

Review of Victor Seow, *Carbon Technocracy: Energy Regimes in Modern East Asia*

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Review of Seow, Victor. 2021. *Carbon Technocracy: Energy Regimes in Modern East Asia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Victor Seow's *Carbon Technocracy: Energy Regimes in Modern East Asia* is both a landmark study of coal, energy, and industrial development in the making of modern East Asia, including Japan and China, and a model for scholars to (re)think doing history of science and technology in view of the climate crisis.

The narrative body of the book focuses on the history of the well-known Fushun colliery (抚顺煤矿) in northeast China in the twentieth century. Weaving together the social, political, economic, environmental, and technological dimensions of the story, Victor Seow 萧建业 gives us a rich, dramatic, and transnational saga about a place that served as a source of power for Japanese colonial and military expansion up to the end of World War II in 1945, and as a site of industrial dreams under the successive Nationalist government and government of the People's Republic of China thereafter. Russian investors and American engineers also make appearances in the account.

As the story unfolds, the reader goes on a journey of discovery as the book moves from evolving mining technologies deployed at Fushun, to the heated discourse of the "Fuel Question" in interwar Japan that made access to fossil fuels a national obsession, the brutal Japanese invasion of China in 1931–1945 powered in part by Fushun's coal, the Nationalist government's drive for reconstruction in 1945–1949, and finally Fushun's re-emergence as a key link in socialist industrial development in the People's Republic of China after 1949. Both the scope and variety of primary sources, covering not only archival collections but also pamphlets, novels, manuals, and much more, in

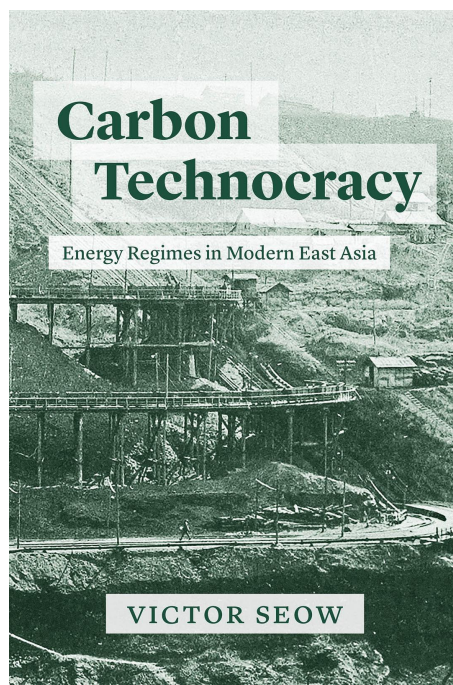
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Japan, China, and the United States, are impressive. Taking advantage of the richness of these sources the author makes powerful connections among state power, the drive for fossil fuel-based energy regimes, shifts in mining technologies, and the lived experiences of coal miners.

Fascinating discussions of the meanings and manifestations of “carbon technocracy” throughout the book lend cohesion, theoretical depth, and relevance to the narrative. Notably Seow defines carbon technocracy broadly as “a technopolitical system grounded in the idealization of extensive fossil fuel exploitation through mechanical and managerial means,” the use of which makes possible “an alternative account of state formation in modern East Asia and a transnational history of technology” (Seow 2021, 8).

As historians, along with much of humanity, become increasingly aware of the worsening climate crisis caused largely by the burning of carbon-based fossil fuels, it is imperative that we explore such alternative accounts of the past, including those concerning science and technology. In doing so one hopes we can help make visible carbon technocracy and other forces in the making of the Anthropocene, thus hopefully aiding the task of confronting their still powerful hold on the world. *Carbon Technocracy* offers us a creative example.



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