Seth Jacobowitz

Writing technology in Meiji Japan: a media history of modern Japanese literature and visual culture. Cambridge MA: Harvard East Asian Monographs, 2016. 312 pages. Hardcover \$39.95. ISBN 978-0674088412.

Writing technology in Meiji Japan addresses tremendously difficult texts, texts that were written precisely when the linguistic and script reforms were taking place. Jacobowitz displays great erudition in describing the chaos from which the national language arose, while also being mindful of the simultaneous discursive movements toward nationalization and standardization that produced a decisive rupture in the Meiji period. The book consists of many short, concise chapters, a necessary structure that Jacobowitz needs to employ as he takes up a variety of topics and writers. He addresses many writers who are relatively unknown, especially those in the early Meiji period, while tackling well-known writers such as Natsume Sōseki and Masaoka Shiki who were active at the turn of the century. The book is made up of four parts: ‘Discourse networks of Meiji Japan’, ‘Scripting national language’, ‘Writing things down just as they are’, and ‘Limits of realism’, each with two or three chapters. Surveying the various linguistic reforms and standardization processes that occurred in tandem, Jacobowitz has clearly conducted an impressive range of archival work.

There are many things taking place in this book, and it is not always easy to see the overarching framework that links together the many archival findings that this book offers. The gist of the argument, however, appears to be this: the history of modern Japanese literature has consistently effaced the importance of ‘shorthand’. Shorthand here isn’t simply shorthand, as it metaphorically refers to a constellation of visual forms that appeared in the early Meiji period that makes possible what Jacobowitz calls ‘transcriptive realism’. What he seeks to do, therefore, is to provide a revisionist narrative by focusing on the *technologies* of writing, in all their renderings. This includes not only shorthand, but postal systems, the telegraph, photography, etc., that were instrumental in producing a rupture in how Meiji Japan and beyond conceptualized the world. These technologies of writing further engaged with the standardization of ‘time, space, and language’, thus generating, as it were, the imagined national community of Japan.

There is an interesting tension in the book. On the one hand, Jacobowitz claims the following: ‘This book in no way presumes the inevitability of the unified style or its role as the vehicle of realism in modern Japanese literature. Rather, it investigates a wide spectrum of debates and experiments that did not necessarily win the day, but nevertheless had lasting reverberations, and

sometimes cascading effects, in the Meiji episteme' (11). On the other hand, despite the desire to highlight the somewhat chaotic space in which varying political and social agendas intersected in the rise of 'realism', the book is full of 'clean' statements such as the following: 'A new investment in the transparency of phonetic scripts arose in the Meiji period as language reformers sought to mend the fragmented polity into a single, cohesive people (*kokumin*) united by common national language (*kokugo*) and scripts (*kokuji*).'

The tension, I believe, is directly linked to the limitation of Benedict Anderson's model, a model to which Jacobowitz is clearly indebted. Anderson theorized the ideological formation of the nation-state in which the production of 'national language' played a significant part. It features a teleological narrative that posits the imagined nation as the putative telos, which produces an inverted narrative that posits the nation as the entity that inspired the movement that created it. In such a paradigm, the urge to nationalize is deemed the primary *cause* of change; the formulaic discussions that seemingly trace the nation-building process often end up as self-fulfilling prophecies.

This explains one of the main problems that appear in the book: Jacobowitz never quite elucidates how specifically the varying 'technologies' engage with one another. He spends page after page providing empirical evidence of the development of these technologies and the many language reforms that occur alongside them. Indeed, they are all 'technologies' that were mobilized to produce the nation. Yet the fundamental relationship between them is left undeveloped. It is almost as if there is a metaphorical link between them—'technology' being the operative metaphor—but the nature of that metaphor itself is never clarified. There are many sentences like: 'Meiji Japan witnessed an array of national, imperial, and international standardization movements—temporal, spatial, and linguistic—in tandem with the new media technologies that increasingly redrew the boundaries of daily life across the globe. It likewise presided over the creation of a national postal service that regulated the sending and receiving of all written messages, including those conveyed via telegraph; national language and script reforms, including experimental phonetic scripts such as shorthand notations; and new categories of literary realism that culminate in the modern novel' (9). Yet how these different realms of reform specifically intersected with one another, generating decisive perceptual shifts, is never fully developed. It is uncritically assumed that they *do*. However, when the 'nation' is yet to be formed as such, the telos that is the nation cannot be assumed; many reforms and policies were implemented in a more trial-and-error mode, one that is recognized by Jacobowitz himself as he acknowledges that there was 'a wide spectrum of debates and

experiments that did not necessarily win the day'. Nevertheless, the clean narrative of nationalization, which relies excessively on the Anderson model, ultimately dominates this narrative.

Moreover, Jacobowitz's focus on what he calls the 'catchphrase' (i.e., 'writing things down just as they are') needs to be more rigorously examined. Of course, this is not to say that he does not examine the archives; he provides plenty of empirical evidence that this was indeed a catchphrase. However, there is an implicit assumption that this seemingly mimetic statement signifies the same thing in each utterance. In other words, he assumes that a condition of agreement was in place. Here we see the trap of the self-fulfilling prophesy of the Anderson model. When the standardization and technologization of the nation occurs, it is uncritically assumed that the discursive homogenization occurs. But any cursory reading of early Meiji texts compels one to see that such clean or easy narrative cannot do justice to their complexities.

One other symptom of this is the very fact that he offers a rather canonical view of modern Japanese literary history. Despite the integration of writers in the early Meiji period who are relatively unknown, he ends up tracing the well-worn path of 'realism'. Perhaps the point is that the narrative of realism must take into account the history of shorthand in all of its visual constellations, and how it engaged with the production of the mimetic discourse taken for granted in the later development of realism. Yet if the objective is to provide a revisionist narrative, the teleology to realism itself should be critiqued more thoroughly.

One thing that this book does well is that it avoids the trap of the influence model. While judiciously providing similar trends of technological and mimetic developments in the United States and Europe, Jacobowitz refuses, I think rightly, to create a causal link between these regions. While examining various Meiji intellectuals who engage with contemporary trends in Euro-America, Jacobowitz does not delineate a facile model of influence but rather gestures toward a synchronic movement of one of the defining developments of modernity: the establishment of the nation-state. Furthermore, by providing such synchronic argument, he further gestures toward an understanding of transnationality that is implicitly critical of Japan as 'particular' or 'unique'. This is an important gesture, as it implies a critique of the larger field of Japan Studies. Inherent in this field is an understanding that the 'Japanese' object of knowledge is in some way particular or unique in comparison to other nation-states. Situating 'Japan' within the global trend of modernity, Jacobowitz implicitly critiques the ghettoization of Japan that occurs all too often in our field.

In effect, *Writing technology in Meiji Japan* is an unbalanced book. It is full of great promise, yet haunted by conceptual problems. While there is a tremendous amount of archival work that underlies this text, there are nevertheless certain significant omissions. The amount of work that must have gone into the writing of the book is admirable, yet parts of the book appear hastily put together. At the same time, however, the book is admirable in its promise. The criticisms I have of this book should not be taken as individually targeted. That is to say, scholars in the field of Japan Studies are typically prone to such conceptual weaknesses, especially as we often bury ourselves in empirical evidence and ultimately reinforce the idea that 'Japan' is a particular form of knowledge that needs to be 'uncovered' through layers and layers of archives.

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