity to the prevailing "general" atmosphere.

Yamamoto attributes this phenomenon to what he considers a cultural – or more precisely, religious – feature of the "Japanese" mindset. In his view, the *kūki* capable of influencing the decision-making process is created by the "mistake" of confusing a relative "divine" power, i.e. the *kūki*, with the absolute God (esp. Yamamoto 1977: 73-6). Yamamoto claimed that in Japan, *kūki* can more readily assume an absolute, even divine status (Yamamoto 1977: 73-9, 84-5), due to the peculiarity of Japanese "animism:" while in an animistic belief system, such as Japanese Shintoism, each "animated" thing is imagined as a "source" of sacred power, in monotheistic religions, these animistic forces are "relativized" in relation to the absolute oneness of the one God (Yamamoto 1977: 76-9, 84-5). For this reason, in the latter cultures, Yamamoto claims, an absolute *kūki* can arise only with a certain difficulty, and even if it does, it is quickly relativized and dissipated. On the contrary, in Japan, where such a monotheistic religion has not become widespread, the power of the *kūki* can easily be regarded as God-like absolute or divine.

Yet, in my opinion, *kūki* should not solely be reduced to mere animistic idolatry or fetishism, as Yamamoto says (cf. also Yamamoto 1977: 40). Rather, it can also be characterized by the fact that the original "source" of its influence is sometimes quite difficult to identify and objectify. Like the air or atmosphere surrounding us, the *kūki* is just floating around without any clear origin and that is why it can be easily considered as self-evident, as we have seen in the previous sections.

It may therefore be possible to distinguish between two kinds of *kūki*. (1) One is the aura-like "air" that radiates from a certain thing or person, which is then regarded as the "source" of the *kūki*. As far as I understand, Yamamoto's primary concern is with this kind of *kūki*. This phenomenon closely resembles what Gernot Böhme (2013: 225-46) described as the atmospheric "ecstasies" of things, where these "things" can also be human beings, especially via their lived-bodily presence, as individual "sources" of their own atmospheric power. (2) The other is the *kūki* of a "place" (often called *ba no kūki* 場の空気 in Japanese). The Japanese term *ba* itself could be examined further within the framework of Atmospheric Studies, but for now it may be tentatively translated as "place." This

type of *kūki* does not have a clear original source but flows through and fills a certain “place”, such as an event, a meeting, or a conversation, even between just two people. In a few passages, Yamamoto also takes issue with this second type, i. e. the *kūki* of a “place”, arguing that – especially in Japan – decision-making often differs between what is said in formal discussions at official meetings and more candid exchanges in an izakaya-restaurant afterward (Yamamoto 1977, 82-3). What exerts an influence there is the atmosphere of the “place”.

Furthermore, by referring to the chapter 2 of this paper, we can classify the uses of *kūki* into two additional categories in terms of objectification: (A) *kūki* that is self-evident and difficult to objectify, and (B) *kūki* that has already – at least to some degree – been objectified but remains difficult to resist due to social pressure. The “air” in the sense of (A) can be transformed into (B) by any form of objectification. However, as the previous examples would suggest, (A) represents the original character of *kūki*. The Japanese idiom expression “to read the *kūki*” (*kūki wo yomu* 空気を読む), which is akin to the English expressions “to read the room” or “to read between the lines” by trying to sense the atmosphere, proves that the *kūki* is not always self-evident; one always needs to be able to “read” it. Once *kūki* has been read properly, then one may be able to resist its pressure: This would be the case of the type B. Resisting the type A is much more difficult, because in that case we are not (yet) aware of the air itself.

This gives us a simple typology of four types of *kūki*:

- (1-A) The aura-like, not (yet) objectified *kūki* of a thing.
- (1-B) The aura-like, objectified *kūki* of a thing.
- (2-A) The not (yet) objectified *kūki* of a “place”.
- (2-B) The objectified *kūki* of a “place”.

Seen in this way, Yamamoto seems to begin his theory with 1-A and seamlessly connect it with 1-B and 2-B. While he occasionally references 2-A, it does not seem to occupy a central place in his argument. In contrast, in Soseki’s novel, *Kokoro*, as we have seen, the use of *kūki* corresponds primarily to type 2-A.

