

<BOOK REVIEWS>The History of Japanese
Psychology : Global Perspectives, 1875 1950 By
Brian J. McVeigh

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BOOK REVIEW

***The History of Japanese Psychology:
Global Perspectives, 1875–1950*****By Brian J. McVeigh**Bloomsbury Academic, 2017
xxvii + 375 pages.**Reviewed by Helena JASKOV**

For many years there has been a trend to broaden the scope of enquiries concerned with the history of specific fields of knowledge from their focus on the perceived place of origin of all modern sciences, namely Europe. The engagement with non-European sites of knowledge production has yielded diverse results depending on the disciplines under whose auspices the research was undertaken (general history, history of science, area studies, etc.). However, regardless of the labels attached to these various projects, be they “transnational,” “transcultural,” or “global” histories, they all consider traditional narratives of center and periphery and address the relationship between global and local knowledge. *The History of Japanese Psychology: Global Perspectives, 1875–1950*, by the anthropologist Brian McVeigh is likewise intended as a contribution to “the worldwide history of Psychology and the globalization of the social sciences” (p. 4). However, at the same time McVeigh aims to redefine the meaning and evolution of modernity itself. By introducing the concept of “interiorization” as the driving force behind the emergence of psychology, he argues for the great significance of this mentality-changing process and bestows “interiorization” with the same transformative power as democratization, [the rise of] capitalism, or the global flow of knowledge (p. 180), which are commonly used to explain processes of modernization.¹

Addressing the “global” elements of the history of Japanese psychology, this book describes the importation of Western institutional structures and scholarly practices during the Meiji period, the creation of global academic networks of scholars investigating the workings of the human mind, and the translation of contemporary British, American, French, and German treatises on the subject into Japanese. Readers familiar with *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Psychology: Global Perspectives* (2012) will find much of the same data regarding Japanese scholars and their achievements, the founding of institutions, laboratories, academic societies, and academic journals, as well as publication details on Japanese translations of foreign texts and original Japanese contributions as in Miki Takasuna’s chapter on Japan. But while the *Handbook* provides a straightforward chronological overview of this data, McVeigh tries with limited success to combine a

¹ The concept of “interiorization” as “a lens for understanding history” has already played a prominent role in McVeigh’s earlier publications; see especially McVeigh 2015 and McVeigh 2016.

“fact”-collection with his narrative on modernity and the impact of “interiorization.” Accordingly, the book is interspersed with long passages simply listing the abovementioned data as well as “snapshots” (boxes with encyclopaedia-like entries on people, events, and “milestones” in psychology). This arrangement impedes the text’s readability without offering much interpretation on the significance and relevance of the listed data.

The global connections of Japanese philosophers, religious thinkers, and experimentally-minded scholars are contrasted with these people’s engagements with local knowledge about the workings of the human mind and soul. McVeigh explores the fascinating symbiosis of Buddhist, Confucian, and Shinto thought with ideas nowadays attributed to Western mental philosophy and psychology. Many of the examples investigated here have already been analyzed in Christopher Harding’s edited volume *Religion and Psychotherapy in Modern Japan* (2015), and I would recommend Harding’s book to those who are primarily interested in the “religion-psy dialogue” as it played out in Japan.

Overall, McVeigh’s approach to the topic remains very descriptive, and suffers from his anachronistic and ahistorical conception of the boundaries of what counts as psychology in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Though McVeigh admirably aims for a genuine appreciation of local knowledge, this is unfortunately hindered by his acceptance of arbitrarily imposed, Western-derived categories which have divided local Japanese knowledge into religion, medicine, philosophy, and psychology. This act of “epistemic violence” is related to McVeigh’s positivist conception of the history of science, which is more in line with Edwin Boring’s (1929) depiction of psychology’s transformation into a “scientific discipline” than with any debate that has shaped the history of science since the 1990s.² It may thus come as a surprise to find a reference to Daston and Galison’s seminal work on *Objectivity* (2007) in McVeigh’s book to support his positivist views (p. 35). Multiple uses and interpretations of Daston’s work notwithstanding, McVeigh’s reference seems misplaced when he repeatedly equates “being scientific” with “being objective” (pp. 14, 35, and 42), considering that one of Daston and Galison’s main arguments was to show that “objectivity has not always defined science,” and that the history of science should not be equated with the history of objectivity.³ Nevertheless, McVeigh even ventures to propose that it was in fact the all-explaining process of “increased interiorization,” traceable “since at least the time of Locke and Descartes,” which gave rise to the subjective-objective divide and by his implication to scientific thought itself (p. 35).

The History of Japanese Psychology provides a present-centered, Westernized view of psychology in Japan, and a source collection which privileges those “national heroes” who fit a positivist conception of engaging with the “psychological.” It does raise general questions about the relationship between modernity and the birth of psychology, linking them via the concept of “interiorization.” However, no direct evidence is provided to substantiate this link, and there is no explanation why the Japanese history of psychology in particular should be suited to answer these general questions.

2 See Spivac 1988 on epistemic violence. For a short historiography of the directions taken within the history of science since the 1990s, see, for example, Romano 2015.

3 Daston and Galison 2007, pp. 17 and 372.

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