An Anthropology of the Japanese Robot

Review by Mateja Kovacic

Robo Sapiens Japanicus: Robots, Gender, Family, and the Japanese Nation
by Jennifer Robertson
University of California Press, 20178

Jennifer Robertson's most recent book on robots in Japan is an easy-to-read ethnography-based overview of the ways that the national robotics policies in Japan are shaping the contemporary Japanese society as well as the ways that the neo-traditionalist society shapes robots. She focuses specifically on gender and family from an anthropological perspective, and proposes that the robots and the seemingly innovative policies are not socially innovative at all. Robertson demonstrates this through an array of examples, including the Innovation 25 program and the accompanying propaganda strips that portray the ways that the innovative technologies are used in a traditional family setting. Drawing on further case studies seen through a robotics lens, such as human rights and health care robots, Robertson further demonstrates that robots are envisioned by the PM Shinzō Abe's government to consolidate traditionalism and nationalism in the Japanese society. This might be seen as counterintuitive at a first glance because robots carry the aura of the futuristic progressive post-human society, but as Robertson demonstrates—and this is the highlight of her book—revolutionary technologies do not guarantee societal revolutions. In fact, they often "sell" the image of a progressive society but more often re-assert the (pre)existing social norms, values, and structures. The main contribution of this book is therefore Robertson's firmly demonstrated argument that robots in Japan not only re-assert the existing societal condition but are in fact reviving the past imperialistic frameworks—of both family and society.

In this book, Robertson builds and expands on her previous works—for those who have read her articles before, this book will provide an updated and expanded synthesis of her continuing research on robots and gender in Japan. She also successfully employs her previous work on Takarazuka, an all-

female theatre in Japan, to discuss the construction of gender, and includes robots in this discussion. She then criticises the unreflective gendering practices of male roboticists who reproduce traditional gender norms and gender performativity in their "innovative" humanoid robots. By doing so, Roberson creates a link between traditional society and traditional gender norms asserted through robots.

While all chapters work successfully around Robertson's golden thread, Chapter 7 on Cyborg-Ableism comes as slightly disconnected from the book's narrative. In this chapter, she writes about the societal perception of disabled individuals and the discrepancy between this perception and the health care robotics research. Perhaps the somewhat implicit idea was to demonstrate yet another paradox of the robotic innovation of the Japanese society, where robots are made and utilised within a traditional mindset. In the particular case of cyborg-ableism, not much has been changed about the ways that the private companies and roboticists discriminate against the disabled despite creating the enabling technologies such as exoskeletons. The discussion on Uncanny Valley in the same chapter also slightly deviates from the book's golden thread, as the idea of the robotic uncanny linked with the fear and anxiety produced by the traditional way of looking at the human body seems under-elaborated in relation to the book's overall framework.

Robertson concludes her book with a very needed "reality check," to remind her readers that robots are shaped by the past and existing social and cultural contexts. She also shows the reader how important it is to discern between the robot hype and what is really out there. Aside from Japan, many countries, including Dubai and South Korea, are using the still-developing technologies to promote their societal agendas as well as to boost their global image. The message of the book therefore is that the utopian futuristic images of society mask underlining problems.

Overall, the book demonstrates Robertson's unique dexterity in researching Japanese culture, and bringing together different phenomena and perspectives to analyse society in a holistic and systematic way. Robertson contextualises robots with history, popular culture, religion, spirituality and other important aspects of the research with ease and dynamism that will appeal to readers. The book provides an updated synthesis for those who are familiar with her work, but it will also be helpful for anyone interested in contemporary Japan. Thanks to Robertson's avoidance of academic jargon and her smooth writing style, the book will be an easy and informative read for both academic and general audience.

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research has a multidisciplinary focus on robots, from autonomous vehicles to humanoid robots in Japan and beyond. She also specialises in the history of technology and science, and the material history of Tokugawa Japan. Mateja's current projects includes the politics and political history of humanoid robots in Japan, as well as collaborative projects on autonomous delivery drones in Africa, urban automation and robotics, and robotics and AI in China.