



Book review of Michiel Baas (ed.) (2020) *The Asian Migrant's Body: Emotion, Gender and Sexuality*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 210 pp.

EVE ORHANLI 

BOOK REVIEW

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The concept of the migrant's body constructs of layers and perspectives. The intimacy and privacy of the body are inseparable from the social, economic and political nature of it. *The Asian Migrant's Body. Emotion, Gender and Sexuality* succeeds in taking account of each of these aspects. This book comprises of eight scientific chapters that bring anthropological, sociological and psychological scholarly views together.

The volume begins with Pardis Madhavi's Chapter 1 on same-sex relations among migrant workers, which is an invigorating contribution to non-heteronormative scholarly literature on migration and sexuality. Some of the informants in her study have an interesting approach to the issue, as they seek to detach sexual politics from identity politics. Although sexuality is an important aspect of their identity, they wish to be associated more through their activism. For them, migration is a political act and in their search for a de-politicised space, they continue to participate in political acts such as LGBTIQ activism.

In Chapter 2, 'Bodies at Work', Denise L. Spitzer examines female migrant beer sellers in South East Asia. It brings to the fore how the beer sellers encounter challenging of their boundaries, agencies and subjectivities. The objectifying treatment begins in the recruitment process by their employers and continues by their customers as they work. Importantly, Spitzer highlights that despite the stigma attached to their bodies as a consequence of their work and their enjoyment of the hetero-sexualised gender performance, the workers are neither victims nor hedonistic neoliberal women seduced by cosmopolitan consumers and ideas of modernity. Instead, the analysis of their situation should concentrate on their strengths and capabilities to survive and thrive in a new environment as migrants, contributing to their households while trying to fulfil their personal dreams for their futures.

With a somewhat different approach, in Chapter 3, Amrita Pande addresses the situation of female migrant domestic workers (MDWs), who experience exploitative conditions in their work in Lebanon. Reports by the mainstream media and NGOs

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about the situation have brought international attention to the issue. However, Pande considers this attention misleading, because it frames the structural problem as a private issue (p. 71). This perspective is crucial because privatising a broader problem takes the responsibility off the shoulders of the nation state. The spatial aspect is essential in the everyday lives of MDWs, because their access to public spaces is restricted. Restrictions actualise on a structural level as 'Otherness'. Here, 'Otherness' means the forms of discipline and desire that the MDW's face (p. 75). The oral histories that Pande has collected from 68 women in Beirut and Tripoli are interesting data for an ethnographic research.

In Chapter 4, Maria Platt, Brenda S.A. Yeoh, Khoo Choon Yen, Grace Baey and Theodora Lam discuss the 'Day Off policy' of female domestic workers in Singapore. Their mixed methods study brings out the employer's anxieties of giving freedom to domestic workers as well as how the 'Day Off policy' has developed into increasingly representing the norm. The research draws on both quantitative and qualitative data but the chapter at hand predominantly relies on interviews with Indonesian domestic workers in Singapore. The new 'Day Off policy' redefines employer-employee relations as well as the boundaries of mobility for the domestic workers.

An exceptionally captivating part for an intersectionally oriented reader is Michelle G. Ong's Chapter 5 (pp. 109-134), 'Embodying the Good Migrant in Ageing'. Ong has employed indigenous methodologies in forming the study setting all the way from the chosen theoretical framework 'Sikolohiyang Pilipino' (indigenous Filipino psychology) to the data gathering method 'pakikipagkwentuhan', which displays similarities to the semi-structured interview. There is no question of the novelty of Ong's research design; however, I expected that the decolonising methodological approach would have included the analysis, too. There is no doubt, however, of the usefulness of the chosen poststructuralist approach to language in thematic analysis. Moreover, the assertion that migration policy is designed to control migrants as a source of labor instead of future citizens is an essential aspect of Ong's study. The Filipina older migrants provide some special perspectives to the question of aging migrants because labor exportation is common in their country of origin. As Ong explains, labor migration has been a systematic economic strategy of the Philippine government since the 1970s (p. 115).

In Chapter 6, Michele Ruth Gamburd discusses the situation of MDWs who move from Sri Lanka to work in Middle Eastern countries. Gamburd illuminates the gendered discourses on migration in Sri Lanka. Migrant women's bodies are perceived through sexuality, reproduction and care as they change over time. Gambourd uses a life course analysis in her study and therefore her research covers for not only the migrant's body but also the aspect of age. To understand the migration decisions strategically made within families, Gambour examines the bodily issues related to youngsters, teenagers, mature individuals, grandparents and frail elders. In the chapter, Gambourd shows that migration decisions reflect the culturally constructed ways of seeing, judging and deciding about bodies and whether they should cross borders. This recognition makes the research an essential part of the book.

The last two chapters examine sexuality and intimacy in two different settings: first in Chapter 7, 'Border-crossing as Sexual Subjects', Alex Yang Li explores the Chinese diaspora's experiences of sexual expression and interracial relations from the perspectives of young migrants living in New Zealand. The data gathered for the research illustrate the conflicting position of young Chinese people operating in sexual

spaces: the expectations of post-migration life offering more liberal gender expression and more equal family life are combined with living in white dominant society and encountering racialisation and exoticising. In Chapter 8, Hareem Khan writes about the role of intimacy in South Asian beauty industry in Los Angeles. Khan interestingly notes that intimacy is important to build loyalty between clients and estheticians, but the downside of it is that within an ethnicised service sector achieving loyalty strongly leans on the fulfilment of classed, gendered and racialised expectations.

This book *The Asian Migrant's Body* connects questions of labor, sexuality, gender, parenthood and religion, additionally approaching them with a wide range of disciplines and methodologies. Some of the methodological frameworks introduced in the chapters are new to bigger audiences such as the aforementioned indigenous Filipino methods in the chapter written by Michelle G. Ong (pp. 109–133). Hence, to some extent the book at hand provides the reader with information of alternative research methods as well. Each chapter calls attention to intersections of two or more simultaneously occurring phenomena that affect the social realities of Asian migrants or their social standings. To me, the core of the book is the empowering message that the baseline should be an active and reflective subject, and in contextualising the Asian migrant's body, situational, historical and cultural aspects play a key role. Regardless of one's own discipline, people looking for literature on migration, intersectionality, alternative research methods and marginalised voices will find this book informative. Compared to classic literature on racialisation and racialised bodies, such as Frantz Fanon's (1986) writings or Sarah Ahmed's (2000) theoretisation of 'Otherness', this book offers a more pragmatic approach by reflecting theory to specific circumstances and conditions.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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