Later discourses on *kūki*, relaying mainly on Yamamoto’s theory, have a tendency to deal mainly with 2-B. Drawing parallels with Noelle-Neumann’s (2001) theory of public opinion, Yōichi Itō (2006: 7) emphasizes the mentality of avoiding the risk of social sanctions as a key factor to explain the importance of *kūki*, arguing that its influence stems largely from

the fear of reprisal. But in the case of 2-A, such risks are not (yet) clearly perceived, and instead, the desire to belong to a shared situation, as seen in Sōseki's narrative, would likely be more significant. Ikeda (2013), too, has applied Yamamoto's discussion to contemporary Japanese social issues, naïvely regarding *kūki* as a specifically "Japanese" phenomenon. Meanwhile, Kōkami (2019) has introduced the slogan: "even if you read the *kūki*, do not follow it" in his bestselling book aimed at junior and senior high school students. As mentioned above, "reading the *kūki*" refers to the shift from 2-A to 2-B through an objectification of the *kūki* of the place, while "not following it" would only be possible when the *kūki* is regarded as 2-B.

To illuminate this categorization from another angle, Hermann Schmitz' definition of "situation" and "constellation" proves helpful. For Schmitz (2005), a "situation" is not composed of individual parts but is defined by its own coherence with a "chaotic multiplicity". According to his neo-phenomenological view, our experience always involves a more or less chaotic multiplicity formed by an undetermined mixture of identical and different parts in it. The conceptual counterpart of a "situation" is, for Schmitz, a "constellation", which is a collection of individual elements. Schmitz claims that traditional European ontology has basically been "constellationist", treating every situation – the world, culture, society etc. – as a mere aggregation of isolated elements, even when they in fact exhibit a more unified, situational character. From this perspective, *kūki* is clearly situational, since it consists of an inner chaotic dynamism rather than a simple aggregation of parts, and for this reason, it is difficult to grasp it within the framework of "constellationism". However, when *kūki* is objectified, as in type 1-B, it comes to resemble more or less a constellation. Similarly, if the *kūki* of a place is reduced to the sum of its observable components, then the *kūki* in the sense of 2-B can also be understood in a constellational manner.

Additionally it should be noted that Schmitz warned us of the risks associated with the process of objectification – in our case, transforming *kūki* from type A to B, by criticizing "the urge to ignore situations as far as possible and to live only in constellations [*der Drang [...] sich über Situationen möglichst hinwegzusetzen und nur noch in Konstellationen zu leben*]" (Schmitz 2005: 28-9). Due to the situational nature of the "air", the distinction between individuals within *kūki* itself remains ambiguous; therefore, the distinction between I and we also gets blurred. This aligns with the earlier observation that the word *kūki* resists categorization in terms of singular and plural. One might then say that people do not

merely “take part” in a group as individuals (in the sense of constellationism), but rather “immerse” themselves in an intimate “cozy, ‘we-feeling’ atmosphere” – namely, in a situation.

This feeling of intimacy can also be found in the work of Peter Sloterdijk, whose *Spheres* project begins with the pre-objective existence and archaic “preceding relationships” within the “bubble.” He quotes the following words from Gaston Bachelard’s *Poetics of Spaces* (*La Poétique de l'Espace*), a classic of the phenomenology of everyday life, as his motto: “The difficulty we had to overcome [...] would have been to keep us away from any geometric evidence. In other words, we had to start from a kind of intimacy of the round” (Sloterdijk 1998: 9). In a similar vein, Schmitz also remarks, by criticizing the “constellationism” of traditional European culture, on “the tendency to isolate and level off individuals by the dissolution of the implanting situations in favor of the supposed self-determination of each person [Die Tendenz zur Isolierung und Nivelierung der Individuen durch Auflösung implantierender Situationen zu Gunsten vermeintlicher Selbstbestimmung des Einzelnen]” (Schmitz 2005: 29).

And yet, there is always the risk, as noted above, of consciously or unconsciously falling victim to the power intrinsic to the common *kūki*, which would deprive us of our individual freedom. In order to being in a position to criticize the *kūki*, by reaching what Griffero calls an “atmospheric competence” (Griffero 2021: 96-103), without reverting to the modern conception of a “strong” subject (cf. Vattimo and Rovatti 2012 [1983]), we would need to further reconsider the diverse historical and cultural perspectives on both individuality and atmosphere.

