Book Review

Constructing East Asia: Technology, Ideology, and Empire in Japan's Wartime Era, 1931–1945

Aaron Stephen Moore

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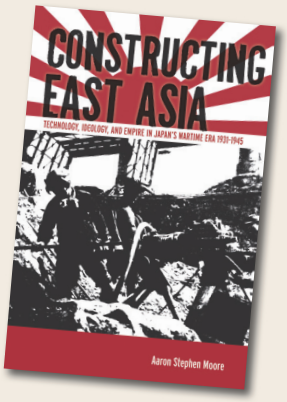

The Japanese empire played the role of a Promised Land for several hundred thousand settlers. It also conjured a vision of a large-scale laboratory for Japan's intellectuals and technocrats. In *Constructing East Asia*, Aaron Moore, assistant professor of history at Arizona State University, explores Japan's colonial construction project and lays out the intellectual discourse that inspired and rationalized Japanese technologies of development. His transnational and interdisciplinary approach combines intellectual history with the history of technology. The close study of actual manifestations of technology in the empire, like dams, city planning, and industrial development, sets the book apart from recent works on Japanese "scientific nationalism" and "techno-fascism."[1]

"Technological imaginary" is Moore's key concept, which he defines as "the ways that different groups invested the term 'technology' (*gijutsu*) with ideological meaning and vision" (p. 3). This generic term allows him to conceptualize the astonishingly porous boundaries between left wing thought and right wing imperialism as well as between utopian visions and technocratic pragmatism. Moore devotes three chapters to the ideas and ambitions of exemplary Japanese intellectuals. He presents a Marxist in the employ of Japanese colonialism, an energetic anti-capitalist engineer at the Home Ministry, and a chief ideologue among Japan's reform bureaucrats.

Aikawa Haruki, a theorist of technology, is arguably the most colorful person in Moore's account. As a Marxist, Aikawa was arrested several times for his left wing activities. Then, in 1937, he converted to staunch support of Japanese colonial expansion. Aikawa's research for the South Manchuria Railway Company provided a detailed plan for the industrialization of Japan's colonies. He based his proposal on Marxist concepts to avoid capitalism's "warped development" (p. 45). When Aikawa was drafted in 1945, he managed to desert to the Soviet Union where he participated in the "reeducation" of Japanese POWs until his return to Japan in 1949.

Miyamoto Takenosuke was an employee of the Ministry of Home Affairs. He also was an engineer with a vision. Moore's account of Miyamoto convincingly demonstrates how Japan's expanding empire offered a unique opportunity for Japanese engineers to advance their traditionally low social status and income. The case of Miyamoto also exemplifies a

1 See, for example, Mizuno 2009 and Mimura 2011.

notion among Japanese engineers that their professional understanding of efficiency and precision was not compatible with liberal capitalism and its narrow focus on maximizing profit. Miyamoto, who became responsible for planning the industrialization of north China, advanced the idea of "comprehensive technology" that was to allow engineers to escape their narrow specialization and engage with the cultural, political, and economic spheres.

Mōri Hideoto is introduced as the exemplary reform bureaucrat who acted as a modernizer and who, at the same time, invoked the "eternal Japanese spirit" (p. 208). Mōri emphasized the productive and creative aspects of technology for mobilizing people and building up a managed economy. In Moore's view the combination of anti-modern and modern concepts in the service of the "revolutionary transformation and mobilization of society" (p. 8) qualifies for the label of fascism. Such a narrow definition might adequately characterize Japanese reform bureaucrats. However, one could object that it contributes little to the ongoing debate if fascism is an analytical category that adequately describes Japan's political development between 1931 and 1945.

Moore dedicates two chapters to specific Japanese infrastructure projects on the continent. These chapters are fascinating on-site accounts of Asian development at work. We learn about river improvement in Manchuria; urban planning in North China; a large-scale industrial project at the Manchurian-Chinese border; and the building of two of the world's largest dams, the Fengman Dam in Manchuria and the Sup'ung Dam in Korea. Rather than treating these projects as distinct case studies, Moore emphasizes their common points. The sheer scale of each enterprise forced the Japanese engineers to adopt Miyamoto's comprehensive approach. They not only had to cope with incomplete data and an increasing shortage of labor and material, but also found themselves confronted with local resistance: they were forced to negotiate the conflicting interests of the military, industrialists, and settler companies. Moore aptly shows how, in an atmosphere of "ambiguity, contradiction, incoherence, and contingency" (p. 104), the engineers had to adjust their utopian dreams about rationality and efficiency to a sobering reality.

While providing us with minute details—like the regular morphine dosage for dam workers—Moore appropriately avoids presenting a "great men's history" of heroic industrialists and engineers. Still, considering how prominently ideologues, bureaucrats, and intellectuals figure elsewhere in Moore's account, it is astonishing how little agency he attributes to eminent figures like Ayukawa Yoshisuke, the founder of Manchurian Heavy Industry, or Noguchi Shitagau, a key player in Korea's industrialization. Noguchi's company, Japan Nitrogenous Fertilizer (*Nichitsu*), was a driving force behind the building of enormous hydraulic power plants in Korea that were to feed his electrochemical factories. In a similar way, the role of Kubota Yutaka, Noguchi's chief dam engineer, is mentioned only in passing, and the reader is surprised to see him reemerge in the epilogue as the key figure in Japan's postwar infrastructure projects in Vietnam, Korea, and Sumatra.

In his epilogue, Moore argues that post-war Japan adapted "techno-fascism" and "techno-imperialism" to promote domestic economic growth and foreign developmental assistance (p. 227). Yet it seems that, if these concepts were so easily transformed into consumerism and soft power, little of their fascist or imperialist legacy can have remained. Arguably, Japan's continuing faith in technology led to the emergence of the construction state, where the Japanese just continued to build dams at home and abroad. As for Japan's former colonies, rather than treating the Fengman Dam as a despicable symbol of Japanese

techno-imperialism, the People's Republic of China effected the completion of the dam. In a twist of fate, the sustained importance of the Sup'ung Dam for North Korea's infrastructure was confirmed by massive U.S. air attacks on the dam's power plant during the Korean War.

The book's overall structure reveals one of its shortcomings. The two chapters on Japanese technology are sandwiched between those dealing with Japan's intellectual history. The theorist Aikawa and the reform bureaucrat Mōri do not appear in the case studies, making it difficult to determine their concrete role in "constructing East Asia." It seems that the engineers and planners at the construction sites gave little heed to the intellectual discourse and just wanted to get their jobs done. In a similar way, after 1945, Japanese engineers and politicians were apparently able to shed most of Japanese technology's ideological baggage, and continue their infrastructure projects in the name of reconstruction and reparation.

Such criticism aside, *Constructing East Asia* deserves praise for bridging the disciplinary gap across the technological and intellectual divide. Moore inspires his readers to take a more comprehensive view of colonial modernity that pays close attention to the history of specific artifacts, even as it takes into account the dynamic interplay of power, technology, and ideas.

REFERENCES

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