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## Manzenreiter, W. and Holthus, B. (Eds.). Happiness and the Good Life in Japan. New York: Routledge, 2017.

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**Manzenreiter, W. and Holthus, B. (Eds.). *Happiness and the Good Life in Japan*. New York: Routledge, 2017.**

This collection of essays is written by sixteen scholars hailing from Israel, the U.S., Germany, Australia, Japan, Austria, Hong Kong, and England. It presents “the first anthropological/qualitative sociological collection of papers about happiness in Japan and [is] possibly the first one about ‘the good life within a single society’” (x).

The collection’s focus on happiness might appear surprising given that early-21<sup>st</sup>-century Japan faces fears of economic decline, an aging population fearful of dying alone and neglected, a spike in depression and suicides, and people’s withdrawal from society. However, this is perhaps precisely why the focus on happiness is timely. Given that happiness is conceived of differently in distinct social and cultural contexts, the authors ask whether there are commonalities among conceptions of happiness when such distinctions are taken into account. This collection provides insight into the happiness and well-being of a wide spectrum of Japanese people – male and female, young and old, married and unmarried, employed and unemployed. While these essays address a multiplicity of topics and angles, the centrality of relatedness as a precondition for happiness stands out. Chapters are divided into two parts of focus: familial relations and community settings. The authors note a generalized perception related to happiness in the “individualist societies” (*i.e.*, Western) that focuses on the autonomous self, self-esteem and ponder whether these individualist markers are relevant to Eastern societies in general and Japan in particular. Despite the popularity of a presumed binary between “individualist” (West) and “collectivist” (East) societies – and between West and East itself – such a binary is often inaccurate and misleading. With this in mind, this collection asks whether conventional meaning of happiness takes for granted or conflates different levels of emotional and cognitive experiences under the generic terms of happiness and well-being” (p. 5). The authors challenge both a presumed universality of happiness and the uniformity of emotional life. While happiness is a universal concept (a human capacity), there are differences in its origins and causes as well as in its understood significance, predicated upon the meaning given by individuals and their societies. Recognizing these differences means further acknowledging “the cultural specificity and situatedness of happiness in social settings” (p. 10).

Dalit Bloch (pp. 25-40) highlights the changed attitude in Japan relating to familial reproduction and the effect of such a change on the happiness of marital partners. She emphasizes the development of the notion of *pātonāshippu* (partnership) – an egalitarian spousal relationship – which is a drastic departure from the previously held notion of spousal relationships as being defined by gender roles, with a sole/primary focus on procreation. Bloch focuses on a couple that challenges the idea that a rewarding partnership is necessarily defined by having children. According to this couple, loving relationships are not simply the product of romantic gestures (*i.e.*, “the cliché of [giving] flowers”) but result from true partnership in all matters, “from [the] biggest to the smallest and most trivial thing..., [including] the couple’s togetherness as thing in itself” (p. 35).

Yoshie Moriki (pp. 41-52) focuses on physical happiness and demonstrates that conjugal well-being in Japan is not necessarily dependent upon physically intimate and loving spousal relationships. Moriki discusses “sexless marriages,” defined as marriages without sexual intercourse for more than one month (p. 43). Sexless marriages do not reflect a lack of interest in sex but rather the prevalence of extra-marital activities. As the author states, “Marriage is not always the place where regular sexual intercourse is found” (p. 44). However, this is not

necessarily indicative of an absence of emotional closeness between spouses since “sexual communication is not necessary once you get to know each other well” (p. 45). In other words, sexless marriage is “part of the expected and generally accepted family life course” (p. 45). She contrasts “the physical un-intimacy” between spouses with parental (mothers’) intimacy with their children. In Japan, a mother’s physical contact with children, which includes co-bathing and co-sleeping until the child reaches the age of six or even ten, is prominent and highly valued. Sexless marriages and co-sleeping arrangements testify to the strong emphasis placed on “familialism” and the weak emphasis placed on “couple culture.” Importantly, sexless marriages do not immediately translate into unhappiness for the married couples but rather point to “a historical perspective [that] is useful in understanding cultural differences in the expression of intimacy and affection between Japan and the West” (p. 50).

