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Aaron Stephen Moore, *Constructing East Asia: Technology, Ideology, and Empire in Japan's Wartime Era, 1931–1945*. Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2013. Pp. xii, 314. ISBN 978–0–8047–8539–6.

Review by Walter Skya, The University of Alaska Fairbanks (waskya@alaska.edu).

Japan has been admired the world over in the postwar period as a great technological and industrial superpower. Few households in the developed world do not contain at least one electronics product made in Japan. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Japanese government itself aggressively promoted the country's image as a technological power and a progressive force for global social development, economic prosperity, and even democracy. Having worked as a translator in the Tokyo Head Office of the Mitsubishi Corporation¹ in the early 1980s, I can say from personal experiences that foreign businessmen in Japan were in awe of its industrial power. Students and faculty from top-notch American business schools flocked to Japan to learn firsthand the secret of its business culture.

In *Constructing East Asia*, however, Aaron Moore (Arizona State Univ.) reminds us that, in the pre-World War II period, Japanese technology facilitated a system of imperial power and repressive colonialism as part of an ideology—"technological imaginary" (3). He "expands the conventional modernization narrative of technology as an abstract, universal force for progress and prosperity by analyzing how a technological imaginary was formulated not only in relation to domestic capitalist development and wartime mobilization but also in close relation to colonial expansion and rule.... Japanese elites actively incorporated utopian notions of technology ... into their fascist ideologies" (3, 7).

In chapter 1, "Revolutionary Technologies of Life," Moore notes that Saigusa Hiroto, a philosopher of science, observed that the term "technology" (*gijutsu*) had become prominent in Japan's public discourse only in the mid-1930s, as the state began to mobilize engineers, technicians, and skilled workers for the "construction of Asia" (21); at the same time, a debate among intellectuals over the meaning of technology raged across the political spectrum. Two main schools of thought emerged: on the one hand,

far right-wing ideologues and politicians pushing for a Shōwa Restoration viewed technology as something that was steadily eroding Japan's spiritual vigor, as well as traditional emperor-centered values of community and agrarianism, or tried to formulate a unique "Japanese Science and Technology." [On the other,] many engineers, bureaucrats, and businessmen viewed technology's spread throughout all areas of life as a key to resolving worsening social ills, and they campaigned vigorously for the introduction of rational techniques of management and administration throughout society. (21–22)

Chapter 2, "Technologies of Asian Development," illustrates how engineers became a prominent social force and shaped the intellectual discourse on technology. They pushed for a comprehensive national science and technology policy, and flocked to Japan's colonies to participate in research projects with the aim of developing Asia as well as elevating their own social status (64). Japanese engineers were aware of the intellectual debates taking place among Western thinkers like Thorstein Veblen, who maintained that technocrats had their own ethics of efficiency, performance, and community as opposed to the ethics of the "captains of finance" (68). Home Ministry engineer Miyamoto Takenosuke, for instance, was the ideological leader of Japan's engineering movement. He had managed colonial technology policy as head of the Asia Development Board's Technology Section and spearheaded engineers' efforts to create a wartime mobilization system and increase the responsibilities of engineers in wartime policymaking.

Chapter 3, "Constructing the Continent," analyzes how project engineers developed and employed technological imagery in Japan's wartime empire, particularly at three large-scale projects in Manchuria and

1. I also helped in preparations for Mitsubishi's biannual international managers' seminars.

China: they were involved in “constructing a major flood control project in southern Manchuria, an urban planning project in Beijing, and a dam-powered coastal urban industrial zone on the border between Korea and Manchukuo.... [U]rban planning in north China was conducted under the banner of pan-Asianist cooperation, which claimed to respect the particularity and uniqueness of Chinese cities while asserting the necessity of modern, comprehensive urban development ...” (106, 123). Despite official Japanese state propaganda touting a putative egalitarian pan-Asianism, the designers planned to build a 100-meter-wide “Asia Development Road” running through Beijing’s city center to a 100-hectare “Yamato Square,” where a “Yamato Altar” would symbolize the anti-Asian radical Shintō ultranationalist slogan “The Eight Corners of the World under One Roof” (125).

