



Noriko Aso. *Public Properties: Museums in Imperial Japan*. Asia-Pacific: Culture, Politics, and Society Series. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013. 320 pp. \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-5413-0; \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-5429-1.

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Published on H-Empire (August, 2014)

Commissioned by Charles V. Reed

Mutable Content, Durable Institutions: Reconceptualizing the “Public” in Prewar Japanese Museums

In her new book, *Public Properties: Museums in Imperial Japan*, Noriko Aso reveals that far from being a minor detail in modern Japanese history, museums and related institutions have been instrumental to and intertwined with a host of important social and political developments since the mid-nineteenth century. Presenting an extensive study of bureaucratic and legal reforms and a series of well-chosen case studies, Aso shows that Japanese museums before World War II were part of a larger “exhibitionary complex” that also included international, domestic, and colonial expositions and even department stores (p. 16). This complex, which was primarily initiated and run by the state, served to engender what Aso calls “imperial publics”; visitors were both “imagined in relation to the central state” in new ways and trained to behave according to “modern” norms advanced by the governing elite (p. 2). Aso explores this latter theme along the lines of Foucauldian self-disciplining practices and is strongly inspired by the work of Tony Bennett (*The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* [1995]) and Takashi Fujitani (*Splendid Monarchy: Power and Pageantry in Modern Japan* [1996]). Linking museum publics to a wide range of important aspects of modern Japanese history, Aso’s ambitious aim is to investigate “modern claims to publicness in light of how they opened up a particular space for ongoing negotiations of such concepts as nation, empire, state, and people as they collectively came to dominate discourse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century” (p. 10). Defining “publicness,” fostering self-disciplining imperial subjects, and negotiating the boundaries between the different spheres that made up prewar Japan are key themes throughout the book.

These themes are developed in greater detail with respect to the early formation of the Meiji era exhibi-

tionary complex in chapter 1. The early Meiji state saw this complex as another means to promote industrialization and correspondingly focused on mass education in the natural sciences. Aso describes how Japanese museums developed in part out of Tokugawa shows, bazaars, and festivals while also being heavily influenced by the new logic of the Western exposition. Expositions and museums were in fact initially organized by the same bureau, with museums being conceived as “permanent expositions” (p. 50). Nevertheless, during this formational period, the responsibility for Japan’s first museums bounced back and forth between several different government agencies, each of which had its own agenda. Much of this chapter is therefore devoted to charting the “bureaucratic turf wars” that would mold the character of the state museum (p. 63).

Chapter 2 describes the major shift that occurred from the late 1880s as museums, along with myriad other government assets, were brought under the direct control of the imperial household. The state’s earlier goals of using museums to promote industrialization were gradually superseded by a perceived need to foster reverence for the emperor as a national benefactor. Accordingly, the aim of state museum collections changed radically from spreading scientific knowledge to promoting an imperial narrative of art history. Aso explains in detail how this in turn necessitated the creation of an art historical canon, which involved using legislation to redefine a great deal of private property as “national treasures.” Although this and other controversial practices that Japan’s newly imperialized museums engaged in were justified in the name of “public access” or the “public good,” Aso insightfully notes that “if the museums were not private, as in removed from the purview of the state, they were certainly not public in the sense of belonging purely to either the state or the people” (p. 74). Rather, imperial

property was a kind of “buffering mechanism” that allowed the state to strategically transfer objects and institutions between the public and private spheres in a way that was difficult to politically contest (p. 93). Falling under the purview of the imperial household fundamentally altered the nature of museums’ “publicness,” as visitors were henceforth “granted a gift of access, not a right” (p. 5).

In the following chapter, Aso describes how museum culture in the colonial territories of Taiwan and Korea followed a similar, but slightly different trajectory from that of the metropole. Originating in expositions just like the first metropolitan museums, Taiwan’s central museum retained a natural science focus long after this had been discarded within Japan whereas Korea’s museums focused on art history from the beginning. In the museum in Taipei, a focus on natural resources was intended to stimulate trade, but the absence of Taiwanese art also sent clear messages that “if ‘nature’ was Taiwanese, ‘history’ was Japanese” (p. 105). Conversely, in Korea an emphasis on ancient Korean artifacts combined with a total absence of modern Korean art was used to spread a classic colonial discourse of civilizational decline that could only be reversed with Japan’s help. Aso rounds off the chapter with a brief discussion of the postwar legacy of these colonial museums and makes a brilliant point that could just as well apply to the rest of the book: the museum form and its disciplined public proved far more durable than museums’ content. The regimes that succeeded the Japanese colonial state in both Taiwan and Korea continued to make use of the Japanese museums and their political strategies of identity formation even as their message changed.

