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A Phenomenological Study of Transformation through Forest Bathing

(森林浴による自己変容経験に関する現象学的研究)

An extended summary of the dissertation presented

to

The Graduate School of International Media,
Communication, and Tourism Studies,
Hokkaido University

by

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1. ABSTRACT

In contemporary society, tourism is increasingly associated with wellbeing, human flourishing, and life satisfaction, emerging as a means of pursuing health and forming a thriving niche market. Tourists now seek experiences that foster self-development, rather than mere sensory pleasure. This shift has intensified scholarly interest in transformative tourism, particularly in nature-based health contexts such as Japan's forest bathing (Shinrin-yoku), which promotes present-moment awareness and psychological wellbeing through immersive engagement with natural environments.

However, existing dominant theories inadequately explain such transformation. Educational perspectives emphasize openness triggered by pre-travel dilemmas, while existential approaches foreground anxiety and crisis as catalysts. Forest bathing typically involves neither condition. Participants are rarely motivated by existential disruption, and empirical studies suggest that forest environments evoke calm, safety, and positive affect rather than anxiety. This study therefore examines how inner transformation emerges through sustained engagement in forest bathing practices, shifting attention from episodic moments of extraordinary to cumulative experiential processes of everydayness.

Specifically, it (1) explores how transformation unfolds through repeated participation, (2) identifies environmental and affective conditions that facilitate change, and (3) develops an alternative framework to explain these mechanisms. Combining Descriptive and Hermeneutic Phenomenology, the study investigates transformation longitudinally, tracing meaning-making over time; and cross-sectionally, examining how specific forest qualities evoke emotional resonance. Data were collected through online and on-site focus groups using the photo-voice method, ensuring methodological rigor and capturing diverse perspectives.

The findings distinguish transient transformative experiences from transformation as a gradual, cumulative process shaped by repeated forest encounters. Three atmospheres, solitude, empathy, and "being opened," emerge as central conditions sustaining this process. A conceptual framework illustrates how hedonic wellbeing initiated through immersion gives rise to eudaimonic reflection, fostering enduring shifts in self-understanding. This perspective reframes debates on transformation by emphasizing progressive evolution rather than epiphanic rupture. While critical moments are acknowledged, they are not treated as primary drivers of change. Instead, transformation is understood as grounded in the cumulative force of everyday experiential engagement. Building on this view, the study proposes that experience design oriented toward accumulation from the tourist's perspective can enhance experiential depth, personalized meaning, and long-term transformative potential.

2. SUMMARY OF THESIS

This thesis is structured into six chapters and incorporates two empirical sub-studies and one conceptual sub-study (see Figure 1). Chapter 1 outlines the research background and problem statement, clarifies the research questions and corresponding objectives, and justifies their significance while positioning the research within its academic context. Section 1.1 introduces forest bathing as the research social context and transformation as its core positive outcome, highlighting current developmental challenges in forest bathing tourism. Building on these challenges, section 1.2 critiques the misalignment between existing theoretical perspectives on transformation and the specific context of forest bathing, thereby establishing the research questions. Section 1.3 further elaborates these research questions (RQs) into three specific aims and six research objectives (ROs):

RQ1: How do tourists experience personal transformation through prolonged engagement in forest bathing?

RO1.1: To identify a theoretical perspective grounded in the conceptual foundations of positive psychology, capable of explaining both short-term motivational triggers and long-term shifts in cognitive patterns induced by immersion-induced transformation.

RO1.2: To develop a framework of this interconnected process that refines existing conceptualizations of transformation within both theoretical and contextual literature.

RQ2: What environmental and affective aspects contribute to the process of personal transformation during forest bathing?

RO2.1: To develop a research framework that integrates the body, emotions, and environment, responding to and extending beyond the emphasis on embodiment in transformative experience research.

RO2.2: To clarify Schmitz's concept of atmosphere within a "more-than-representational" framework, and employ a descriptive phenomenological approach to identify specific atmospheres within forest bathing that significantly influence transformation and leave lasting impressions.

