

Carbon Technocracy: East Asian Energy Regimes and the Industrial Modern, 1900–1957

Victor Seow

Carbon Technocracy argues that coal was central both to Chinese and Japanese experiences with global industry modernity and to the emergence of trans-war technocratic regimes in East Asia. Few would contest the claim that coal played an essential role in the great transformations of the modern age. It powered mass industrial manufacturing, long distance transport by rail and sea, and urban expansion on an unprecedented scale. In so doing, it gave rise to the socio-technical assemblage we still inhabit today. Yet coal did more than rebuild the material foundations of human society. It also allowed for new kinds of politics. My project examines how coal served as a site for the articulation of statist development, economic nationalism, and technological governance in East Asia in the first half of the twentieth century.

I ground my inquiry in Fushun, the “Coal Capital” of Manchuria that once boasted East Asia’s largest coal-mining operations. Through the history of the Fushun Collieries, I explore how Chinese and Japanese states and their subsidiaries, which had at different times extended control over these mines, participated in the co-production of calorific and political power. I pay particular attention to the meanings and importance ascribed to energy as a factor of production and as a necessity for modern life, as well as to shared ideals of securing access to endless and cheap supplies of energy resources. To numerous Chinese and Japanese businessmen, engineers, scientists, soldiers, politicians, and technocrats, Manchuria promised a solution to the energy crises of their times, and there they experimented with new extractive technologies that would reshape that vast landscape.

My study engages several bodies of literature. The first is the history of energy, a field that links the production, circulation, and consumption of energy to the social and environmental implications of these processes. My narrative invites us to rethink the relationship between energy and politics, energy determinism, and energy transitions. Second, I speak to the scholarship on the trans-war Chinese and Japanese states, and propose that the lens of energy brings into view marked commonalities between the otherwise very different political regimes. Finally, this project asks us to consider the industrial environment of modern coal mining, how changes in technology and labor management techniques interfaced with the geophysical conditions of the site, and what effects this had on the miners whose work sustained the system of carbon technocracy. This book should be of interest not only to historians of modern China and Japan, but also to those interested more broadly in the workings of technocracy, the nature of industrialization, and the political economy of energy.