Chapter 4 consists of three case studies of private museums that challenged both the state’s monopoly on exhibition and even many of its strategies for creating a certain kind of public. By privately financing development projects including a prominent art museum, the prominent businessman Ōhara Mogasaburō tried to build his hometown of Kurashiki into a model city that would challenge the centrality of Tokyo. Similarly, although never realized, financial mogul Shibusawa Keizō (grandson of the better-known Eiichi) drew up plans for a museum of economic history that would advocate the Japanese people’s diversity, rather than uniformity, as the cornerstone of Japan’s prosperity. Finally, Yanagi Muneyoshi’s Japan Folkcrafts Museum displayed beautiful everyday craft objects in a milieu that resembled a traditional Japanese home, subverting the state’s conception of museums as monumental neoclassical buildings that should display valuable, elite artifacts.

Another private exhibitionary sphere that helped to define a new kind of Japanese public, the department store, is examined in chapter 5. Following Bennett and Yoshimi Shun’ya (*Hakurankai no seijigaku* [1992]), Aso skillfully demonstrates that department stores were an integral part of the prewar Japanese “exhibitionary complex.” The largest department stores carved out a broad public role for themselves by sponsoring exhibits, research, lecture series, and publications. Aso speculates that “perhaps the emergence of expositions, museums, and department stores in Japan within a compact time frame and at the height of their global influence encouraged the blurring of domestic institutional boundaries” (p. 190). Even after department stores developed into a serious rival to state institutions in the first decades of the twentieth century, however, “the wartime crisis of the late 1930s and early 1940s provided the state a chance to requisition private sites of publicness” including these retailers; Aso describes the wartime state as “consuming” (pp. 7, 201). Rather than ending with World War II, however, Aso caps off the book with a reflection on how the process of negotiation between state and society continued in the postwar period through the reinvention of Japan as a peaceful “culture nation” (*bunka kokka*) and more recently through the neoliberal privatization of much of the state’s exhibitionary complex.

One of the greatest strengths of Aso’s book is the excellent contextualization of its arguments. Aso is keenly aware of how developments in Japan’s early museums relate to broader currents in Japanese history. Meiji expositions are linked to Tokugawa product fairs, the imperialization of museums and other state property is compared to the evolution of medieval shōen estates, and present-day developments are linked to prewar precedents. Likewise, the chapters fit together nicely and their themes are interwoven, demonstrating, for example, how strategies of displaying objects were shared between retailers and museum bureaucrats or how Yanagi’s folk craft movement was financially reliant on department stores and inspired by Korean crafts. Aso also rises to the challenge of numerous postcolonial scholars to write colonialism back into monolithic national narratives.[1] Her chapter on colonial museums clearly shows that these developed in concert with those in the metropole and that the two should not be treated separately.

Public Properties presents research that has previously only been available in Japanese through its summaries of key arguments from works by Matsuda Kyōko (*Teikoku no shisen: Hakurankai to ibunka hyōshō* [2003]), Suzuki Masayuki (*Kōshitsu seido* [1993]), and Yamaji Katsuhiko (*Kindai Nihon no shokuminchi hakurankai* [2008]),

among others. While several of Aso's case studies draw on a significant amount of archival material, overall the book perhaps relies less on primary sources than one might expect for a work of its kind. Nevertheless, its creative synthesis of a wide variety of research allows *Public Properties* to treat Japanese museums from a multitude of perspectives. Aso's work is especially apt in its application of Bennett's theories to the case of Japan.

Historians regularly face the problem of whether to organize their work chronologically or thematically, and in this case Aso has decidedly gone for the latter approach. This allows her to analyze each node of the Japanese exhibitionary complex in greater theoretical depth, but has the downside of obscuring the parallel changes in these institutions over time that Aso also clearly hopes to bring forth. The text often jumps back and forth in time when drawing thematic parallels, which could make it difficult to follow for those without a solid knowledge of modern Japanese history. Many of the book's theoretical arguments also build on a linguistic analysis of different Japanese terms for "public" or "folk," which present an additional impediment to

the non-Japan specialist. Nevertheless, this book could easily be used as an exciting portal for introducing students to diverse aspects of modern Japanese history and its clever theoretical framework will undoubtedly serve Japan scholars well.[2]

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Gurminder K. Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[2]. Two recent dissertations not treated by Aso but that would be of great interest to scholars studying Japanese museums are Oh Se-Mi, "Consuming the Modern: The Everyday in Colonial Seoul 1915-1937" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2008), which theorizes consumption and modernity in colonial Korea in relation to expositions and department stores, and Karl Gustafsson, "Narratives and Bilateral Relations: Rethinking the 'History Issue' in Sino-Japanese Relations" (PhD diss., Stockholm University, 2011), which analyzes presentations of World War II in Japanese and Chinese museums.

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Citation: John Hennessey. Review of Aso, Noriko, *Public Properties: Museums in Imperial Japan*. H-Empire, H-Net Reviews. August, 2014.

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