

© Li, E.C-Y, 2020. The definitive version of this article is published in *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* 7(2): 319–3 22. DOI:10.1386/eapc\_00057\_5.

Li ECY (2020) Book Review: Handbook on Gender in Asia, edited by Shirlena Huang and Kanchana N. Ruwanpura. *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* 7(2): 319–3 22.  
DOI:10.1386/eapc\_00057\_5

## **Book Review**

*Handbook on Gender in Asia*, Shirlena Huang and Kanchana N. Ruwanpura (eds) (2020)  
Cheltenham, UK; Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar, 456 pp., ISBN: 978-1-78811-290-1: h/bk, £155

Reviewed by *Eva Cheuk-Yin Li*, Lancaster University

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3076-3386>

In *Handbook on Gender in Asia*, editors Shirlena Huang and Kanchana N. Ruwanpura offer a volume of essays that explore the contemporary intersectional gender landscape in Asia under the global and regional dynamics of demographic transition, economic development and transnational mobilities. The volume consists of 23 chapters, excluding the introduction, which are authored by researchers at different career stages, representing institutions both within and outside of the region. Most authors have a background in the social sciences, such as geography, sociology, political science, public administration and international development (with one exception in anthropology). In terms of geographical coverage, this volume mainly includes East, Southeast, and South Asia, with one chapter on the region of West Asia (Turkey).

Despite the vastness of the inter- and multi-disciplinary fields of gender studies and Asian studies, the editors of this volume have successfully offered a transnational dialogue on local and Western-centric knowledge to capture key issues in the gender landscape of Asia. It is apparent that most chapters in the volume tackle the central issue of how arrangements relating to the family and individuals' lived experience are impacted by the global and regional processes of neo- and/or post-colonial capitalism, compressed modernity and gendered migration. The gendered consequences of rapid economic development in the region have led to changes in family structures and living arrangements, giving rise to new healthcare needs that require both paid and unpaid care providers through work migration or marriage migration. On the other hand, the rise of the newly emerging middle class has led to skilled labour migration, lifestyle migration and education(al) migration, giving rise to new inequalities across class, race and nations.

The chapters in this volume can be categorized into four clusters despite the diverse themes covered. The first concerns the production of gender knowledge within institutions and the respective academic discipline, as well as the field/site where research data were collected. Anindita Datta (Chapter 2) explores the formation of institutional misogyny in the context of Indian higher education, and highlights the intricate ways in which public patriarchy, race, caste, class, the (Western-centric) academic peer review process, and the neoliberal regimes of higher education originating in the Global North have shaped a systematic academic misogyny, thus constituting a work space that is difficult for, if not hostile to, both female scholars and the production of feminist knowledge. By intersecting race, the gendered body, gender expression, and language in the (co-)construction of situated knowledge, Wai-man Tang (Chapter 3) and Maddy Thompson (Chapter 4) provide highly reflexive accounts of practice. Tang reflects on his positionalities as a well-educated, ethnic Chinese male in his multi-sited fieldwork on Nepali drug users (both male and female) in Hong Kong, and how his position could become vulnerable even though his gender and race were generally regarded as dominant/powerful in the local context. Likewise, Thompson reflects on her experience of conducting fieldwork in Manila as a young, white, British woman, and how her intersectional identities brought her both privileges and vulnerabilities. Shifting away from qualitative research knowledge production on gender, Yi Yang (Chapter 6) explores the gendered consequences of ageing and health in China with the aim of establishing quantitative, statistical data to understand the gendered implications of ageing, which have been overlooked by existing scholarship. These chapters accentuate the need to decolonize and reflect upon the production of knowledge about gender across academic disciplines and institutions.

Asia is a geographically vast region characterized by rapid social, economic, political, and demographic transitions over the last few decades. Such social processes have produced new exploitations and furthered pre-existing gender inequalities. The second cluster of chapters focuses on the risks associated with the reconfiguration of the domestic/transnational economy (both formal and informal). For example, Cynthia M. Caron (Chapter 11) explores the way in which macro-economic restructuring in South Asia has led to unequal gendered consequences in the agricultural sector. Within this context of market-led reforms, male agricultural labourers were quick to leave rural areas in favour of cities as they sought better-paid opportunities. The women who were left behind were forced to take up farm work to sustain themselves, yet the gendered division of agricultural labour and patriarchal social arrangements have disadvantaged women's participation, because there is a lack of recognition of women's legal

right to land ownership. Smita Ramnarain (Chapter 23) looks into new forms of violence against women in post-conflict Nepal by focusing on two particular types of victims, trafficked women who suffered from pre-existing gender inequalities prior to conflict and widowed women who now face post-conflict economic deprivation and gendered poverty. Sallie Yea (Chapter 20) explores a rare topic in the field of mobility and migration: failure and emotions entangled with migration. The emotional distress of 'failed migration' creates a sense of shame and guilt for women in particular, due to their absence from performing the roles of wives, mothers, and homemakers, while simultaneously being subject to moral-religious suspicion of sexual infidelity during migration.