RQ3: How can a novel narrative framework better represent the process of transformation through forest bathing?

RO3.1: To challenge the conventional "travel-(special)experience-reflection-transformation" narrative by situating transformation within a longitudinal framework that accounts for tourists' habitual behaviors and meaning-making processes over time.

RO3.2: To conceptualize an alternative framework of transformation, thereby expanding the framework developed under RQ1.

Section 1.4 clarifies the position and the scope of the research by defining its conceptual grounding in positive psychology, the focus on tourist experiences in forest bathing, and the phenomenological methodology adopted. Section 1.5 provides definitions of key terms to facilitate reader comprehension. Finally, this section of 1.6 presents an overview of the thesis structure, including a flowchart outlining the content of each chapter to enhance readability and conceptual clarity.

Chapters 2 review the related literature. Through this chapter, I review literature from tourist experiences studies, positive psychology, customer psychology, and philosophical discussions on cognition and identity, to highlight key conceptual gaps in existing research on personal transformation, particularly in the context of forest-based tourism. By clarifying these gaps, each section addresses the first objective of each of the three aims proposed in Chapter 1 (i.e., RO1.1, RO2.1, and RO3.1). Furthermore, to meet the second objective of each aim, the consequences stated in this chapter provides conceptual foundations for the selection of appropriate research methodologies.

Moreover, it is crucial to note that as a phenomenological research, this thesis adheres to the fundamental principles of the phenomenological tradition. Although it draws upon diverse phenomenological paradigms, its overarching approach is consistent in one key aspect: Chapter 2 (the literature review) is not conceived as a foundation for constructing a rigid theoretical framework to be applied deductively. Instead, its purpose is hermeneutic and integrative; I aim to synthesize concepts and theories from various fields to trace a logically coherent, potential flow of experience that aligns with the phenomenon under investigation.

Consequently, the objective of this chapter is not to establish a single, all-encompassing framework that governs the entire thesis. Rather, it is to engage in a critical analysis of existing literature to elaborate aspects of lived experience that are often overlooked in current scholarship. This critical engagement serves the primary aim of grasping the process of transformation through the analytical lens of orientation (RQ1). Through this lens, I then identify the unique environmental factors specific to forest bathing that facilitate this process (RQ2). Ultimately, this synthesis allows for the proposition of an alternative narrative logic of transformation (RQ3), one that emerges from experience itself rather than being imposed by pre-existing models.

In the remainder of Section 2.1, I first introduce three key core concepts of this thesis: forest bathing, immersion, and transformation. This overview enables readers without prior background knowledge to understand their historical development, common applications, and specific roles in this thesis.

In section 2.2, I primarily clarify the concept of immersion within forest bathing in terms of its definition and application to answer the RQ1 in this thesis. A review of the literature on the relationship between immersion and transformation reveals that existing perspectives on transformation are not well suited to the particular characteristics of forest bathing as a tourism practice. To better understand the experiential meaning of transformation through forest bathing, I draw inspiration from positive psychology and adopt the concept of orientation as a lens to explore how transformation is experienced by tourists.

In section 2.3, to response to the RQ2, I first review existing studies on the affective dimension of transformation. This allows for an understanding of transformation as a shift in the evaluative mode through which individuals emotionally and experientially relate to their environment. Such a shift reflects a change in how individuals perceive the place and position of certain environments within their lifeworld. Accordingly, this suggests the need to examine how the forest bathing environment facilitates transformation from a spatial perspective, leading to irreversible changes not only in how tourists engage with forest settings but also in their overall mindset.

Section 2.4 begins by outlining the evolving trajectory of research on (special) tourist

experiences within the field of tourism studies. Building on this foundation, the section launches a critical interrogation of the prevailing literature on transformation, specifically targeting its predominant emphasis on conscious reflection as the primary mechanism for change. Proceeding from this critique, the section then introduces the concept of narrative identity as a vital theoretical lens. It posits that transformation may involve significant pre-reflective, unconscious processes that precede and inform any conscious deliberation. This critical perspective serves to crystallize a significant gap within current tourism research, namely, the neglect of the non-conscious dimensions of change. By articulating this gap, the section establishes a firm rationale for this thesis and directly paves the way for developing the alternative framework called for in RQ3, one that can account for the more intuitive and narratively constructed aspects of transformative experiences.

