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# Book Review: Intimate Encounters: Filipina Migrants Remake Rural Japan

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***Intimate Encounters: Filipina Migrants Remake Rural Japan.*** Lieba Faier. 2009. Berkeley: University of California Press. 280 pp (Includes Illustrations, Appendix, Bibliography and Index). \$21.95 (Paperback).

Reviewed by Gwénola Ricordeau<sup>1</sup>

When Third World women and First World men meet, fall in love and get married, how does the economic, political and symbolic world order affect and shape their intimacy? How do these women resist or challenge the dominant gendered order? Lieba Faier captivantly addresses these questions in *Intimate Encounters*. The author carried out accurate and rich ethnographic fieldwork in the Kiso Valley, a region in rural Nagano prefecture, Japan, about marriages between Japanese men and Filipina women who are employed in hostess bars. Her research is based on a 23 month stay in this region and on several trips to the Philippines, where she met her informants' relatives.

Faier's in-depth interviews and observations reveal not only the dissatisfactions and frustrations produced by these marriages, but also the pleasures and opportunities they offer to both Filipina wives and their Japanese relatives. The author carefully describes Filipina women's stories without eliding their work as hostesses in bars. Thus, in addition to being a study of international marriages, the book offers an interesting exploration of gender relations in Japan and deals with the fuzzy and unstable boundary between work and marriage for migrant women.

Beginning about thirty years ago, these marriages between Japanese men and Filipina women are a remarkable phenomenon. They cannot be considered apart from relations between Japan and the Philippines and the latter's development as a privileged destination for Japanese sex tourists during the 1970s. During this time, Filipina women began to migrate to Japan. Their arrival was due to the opportunity opened up during that decade by the replacement of Japanese women by foreign ones in the "entertainment industry", in particular around the American military bases in Okinawa. These newly hired foreign workers mainly came from Korea, China, Taiwan, Thailand, Rumania, Russia... and the Philippines. Actually, Filipina women were, in the middle of the 1980s, the main national group among these workers. Called "Overseas Performing Artists" (OPAs) in the Philippines, they are also often disparagingly labeled "japayuki" or "japayukisan". This term was created at the beginning of the 1980s. It recalls the "karayukisan" (literally: "one who has traveled to China"), a term coined to disparage the Japanese women who, from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, were prostitutes in China. The year 1979 is often called "Japayuki Year One": more than 10,000 Filipina women left that year for Japan. Beginning in the early 1980s, tens of thousands of Filipina women arrived each year in Japan and, in 2003 and 2004, Japan recorded more than 80,000 entries.

Since the early 1970s, men in rural Japan have faced difficulties finding wives. Local authorities initially encouraged bringing in Japanese women from the cities. Then, from the middle of the 1980s, they promoted "kokusai omiai kekkon", i.e. international marriages arranged by matchmaking agencies. Intermarriages were until then exceptional

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on account of a national imaginary centered on Japanese ethnic and cultural homogeneity. Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “kokusai kekkon” (literally: “international marriages”) have almost exclusively been unions between Japanese women and Western men. Encouraged by Japanese authorities and matchmaking agencies, marriages between Japanese men and Filipina women became a noteworthy phenomenon.

The marriages Lieba Faier discusses are also “kokusai kekkon”, but they are those contracted by Japanese men and Filipina women who met in bars, cabarets or clubs where the women were employed as “konpanion” (“partners”) or “hosutesu” (“hostesses”). These men’s profiles are different from those who resort to matchmaking agencies: the husbands-to-be are “blue collar” workers, not farmers or craftsmen seeking to maintain a family-run business. Because of their growing number, this new kind of intermarriage reshapes gender relations in rural Japan. In short, Lieba Faier’s research about these marriages contributes to clarifying three topics: the work of hostessing, Filipina women’s migration, and gender relations in Japan.

Following Allison (1994), Faier shows that hostesses in Japan are ordinarily expected to perform “emotional labor” and not necessarily sexual services: customers are looking for their own “eroticization”. The bars enable the men’s projection of themselves as “powerful and desirable”, and particularly so for men in the countryside. In hostess bars, farmers, and “blue collar” workers identify themselves with urban men and feel “desirable”, even though they are regarded as “undesirable” by urban Japanese women. If hostess bars are places where male customers project themselves as rich and modern, these men simultaneously and paradoxically realize their exclusion of from this category and, more largely, from a Japanese masculinity centered on urban “white collar” workers (41-42).

For Filipina women, the bars are concurrently places of shame and anxiety (places where they feel vulnerable [in particular because they are granted only six month visas] and exploited) and also places where they try out a new identity, feel desirable, and maintain control over their relationships. Their feelings of desirability stem from the self-presentation involved in their work, which is associated with “glamour” for them. It results as well from their earnings which are used not only to help their kin in the Philippines but also in order to “pagpapaganda” (beautify), i.e. to be fashionable, to go to the hairdresser, etc. In addition, in the Philippines, would-be OPAs are selected on artistic criteria (dancing and singing abilities, in particular). They seldom lack artistic skills, and through the multiple facets of their work, hostesses present an image of themselves that ambiguously recognizes their talent.

