

Aging and Loss: Mourning and Maturing in Contemporary Japan, by Jason Danely. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2014. Pp. 246. \$120 (hardcover); \$34.95 (paperback); \$34.95 (electronic).

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Japan, a country which has long faced the challenges of an aging population. It is generally believed that in Japan older people are revered and offered good (and typically familial) care. This seems in conflict, however, with occasional, yet shocking, news reports about cases of neglect, abuse, and even murder of older people by their familial carers.

Jason Danely's *Aging and Loss: Mourning and Maturing in Contemporary Japan* offers insights into this seemingly contradictory picture. The book is based upon his fieldwork in Kyoto, mostly in 2013-2014, during which he conducted interviews with older residents. Through these interviews and the life narratives that emerged from them, Danely explores aging in contemporary Japan. In doing so, he rejects both the essentialist discourse that endorses certain forms of care (typically, familial care based in multi-generational households) as being inherent in Japanese culture, and a similar discourse that attributes changes in elder care to the corruption of 'authentic' Japanese culture by Westernization (17). Instead, Danely carefully situates his observations within a detailed socio-economic and cultural context and presents a multifaceted and nuanced picture of aging and care in contemporary Japan. He states, "If Japan was never a genuine geriatric utopia, then it is not currently a paradise lost" (17).

At various points in the book, Danely discusses the old tale of Obasuteyama ("The Mountain of the Deserted Crone") and its variants. Set in a rural village, the prototypical story describes the abandonment of a mother by her son in order to ensure the survival of the community in the face of terrible food shortages. There is no historical basis for the story, Danely points out, but this is a story that is widely known in Japan, and there have been numerous variants in theatre, cinema, literature, and graphic fiction. The story's enduring appeal lies in the fact that it speaks to the tension between abandonment and care that many older adults in Japan live with, or, in the words of Danely, "fear of being

a burden, wishing to yield, yet dreading abandonment” (12). Noting that these feelings may be shared among older people in many societies, he suggests that they nonetheless manifest and are internalized in culturally specific ways. In the book, Danely focuses on loss and demonstrates how older adults in Japan work through loss at personal and social levels. In particular, he closely examines ways in which they use aestheticized practices to memorialize the spirits of the family ancestors. Memorialization is significant as it allows them to “transform experiences of loss into new connections, meanings, and hopes,” exercising creativity and autonomy in doing so (5).

Chapter one introduces the key concepts, such as loss, mourning, transience, and hope, that characterize the experiences of aging described in the book. The following chapters focus on ethnographic observations and interviews that portray various practices of memorialization, which are analyzed in relation to the specific theme that each of the chapters explores. Chapter two describes various kinds of loss that older adults encounter and how they give meaning to these losses. The chapter also contextualizes these experiences in relation to the Japanese social welfare system. Chapter three focuses on places of mourning and memorialization (e.g., home altars (butsudan), graves, and mountains), whereas chapter four considers the Japanese aesthetic configuration of time. Characterized by qualities such as transience and cyclicity, the Japanese concept of temporality enables older adults to imagine their place in interdependent relations that stretch into both past and future and encourages a “yielding” (yuzuri) to the younger generations. The fifth chapter presents ways in which older adults construct their narratives of aging through their participation in the economy of care, which implies that they exchange concern for one another through kinship and community networks. Chapter six examines abandonment as a result of an estrangement from the economy of care. The chapter illustrates how older adults in contemporary Japan live suspended between the fear of abandonment and hope for care, as family- and community-based care becomes increasingly unsustainable. Similarly concerned with abandonment, chapter seven explores how older adults encounter and communicate with deceased family members through channels such as dreams

and visions. In so doing, they show their recognition of the “other” world (161), imagine their place there in the future and locate themselves in the continuing economy of care.

Danely’s book adds new dimensions to the pictures of aging in Japan previously drawn by anthropologists such as Margaret Lock (1993) and John Traphagan (2000, 2013). There is, of course, a possibility that the chosen location of Kyoto, an old capital of Japan, may have facilitated the emergence of a particular account of aging, an account in which traditional and spiritual practices figure prominently. (Having lived most of my life in Japan, I found some practices unknown or unfamiliar to me. But this only confirms the situatedness of our experiences and observations.) Danely does acknowledge this fact in the book and suggests that the ethnographical accounts in his research aim to “aid in development of more nuanced and critical perspectives on models based primarily on data drawn from statistical and quantitative techniques” (6). Bringing to the fore the experiences and thoughts of older adults, *Aging and Loss* indeed reveals the complexity and multiplicity of aging subjectivity, something that more structured and quantitative methods do not easily convey.

For example, the aging narratives presented in the book demonstrate the possibility of exercising autonomy and creativity and finding hope in the experience of loss. This complicates typically narrow and negative perceptions of loss and decline and, as Danely suggests in the conclusion, invites us to redirect our attention to these aspects of aging that have been overlooked in gerontology’s move towards “successful aging.” The book also presents an example of the economy of care that accommodates as well as enforces a greater degree of interdependency than in Western cultures. Danely illustrates how self and autonomy are conceptualized in culturally specific ways, and this perspective helps us broaden possibilities for and understandings of reciprocity and care.

Ageing and Loss presents intimate accounts of aging in contemporary Japan, while bringing useful critical perspectives to them. The productive combination

of the empirical and the theoretical makes this book widely relevant to age-studies scholars, whether or not their focus is on Japan.

WORKS CITED

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