The third cluster examines the biopolitics of women's bodies in the process of nation-building and market-led reform. Ayşe Arslan's analysis (Chapter 10) of Turkey, and Sara Shroff's analysis (Chapter 13) of Pakistan present an interesting contrast. Arslan observes that, with the rise of capitalism in Turkey, government leaders have identified women's reproductive labour as the key to a thriving national economy, and they advocate this through promoting the flexibilization and informalization of women's paid labour in employment. In contrast, Shroff observes that, in Pakistan, middle-class Muslim women are now at the forefront of modernizing the nation, through the heavy mediation of their 'modestly modern' images. The traditional religious discourse that associates working women with promiscuity has now been replaced by the neoliberal discourse of being productive and contributing to the country's economy. The striking similarity shared by both chapters is that women's bodies in Asia are now at the forefront of national economic success, and that such biopolitics serves heterosexist, patriarchal nationalist visions.

The final cluster in the volume presents the opportunities and emergence of new spaces for the negotiation of gender norms and roles under the macro processes of global capitalism. In my view, this cluster presents the most exciting additions to understanding the dynamic gender landscape in the region. The global and regional forces of neoliberalization, the movement of labour, and both intra-country and inter-country migration have presented families and gendered subjects with new risks, but also new opportunities. Parvati Raghuram and Gunjan Sondhi (Chapter 15) explore the ways in which gender influences skilled migration within and beyond the region. While the history of skilled labour migration in Asia has been dominated by the history of colonialism, the new transitional movement of highly skilled female labour has led to the rescripting of masculinities of the 'left-behind husbands' and a renegotiation of domestic gender roles. Likewise, Lan-hung Nora Chiang and Elsie Seckye

Ho (Chapter 8) discuss parental care in transnational families, by looking at Taiwanese-Chinese families in Australia and New Zealand. Traditionally, women – daughters and daughters-in-law – are expected to take up care responsibilities as an expression and expectation of filial piety (while sons are only expected to contribute financially). The new arrangements within transnational families have given rise to negotiations of care practices and the meanings attached to filial piety, meaning that gender is now a less crucial factor in determining caregiving responsibility, replaced by other emotional and practical concerns, such as location and the availability of family members. As a result, a relatively flexible gendered scripting of care is emerging. New opportunities also enable women to navigate gendered and racial stereotypes to achieve economic empowerment and upward mobility. Paul Statham (Chapter 9) provides a nuanced analysis of Thai women’s life transformation through partnering older western (white) men. The chapter documents the ‘narrative arc’ adopted by Thai women when forming Thai-Western partnerships; some have succeeded in securing long-term partnerships or legal recognition and have achieved upward social mobility, while others have failed and suffered from domestic abuse by their ageing partners. These new opportunities are not without risks, and the ability to navigate these risks is highly dependent on individual women’s structural position and their social and cultural capital. It should also be noted that these new opportunities are usually created by a strategic reworking and manoeuvring of existing gender norms intersected with race, class, and sexuality. As Hyunok Lee (Chapter 17) succinctly puts it: ‘gender norms are important for women’s empowerment, as they create structural opportunities for women and influence individual women’s experience’ (300).

While migration and mobilities are pertinent in Asia’s contemporary gender landscape, this volume offers relatively little discussion on feminist movements or other gender-based and/or sexual-identity-based human rights movements in the region. The final chapter by Asha L. Abeyasekera (Chapter 24) on the invisibility of women’s activism in higher education from a Sri Lankan perspective came closest to this. However, it would have been helpful to see more discussion on local and transnational feminist synergy. Another theme that is largely missing from the volume is the gendered consumption and use of media in relation to gendered migration in Asia. There is an emerging field of work about migrant women’s and families’ use of digital technologies to communicate with their natal family and renegotiate domestic gender roles and care work. In addition, the representation of gender in the region has become increasingly diversified as a result of the dominant, hegemonic global flow of Anglo-American popular culture, and the rise of regional media production centres such as Korea, Japan, India

and Hong Kong. It would be interesting to consider the impact of such changing representations on the lived experience of gendered subjects, and how the disjuncture between representation and lived experience creates tensions and new biographies.

To conclude, this handbook provides an overview of the recent gendered transformations in Asia in terms of mobilities, migration, and demographic transition, in the midst of the trajectories of compressed modernity, global capitalism, and (neo-/post-)colonial inequalities. This book offers a multi-disciplinary, social-science-focused dialogue on gender in Asia from a transnational perspective. It offers a powerful and useful reminder of the nature of situated knowledge and the need to decolonize theory and practice in the field. To researchers who are interested in media and culture in the region, this volume offers a much-needed grounded, empirical basis for an exploration of the connections between the textual and the social.