Lynne Nakano (pp. 53-66) discusses single Japanese women’s perception of happiness as a combination of independence and personal growth, which is at odds with the societal expectation of marriage as a life goal for all women. Nakano argues that single women face challenges in achieving happiness because remaining single means living an unconventional life. She notes that there is “a growing acceptance of [the] neoliberal [belief] that everyone is responsible for their own happiness” (pp. 56-57). However, this view is not coupled with any institutional changes, and Nakano points to the enduring “inflexibility of the institution of marriage” (p. 62). She writes: “The rigidity of the marriage and family systems...compromise[s] the happiness of both the married and the single, women and men” (p. 64).

Laura Dale (pp. 67-85) addresses friendship, particularly among unmarried people, who represent a minority group in a familialist society. Friendship is defined as a relationship that provides “an opportunity for happiness based on ideals and practices of affinity” (p. 67). This chapter focuses on “unconventional” women: those who never married or married late, those who are divorced or single mothers, those who cohabit without getting married, and those who have intimate relationships outside their family. This chapter follows the proposition that “happiness is contingent upon interpersonal context” (p. 68). Dale reminds the reader about the distinction between eudaimonia (relationships that are integral to the Aristotelian concept of “the good life”) and hedonia (those that focus on pleasure and temporal positive affect). This essay concludes by stating that “while marriage features centrally, as an ideal and practice, for many Japanese women and men, intimate relationships beyond the family both strengthen and extend the mesh of affective and material support” (p. 82). She points out that friendships “bolster resilience to stress” and “reinforce sense of belonging” (p. 82), especially for unmarried women, who are seen as “unconventional.” Familialist society requires additional support for those who fall outside of conventional expectations – either by their own choice or as a result of forces beyond their control.

Hiroko Umegaki-Costantini (pp. 86-105) focuses on the self-identity of older men and their sense of self-worth. He addresses the paradox of “a fatherless society” – in which men provide well financially for their families but are emotionally unavailable. As the men of the *dankai sedai* generation (post-war baby boomers) reach retirement, their identities, which were previously contingent upon their work status, become seen as *sodai gomi* (“useless ‘oversized rubbish’ that takes up a lot of space”) and *nure ochiba* (“‘sodden, fallen leaves’ that cling annoyingly to wives’ feet”) (p. 86). This change in identity necessitates a need for a reinvented self-identity, which often leads to greater involvement with their grandchildren, including the provision of financial support. Umegaki-Costantini writes: “Grandchild care is seen by these men as a means to establish and maintain positive new family relationships, which enable

grandfathers to maintain a sense of masculinity that provides a foundation for their emotional stability” (p. 102). This approach is accompanied by the “expectation of care and support in their old age” (p. 102). Umegaki-Costantini states that at this time, “grandparents display agency” and “find self-worth and feel content in their relationships with loved ones, and so achieve happiness” (p. 102). This happiness is, however, predicated upon the financial security that resulted from their lives as “salarymen.”

Erick Laurent (pp. 106- 122) points out that in Western cultures, happiness relates to self-esteem, personal accomplishment, emotional expression, and one’s positivity. In contrast, happiness in East Asian cultures, which value interpersonal and social aspects of happiness (relational balance, human support, positive social engagement, and social harmony) is “optimized through relations to others” (p. 108). He states: “For Japanese, happiness is a temporary state, to which the mere absence of negative events also belongs” (p. 109).

Laurent discusses sexual identity in Japan. He specifically examines the question of the rights of homosexuals and argues against social activism. He asserts that the happiness of gay individuals in Japan is not contingent upon their demand for legal rights. Laurent problematizes the uncritical expectation that all cultures should follow the same patterns related to social activism and asserts that the notion that activism and the pursuit of “liberation” is the only path to happiness for all socially marginalized communities is akin to viewing all men or all women as “belonging to one monolithic group” (p. 110). In his articulation, “Gay identity is not universal, given once and for all, but rather constructed on, and from, a certain social and cultural background” (p. 111). In his view, to expect the same sort of gay activism that is prevalent in America is an “imposition” on Japanese values. In Laurent’s words: “The imposition of Western paradigms, ways of thinking, and models of activism, while postulating that ‘happiness,’ although supposedly a universal concept, may only be defined according to ‘Western’ standards, undoubtedly falls within the sphere of ethnocentrism” (p. 110). Western, ethnocentric assumptions fail to note, for instance, that in Japan, one’s sexual identity is not viewed in terms of a “fixed homo/hetero binary” (p. 112). Nor do Western perceptions acknowledge that being unmarried in Japan is a worse social taboo than being gay or transgender, as marriage itself appears to serve as a means of preserving and maintaining cultural identity. Further, Laurent explains, choosing marriage in Japan does not preclude one from “having sexual encounters with men on the side” (p. 113). This is one of the most engaging and provocative essays in this collection.

