

Review Essay

The Sociality and Politics of Information as History

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Terrence Jackson. *Network of Knowledge: Western Science and the Tokugawa Information Revolution*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016. 232 pp. \$55 (cloth).

Seth Jacobowitz. *Writing Technology in Meiji Japan: A Media History of Modern Japanese Literature and Visual Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. 312 pp. \$40 (cloth).

Thomas S. Mullaney. *The Chinese Typewriter: A History*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017. 504 pp. \$35 (cloth); \$19 (paper).

In recent years, our early optimism about the transformative potential of digital technology has subsided, as we have increasingly come to associate the digital infrastructure with new forms of state surveillance, corporate domination, fake news, gig economy, and so forth. Nonetheless, in order to make sense of our contemporary condition, it is more important than ever to examine the history and politics of information. Historians are catching up with this trend, and many have begun to include the history of information as a new category of scholarly inquiry.

The three books under review here are examples of this new direction. Moreover, these studies of the history of information are also part of the larger trend of rewriting the history of modern East Asia in light of the region's rapid economic and technology development. The once-popular modernization theory that embraces the narrative of East Asian societies such as China and Japan simply as latecomers catching up with the West by traveling on the same historical path is no longer tenable empirically or conceptually. How, then, do we use the experiences of East Asia to engage the modernity question?

The question of how and why Japan was able to take up a wide spectrum of modernizing initiatives in the Meiji era (1868–1912) is central to Terrence Jackson's *Network of Knowledge: Western Science and the Tokugawa Information Revolution*, which seeks to find the answer in the "information revolution" of Tokugawa Japan (1603–1868). For Jackson, this "information revolution" was mostly about the

emergence of a network of new knowledge associated with *rangaku* (Dutch studies), which involved the introduction, translation, and circulation of European ideas as mediated by Dutch traders allowed to station in Nagasaki. According to the author, this vibrant community was particularly essential to the transmission of practical and scientific knowledge areas such as medicine, cartography, and astronomy.

In many ways, the early modern and modern intellectual history of Japan is already a developed field, and quite a lot of works have already been written on *rangaku* and its relationship with neo-Confucian learning and *kokugaku* (native studies) of the same period. Many of these earlier studies similarly noticed the democratic and subversive nature of *rangaku* in the highly hierarchal intellectual and political landscape of Tokugawa. Jackson's contribution, however, rests on his attempt to rethink the significance of *rangaku* in terms of information. Although much of *Network of Knowledge* focuses on the life of the scholar-physician Ōtsuki Gentaku and his immediate context, Jackson's intention is not to present yet another intellectual biography. He therefore emphasizes the new social space and practice of collecting, safekeeping, policing, and disseminating the wide range of information that included ideas, facts, data, and rumors. Jackson draws parallels between this rise of "information systems" (11) and similar developments in Europe. He contends, for example, that the new social network emerging in Tokugawa was similar to the rise of European salons, even though the former was not as political.

In some ways, Jackson's work demonstrates a level of sensitivity by placing Japan's success in modernization in a deeper—and arguably more Japan-centered—historical context, rather than just crediting the arrival of Western imperialism as the starting point of Japanese modernity. Nevertheless, by subsuming the Tokugawa experience under the European history so quickly, he may or may not have escaped the Eurocentric trap after all. Moreover, as scholarship in the past two decades has already shown that capitalism, international law, and even the Enlightenment itself were very much products of larger global processes, including violent colonial encounters (see Chakrabarty 2000; Pitt 2018; Pomeranz 2000), it is questionable whether the salon is still such an important category for making sense of European history itself. But even if Jackson's book may fall short of this ambitious claim, it effectively reinforces earlier observations that early modern Japan was in no way inward-looking and fully insulated from the outside world. This book also provides the useful suggestion that information could be an important category to explain why Japan was able to mobilize so quickly in the wake of its confrontation with the industrial West in the later part of the nineteenth century.

Many of the issues raised or implied in Jackson's book no doubt come to fruition in the Meiji period, when Japan was threatened by the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry's expedition (1853–1854). Seth Jacobowitz's *Writing Technology in Meiji Japan: A Media History of Modern Japanese Literature and Visual Culture* is a sophisticated attempt to grapple with these questions. In contrast to Jackson, who uses an individual as his entry point, Jacobowitz casts a much wider net in his study of the "unprecedented

standardization of time, space, and language,” and therefore the rise of a new regime of universalism (19). In essence, Jacobowitz’s book is an examination of the shift of the Japanese mediascape in the age of empire. Although it is not the author’s intention to offer an inventory of new standardizing practices, he offers a cluster of tangible sites such as measurement, conventions, telegraph, linguistics, sound, and language reform to demonstrate how new inscriptive technologies came to create new cultural and political imaginings through literature, visual culture, and related media practices. Together, these sites convincingly paint a picture of what may in fact be called the “Meiji information revolution,” with drastic implications. Thus, Jacobowitz’s argument is not so much about whether or not Japan was ready to modernize. Rather, it illustrates the radical changes whereby culture and knowledge were restructured at the basic level. As such, the information revolution as described here was nothing short of an epistemological and technological upheaval. Among other things, this new regime of knowledge was more than just about the gathering or storing of information; it also allowed for new possibilities in processing and manipulating data that could construct new realities.