Filipina women also stressed their control in their relationships with customers, in particular during “dōhan” (escorts), which involve accompanying customers for dinner, shopping, etc. This control is especially exerted through customer selection, as hostesses are not entirely deprived of resources to avoid the “sukebei” (lascivious) and to attract the “majime” (serious) ones. Insofar as these women are proud to receive gifts from customers, hostesses also associate “entertaining” customers with their own satisfaction and pleasure. In hostess bars, the forms of desires that meet are historically precedented, unequal, and commodified, but these bars are also places where hostesses experience “opportunities”.

Among these “opportunities” are multiple versions of love, palpable in the women’s “romantic and dramatic stories” about their customers. Many former hostesses

explained how they fell in love during “dōhan” or experienced “love at first sight” with a customer (64). Women who married customers did not associate their work simply with shame, but also with the opportunity for finding true love. Unanimously, these women said that they would not have liked to meet their husband through a matchmaking agency.

By exploring Filipina women’s migration trajectories, Faier shows how their imaginings of the United States and Japan--both “figures of the desire”—shape how they include, understand and rebuild their migrant experiences as hostesses and wives. Most of them migrated to Japan because they associated it with the United States and a modern, cosmopolitan, and “vibrant” life. After arriving in rural Japan, these women experienced their exclusion from their imagined Japan. Worse: their life in Philippines proved sometimes to be more modern, cosmopolitan or even “vibrant” than the routines of their lives in Japan. The women often described their trouble, their frustrations (in particular their inability to be fluent in the Japanese language), and even their anger, when they faced discrimination.

They simultaneously responded to their Japanese families’ desires that they conform to the local standards, and also to their own desires for “cosmopolitanism”. In fact, since the early 1980s (110), Japan underwent “kokusaika” (literally: internationalization), a movement that prized opening the country to the outside world. This movement resulted in a transformation of Filipino women’s image; these women became desirable because they were represented as Westernized, in particular on account of their fluency in English. Japanese men’s dreams about and desires for Filipino women are thus not free of misunderstandings: Filipina women migrate to Japan because they imagine it as “modern and cosmopolitan”, but in rural Japan, they are the ones who epitomize a form of modernity and cosmopolitanism from which their husbands are excluded.

By considering relationships among Filipino women and their Japanese families, Faier explores the difficulties encountered by the women, as foreigners, to conform to the ideal of the “oyomesan”. This honorary or polite term, which is used to designate a wife or a daughter-in-law, has extensive implications. The “oyomesan” is, indeed, the connection between the hearth, the community and the Nation. Moreover, the “oyomesan” is expected to be devoted to her in-laws, even self-sacrificing, and to give up the manners (even the ways of cooking) of her original community to accommodate those of her new family. Once married, Filipino women are also expected to “naturally” adopt Japanese nationality as evidence of their commitment to their in-laws – and consequently give up their Filipino nationality. Faier describes the multiple ways in which Filipino women undergo pressures to conform to the role of “oyomesan”: generally educated in the manner of holding their hearth by their “shūtomesan” (mother-in-law), these foreign wives can also take courses dedicated to them and subsidized by the government, such as a “Mothers’ Class” (145).

Faier does not ignore dissonances between Filipina women and members of their Japanese families. She neither elides the most dramatic situations (in particular the conflicts between Filipino wives and their Japanese families), nor their tragic lot when they “escape” and “go underground” in Japan (190-210). But the author observes that some Filipino women are described as “more typically Japanese [“nihonjinrashii”] than young Japanese women today”. By affirming that some Filipino women became ideal “oyomesan”, their relatives actually renegotiate their own marginality (139): they

celebrate a rural and “traditional” Japan they consider superior to the urban and “modern” one from which they are excluded.

With *Intimate Encounters*, Faier expands the study of marriages between Japanese men and foreign women (see: Kim, 2005). Her work deals with two vigorous and challenging research fields: international marriages – of which Constable (2003, 2005) is a milestone – and the work conditions of women coming from the South and working in the North. The feminization of migration (see Parreñas, 2001; Tyner, 2004) revitalizes questions about the relationships between productive and reproductive work, in particular because migratory and matrimonial strategies are sometimes articulated, and even merge.

Lieba Faier, without moralism, nor naivete, shows how these Filipina women face the global order to reinvent their destiny and how they, thereby, recompose, though modestly, gender relations. Like other women from Third World countries, they are sometimes trafficked but much more ordinarily victimized by the capitalist system and a global and gendered social order.

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