



Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 22 | Issue 5

Article 37

June 2021

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Recommended Citation

Maranger, Frances H. (2021). Book Review Essay: Handbook on Gender in Asia. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(5), 495-498.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss5/37>

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Book Review Essay: Handbook on Gender in Asia¹

By Frances H. Maranger²

Handbook on Gender in Asia (2020) (*Handbook*) is an overview text that addresses the manner in which gender remains a fundamental factor not only on the lives of individuals and families of people living in Asia but also in societies as a whole, including the transnational relations between them. This substantial volume includes the works of thirty contributors; notably, many of whom identify as Asian, live in Asia, and/or do not necessarily write or publish predominantly in English (Huang and Ruwanpura, 1). The perspectives captured challenge traditional master-narratives of feminist theory, which is still far too often written by white scholars, published in the English language, and penned by authors living in the global “West.” This characteristic alone makes the *Handbook* a significant addition to feminist scholarship, as contemporary feminist scholars such as Rebecca L. Clark Mane (2012) and Deborah Rose Lunny (2019) (among others) continue to call for a greater focus on transnational and non-English feminist perspectives.

The *Handbook* incorporates a transnational approach to topics from countries and cultures across the continent and beyond and is strongly centered on gendered migration, labour, and ageing. Further, it supplements previously published collections from the field, including the *Routledge Handbook of Gender in South Asia* edited by Leela Fernandes (2014), which centers on India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. This text surveys a vast array of topics from an historical analysis of the impacts of colonialism and nationalism on gender in South Asia, to representations of culture in relation to South Asian identity. The *Handbook* also complements Barbara Molony, Janet Theiss and Hyaeweol Choi's *Gender in Modern Asia* (2016), which solely focuses on the history of women in China, Japan, and Korea.

The contribution of the *Handbook* compared with the aforementioned texts is its focus on the complexities of conducting feminist research. The majority of the contributors adopt an intersectional feminist theoretical framework in their writings and while most of the contributors to *Handbook* rely predominantly on qualitative methodology strategies. Interviewing, (auto)ethnography, and self-reflexivity, as well as to a lesser extent, data-driven practices such as surveying, longitudinal data, or national data analysis are among the research techniques used. Crucially, a decolonialization approach is implemented throughout the volume to remind readers of the ripple effects that patriarchal colonialism and imperialism have both had, and continue to have, on peoples, governments, and cultures across Asia.

The text is composed of twenty-four chapters, each organized into five major sections with topics related to gender including health, eldercare, migration, marriage, labour, transnationalism, and feminist activism. The *Handbook* avoids overgeneralized compartmentalization of Asian women; each chapter provides a sufficient amount of introductory information on the theories, methodologies, histories, and key terms utilized by each author.

¹ Reviewed Book: Huang, S. & Ruwanpura, K.N. (Eds.) (2020). *Handbook on Gender in Asia*. Cheltenham, UK; Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing.

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The starting point of discussion, “Gender in Asia: Theory and Practice,” includes three chapters that are all reflexive pieces written by researchers writing on Asia. In chapter two, Anindita Datta examines the inherently political nature of feminist research in the context of writing geographies of gender in India. Her piece examines how colonial and patriarchal ways of knowing continue to be privileged in Indian academic institutions. Wai-man Tang’s reflexive chapter on his Ph.D. dissertation research on Nepali drug users is a striking look at drug-use ethnographies as they relate to gender, reflexivity, and identity. Drug-use is a topic which is often left out of contemporary, popular feminist discourse. The first section also includes Maddy Thompson’s chapter on care-full and responsible feminist research. In it, Thompson provides a thorough self-reflection on her privilege as a white researcher in Asia and emphasizes a focus on decolonization and collaborative research practices for researchers working in Asia. The chapter is a useful case study of self-positioning and the ethics of care in transnational and anti-oppressive focused feminist (field) research.

“Gender, Aging, and Health,” the second thematic section, is divided into five chapters. These chapters have a heavy focus on women, aging, and eldercare. Crucially, and as editors Huang and Ruwanpura discuss in their introduction, “Asia is at the forefront of the global phenomenon of population aging” (3). This section is a response to the urgent call of feminist research on the ways in which ageing women in Asia are entering a precariously vulnerable era, in which they are facing higher levels of poverty than their male counterparts. Chapters five and six address the urgent need for research in this area, by focusing on how women are negatively affected by ageing as it relates to their wellbeing, care, social connections, and personal economics, namely for ageing women in Myanmar, Vietnam, Thailand, and China. Chapters seven and eight explore the growing need for eldercare throughout Asia; in chapter seven, authors Ruri Ito and Mie Morikawa explore the increase in need for eldercare in Japan, while also exploring how eldercare is often provided transnationally as families migrate throughout Asia and beyond. In chapter eight, Lan-Hung Nora Chiang and Elsie Seckyee Ho examine transnational eldercare and the experience of Taiwanese-Chinese families living in Australia and New Zealand. And in chapter nine, Paul Statham explores the feminization of migration as it relates to cross-border marriages for women living in rural Northeast Thailand. Statham examines how transnational partnerships age and are sculpted by negotiated gender roles (146-147).

