

**Andrew Gordon.** *Fabricating Consumers: The Sewing Machine in Modern Japan.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. 304 pp. \$57.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-26785-5.



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The story of the sewing machine in Japan, according to historian Andrew Gordon, connects two intersecting narratives—a global account of intercontinental flows of technology, goods, and organizational practices and an account of business strategy and innovation, national identity, and daily life in Japan. In *Fabricating Consumers*, he charts a history of the consumer (herself a producer of clothing), alongside a history of the manufacturers who supplied her with a crucial piece of technology. At the most miniscule level of analysis, Gordon shows how individual machine parts (and even part numbers) became grounds for intellectual property skirmishes between American and Japanese manufacturers and their governments. At the macro scale, he sketches a vision of globalization, viewed through the lens of the sewing machine, in which local groups selectively integrated American products (though not always the narratives that accompanied them) in a way that differentiated rather than homogenized. In doing so, he provides an instructive counterpoint to Victoria de Grazia's influential recent book *Irre-*

*sistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (2005).

Gordon also joins a growing number of social historians who engage economic and business history, connecting daily life to institutions and public policy. He frames social change in Japan within the ebb and flow of Singer Sewing Machine's prominence in that country, charting its rise in the early twentieth century to Japanese producers' out-maneuvering of Singer in the years leading up to World War II. *Fabricating Consumers* joins some of the most compelling recent work by these historians, such as Richard White's *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (2011) and Lizabeth Cohen's *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (2003), which knit together a study of business frameworks with social analyses of consumption and culture.[1] Like White and Cohen, Gordon asks questions and draws connections that less ambi-

tious studies of business or society alone cannot achieve.

The book opens with Singer's entry into the Japanese market at the turn of the twentieth century. Before 1900, sewing machines gained access to Japan almost exclusively through Japanese-run commission houses in port cities.[2] After Japan's 1899 victory in the Sino-Japanese war, Gordon suggests, "a wave of public enthusiasm at the twin achievements of (near) equality with the Western powers and the status of empire (the Qing ceded Taiwan to Japan as a colony)" lessened fears about Western companies' entry into the Japanese interior (p. 24). Most significantly, the Japanese government ended longstanding prohibitions on foreign ownership of property, allowing Singer to purchase and lease storefronts for its direct sales apparatus. Around the world, Gordon stresses, Singer thrived almost solely because of its "universal" sales model and name recognition—not because of lower prices (Singer machines were "relatively expensive"), superior technology ("other American and German machines were reputedly better"), or better design or advertising ("all the leading machines looked alike") (p. 30). From the beginning, purchasing a Singer was about much more than simply owning a sewing machine.

Singer came to Japan with a half-century of international business experience. In all of its markets, the company had to build distribution networks, usually from the ground up, while simultaneously cultivating desire for new products among consumers, demonstrating their utility, managing installment payment systems, and incentivizing their sales and collections forces. As such, the company confronted problems similar to those facing many American exporters of complex machines, like harvesters and cash registers. [3] Like many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century manufacturers who made specialized products and had an eye toward international growth, Singer had to standardize parts, teach

consumers to use novel machines, and create channels for the repair and maintenance of their expensive products.

In Japan, however, Singer faced several additional and distinctive trials. The sewing machine was well suited to "Western sewing," but failed to replace hand sewing for the kimono, a garment requiring a loose stitch that could easily be taken out for washing and then resewn. Singer had faced similar challenges in India and China due to customers' non-Western style of dress, for which the company developed a chain-stitch machine and free company sewing schools. Yet the sales in these other Asian markets paled in comparison to Singer's sales (and perceived sales potential) in Japan.[4] Higher stakes—and hope for far greater rewards—characterized Singer's entry into Japan.

In the early twentieth century, Western-style apparel had been adopted by many Japanese men and was considered acceptable for children's clothing, but most adult women continued to wear kimonos. At the same time, the Japanese ready-to-wear clothing market remained proportionally much smaller in this period than in the United States or Western Europe; most clothing was made-to-order, either by hired seamstresses or at home. This generated higher demand for the sewing machine in Japan as compared to these other countries. In Japan, choices about fashion and comportment occurred much closer to the level of the individual consumer, at least for those who could afford to choose, and the sewing machine potentially had a central role to play in either modernizing Japan or shackling the country to the interests of Western fashions and industries. Changes in dress during this era represented just one of many dramatic shifts taking place in Japan, and battles over the terms of Japanese modernity involved all levels of society.

