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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

The Art of Aging

Review by Sarah Hall

Aging and Loss: Mourning and Maturity in Contemporary Japan

by Jason Danely

Rutgers University Press, 2014

Jason Danely's exploration of the experiences of Japanese elders and their negotiation of aging in his book follows along what one would very much imagine was his natural progression of thought, throughout his years of research on the topic. Overtly artistic in nature, the author invites his readers in to inspect the intricacies of Japanese culture, as an art teacher gathers his students to marvel at a masterpiece. In turns humorous, tense and poignant, Danely's vignettes of his conversations with his informants allow their voices to seep through, despite the boundaries of translation, and a sensitive reader will be allowed to feel some fraction of the emotions embodied during Danely's research.

This is not the sort of ethnography that is easily summarized. Each chapter of the book addresses different emotional states, related through the lens of Danely's interactions with his informants, and incorporating broader players such as the Japanese government and the strain of having a super-aging society. Throughout the narrative runs a strain of devotion to family and ancestors and deep-seeded fears of becoming a burden, of needing to be taken care of by those who once depended upon you. "To most of the older people I spoke with, longevity meant that in spite of the 'promise of adulthood' and self-cultivation, eventually they would become a burden on others" (p. 4). Over and over again, informants relate to Danely a desire to not burden others, in terms of both physical need, but also, in the case of one man, Sato-san, an emotional burden. Struggling with such topics as cultural authenticity, a good death and self-value, the reader is enveloped in Danely's almost personal interest in these people. More friends than informants, he relates times of helping Mori-san to move house, gardening, volunteering, and amusing flirtations. In all of this, the impression is built of the author as a

neighbor, of having lived in Kyoto, in truth, rather than the more traditional anthropologist as a temporary guest. He ends with an offering of his own sense of loss, having completed his work and his time in Japan. “Was I now abandoning them too?” (p. 186).

If fear of dependency is what they related to Danely, devotion to the memorialization of their dead family and ancestors is how they largely illustrated and dealt with that fear. “The most prominent way in which Japanese culture shapes and is shaped by the experiences of older adults is through images and ritual practices for the ancestors and spirits of the family dead...” (p. 12). The theatre of memorialization is related to the reader as a way for the elderly to demonstrate to their heirs the way they (the elders) wish to be treated after they pass, to be remembered and respected. Informants who seem more content are those who have better relations with their families, and trust that their families will do right by them, viewing kinship as an exchange (p. 68). “Circulating sentiments perpetuates the bond of memory between the living and the dead, and with each turning back to face the departed, there is a sense of seeing one’s own future as well...” (p. 31).

While largely working for this piece, Danely’s voice is, at times, fairly dripping in sentimentality. The author’s artistic inclinations, and his flowery descriptions will, perhaps, occasionally cause a foot to tap in impatience for something slightly more empirical. Long passages, waxing particularly on the beauty and mystery of the mountains and the cemeteries – “There was something dreamlike about this sudden transformation from city to mountain, the ghostly wisteria growing wild through the treetops or the traces of wild pigs digging up bamboos shoots in the spring.” (p. 70) – while poignant, may detract from the point he tries to make.

From a linguistic standpoint, Danely’s insertion of many original Japanese words (rather than merely translating it and asking for the reader’s faith) and occasional subsequent discussion on the possible nuances of the chosen vocabulary brought in some intriguing peripheral points of interest, in addition to granting extra confidence in Danely’s command of the Japanese language.

This book is well-written, easy to read, but rather than falling into simplicity, invites the reader into deep reflection on the proffered narratives. It is a work that often evokes more of an emotional reaction than a purely intellectual one, and that may very well be the author’s intent and purpose, and the strength of this qualitative piece.

Sarah Hall recently received her MA in medical anthropology from the University of Colorado, Denver. She currently works in Thailand.



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