Needless to say, underlying these rapid changes was the expansion of empire and capitalism that required a whole new level of standardization and exactitude so that information could become commensurable and calculable. If *rangaku* had democratic potential by subverting the existing regime of knowledge and power, the new inscriptive technologies in Meiji Japan were at once enabling and restricting. Specifically, they demolished the old social and political hierarchy of the Tokugawa era but also subjugated individuals by converting them into new political subjects for the nation and, ultimately, empire. Appropriately, Jacobowitz ends his book with close readings of poems and photographs that show that the excess meanings in these cultural expressions could not be fully captured by the new scripts and codes after all.

If Jacobowitz’s media history of Meiji Japanese literature and visual culture is a serious attempt to put East Asia in conversation with the larger global world through technology, *The Chinese Typewriter: A History* by Thomas Mullaney is yet another such important contribution. Unlike Jacobowitz, who approaches writing technology in a broad context of mediascape, Mullaney uses a single technology to open up a wide range of issues. Yet, whereas Jacobowitz focuses on a single historical moment, Mullaney’s work cuts across the entire twentieth century.

Central to Mullaney’s starting point is a persisting view of cultural fatalism, which insists that the non-alphabetic nature of the Chinese language has made it fundamentally incompatible with modernity. The notion of this supposed Chinese “deficiency” was equally embraced by many Chinese intellectuals, who argued for the need for radical language reform in order to overcome this problem. Such Orientalization of Chinese characters was hardly unusual. In fact, both Mullaney and Jacobowitz note that Japanese intellectuals and bureaucrats, too, had similarly argued that Japan needed to abolish Chinese characters in order to modernize and establish parity with Western industrial powers. They both discuss, for example, the proposal of

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Maejima Hisoka, the founder of the Japanese postal service, to eliminate kanji. In Mullaney's case, Maejima's effort to develop an all-kana typewriter is part of the larger history of seeing Chinese characters as "unfit" for the modern world. Both Mullaney and Jacobowitz remind us that these debates on culture and knowledge were conditioned by geopolitics and colonial legacies in no uncertain terms.

But Mullaney does more than just deconstruct the myth of the unsuitability of the Chinese language. An important part of his project is to uncover the hidden history, alternatives, and trials and errors in the development of typewriters, especially Chinese typewriters, that has been buried by the triumph of the QWERTY keyboard. These fascinating and nuanced stories of design and engineering ultimately also form a history that decenters the single-shift QWERTY keyboard, which was mainly developed for English typewriting. Mullaney concludes that the rise of input, combined with the non-alphabetic and non-syllabic nature of Chinese script, is actually more powerful than the QWERTY keyboard.

Without doubt, all three of these books point to the importance of using information as a historical category to make sense of our contemporary condition through specific historical sites, whether in China, Japan, or elsewhere. The works by Jacobowitz and Mullaney especially succeed in moving back and forth between relevant thinkers, practitioners, institutions, and technologies across different cultural and national boundaries without subsuming one history into another despite the uneven geopolitical terrains. If Jacobowitz's work aims to put Meiji writing technology into the global context in order to raise new questions that are still mostly about Japan, Mullaney's book seems keen on using the Chinese typewriter to begin to write a more inclusive global history of information and technology. This new global history potentially raises critical questions about the history of information and technology that has so far been based primarily on the Euro-American experience. In raising new questions, these works remind us that we need to become aware of the cultural and political bias embedded in standardizing technology created in the name of efficiency, or the dangers of what Mullaney, in the context of his study, calls the "collapse of technological imagination" (43).

In his brief discussion of the standardization of the QWERTY layout in the Remington typewriter, Jacobowitz, like Mullaney, laments that such standardization has also led to the standardization of the typist (24). In some ways, this imagery of the disciplining of the body seems to epitomize our greatest fear about how the advance of information technology could ultimately lead to a further subjugation of our lives to the ever more powerful digital infrastructure. Yet, significantly enough, Mullaney's history of the Chinese typewriter seems to offer an intriguing response to this concern. Even before the rise of input, he argues, the development of the Chinese typewriter during the Maoist period had already led to a typewriting practice that involved the "merging" of bodies and machines in a decentralizing way. This new technological practice, which allowed the typist to reorganize the tray bed based on individual needs, had essentially created a "democratically, empirically, and privately determined" practice (304). This

observation suggests that technology is not always totalizing, and could even be liberating. If so, it certainly provides a hopeful note at a time of intensive debate about the pros and cons of individualized news feeds, self-driving technology, and peer-to-peer transactions in the neoliberal age.

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