Chapter 4, “Damming the Empire,” concerns two of Japan’s most prominent wartime civil engineering projects—the Fengman Dam in Jilin Province, China, and the Sup’ung Dam at the Korean border with Liaoning Province, China. Since the dams were largely completed before the end of the war, “an analysis of them contributes greatly to our understanding of the relationship between technology and colonial power” (153). The dams were meant to generate hydroelectric power and control flooding, but, Moore argues, they were also very visible projections of imperial power that served to justify and entrench Japanese colonial rule.

In chapter 5, “Designing the Social Mechanism,” Moore illustrates how the “reform bureaucrats” (*ka-kushin kanryō*, literally “renovationist bureaucrats”) played a major role in shaping the significance of technology. He focuses on one of their chief ideologues, Mōri Hideoto, and demonstrates the predominant influence of a close-knit group of officials on Japan’s economic policies and administrative planning both at home and in the empire between 1931 and 1941. Their central ideological goal was to create a “managed economy” (*tōsei keizai*) that would replace the inequalities of laissez-faire capitalism with a self-sufficient total war economic system.

In an incisive analysis, Moore reveals just how out of touch Japanese intellectuals, “conservative” engineers, reform bureaucrats, and other technocrats were with the true intellectual, political, material, and ideological conditions in Japan’s East Asian empire. Mōri Hideoto, for example,

began to implement [the reform bureaucrats’] program of a managed economy rooted in corporatist organizations among the people [and] incorporated some of the ideological framework and language of technology being articulated by technology bureaucrats, engineers, and intellectuals.... Although the reform bureaucrats were modernists committed to transforming Japan into an efficient and productive social mechanism based on vocation and advanced industry, at the same time they viewed this transformation as one more expression of an eternal Japanese spirit. (191, 208)

Moore notes that this fusion of technological rationality, comprehensive planning, and modern notions of productivity and efficiency with ethnic nationalism and right-wing ideologies has been referred to as “techno-fascism.” But it is more a matter of *fascism* pure and simple, or what I call radical Shintō ultranationalism in Japan’s case. British historian Roger Griffin has shown² that National Socialism’s preoccupation with a mythologized Aryan past went hand in hand with the intense modernization and astounding technological advances of the Third Reich, which appealed so strongly to many German academics in the natural and applied sciences. Griffin writes that the Nazi Revolution enabled scientists and technocrats to reconcile empirical and technological knowledge with a powerful, quasi-spiritual sense of national identity. Italian fascism, too, though often seen as a totally irrational revolutionary ideology, sought to construct a “Third Rome” through rapid industrialization.³ In this sense, Shintō ultranationalism was no different from German or Italian fascism.

Similarly, Moore writes that “Scholars have recently examined the role of science and technology in planning and justifying Japan’s imperial rule across Asia and thereby challenged earlier views of war and empire as the product of spiritual fanaticism and a runaway military” (151). But the idea that the “spiritual

2. In his *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

3. See, e.g., A. James Gregor, *Mussolini’s Intellectuals: Fascist Social and Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 2004).

fanaticism” of the radical Shintō fundamentalists represented a flight from modernity needs to be carefully examined. This is not a matter of denying that spiritualism helped justify Japan’s imperial rule across Asia. Spiritual fanaticism could and did co-exist with scientific and rational technological planning—as it did in the minds of most Shintō fanatics. In other words, the real danger was that the spiritual fanaticisms of the Axis Powers were being *combined with* a scientific and technical mindset. It took not only two atomic bombs, but the—probably decisive—Russian entry into the war to destroy radical Shintō ultranationalism, a suicidal ideology that was driving Japan to total annihilation.