In section 2.5, I reveal and summarize the current research gaps identified in the preceding three sections. These gaps, mainly concerning theoretical perspectives and conceptual frameworks within the context of forest bathing, serve as a foundation for the research design.

Building upon the conceptual and problem-driven discussions in the preceding chapters, Chapter 3 revisits the introduction and application of phenomenology in tourism studies, with a specific focus on the central themes and methodological approaches of Hermeneutic Phenomenology and New Phenomenology. On this basis, Chapter 4 systematically outlines the research strategy, specific techniques, and sampling methods employed in the thesis. It further presents key themes emerging from the analysis of participants' narratives and descriptions, illustrating the process of transformation through forest bathing, the affective triggers and mediators within the forest environment, and the underlying narrative logics.

Specifically, section 4.1 provides a comprehensive introduction to the empirical component of the thesis. Section 4.2 details the implementation of both on-site and online data collection processes. Section 4.3 adopts a Hermeneutic Phenomenological approach integrated with a longitudinal perspective to directly analyze how tourists gradually achieve self-development through immersive forest bathing experiences and how they construct meaning from individual sessions, thereby addressing RO 1.2. In contrast, section 4.4 employs a New Phenomenological framework combined with cross-sectional analysis to elucidate how three distinct atmospheric affordances within the forest environment facilitate long-term personal transformation, responding to RO 2.2. Together, these analyses offer a more holistic empirical understanding of how individuals make meaning of transformative experiences over time.

In Chapter 5, drawing on Deleuze's conceptualization of the three passive syntheses of time as unconscious processes, I further develop and articulate the narrative logic underlying transformation through sustained engagement with forest bathing. Building on this, I propose a conceptual framework that outlines the basic process of personal developmental transformation. Ultimately, Chapter 6 builds on the findings and results from the previous chapters, summarizing the research's key insights, examining their contributions to existing literature, and discussing their theoretical significance and practical implications.