4. A Cross-cultural outlook – Ki, *kūki* and *pneuma*

The main limitations of Yamamoto’s argument lie, in my opinion, in its cultural essentialism. His treatment of Japanese and Israeli/Jewish cultures is often simplistic, at times ideological, and based on broad generalizations supported by only a few examples. Nevertheless, Yamamoto himself acknowledges the possibility of expanding the discourse on *kūki* in a cross-cultural direction, stating that similar phenomena can be found not only in Japan but all over the world. One such parallel is the ancient Greek word *pneuma*. (While Yamamoto identifies its Latin counterpart as *anima*, *spiritus* would in fact be the more accurate term in light of the intellectual history of these ideas. Cf. Verbeke 1945, Putscher 1973, Boenke 2005). Yamamoto points out that *kūki* and *pneuma* are both invisible forces that

bind and control people, sometimes even placing them in states of religious ecstasy. Under their influence, individuals may lose their freedom of judgement, speech, and action – going so far as to make decisions that lead to their own destruction (Yamamoto 1977: 58-60), as seen in the well-known description of Pentecost (Acts 2: 1-31). In this lineage of ideas, *kūki* may also be compared with the supra-personal collective “spirit” denoted by the German word “Geist”, not only in the well-known *Zeitgeist*, but also in other composite terms such as *Volksgeist* or *Nationalgeist*.

From the standpoint of a comparative history of ideas (cf. Libbrecht 1990), the key issue may lie in the internalization and dematerialization of both *pneuma* (Verbeke 1945) and *ki* (Nakai 1995). Both concepts have undergone semantic shifts through more or less similar processes in the history of ideas, though at different intensities and speeds: in Europa, the idea of *pneuma* had lost its original association with breath by the time of Saint Augustine (Verbeke 1945), even if a few philosophers and poets have tried to revive the ancient roots of this word (Parisi 2023). In contrast, of the evolution of *ki* has been much more gradual, and even in modern Japanese usage, it still retains strong atmospheric connotations (Hisayama 2014, Kuwayama 2023). Before such philosophical transformations took place, both *pneuma* and *ki* arguably represented an atmospheric, respiratory, and somehow divine power.

It would be worth noting that a number of contemporary European and American thinkers – such as Jacob Taubes, Giorgio Agamben, David Abram, Lenart Škof, to name a few – have emphasized the importance of *pneuma* to overcome the narrow framework of modernity. At the same time, any revival of *pneuma* should be approached with caution to avoid regressing into an idealistic or nostalgic pre-Post-Modern framework (cf. Derrida 1987).

One of the key issues would be the relationship between the individual and the atmosphere in modernity. The Japanese philosopher Fumi Sakaguchi offers a helpful perspective here: “The clear emergence of the concept of the individual was both a blessing and a curse for Europe. In the Middle Ages, the problematic elements of this idea, especially the issues of isolation and closure, were kept at bay by the existence of a God who created and governed everything as the One, and by Aristotelianism, which the Middle Ages largely adopted” (Sakaguchi 1996: 273-4). She then poses a question about the present situation: “In the modern era, which has lost those two foundations, both the light and the shadow of individual thought have become apparent. Do we not live, in contempo-

rary philosophy, still within this conflict of its light and shadow?” (Sakaguchi 1996: 274).

This question seems more relevant than ever today. With the radical transformations of the technical conditions of human life – through virtual spaces on the internet, social media, the metaverse, or virtual reality – a “digitalized” and dematerialized, yet in a certain sense still atmospheric, *kūki* is influencing our daily lives more and more intensively as a latent, self-evident force that creates our sense of belonging, in an age when we are less and less sure about to which community, to which world, or to which reality we actually belong. In this context, further cross-cultural investigations of the word *kūki* may help open broader, far-reaching questions about how we might – and should – deal with both our individuality and the atmospheric powers that surround and condition us.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (KAKENHI Grant Numbers: 23K25271 and 23K00428, Core-to-Core Program Grant Number: JPJSCCA20250001). This essay is based on my following talks: (1) “First steps towards understanding *kūki*”. The International Symposium: “Our Dealings with the Invisible: On the Air as a Form of Commons”, at the University of Tokyo, 21. July 2024. (2) “Decisive Atmosphere, Decisive Moment: Rethinking the Japanese Words ‘*kūki*’, ‘*ki*’, and ‘*ke*’”. The 18th Sensibilia Colloquium, online talk, 19. September 2024.

