

Book Review

Jin Sato and Soyeun Kim (eds), *The Semantics of Development in Asia: Exploring “Untranslatable” Ideas Through Japan*, Springer Nature Singapore, Singapore, 2024, 243 pp. ISBN: 978-981-97-1215-1, Hardcover \$59.99, Softcover \$39.99

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The global development discourse has long been shaped by concepts rooted in Western thought and legitimized internationally, often marginalizing local knowledge systems (Cornwall and Eade, 2010; Escobar, 2011). As a result, development practices are frequently forced to align with external frameworks that may not reflect local social, cultural, or historical contexts. *The Semantics of Development in Asia* (edited by Sato and Kim, 2024) offers a conceptual intervention by foregrounding Japanese development ideas that resist direct translation into English. Through semantic and historical analysis, the book challenges power-laden assumptions in development language and calls for greater recognition of epistemic plurality in both theory and practice (Gluck and Tsing, 2009).

This book comprises 14 chapters organized into four sections. The first outlines Japanese development norms such as *doboku* (Kuramoto, pp. 15–28), *kaizen* (Shimada, pp. 29–43), and *genba-shugi* (Matsubara, pp. 44–58). The second examines Japan’s identity through concepts like Asianism (Nakasato and Kuroda, pp. 61–78), *hito-zukuri* (Hashimoto, pp. 79–92), and endogenous development. The third discusses aid strategies based on *yōsei-shugi* explored by Sato (pp. 113–128), *jijo-doryoku* (Maemura, pp. 129–148), and ownership (Doi, pp. 149–164). The fourth section examines international responses to Japan’s development model, focusing on China’s adoption of key concepts, explored by Kim (pp. 179–194) on *kaihatsu-yunyū*, Shiga (pp. 195–208) on Yen loans, and Wang (pp. 209–224) on the Trinity of aid, trade, and investment. The concluding chapter calls for pluriversal development knowledge, an approach that values diverse regional perspectives and challenges the dominance of a single ideological center. From UNESCO’s perspective, pluriversalism highlights the importance of diverse ways of thinking, in contrast to universalism which prioritizes a singular worldview in Western culture.

The book, as a whole, critiques the epistemological foundations of global development discourse through the lens of local Japanese concepts. It argues that these terms are not merely technical, but embedded with historical, ethical, and social values that shape how development is understood and practiced in Japan. By rereading these concepts, the book contributes to development literature by foregrounding East Asia’s often-overlooked epistemic contributions, particularly those of Japan. It also reconceptualizes “translation” as a historical and contextual process,

rather than a purely linguistic one. Moreover, it challenges the universality of Western development concepts frequently adopted by non-Western countries without local contexts. Rather than presenting Japan as a “unique” model of non-Western modernization, the editors adopt the “Japan as method” approach, positioning Asia not merely as an object of study but as a source of methodological insight. While focused on Japan, the book highlights elements of Japanese development approach that have influenced other Asian contexts, particularly China, thus providing broader regional reflections. Therefore, it aligns with postdevelopment and decolonial agendas advanced by Escobar (2011) and Kothari et al. (2020), and supports a more reflective and locally grounded approaches in contemporary development studies (Kim, 2023).

In the context of knowledge decolonization, this book represents a concrete effort to challenge the dominance of global intellectual frameworks rooted in the historical experiences and linguistic structures of the Western world. By placing vernacular concepts on the same level, it not only broadens the theoretical horizons of development, but also fosters the emergence of a more equitable and pluralistic ecology of knowledge. Decolonization, in this context, does not entail rejecting Western discourse altogether, but rather creating space for dialogue among diverse knowledge traditions that have long been marginalized within the global structure of intellectual production.

The book makes a significant contribution to architecture by framing development as a contextual and historically grounded social practice, reinterpreting it as collective community efforts, beyond their technical connotation and underscoring the value of on-site engagement, resonating with participatory design approaches. By examining these “untranslated” Japanese terms, the book encourages a rethinking of development rooted in local knowledge. For architecture and planning, it challenges universalist assumptions and underscores the need to embed local values in designing spaces that are both functional and culturally meaningful.

This book highlights that development is not merely economic but also deeply social and cultural. As a decolonial intervention, it challenges the dominance of Western concepts and languages. Neglecting local contexts can risk human rights violations, as decolonization involves freedom, justice, cultural authenticity, and sovereignty (Schayegh and Di-Capua, 2020). Its critique of universalism aligns with efforts to rethink human rights through a pluriversal lens, one that embraces cultural relativism and the right to development (Habi, 2023).

The book’s major shortcoming is the lack of empirical applications of the development concepts introduced. Most of the contributions in this book focus on semantic analysis, concept genealogy, and textual studies, but few are accompanied by field data showing how Japanese concepts are articulated and practiced under contemporary development.

Its weakness notwithstanding, this book invites readers to re-reflect on how development ideas are formed, disseminated, and interpreted within a pluriversal world of multiple cultural logics. With its sharp analytical framework and interdisciplinary approach, this book is worth reading for academics, researchers, policymakers, as well as practitioners in the fields of development, Asian studies, architecture, and spatial planning interested in issues of language, power, and knowledge production in an ever-changing global context.

References

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