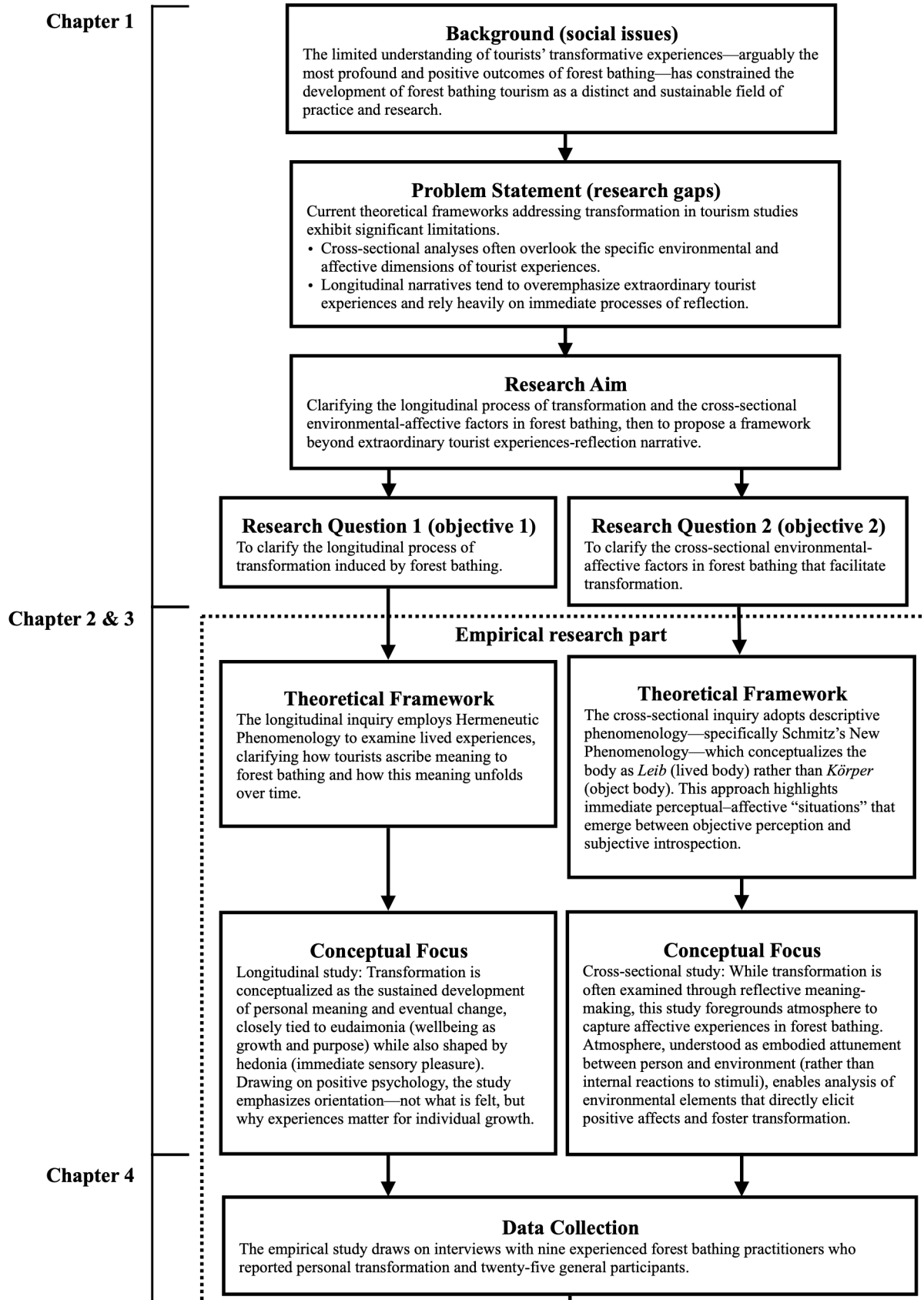
By addressing these research questions above, this thesis ultimately reinterprets the reciprocal relationship between forest bathing experiences and tourists' daily lives, while also clarifying the pervasive temporal lag in tourists' recognition of their own narrative identity. Building on these insights, developmental transformation is defined as a process in which individuals unconsciously accumulate a growing discrepancy between their immediate lived

impressions and their narrative self-understanding. Through repeated tourist experiences, this discrepancy may eventually lead to the realization that change has already occurred, often prior to conscious awareness. This therefore addresses the RQ1 by articulating such process.

Within this process, the moment in which a tourist becomes aware of this change is termed a transformative experience. This understanding departs from prior studies that emphasize extraordinary tourism events and retrospective reflection. This therefore analytically distinguishes transformative experience as a fleeting moment of self-recognition. It further reconceptualizes transformation as a gradual process sustained through repeated participation, thereby reconciling a longstanding debate in tourism studies concerning sudden insight versus incremental change. The three modes of atmospheric perception identified in the forest bathing setting: solitude, empathy, and “being opened,” provide empirical support for the transformative experiences reported by participants, thereby response to the RQ2. The resulting framework foregrounds long-term engagement, offering a nuanced framework for understanding the mechanisms of change in nature-based tourism and its implications for destination management.

In closing, I advocate for an alternative perspective, proposing that tourists’ transformation arises from gradual changes in personal habits rather than sudden shifts dictated by various tourism milieus, thereby addressing RQ3. In terms of tourism practice, this underscores the importance of fostering long-term relationships with a stable customer base. It also highlights the value of leveraging unique and inimitable destination experiences to influence tourists, rather than relying on short-term, spectacle-driven attractions. For tourism scholars, it calls for a research agenda focused on how destinations can be optimized to create lasting impacts on tourists. Subsequent sections discuss the theoretical and practical implications arising from the sub-studies conducted to address each research question.

