Book Review


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External, foreign pressure forced Japan to end its Sakoku (closed country, isolationist policy) in 1853. Japan’s strict, almost closed-door foreign migration policy, however, remained. At present, internal demographic challenges — the world’s highest percentage of elderly amidst declining population growth, changing family size, and a labor shortage — are among the pressing factors pushing Japan to reconsider this policy. Who will take care of the Japanese elderly? Their fellow Japanese? Non-Japanese workers? Robots even?

Beata Switek shares her insights about this important topic by skillfully blending qualitative, ethnographic data focused on the various participants directly and indirectly involved in the care of Japanese elderly with comprehensive literature and statistical information. Through a reflective theoretical framework, she follows certain Indonesian caregiver candidates in the early phase of the implementation of the 2008 Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between Indonesia and Japan, situating them within “the wider context of international interdependencies” (5). In doing so, Switek clarifies her research goals of “using ethnographic descriptions of the Indonesian workers’ lives at work and beyond in Japan... to trace the connections between the ideas of the national, interpersonal and bodily intimacies” (4).

Some readers interested in empirical data about Indonesian informants’ experiences and interaction with Japanese coworkers, employers, and older residents at the elderly institutions, and their so-called intimacies may find Switek’s theoretical discourses distracting or difficult to understand on first reading. Other readers, however, will appreciate her engagement with literatures and themes including migration, reproductive/emotional labor, global care chains, agency, and the politics of multiculturalism in Japan as a homogeneous country.

Switek shares background data about Japan’s historical experiences with foreign migrants scrutinized and subjected to Japanese ideas of race, ethnicity, and culture, comparing their experiences in Japan with the experiences of diverse workers with other countries. While in the initial stages of cross-cultural interactions between host societies and migrants in many locales, problems, resistance, and rejection have been observed, over time, these initial negative phases often give way to official and/or informal, interpersonal positive acceptance and intimacies, even in many countries which were initially closed to foreign migrants.

Japan, however, continues to hesitate, be ambivalent about, resist, or even openly reject accepting non-Japanese workers on several levels, from government to interpersonal levels, as Switek discusses. Can Japan continue this reluctant stance toward migration, given the serious implications of urgent demographic trends facing its society? Will Japan open up and grant more non-Japanese residents full working visas or reconsider the stringent restrictions and conditions for those accepted on provisional basis like the EPA candidates or the larger number of trainees?

Switek, with her multilingual facility and privileged advantage of being allowed inside the very private Japanese elderly institutions, takes the reader theoretically and empirically through a careful scrutiny of the processes involved within various interpersonal levels of acceptance or nonacceptance, of intimacies or negative interactions between her Indonesian

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informants and certain Japanese elderly, coworkers, and other actors within and outside their work context.

As Switek notes, five informants decided to return to Indonesia while two decided to remain in Japan. Those who returned felt that their “value and usefulness as a human being” (193) were denied and were “bothered by the subsumption of themselves as viable persons under the blanket of linguistic incomprehension, cultural differentiation, and political economic categorizations as migrant or foreign migrant which obstructed their recognition as individuals who wanted to be appreciated” (194).

More broadly, however, more migrants are deciding to stay in Japan rather than return to their home countries, despite prevailing personal, professional, and cultural hurdles. Only 82 of the 402 Indonesian and Filipino EPA candidates who passed the Japanese national examinations through mid-2014, for example, chose to return to their home countries. Based on this trend and her wider research, Switek concludes that “intimacy builds worlds” (Lauren Berlant in Switek, 201), that “bodily and interpersonal intimacies achieved through shared experiences and outlooks” can serve as “a platform on which people otherwise conceiving of themselves as different can identify” (201).

While it is important to consider these interpersonal intimacies within migration, as Switek's book emphasizes, even Switek herself recognizes that “both systemic and social changes are still needed to encourage non-Japanese to arrive and remain in Japan” (193). As she both argues and illustrates throughout her study, weaving together separate but broad and deep incursions into agency, structure, and the link between the two can lead to a more comprehensive understanding and better policy for migrants and societies globally.