Up to its discussion of roughly the 1920s, Gordon's book mostly builds on and extends existing Singer scholarship by Andrew Godley, Robert Davies, and Geoffrey G. Jones and David Kiron,

among others, who have examined Singer's global sales and marketing strategies in-depth.[5] Gordon's initial chapters continue somewhat in this *veni, vidi, vici* tradition, illuminating how Singer's global innovations—door-to-door sales and collections apparatuses, consumer credit arrangements, and the creative framing of the promises of modern consumer life—fit into a Japanese context and brought the company rapid growth and national renown. Many aspects of Singer's early strategy in Japan mirror Singer stories around the world. When Singer entered Japan, "it made remarkably little adjustment to its selling system." This system, "created through trans-Atlantic trial and error," initially worked remarkably well in the Japanese marketplace. Within a decade, the company "stood unchallenged with more than 80 percent of the Japanese household market," maintaining nearly complete dominance through the 1920s (p. 31).

In the 1930s, however, Singer began a steady decline in the Japanese market, and Gordon's analysis of the company's fall breaks new ground. *Fabricating Consumers* moves beyond established analyses of Singer's triumph as a multinational firm by showing Singer in conversation and competition with domestic challengers, such as Janome, Mitsubishi, and Brothers, and relates how a combination of strategy and circumstance led these start-up companies to completely displace Singer over time.[6] In 1932, large-scale, violent labor unrest among Singer employees, especially the salesmen who relied on dwindling commission checks, threatened Singer's Japanese dominance, and domestic firms quickly took advantage of the melee. These domestic manufacturers cloned Singer models—both in terms of the commodities sold (machines and parts) and the strategies used to sell them (installment plans, sales and service strategies, and employee compensation). Then they adapted these models to expand the market for sewing machines while satisfying waxing preferences for products of national origin. The Brothers Sewing Machine Company,

for example, introduced a near-exact copy of Singer's sewing machine design, down to even the decorative decals. Janome explicitly advertised its machines as being "the same" as Singer's model 15 at "half the price," with the additional virtue of being "our country's product" (pp. 110-111). Gordon's presentation of the competing sewing machine models and print advertisements from the period powerfully amplifies his argument. Instead of adapting to these new challenges, Singer became recalcitrant. Its executives "stubbornly defend[ed] the global validity of a single selling system" and became increasingly less willing to "negotiate and consider changes for its salesmen," despite an escalation in labor violence and the slipping of its market share (p. 93).

Intellectual property disputes were by no means new territory for Singer. The mismatch between the formally legal and the informally acceptable became a key arena of contention in Japanese industry. Within the United States, the sewing machine had been the subject of many vicious legal battles over patent infringements, and Singer's successful navigation of American intellectual property laws had propelled the company's initial rise in the early nineteenth century.[7] Singer also had experience maneuvering the complexities of intellectual property laws abroad. For example, in the United Kingdom, courts ruled that patents for American designs for the eye-pointed needle and the shuttle were in the public domain, "opening markets to new competitors" for Singer in the UK.[8]

Any potential complaints from Singer to the Japanese government about patent infringement ran into the buzz saw of rising nationalism in the immediate pre-World War II period. Government policy and consumer preference already privileged Japanese producers, and Japan's invasion of China and rising anti-American sentiment in 1937-38 pushed Singer out of Japan completely. Singer's executives, however, hardly forgot their intellectual property grievances, and legal battles

recommenced even before the company formally reentered the postwar Japanese marketplace. In 1949, rumors that Singer was preparing to return led the Ministry of Commerce, now highly solicitous of good relations with American officials, to issue a directive listing new standardized model numbers for sewing machine parts and the explicit prohibition of the use of Singer model names or part numbers by domestic producers. “Clearly,” Gordon explains, “many manufacturers were not only copying Singer parts, but also using Singer part numbers and model names to signify their achievement” (p. 157).

Japanese government directives ultimately did little to end domestic incursions onto Singer’s product lines. A sewing machine trade journal “published dozens of articles presenting diagrams and technical specifications of Singer machines and parts, along with their associated patents” between 1948 and 1950. While superficially exhorting makers to study these designs in order to respect Singer’s intellectual property, the journal “equally offered the possibility of making copies based on the designs” (p. 157). Ultimately, the struggle to protect intellectual property fell into a “grey zone,” in which much of the so-called infringement was “not necessarily illegal” since many of Singer’s basic patents had since expired. Nevertheless, Singer’s president Sir Douglas Alexander described the actions as “unethical in every moral sense” and complained that “the Japanese were always imitators and always will be” (p. 159).

