Essay Review

JANICE MATSUMURA

THE ‘ALL-KNOWING’ JAPANESE STATE?
NEW SCHOLARSHIP ON MEDICINE, SCIENCE,
TECHNOLOGY, AND INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS


Appearing around the early 1980s, when the Japanese economy was the envy of other countries, Ezra F. Vogel’s Japan as Number One: Lessons for America and Chalmers A. Johnson’s MITI and the Japanese Miracle: The Growth of Industrial Policy, 1925–1975 helped promote the view of ‘Japan as a harmonious, coherent whole’, guided by a far-sighted, well-organized economic leadership.1 Reviewers supported efforts to refute explanations that attributed the economic miracle to unique qualities of the Japanese culture. At the same time, reviewers warned against underestimating differences of opinion and overestimating the wisdom of government.2 Such cautions, which

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have since gained wider acceptance with the ending of the ‘bubble economy’ and decades of stagnant growth, have been supported by subsequent studies, including these four new books. While each contributes to our understanding of technological advancement, all four give reasons for abandoning the view of Japan as an ‘all-knowing’ state. In this case, the role of private entrepreneurs is highlighted by political scientist Kathryn Ibata-Aren, and the role of the state as patron is reassessed by sociologist Miwao Matsumoto and by historian Morris Low.

The essays in *Building a Modern Japan* expand upon a number of groundbreaking studies – Carol Gluck and Takashi Fujitani, on ideology and policymaking; James Bartholomew, on the formation of a scientific community; and William Johnston, on the social, political, and cultural dimensions of disease. As Low notes in his introduction, historians have tended to treat medicine in isolation from science and technology, but its inclusion illustrates the nature of efforts to modernize Japan. From the Meiji period (1868–1912), Imperial officials undertook to make Japan ‘a rich country with a strong army’, the economic and military equal of Western nations, a destiny that invoked not only the establishment of new institutions, but also greater regulation of minds and bodies.

Public health was a principal area of concern, as Christian Oebränder shows in the case of beri-beri. Japanese officials could not turn to the West for ready-made ways of dealing with the disease because it was not prevalent in these countries. However, they showed a tendency to put their faith in foreign miasmatic theories, rather than stand by Japanese naval doctors who treated symptoms effectively by changes in diet. As a consequence, such government initiatives as the establishment of a Beri-Beri Hospital in 1878 proved unsuccessful in combating the disease. Other ways had to be found for Japan to ‘modernize’.

Similar considerations arose in dealing with the pathologies of progress. Sabine Frühstück demonstrates how leading sexologists, linking neurasthenia to modern life, claimed that the disorder threatened Japan’s body politic by making its predominantly male sufferers susceptible to suicide and other self-destructive practices.

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