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REVIEW

Making Meaningful Lives: Tales from an Aging Japan

Iza Kavedžija, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, PA, 2019, 216 pp., hbk £37.00, ISBN 13: 9780812251364

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'Japan's ageing society' today is a commonly and globally recognised 'issue': pretty much everyone seems to have something to say about it, offering a diagnosis and fancying a solution. This discursive incitement, however, often obscures the voices of older people themselves, the very people to whom aged subjectivity and sociality are of real, practical and existential import. Iza Kavedžija's *Making Meaningful Lives* is an invitation to listen to such voices. Exploring the lived experience of older women and men in two neighbourhoods in Osaka, she focuses on various acts of care and storytelling through which they make sense of their life. Much of this storytelling is anchored to the 'salon', a café-esque communal space established in the neighbourhood. A concrete space of discursive and material exchange, the salon serves as a place where its participants cultivate an emergent sense of sociality through 'links of care' (p. 7). As one participant puts it, 'this salon is the source of our well-being' (p. 5).

Kavedžija connects her interlocutors' singular life stories to general existential questions that concern us all: autonomy and mutuality, privacy and intimacy, self and alterity. In particular, she explores 'the good life' – what makes a life 'worth' living (*ikigai*) – as the central question of 'existential anthropology', 'an investigation of the ways in which people try to make their lives their own in the face of adversity and constraint' (p. 6). Notwithstanding the gravity of such questions, Kavedžija's calm and unassuming prose invites us to withhold our usual expectation for narrative rupture and closure. Everything in this ethnography happens quietly: 'Here, existential dramas did not play out in the form of ruptures or discrete events, but quietly, in everyday life' (p. 6). Irreducible to narrative *dénouement*, the salon participants' 'dramas' consist of acts of delicate 'balancing' – a recurring theme featured throughout the book. Kavedžija demonstrates that they co-construct the meaning of the good life and their 'disposition to care' (p. 172) through negotiating differences in a dialectic tension within the seeming orderliness of the everyday.

Chapter 6 explores this balancing in terms of a dialectic between intimacy and independence, between the burden of connection and the risk of freedom, and Chapter 3 reveals how 'distance, or a certain degree of separation' (p. 53) is an enabling condition, not a hindrance, in the enjoyment of social connection for

the salon goers. Likewise, the discussion of sociality in Chapter 4 demonstrates how interaction and its avoidance are carefully kept in balance in order to sustain the salon as an infrastructure of care, to sustain what sustains the 'source' of these people's wellbeing.

In her analysis of the salon participants' life stories (most directly treated in Chapter 5), following Bakhtin's insight that narrative resists 'finalisation', Kavedžija shows that these stories are open to multiple interpretations, as they are 'messy and multifaceted', full of 'digressions, omissions, and contradictions' (p. 163). Her analysis frames these diverse stories in a dialectic tension with the 'model story' or 'model life' of contemporary Japan, the 'story of salaryman and housewife' (p. 86 *passim*).

Now, this 'model life' recalls what Bakhtin calls an 'authoritative discourse'. A self-finalising, generalised story, it demands that *everybody* take it to be a frame of reference because it manifestly belongs to *nobody-in-particular*: '*a* "Mr. and Mrs. Jones", or *a* "Sato-san"' (p. 89, emphasis on the indefinite article added). It is thus strange that Kavedžija's analysis, which painstakingly attends to particular *somebodies*, at times appears to take the power of 'the model' at face value too easily: 'once [the salon participants] are aware of the story, they might conform to it, aspire to it, resist it, or attempt to ignore it – but they cannot pretend that they have not heard it' (p. 89). It is as though the salon goers could imagine and live their 'good life' only by way of hegemonic subsumption to the life of nobody-in-particular. Maybe that is somehow true, but one could still ask whether it really is the case that 'no other dominant unitary concept has replaced it' (p. 89), or whether other, even contradictory, authoritative models might not coexist with it. For example, consider the mantra of 'self-responsibility' (*jiko sekinin*). A 'model story' of the neoliberal regime since the late 1990s, the concept has haunting effects on institutional and personal interpretations of care and welfare. One wonders if it may not have entered the salon goers' consciousness in some non-trivial way.

Making Meaningful Lives is a lucid ethnography of care in an emergent community of older persons. Reading it along with works on good life and happiness – Sara Ahmed's (2010) *The Promise of Happiness* immediately occurred to me – would animate good classroom discussion. I would also add that its discussion of intimacy and distance may gain new significance in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has accentuated the vulnerability of older people everywhere in a brutal manner.

Reference

Ahmed S (2010) *The Promise of Happiness*. North Carolina: Duke University Press, pp. 328.

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