Janome also tweaked Singer’s proprietary business models. At least in part a response to Singer’s labor disputes in the 1930s, Janome transitioned to a fixed-pay salary arrangement (with smaller additional commissions earned on products sold) that provided wage security for salesmen. The company also launched a new installment plan aimed at the lowest-income consumers that allowed purchasers to pay five yen per month toward a down payment on a reserved ma-

chine, then either take the machine home for cash or installment payments or pay off the machine in full at a discount while it remained on layaway —“essentially earn[ing] interest on the money deposited ... over two years.” Despite some initial resistance from Japanese regulators, who complained that the company’s layaway program “was violating banking laws by acting as a savings bank,” the program ultimately won approval through an “appeal to national interest,” including an argument that this system would be “especially suited to a family with young daughters” because the machine would be paid for at around the time the girls took their first sewing lessons (p. 112). Here it is clear that Singer’s “universal” distribution strategies did not perfectly fit the needs of all Japanese market segments. Japanese producers succeeded by adapting established methods to the needs of their salesmen and low-income consumers and shaping their sales rhetoric to appeal to the Japanese sense of “common good.”

Throughout the sixty-year scope of the book, both the Japanese government and individual firms promoted understandings of production and consumption as political acts. Japanese-government-promoted “common sense” increasingly demanded that consumers be frugal, smart, and sensible, satisfying wants and needs in a world where consumption choices could signal individuality, modernity, and patriotism. Both the national origin of products and their associations with certain sensibilities and styles mattered in the contentious market for consumer goods, before and after World War II.

*Fabricating Consumers* also offers numerous insights to scholars outside the field of business history, including those whose interests lie primarily in the realms of culture, nation, empire, and identity. The sewing machine, whether sold by an American-based multinational or a local manufacturer, had a disputed symbolic presence in multilayered and overlapping debates sur-

rounding national consciousness, gender roles, class formation, and modernity. These factors made understandings of the sewing machine even more ambiguous in a Japanese context: was a foot-pedal machine a sensible tool for the cost-conscious Japanese “good wife, wise mother,” or an overpriced, status-endowing commodity of Western origin that would threaten the nebulous, shifting category of “Japanese”? Throughout *Fabricating Consumers*, Gordon makes clear that such battles were not fought in a world with precise distinctions between East/West, modern/traditional, or capitalist/anticapitalist. Rather, these descriptors were constantly shifting so that Japanese women might reimagine the *hakama*, a Japanese garment originally worn by men, as a signifier of modern Japanese femininity worn by both the privileged “girl student” and the “self-reliant ‘woman teacher’” (pp. 40, 84-85).

Gordon also explores “who sewed what for whom, and where?” as a central organizing question about social experience. This tack opens up his narrative to complicating issues of class and gender, and to the significance of the sewing machine to young brides-to-be and middle-class professional housewives, as well as the mothers, daughters, and widows who took on homework to scrape by and who viewed the sewing machine as a gateway to a middle-class lifestyle, an aspirational category that, in itself, was contested and constantly in flux. In these ways, the sewing machine epitomized negotiations of the terms and categories of “modern life” in Japan’s twentieth century.

Here Gordon relies on a rich mix of source material, including newspaper advertisements and articles, interviews, and didactic “true stories” from *The Housewife’s Companion* and industry marketing magazines, such as *Janome mōdo* (Janome mode). He also uses time-use studies to estimate the amount of time Japanese women devoted daily to sewing by hand or machine (considerably more than their American or European

counterparts) and the proportion of women who undertook homework sewing tasks to generate household income (a small, though significant, percentage).

Gordon additionally provides an important, though somewhat understated, intervention in globalization studies, particularly focused on how global flows relate to multinational enterprise. In his analysis of the role of the sewing machine in both Japanese business and culture, Gordon finds much that does not fit a characterization of globalization as a universalizing or homogenizing force. Gordon aligns himself more closely with Arjun Appadurai (*Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* [1996]), who, Gordon explains, “understands ‘local’ dynamically” and “does not see globalization as homogenization” (p. 5).

While few contemporary historians would maintain that the world is truly flat—that globalization invariably produces sameness, or that it invariably coopts without contingency or nuance—Gordon’s analytical target is subtler. He compares his own perspective with that of de Grazia in *Irresistible Empire*. As Gordon states, De Grazia argues that “American capitalism in the twentieth century, especially the ethos and practice of mass merchandizing and branding goods such as Singer’s machine, constituted an ‘irresistible empire,’” and that this cluster of business practices and social ideals “transformed and remade the civic and daily lives of twentieth-century Europeans in America’s image” (pp. 4-5). “Implicitly here,” Gordon explains, “if Europe could not resist this empire, neither could the rest of the world” (p. 5).

