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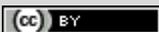
Book Review

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Book Review

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While foreign migrant labor is a common feature of paid eldercare around the world (Parreñas 2015), Japan remains exceptional among highly developed countries for its reluctance to accept foreign eldercare workers, even though this sector dangerously under-resourced. Japan's population is the oldest in the world, with the proportion of the population aged 65 and older making up around 27 percent of the overall population. Despite Japan's huge investments in media-friendly social robot carers (Robertson 2014), care of the elderly still remains dependent upon human labor. By 2025, when the post-war baby-boom generation enters their mid-70s, the Japanese Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare estimates a [shortfall of 380,000 eldercare staff in Japan](#). Immigration, even if it were to start in earnest today, would still not make up these numbers in the next eight years. And yet the small numbers of foreign trainees working towards professional caregiver qualifications that will earn them the ability to stay and work in Japan have received a lot of attention in the media, where they are simultaneously commended for coming to Japan's aid in a time of crisis and held up as examples of the many obstacles that immigrants continue to face.

Beata Świtek's ethnography of the first cohort of Indonesian care work trainees brought to Japan under the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) helps us peel away the many layers of representation that circulate in debates about aging, immigration and care by taking the us into the rooms of the nursing homes where encounters between trainees, Japanese staff members, and residents bring "national imaginations and public discourses" (4) to the level of personal relationships and everyday practices used in "constructing, recognising and denying the viability of certain kinds of person" (4). The parallels between these Indonesian caregivers and the older residents is clear, and Świtek illustrates these two groups often strike up friendly alliances. But this is only one example of the many ways new relationships might emerge as rapidly aging, globally embedded societies bring about new sites of "multicultural coexistence" (4) which destabilize taken for granted assumptions and uncover anxieties about cultural identity. Świtek shows that what is at stake for the Japanese people in opening the possibility of more immigrant labor is both their contention of cultural-ethnic uniqueness and their claim to be an international economic power.

As I read Świtek's book, the word "reluctant" kept resurfacing. It is the ideal term for the kind of awkward, ambivalent 'intimate encounters' (to borrow Faier's (2009) phrase) that are neither complete embrace nor total refusal. They are encounters where a distance is maintained, shaped and reshaped in ways that reflect both desires and discomfort. As an excellent ethnographer, Świtek never lets this uncomfortable action too far out of her sight, recognizing them as sites where the universal human tendency to create categories of difference is 'ruefully' revealed (81). The notion of 'reluctant intimacies' allows Świtek to address three main areas of contention: the bodily intimacy between caregivers and the elderly; the interpersonal intimacy between the trainees and Japanese staff; and finally the national intimacy between

Asian neighbors brought about mainly through economic interests and globalization. Świtek's ethnography shows how these three sites interpenetrate each other, and how this can explain many of the seeming contradictions in policies, attitudes, and practices across each.

Świtek was able to shadow several of these workers in care home placements across Japan and to conduct interviews and observation. She would also travel to Indonesia to meet the families of the migrants. The EPA agreement itself reflects the reluctant intimacies and dependencies across Asia. Chapter 1 begins by describing the recruitment of Indonesian candidates through the EPA, many of whom were highly educated and experienced in caregiving and viewed the chance to work in Japan as not only a chance to earn money and support family through remittances, but also to chase a Japanese 'dream' of the good life. Świtek follows the candidates to Japan, tracking their hopes and disenchantments as they are given a six month crash-course in language and then dispersed to care homes where they must master a demanding schedule of menial tasks.

As they bore the weight of their decision and tried to forge a life of success and dignity, they faced institutional and interpersonal obstacles and uncertainties. In Chapter 2, Świtek describes how, at times, the Indonesian candidates' novelty was an asset, at other times, a sign of their unsuitability. Świtek examines the implications for these perceptions in terms of theories of care as well as the semiotics of "essentializing" or "stereotypical imaginations" (96). By grounding these concepts in ethnographic descriptions, Świtek moves us beyond a simple notion of workplace discrimination, showing instead the ways candidates sought ways to accommodate Japanese ways of life and even find friendship. At the same time, she is clear that the constant awareness of being a disruptive presence in the workplace (added to the already stressful conditions of care work), were not always easy to cope with.

In many ways, by helping us see the Japanese eldercare system through the eyes of the Indonesian trainees, 'circulating' (33) through the dispersed care homes they were dispatched to on arrival, Świtek is able to reveal much more about care institutions and immigrants' experience than a typical 'nursing home ethnography' based in only one site. This is most clear in Chapter 3, where she moves from staff coworkers to employers and broader institutional accommodation for the EPA candidates. This includes everything from cultural orientation manuals to welcome ceremonies with staff and residents presenting flowers to their new trainee (133). One institution even chose to strike all pork products from its menus as a sign of respect for Islamic dietary restrictions. These gestures, and other ways employers invested in the candidates, engendered, on the one hand, the feeling of a close familial bond, and on the other, a way for employers to exert more influence on candidates' private lives. In the absence of the usual employer-employee relationship, Świtek shows how employers' position of responsibility for their EPA candidates is one of both beneficence and control, but that intimacy provides further chances for personal relationships to form.

Chapter 4 returns to the topic of the representation of the Indonesian candidates in the context of national discourses about immigration, internationalization and Japan's aging society. Świtek covers an impressive range of sources, from policy and history to images in popular media. The picture that she paints is one of a Japan that is reluctantly reflecting on its own long held ideology of cultural homogeneity as it finds itself caught up in a world of new pressures from inside and out. Świtek acknowledges that immigrant labor will not become a panacea to Japan's eldercare worker shortage and she gives us little reason to believe politics around the issue are going to radically shift in the near future. Nonetheless, Świtek encourages us to also consider the potential of EPA programs to provide new opportunities for not only beneficial

employment paths for immigrants, but also for introducing intercultural engagements that could have positive effects for dissolving reductive perceptions of foreigners and that might produce a more lively environment for care home residents and staff alike.

Reluctant Intimacies does not shy away from the complexity of both the macro-level economic and political circumstances surrounding the EPA, or the micro-level practices in the care homes, but masterfully weaves together the tense strands of mobility, economy, culture and care in a way that is clear, smart, and compelling. While much of the book will be of particular interest to Japan specialists, Świtek's main contributions are to our understanding of intimacy, familiarity and cultural imaginations in an aging society, and she frames these concepts with brief but effective references throughout. For this reason, and for its sensitive ethnographic descriptions, *Reluctant Intimacies* would be appropriate for use in undergraduate or graduate courses, and should be seen as a model for anthropologists writing on the complexities of care and immigration.

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