Part II does an about-face from Laurent’s chapter and switches the focus to social activism as a source of happiness. Patricia Steinhoff (pp. 125-143) focuses on Japan’s invisible social society, made up of “a wide variety of small groups with ties to the New Left protest cycle of the late 1960s to early 1970s” (p. 125). These groups are loosely organized, which explains their invisibility, and their activities, she says, “constitute an alternative or subaltern civil society” (p. 125); the members of these groups are united by the ideal of “the pursuit of happiness through protest” (p. 141).

Phoebe Holdgrün (pp. 144-161) focuses on dimensions of happiness for young political activists. She focuses on the Green Japan party, which was launched in 2012 as a response to the triple disaster of March 11, 2011 and which attracted younger constituency. She discusses how political ideals and subjective values are applied to social interactions and institutions and how these contribute to happiness and sense of meaningfulness.

Susanne Klien (pp. 162-180) analyzes disaster volunteers in Northeast Japan. She directs her attention to individuals between 20 and 40 years old and argues that for them, volunteering

“promises insight into the negotiation of subjective well-being on the range between hedonism (striving to maximize pleasure) and eudemonic motives (doing good)” (p. 163). Klien maintains that this generation is “different from previous ones of salaried workers in that they tend to question working conditions and [seek] work-life balance.” She adds that most of the volunteers “lead fulfilling lives because they are in pursuit of their own projects rather than carrying out tasks conceived by others” (p. 176). As a bigger implication, Klien argues for “historical generational change, [which] expresses itself in a vast array of individual choices and micro-interactions rather than through organized protest of even conscious generational solidarity” (p. 177). This statement seems to implicitly support the ideas discussed by Laurent as well. In addition, Klien points out the attitudinal change of Japanese youth and mentions that while the younger generation expresses “a lingering sense of insecurity” resulting from the loss of lifelong salarymen positions, they focus on short- and medium-term projects and “temporary and small-scale happiness” (p. 178). In addition, they exhibit “a departure from the passive accumulation and consumption of material goods” and appear to live “a more creative, reflexive, and innovative lifestyle” (p. 178).

Christopher Bondy (pp. 181-194) discusses the challenges of the intersection between youth and adulthood and the role of the community, which serves as a “protective cocoon.” He defines a teenager as someone “torn between two forces” – neither a child nor an adult (p. 181) – and considers factors related to the well-being of this age group. Specifically, he focuses on a *buraku* youth – a group that is differentiated from other Japanese based on a legacy of complex historical divisions during the Tokugawa era (1603-1867). The social and political marginalization of this group continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and this group appears to be akin to the Hindu “untouchables.” Bondy’s interest is in the connection between well-being and the body, particularly in terms of the location of this body, namely “‘the physical where’ of well-being” (p. 182). In his words, “The connection to place, as a socio-physical location where well-being is established, grows, and expands over time, must also take its place as a central factor in how we understand well-being” (p. 182). For a group that is subjugated or subject to any form of discrimination, place is more than a physical location; it is “the protective cocoon” that “reinforces a sense of trust in others, encourages pride in belonging to a group, strengthens the connection to the community, and solidifies the well-being of the youth by holding back the encroachment of outside forces” (p. 191).

Martin Lieser (pp. 195-210) focuses on Japanese football fans and their interpersonal dimension of happiness. He addresses various dimensions of happiness (physical, interpersonal, existential, and institutional) and argues that football fans manifest a “new form of post-traditional community” in which its members “experience subjective well-being through finding a form of community that they do not experience in other parts of their lives” (p. 208).