Gordon’s evidence in Japan suggests otherwise, especially with regard to the substantial revisions to Singer’s so-called universal sales model undertaken by Singer’s competitors. At least in the world of sewing machines, Japanese consumers and producers proved at times quite resistant to the “American Market Empire,” choosing to selec-

tively adopt parts of the American sales model (and its accompanying implications for the dream of a middle-class consumer lifestyle) while rejecting other parts outright. Elsewhere, Gordon has explicitly articulated his contribution as both an extension of de Grazia's thesis and a challenge to it.[9]

Gordon successfully illuminates transnational flows of ideas and goods between Japan and the United States. However, the implications of these same flows within the Japanese Empire are far less fully developed. Singer had stores in Taiwan and Korea since its earliest days in Japan, and, by the 1920s, Singer's Seoul operation had expanded into a central office that oversaw "a growing operation in Korea and Manchuria" (p. 33). Unlike Singer's experiences in the Japanese home islands, Gordon notes, the company did not "find itself on the wrong side of ethnic resentments" in Korea (p. 114). Furthermore, a survey conducted in June 1937 on women's dress in different cities found that the colonial capitals of Taiwan and Korea had the highest percentage of women in Western-style dress, 46.6 percent and 40.7 percent respectively. By comparison, the surveyor observed only 25 percent of Tokyo women in Western dress, and the empirewide average was 26 percent (pp. 122-123). Clearly, the forces at work in Taiwan and Korea were distinct from those in Japan proper, but Gordon offers barely a glimpse of what those forces might be. This is undoubtedly an area with potential for further research—not only to better understand the diverse meanings and practices surrounding the sewing machine, but also to further explore the reach and depth of de Grazia's and Gordon's contrasting Market Empires.

Overall, *Fabricating Consumers* combines a rich analysis of business and consumer history in a package that is accessible to a wide audience. This book would be a valuable addition to a syllabus for a course on twentieth-century Japan at the graduate or undergraduate level, but would

also work well as a case study in a business history course or a course dealing with issues of gender, transnational material culture, globalization, or modernity. Gordon reinvigorates the history of the sewing machine and suggests that there is much more to learn about this extremely significant piece of household technology.

#### Notes

[1]. Cohen also blends social and business history in her discussion of chain stores in *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[2]. Robert Davies, *Peacefully Working to Conquer the World: Singer Sewing Machines in Foreign Markets, 1854-1920* (New York: Arno, 1976), 194.

[3]. See, for example: Mira Wilkins, *The Emergence of Multinational Enterprise: American Business Abroad from the Colonial Era to 1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970); Fred V. Carstensen, *American Enterprise in Foreign Markets: Studies of Singer and International Harvester in Imperial Russia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); James W. Cortada, *Before the Computer: IBM, NCR, Burroughs, and Remington Rand and the Industry They Created, 1865-1956* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Walter A. Friedman, *Birth of a Salesman: The Transformation of Selling in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[4]. Davies, *Peacefully Working to Conquer the World*, 199.

[5]. See, for example, Davies, *Peacefully Working to Conquer the World*; Andrew Godley, "Selling the Sewing Machine around the World: Singer's International Marketing Strategies, 1850-1920," *Enterprise and Society* 7, no. 2 (2006): 266-314; Andrew Gordon, "Selling the American Way: The Singer Sales System in Japan, 1900-1938," *Business History Review* 82, no. 4 (2008): 671-699; and Geoffrey G. Jones and David

Kiron, “Globalizing Consumer Durables: Singer Sewing Machine before 1914,” Harvard Business School Case 9-804-001 (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2008).

[6]. The Yasui family had been repairing sewing machines in Nagoya since 1905, and the patriarch’s two sons began making machine parts and later introduced a sewing machine in the 1930s. The Yasui brothers took the name Brothers Sewing Machine Company for their new enterprise, which emerged from the Yasui business. Meanwhile, two partners (each with the character for “pine” in his name) founded the Pine Sewing Machine Company in 1921 and achieved prominence in the market with their Janome model. Pine’s founding partners split, and the exiting partner took the name “Pine” to form his own company, while the remaining partner changed the name of the existing firm to “Janome.” Janome and Brothers are used here, for the sake of clarity, to describe what would become the Janome and Brothers enterprises. See Gordon, p. 108.

[7]. The early nineteenth-century “Sewing Machine Wars” only subsided with the 1856 signing of the Albany Agreement, which created a “patent pool” of ten essential sewing machine patents jointly held by four companies—and required that any competing firm pay a hefty licensing fee for each similar machine sold. Jones and Kiron, “Globalizing Consumer Durables,” 3-4.

[8]. Ibid., 5.

[9]. Gordon, “Selling the American Way.”

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