Bibliography

- Blankenburg, W., *Der Verlust der natürlichen Selbstverständlichkeit* (1971), Berlin, Parodos, 2012.
- Boenke, M., *Körper, Spiritus, Geist. Psychologie vor Descartes*, München, Wilhelm Fink, 2005.
- Böhme, G., *Atmosphäre. Essays zur neuen Ästhetik* (1995), Berlin, Suhrkamp, 2013.
- Corbett, G., *Number*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2000.
- Derrida, J., *De l'esprit. Heidegger et la question*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 1987.
- Griffero, T., *The atmospheric “We”. Moods and collective feelings*, Milano, Mimesis International, 2021.
- Hisayama, Y., *Erfahrungen des ki. Leibessphäre, Atmosphäre, Pansphäre*, Freiburg und München, Karl Alber, 2014.

- Hisayama, Y., *Individuum und Atmosphäre. Überlegungen zum Distanzproblem am Beispiel des japanischen Wortes kūki*, in ed. M. Großheim et al., *Leib, Ort, Gefühl. Perspektiven der räumlichen Erfahrung*, Freiburg und München, Karl Alber, 2015, pp. 56-70.
- Ikeda, N., *Kūki no kōzō* [The Structure of kūki], Tokyo, Hakusuisha, 2013.
- Ito, Y., *Climate of opinion, kuuki, and democracy*, "Keio media communications research", n. 56 (2006), pp. 3-27 (in Japanese).
- Ito, Y., *Japanese Kuuki Theory*, in ed. S.W. Littlejohn, K.A. Foss et al., *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, Los Angeles, Sage, 2009, pp. 573-4.
- Janis, I.L., *Groupthink*, "Psychology Today", (nov. 1971), pp. 84-90.
- Janis, I.L., *Groupthink. Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes* (1972), New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1982.
- Kōkami, S., *Kūki wo yondemo shitagawanai* [Even if you read the kūki, do not follow it], Tokyo, Iwanami, 2019.
- Kuwayama, Y., *Ki (気), Fühlen und Empfinden: Eine linguistische Phänomenologie vorprädikativer Erfahrungsformen*, Baden-Baden, Karl Alber, 2023.
- Libbrecht, U., *Prana=Pneuma=Ch'i?*, in eds. W.L. Idema, E. Zürcher, *Thought and Law in Qin and Han China*, Leiden, Brill, 1990, pp. 42-62.
- Nakai, M., *Ke/ki no nihongo to shitenō hensen* [Metamorphose of the Japanese word ke/ki], in *Nakai Masakazu hyōron shū*, Tokyo, Iwanami, 1995, pp. 176-206.
- Natsume, K[in'nosuke], *Sōseki zenshū* [Complete Works of Sōseki], vol. 9, Tokyo, Iwanami, 1994a.
- Natsume, S., *Kokoro*, Engl. transl. O. Benl, Zürich, Manesse, 1994b.
- Natsume, S., *Kokoro*, Engl. transl. E. McClellan (1957), Washington, Gateway, 2000.
- Nihon kokugo dai jiten* [Large Dictionary of Japanese Language] (1972), 2nd ed. 14 vols., Tokyo, Shōgakukan, 2001.
- Noelle-Neumann, E., *Die Schweigespirale*, München/Zürich, Piper, 2001.
- Parisi, A., *The Intention of the Spirit. Air, Breath, and Voice in European Poetry and Philosophy*, Dissertation at the Harvard University, 2023.
- Putscher, M., *Pneuma, Spiritus, Geist. Vorstellungen vom Lebensantrieb in ihren geschichtlichen Wanderungen*, Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner, 1973.
- Sakaguchi, F., *Ko no tanjō. Kirisutokyō kyōri wo tukutta hitobito* [Birth of the Individuals. Contributors to the Christian Thoughts], Tokyo, Iwanami, 1996.
- Schmitz, H., *Situationen und Konstellationen. Wider die Ideologie totaler Vernetzung*, Freiburg und München, Karl Alber, 2005.
- Sloterdijk, P., *Sphären. Mikrophörologie*, vol. I. *Blasen*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1998.
- Tellenbach, H., *Geschmack und Atmosphäre. Medien menschlichen Elementarkontaktes*, Salzburg, Otto Müller, 1968.
- Vattimo, G., Rovatti, P. A., *Yowai Shikō*, Japanese transl. of *Il pensiero debole* (1983), ed. U. Tadao et al., Tokyo, Hōsei Daigaku UP, 2012.

Yuho Hisayama, *Decision-making in a self-evident atmosphere*

Verbeke, G., *L'evolution de la doctrine du pneuma du stoicisme à s. Augustin*, Paris, Desclee de Brouwer, 1945.

Yamamoto, S., *Kūki no kenkyū* [A Study on *kūki*], Tokyo, Bungei Shunjyū, 1977.