The third thematic section “Gender and Labour” is divided into five chapters. Each explores a different aspect of the construction(s) of gendered labour and the characterization of feminized labour as illegitimate work. This section may be of particular value to undergraduate level feminist economics or critical family studies courses that explore the feminization of labour in Asia and the relationships between capitalism, neoliberalism, domestic labour, and gender. In chapter twelve, authors Sarah Turner, Ammar Adenwala and Celia Zuberec write a compelling piece on the gendered differences for street vendors in Southeast Asia and the discrimination that many of them continue to face by police and other urban actors (203-204). They unpack the specific issues that female street vendors face from an intersectional approach and examine additional factors that relate to their labour such as race, class, migration status, and religion. The co-authors explain their use of intersectionality as a research method and as a result, the chapter could be used as a case study for students interested in learning how to apply intersectionality as a method in their own feminist research.

The fourth section, “Gendered Migrations and Mobilities” circles back to many of the themes that arise in the *Handbook*. As the editors Huang and Ruwanpura note, “[...] Asia has the largest number of international migrants of any continent, as both a sending and receiving region from

within Asia as well as beyond” (7). This section returns to many of the questions posed by authors in chapters on ageing, care, and labour, and how each of these relates to migration both within and beyond Asia. In chapter nineteen, Bittiandra Chand Somaiah situates her work in the field of Migration Studies, though it should be noted that her writing is also a valuable contribution to the growing fields of Motherhood and Family Studies. Somaiah explores the ways in which transnational migration can re-gender parenting roles—and yet at times— have the ability to reshape these family roles into something more flexible and fluid that transcends borders and traditional (often “Western”) ideas of the nuclear family. Each chapter in this section illustrates the intersection of family and migration and ultimately invites more research on gendered migration and transnational family studies from across Asia.

Finally, section five, “Gender at the Margins,” speaks to how Asian women’s experiences are often left invisible and the ways in which they are often left to navigate challenges and conflicts unassisted and alone. This section includes many strong chapters on displacement, migration, family, and labour, including a riveting chapter written by Asha L. Abeyasekera, “Silence and Invisibility: The Gender Dimensions of Women’s Activism in Higher Education in Asia.” In it, she describes how women’s voices are oftentimes silenced in student activist circles and mass movements. Abeyasekera unpacks the “absence, silence, and marginalization” of women’s involvement in these student movements by using the student-led social movements in Sri Lanka as a case study (409). Ultimately, she calls for a greater focus on the ways in which women have been marginalized in social protests and she argues that the internet is one space that can be used to show how women are participating in activism through online engagement that is “[...] both visible and vibrant” (Abeyasekera, 420). As the editors aptly describe the section “Gender at the Margins,” “these contributions [...] show how the possibilities for creating awareness together with political and social change can be enacted [...]. They have traced for us how women’s presence and strength is as enduring as gendered norms may be, and it is through this fortitude that transformations can come about, starting from the margins” (Huang and Ruwanoura, 10).

In summary, the *Handbook* provides a remarkable breadth of varied writing on topics of gender in Asia. The text briefly mentions that the volume was finalized in the moments before the coronavirus crisis. The timing of this publication makes it a valuable teaching tool to be used by educators during the ongoing international battle against the coronavirus, as well as in the eventual post-COVID-19 world, where the inevitable impacts of the global pandemic will disproportionately effect women, people of colour, and poor communities.

In an academic setting, the *Handbook* can function as an introductory text to critically explore the gender relations across the continent of Asia, while introducing students to introductory concepts in feminist and interdisciplinary studies including intersectionality, transnationalism, hegemony, responsible feminist (care-full) research, and the feminist adage “the personal is political.” Some chapters of this volume may be more useful for a graduate student level feminist methodology course such as chapters three and four, which could yield a valuable class discussion on the ethics of feminist research, applying intersectionality as a research method, the politics of care, and collaborative feminist research practices. The breadth of the *Handbook* makes it a useful teaching tool for undergraduate educators across a variety of interdisciplinary fields including Women and Gender Studies, Sociology, Equity Studies, Critical Race Theory, Health Studies, or Social Sciences.

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