Carmen Sapunaku Tamas and Adrian O. Tamas (pp. 211-224) focus their research on night-time party hoppers to address the “false sense of happiness” experienced by those in pursuit of instant gratification. The authors discuss what they call the “rules of conduct” that guide the “after midnight” community that meets at a specific bar (Bardis). This community’s rules reflect their view of happiness as “stolen moments” that come after midnight (p. 212). The authors use the term “under-the-counter happiness,” which designates “numerous products that were available only to a privileged few, through a network of intricate connections” (p. 214). The subjects of this study are pleasure-seeking Japanese with hedonistic tendencies. For them, the place where they can experience pleasure in all forms (ecstasy, elation, euphoria, exultation, etc.) is linked to a “zone of liberty” (p. 214). Unlike the football fan community, this midnight

community aims to “escape from the real world [by] pursuing a kind of pleasure that usually ends at dawn” (p. 215). This midnight community is characterized as seeking “an ephemeral happiness through the lack of responsibility for one’s actions and behavior [and] lack of peer judgment (or appraisal, for that matter)” (pp. 220-221). In short, their happiness comes from breaking all social norms. The authors maintain that these people demonstrate strong signs of addiction, “not to alcohol, but to an environment that is a substitute for real human relationships and which, like any addictive substance, has only short-term efficacy, thus requiring increasingly frequent and stronger doses” (p. 221). This group breaks both Western and Japanese approaches to happiness, in which happiness is normally connected to developing closeness with other humans.

The concluding section of the book, part III, includes two essays. Gordon Mathews (pp. 227-242) discusses the Japanese happiness guidebook industry and argues that Japan is following the neoliberal path shared by highly industrialized nations. In line with neoliberalism, happiness is depicted as an individual responsibility. Mathews questions how this change will affect a group-oriented Japan in the high-growth era (p. 227). In other words, will the switch to more individualistic choices enhance Japanese sense of happiness? He points out that while Japan ranks 17<sup>th</sup> on the Human Development index, it is 43<sup>rd</sup> in the World Happiness report (p. 228). However, he argues that these reports overlook what it means to be happy in Japan. For instance, boasting about one’s own happiness goes against cultural norms regarding Japanese personal modesty, which is “a key social value” (p. 229). He notes that since the Japanese term for happiness (*shiwase*) refers to interpersonal connection as its central attribute, it complicates cross-cultural measurement. Understanding of happiness is verbalized by the feeling of *heibon no shiwase* (ordinary happiness) (p. 234). He points to the distinction between *ikigai* – “living for others and sacrificing one’s own selfish desires in order to create a better society” and “separat[ing] yourself from the group, particularly the company, and follow[ing] your own path in life” (p. 235). In Japan, there is a pull between “subordinating one’s own desires [for the sake of] others versus following one’s own path” (p. 235). Mathews suggests that the latter is a neoliberal primer. He warns that by focusing on personal happiness at the individual level, people ignore the injustices in their society, avoid rectifying these injustices, and even fail to comprehend their existence. He concludes his essay by posing a provocative question: “Will a poorer but more socially diverse, freer, more individualistic Japan be a happier society than the richer but more socially constraining and group-oriented Japan of a few decades past?” He offers a broader implication by suggesting that the answer to this question “may provide insights into how a happy and fulfilled society anywhere in the world must be structured” (p. 240).

The last essay, by Barbara Holthuz and Wolfram Manzenreiter serves to summarize the arguments presented in the other essays. They conclude by stating, “In sum, we see that the seemingly simplest lives are highly complex, responsible for the high variability of happiness even within [one] society” (p. 254).

The essays in this collection differ in their complexity and scope. Nonetheless, they skillfully introduce a broad spectrum of issues that deserve close attention, especially for Western readers. Some of the essays warn against reductionism and essentialism in the interpretation of societies that are different from one’s own and, in the case of some chapters, make visible to Western readers the persistent desire to impose Western standards and values on non-Western cultures. A close attention to cultural peculiarities is warranted in order to ward off ethnocentrism. Particularly important is to recognize that happiness, which is often perceived as a universal notion, is culturally specific. The reader of this work is challenged to consider what

makes one happy or unhappy on both personal and social levels in a culturally nuanced environment.

The idea of finding comfort in silence and harmony deserves attention and perhaps can be a good tool to be exercised in all societies. However, this is not to say that the authors aim to replace one cultural imposition by another; indeed, the uniqueness of cultural differences should not be undermined. In addition, the authors refrain from exoticizing or valorizing Japanese society and retain their critical angle throughout the work. If interested in learning more about Japanese society, the reader might wish to supplement his or her reading by turning to the Publications of East-West Center, including “Low Fertility in Japan—No End in Sight” by Noriko O. Tsuya, (*Asia Pacific Issues*, no. 131, June 2017), which addresses the issues of families and procreation, one of the central topics of the current selection as well.

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