The author further shows that Mōri shamefully ignored the sheer brutality of Japan’s war in China. No blending of State Shintōism and a “higher multiethnic East Asian nationalism” (218) could have united the Japanese with the Chinese and other peoples. Mōri’s assertion that “such East Asian nationalism was an essential part of the Japanese nation, ... [which was] a ‘plural nation’” (218) was simply preposterous. What “plurality” existed in the Japanese nation? Was Mōri unaware of the realities of Korean life under Japanese colonial rule? Equally fatuous is his notion that “Japan’s multiethnic nationalism could ‘fertilize’ the Chinese national instinct and make possible the ‘Symbiotic Body of East Asia’” (218). What basis could there be for multiethnic nationalism in a nation espousing wartime Shintō ideology, with its vision of the superior Yamato race (*minzoku*) at the apex of a rigid hierarchy, far above other, inferior “races” ranked in descending order depending upon their perceived ethnic capabilities? One wonders what the Japanese could have taught the Chinese about a multiethnic nationalism based on the ideal of equal relations and solidarity among Asians.

In Moore’s analysis, Mōri made no serious attempt to square State Shintō ideology with an imagined “East Asian Nationalism” (218), which had no historical roots whatsoever. Paradoxically, the Japanese, who railed against Western influence, had no qualms about appropriating the word “Asia,” a distinctly Western political construct. The shallow thinking of Japan’s reformed bureaucrats and economists is stunning. Technology cannot compensate or substitute for values: people do not live and die for technology. Not surprisingly, then, the Japanese had no real East Asian allies in the war, even though they were supposedly fighting to foster Asian solidarity by expelling the West’s ideologies of communism and liberal economic capitalism.

Japan’s technocrats and military elites, including Army Minister Sugiyama Gen, had expected a quick victory—within two or three months—should war break out with China. They had imagined being greeted as liberators of the grateful Chinese and other Asians from the yoke of hated Western imperialism. After Western-style capitalism and communism were eradicated from East Asia, a New Order would be built on the pillars of pan-Asianism and Japanese technological wizardry. Mōri believed the 1937 China Incident⁴ “signified the overcoming of the liberal capitalist world order and the formation of the mobilized, self-sufficient production economy through the national life organization” (208). Chiang Kai-shek interpreted the event far differently: when he heard that Gen. Song Zheyuan’s troops had clashed with the Japanese, he wrote in his diary that “The dwarf bandits have attacked Lugouqiao.”

As Moore points out, Mōri saw Japan’s “world’s historical mission” as the establishment of a new East Asian Nation free of Westerners and communism. Ironically, Japan’s Greater East Asian War enabled the communists to come to power in China, furthered Western influence in the region, and completely destroyed Japan’s radical Shintō world order. While some Japanese technocrats, engineers, and bureaucrats may have embraced a sincere, if deluded, belief that they were destined to liberate the Chinese from pernicious Western influences, it never occurred to them that Chinese nationalists might see Japan as posing a greater threat than the West. Incidents like the Nanjing massacre were the fruit of Japanese misperceptions of Asian attitudes. When other Asians fell short of Japan’s expectations, its response was to lash out violently.

One could argue that pan-Arabism—and even pan-Africanism—have more historical validity than pan-Asianism, which was a product of the superficial thinking of a self-deluded coterie of intellectuals. No strong sense of an overarching pan-Asianism has ever supplanted the fierce ethnic nationalisms of modern

4. The so-called Marco Polo Bridge Incident.

East Asia. Even seventy years after World War II, Koreans and Chinese are not appreciative of Japan's pre-war efforts to modernize their countries. The Japanese public must acknowledge that any geopolitical dreams of a Shintō world order, masquerading as pan-Asianism, were buried in the rubble of the Second World War. And, considering the recent explosion of nationalist passions in other East Asian countries, such an acknowledgment is vital to Japan's national security.

Aaron Moore's discerning and persuasive book should be required reading for anyone seeking to understand Japan's failed attempt to develop an East Asian empire. It offers a breathtaking exposé of the arrogant fantasies of the "rational" technocrats, engineers, and reform bureaucrats who led Japan into the abyss.