3. APPENDIX



(Figure continued on next page)

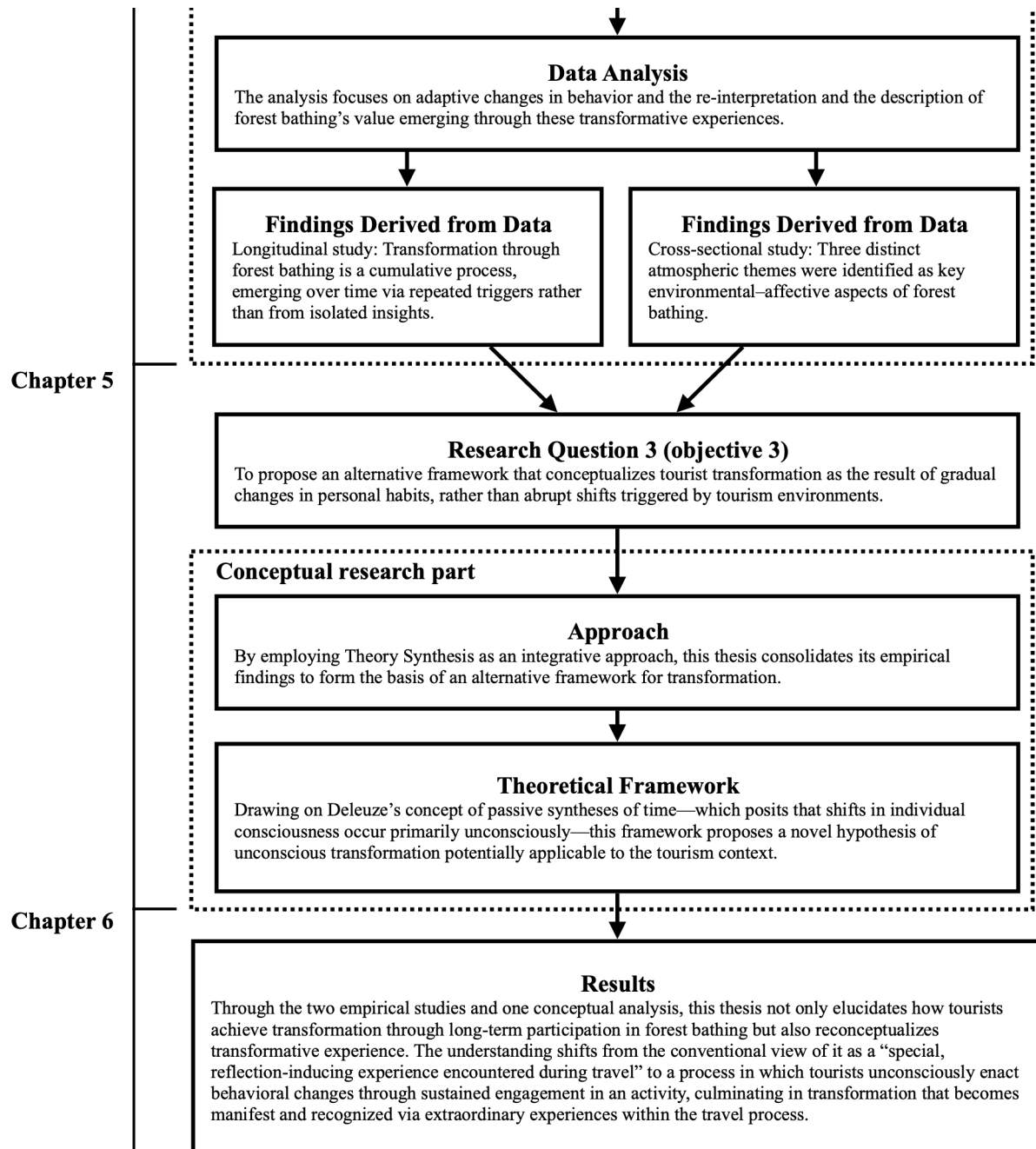


Figure 1. Structure of the thesis. *Source: developed by the author*

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